



So Hollow (Faith Bold #17)

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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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Samantha inhaled deeply, allowing the breath to cleanse her. As she exhaled, she transitioned slowly from balasana to padmasana— child’s pose to lotus pose. In her class, she used the English names, but at home, she preferred the Sanskrit titles. The language flowed so beautifully compared to English.

She closed her eyes and rested her hands on her knees, palms up. She didn’t believe in the metaphysical benefits of meditation or the spiritual associations with the chakras, but there was no denying the physiological benefits of the chant and the calm that came with focusing completely on her body and mind in the present moment.

She hummed the chant, and it seemed as though her body did mold with the universe and become one. She smiled softly—technically a mistake. Strict practice would call for her to divorce herself from emotion and simply be. But Samantha wasn’t strict. She wasn’t looking to be a guru like Irma or Kelly, the other daytime instructors at Lake Yoga. She was perfectly content to help people discover the beauty and grace of their own bodies.

She remained in padmasana until she felt completely relaxed. Then she bowed and offered the traditional farewell of namaste to no one. Well, to herself. She stood and began to prepare dinner. Tonight was a green salad with chickpeas, walnuts and dates seasoned with a mild rosemary vinaigrette. Her culinary instructor would probably die if he saw what she was eating, but Samantha had given cooking up years ago.

She clucked her tongue and shook her head. “What’s with all the animosity today, Sam? Irma, Kelly, and now Chef Hoisin? I think you need more meditation.”

She finished the salad and sat in front of the TV. They were playing her favorite romcom tonight, and while Samantha wouldn't allow herself the glass of wine and bowl of ice cream that such an occasion demanded, she would allow herself to wistfully pine after the male lead, a drop-dead gorgeous man who really deserved better than the whiny, selfish girl who just needed to get over the fact that her sister was more successful than she was already.

She wondered how Giacomo would react if he knew that Samantha was fantasizing about an actor in a romcom. He'd probably get all pouty and jealous. She liked Giacomo, but he could be so dumb sometimes.

"He's just got some growing to do," she said to herself. "But it's not like we're married. We'll take our time, and if he—"

A loud thump jarred Samantha from her thoughts. The mystery of what Giacomo needed to do or refrain from was left unanswered. She stilled and listened intently for a repeat of the noise. One thing yoga had succeeded at was driving fear from her mind, but she was still a woman living alone, and it seemed like every week, some new maniac popped up somewhere targeting women.

She didn't hear anything for a while, and finally relaxed. "That's okay, Sam. It's just—"

A hand clamped down over her mouth. She didn't have time to fight before another hand grasped the back of her head and twisted viciously. She heard the snap of her spine severing, then everything went black.

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Special Agent Faith Bold's heart pounded as she took a seat in the swiveling office chair, silently declining the futon. She hoped she wasn't sweating as much as she felt like she was.

Dr. Susan Perth didn't seem to notice Faith's anxiety, but Faith was certain that she did. She was paid to know when people were anxious, so there was no way she couldn't see Faith's nervousness.

Turk watched Dr. Perth warily, sensing Faith's concern. Faith smiled at the dog, but it must not have been a very convincing smile because Turk only stared harder at the psychologist.

"I can allow Turk to sit in on this session," Dr. Perth said, "but in future sessions, he will have to be left home."

She had a soft British accent and a matronly demeanor that Faith liked. She very much did not like the idea of leaving Turk at home. "Can he come for a while? I've... well, I didn't really have a good experience the last time I was in therapy."

The last time Faith was in therapy, her doctor was one Franklin West, known now to Faith and the world as the Copycat Killer, the vicious and prolific serial killer who had far surpassed his idol, the original Donkey Killer, Jethro Trammell.

Ironically, Faith was in therapy because of injuries she sustained at the hands of the Donkey Killer. Learning that her trusted doctor was the more dangerous disciple of the killer who had nearly taken her life had left her wary of therapists and therapy in general.

But she was trying. At the Boss's insistence, and David's and Michael's encouragement, she was trying.

"I understand that," Dr. Perth said, "I'll allow him to attend for a few more sessions. But we must reach a point where you are comfortable without him. I understand that he's only a dog, but I don't think you'll be entirely honest with me in front of him."

Faith frowned. "He's not only a dog." Dr. Perth simply regarded her with a patient smile, and Faith sighed. "Which is exactly your point. Okay. But not yet."

"Not yet," Dr. Perth agreed. "As this is our first session, we'll keep things casual. I'll focus on getting to know you and learning how I can best serve you as your doctor."

"That works for me," Faith said.

"Good. Why don't we start with you telling me what you hope to gain from therapy?"

Faith sighed. "Well, getting people off of my back would be nice."

"Do you feel you're being pressured to take therapy?"

"No, not exactly. Just..."

The Boss's words of the week prior came to mind. "This isn't a request, Faith. The brass is up my ass about sending you to a desk. If we want to avoid that, we need to show that you're following the rules. Skirting counseling has to stop."

"A little," she admitted. "I just think that everyone worries too much about me."

"Do you feel guilty that they worry?"

“No, I just... I mean, it’s my business, right? Like, I know they’re concerned, but I should be allowed to decide for myself the kind of help I need.”

“What kind of help do you think you need?”

“Nothing. No offense, but I really don’t think I need this. I mean, I used to have nightmares and stuff, but I don’t really have them anymore. I put West in prison once and for all, and I’ve been the most successful agent in the Bureau over the past two and a half years. Me and my partner, that is. I’m fine. Really.”

Dr. Perth nodded. “How do you feel?”

Faith blinked. The question was both a change of subject and broad as hell. “How do I feel about what?”

“In general. How do you feel?”

She shrugged. “Fine. I mean, there are good days and bad days, but I’m fine.”

“What’s a good day?”

"When I see David. That's my boyfriend. When I solve a case. When Turk and I hang out without work hanging over our heads. When I have dinner with Michael and Ellie doesn't look at me like I'm a vicious skank who wants her dead and Michael in my bed."

“Michael is your partner?”

“Yes. And my best friend.”

“And you have a romantic history with him, correct?”

Faith felt a flicker of annoyance. If only she had never dated Michael. Everyone wanted to believe the two of them were still attracted to each other. “We dated for a year, but it wasn’t serious. I love David, and he loves Ellie. And Ellie’s not jealous anymore. That’s the point. She likes me now.”

Dr. Perth nodded. “And what’s a bad day?”

Faith’s smile faded. Images of dead bodies, taunting killers, and weeping loved ones flashed across her mind. Behind those images, looming over it all, were the twin smiles of Jethro Trammell and Franklin West.

“Losing people,” she replied. “Not solving a case in time and looking at the bodies of the people I couldn’t protect. Those are always hard days.”

Dr. Perth nodded again. That was going to be very annoying over time. “What are your hopes for the future?”

Faith chuckled. She didn't like the tense quality of her voice. "What am I doing, making a dating profile?"

Dr. Perth smiled, utterly unoffended. That was going to be very annoying over time. Faith was sure that part of being a therapist meant taking nothing personally and divorcing one’s feelings from every session, but it just came across as smug to her. “No, but the general idea is the same. An online dating profile is designed to give people a snapshot of who you believe yourself to be. The questions I’m asking have a similar purpose. They’re designed to give me insight into who you see yourself as.”

“Are you insinuating that who I see myself as is not who I really am?” Faith challenged.

“Do you believe that’s what I’m doing?”

Faith took a breath to avoid snapping at the doctor. “I believe that you are doing your best to help me,” she replied, “but yes. I think that you believe that you know better than I do who I am and who I should be.”

“Then you have a misunderstanding of therapy,” Dr. Perth replied. “My purpose is to help you come to terms with the challenging aspects of your life, to find closure for your past and to commit yourself to your future. But I rely on you to tell me which aspects of your life are challenging as well as to tell me what closure means for you and what future you desire to commit to. Some of those things you’ll tell me explicitly. Others I’ll learn from observation.”

“Okay, I’m going to stop you right there,” Faith interrupted. “You don’t get to examine me like a zookeeper watching a monkey. If I tell you something, it’s the truth. If I don’t tell you something, it’s not important.”

“That is not true for you, me or anyone else,” Dr. Perth replied mildly.

Faith pressed her lips together. "All right, well, if you want me to cooperate, then you need to stop treating me like a case study. I get that you're doing your job, and I'm trying to be patient, but I'm done with the whole, 'look at this inkblot and tell me what you see' schtick."

Dr. Perth pursed her lips and leaned back in her chair, regarding Faith thoughtfully. After a moment, she said, “I can see that it will take time to build trust. That’s perfectly fine. However, I will kindly request that you answer my questions to the best of your ability and trust that I—as you put it—am committed to doing my job. We will both make mistakes along the way, but I am committed to working through those mistakes. Are you?”

Faith sighed in exasperation. “Honestly, doc, I’m committed to getting this over with. That’s the best I can give you right now.”

“Fair enough. Do you feel comfortable sharing your hopes for the future with me?”

“I will answer your questions in spite of my discomfort. Does that work?”

“For the moment, yes.”

"Wonderful. My hope for the future is that Turk and I save many lives and put many assholes behind bars where they can't hurt anyone. I hope to marry my boyfriend one day, and I hope to be friends with Michael for the rest of my life. I don't know if this rises to the level of a lifelong dream, but it would be cool to own a '49 Chevy and turn it into a grand tourer I can take Turk across the country with."

“You are a fan of classic automobiles?”

“Oh yes. If I hadn’t joined the Marine Corps, I would have apprenticed at an auto shop and learned how to work on cars. I still think it would be cool as hell to drop a small-block into a '49 Chevy, maybe pair it with a six-speed and some upgraded suspension and better tires and take it across the country.”

“That sounds fun.”

Faith nodded. “It’ll be a challenge to get a six-speed to fit, but I’m pretty sure I can make it happen. I might have to forgo the supercharger, but a stock small block will still put out three hundred fifty horsepower, and that’s three times the power the original engine has.”

Dr. Perth smiled placidly at her, and Faith felt heat climb her cheeks. It was pretty damned obvious that she was talking about cars to avoid talking about anything serious. The fact that Perth knew this and chose not to say anything bugged Faith.

Well, Perth had asked. It was her fault.

“What about fears?” Perth asked when Faith fell silent. “What do you fear could happen in the future?”

Faith sighed. “I fear...” She fell silent again and finally said, “You know what, Doc? I’m sorry, I’m just... this is a lot at once. I think you and I have different ideas of what constitutes a light opening session. Can we not talk about my fears today?”

“We don’t have to talk about them today,” Dr. Perth agreed. “But we do need to talk about them.”

“Why?” Faith blurted out before she could stop herself. “I mean...” she reddened. “I just... I’m fine. I really don’t understand why everyone acts like I’m not.”

“Who acts like you’re not fine?”

“No one. I just mean...” She pressed her lips together and waited for the response she knew was coming.

“No one is a bit of a far cry from everyone,” Dr. Perth pointed out.

“I didn’t mean everyone,” Faith insisted. “I just... I don’t want to be here, okay? I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. I’m sure you’re a great doctor, but I do not want to be here. I don’t need to be here, and I’m not happy about it. So there.”

Dr. Perth looked away and tapped her clipboard for a moment. “You more than anyone else have a reason not to trust therapy, Faith. There are no words that can describe how heinous Franklin West’s actions were. As someone who’s committed my life to counseling people, knowing that Franklin West used my profession as a tool to torture you psychologically infuriates me.”

“You don’t look infuriated.”

“It wouldn’t help you for me to show anger,” Dr. Perth replied. “But I am angry. The same way you would be angry if a killer masqueraded as an FBI agent and used that cover to murder innocent people.”

The egg timer chimed, and Dr. Perth calmly pressed the snooze button. “And that is our session for today.” She met Faith’s eyes. “I think you’re right. I think you should continue to bring Turk with you for a while. We have a long way to go to build the rapport we’ll need to truly tackle the issues troubling you. You should have someone you trust absolutely to help you take the first steps.”

Faith sighed. She felt a lot of things, but to simplify everything, she chose to express the gratitude. “Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your understanding.”

“Of course.” Dr. Perth stood and handed Faith her business card. “Please don’t hesitate to call me at any time for any reason.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Eventually, I will create more boundaries, but for now, it’s important to me that you know I’m committed to helping you.”

Faith didn’t want to take any more time trying to wrap her head around this decision, so she took the card. “Thank you, Doc.”

“Of course. Have a good evening, Faith.”

Faith led Turk from the office and tried to make sense out of everything. She really didn’t want to go to therapy, but as long as she was here, she might as well play along.

Perth was just so different from West. It galled Faith to admit it, but she preferred

West's more straightforward approach. Dr. Perth wanted Faith to run the sessions, it seemed. Faith wasn't sure she wanted to do that.

She sighed and ruffled Turk's fur. "One step at a time, right boy?"

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Michael grinned at her when she stepped out of her car, a 2009 Crown Victoria that wasn't nearly as classic as the '49 Chevy she referenced in her session with Dr. Perth but was still a damned fine example of American automotive engineering. She sighed and said, "Please don't ask, Michael. Seriously."

"You know I have to."

"You really don't."

The two of them started walking to the office, Turk trotting happily in between them.

"Okay. I will make a statement, then. Therapy was irritating because Dr. Perth might actually get you to talk about things instead of letting you bottle them up."

"Therapy was irritating because I can't have things that are just my own damned business and no one else's. I feel like I should start tracking my bowel movements."

"It's not a bad idea. Get the habit started early. You're not getting younger, you know."

She frowned at him. "I'm sure there was a joke in there somewhere, but it didn't come close to landing."

He shrugged. "Hey, you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Didn't figure you for a hockey fan."

His brow furrowed. “What?”

“Never mind.”

The two of them walked into the building and headed for the Boss’s office. Faith steeled herself for the meeting to come. If anything, it would be even more uncomfortable than the therapy session had been.

“You okay?” Michael asked.

“Ask me that again,” she grouched. “I dare you.”

He lifted his hands placatingly. “Okay.”

They walked into the office, and the Boss fixed them with his trademark scowl. Special Agent in Charge Grant Monroe—known affectionately to his subordinates as The Boss—was a twenty-five-year veteran of the Bureau who had spent the past fifteen of those years as the head of the Philadelphia Field Office. He was notorious in the Bureau both for the militant way he ran the Philadelphia office and for his willingness to call Bureau leadership out for their poor decision-making. This had earned him the ire of the directors but also their grudging respect. He would never advance beyond SAC, but his position here was secure.

They took their seats and waited for the Boss to speak first. He took his own seat and sighed. Not a good sign. If something had him worried, then it was serious.

Of course, Faith didn’t need to hear the Boss sigh to know this situation was serious. “I take it we haven’t learned anything about the murder.”

The murder Faith referenced was the death of a clerk at a mom-and-pop electronics store near downtown. The clerk was a forty-five-year-old overweight balding man by

the name of Bob Hosier who was found with his gut cut open, and a small portable television placed on the cavity with a note written on the screen in red marker. **THIS IS YOUR FAULT, BOLD.**

That murder had occurred a week ago, and no one had yet figured out who could be responsible or whether or not this really was intended to send a message to Faith. As a precaution—mostly to keep Faith from the media circus, she guessed—the case had been given to Desrouleaux and Chavez, two of the Boss’s other agents.

“No,” the Boss replied. “We’ve been looking online for anything that could suggest someone has it out for you, but nothing’s popped up. We even checked the Franklin West fan page.”

“He has a fan page?” Michael exclaimed.

Faith wished that the news surprised her as much as it surprised Michael.

“I’m afraid so,” the Boss replied, his lip curling in contempt. “People are foolish. But the people in that fan club are mostly teenagers who think it’s funny to act like they’re attracted to serial killers. No one mentioned anything about the murder, and no one seems to care that Faith exists other than to mention that she really isn’t Dr. West’s type, and he should go for someone with a darker aesthetic.”

Faith chuckled softly. “Would this be a bad time to ask if I could work the case?”

“Every time will be a bad time to ask that question,” the Boss replied. “We can’t risk any more questions with you. People are already picking you and the Bureau apart over the West case. You’re walking the line from now on. You’re too close to this case, so the answer’s no.”

“But is she in danger?” Michael asked. “Do we think this person will come after

her?”

“We still don’t know if the person who did this is really concerned with Faith at all. The M.O. is theatrical, but it’s not remotely the same as West’s M.O. If this person is an admirer, then they’re showing their admiration in a very odd way.”

Michael scoffed. “What’s a normal way to show admiration for a serial killer?”

The Boss met his eyes. “The way West did.”

Michael pressed his lips together and said nothing.

“If I’m not part of the case, then why are we talking about it?” Faith asked. “No offense, sir, but if I can’t be involved in the resolution of this murder, then it would be better if I don’t hear about it.”

“Nine hundred ninety-nine times out of a thousand I’d agree with you,” the Boss replied, “but your name was mentioned. So I thought I should at least ask and see if you’ve heard or seen anything unusual over the past few weeks.”

Faith shook her head. “Nothing. My neighborhood’s been quiet as a cemetery.” She immediately regretted using that analogy.

The Boss sighed. “Well, let me know if anything changes. For now, I think it’s safe to say this was probably just a one-off.”

“Hell of a one-hit wonder,” Michael muttered.

“Don’t hold your breath, Prince,” the Boss said, reaching into his desk drawer. “I’ve got a beautiful little psychopath of your very own to hunt.”

“Oh joy,” Michael said drily. “Christmas already?”

The Boss dropped a file on the desk. “Cassidy Holt, twenty-eight. Found naked in a botanical garden. The body was covered in a black powder and was posed with her knees tucked to her chest and her arms wrapped around her feet.”

“Cute,” Michael quipped.

“Sexual assault?” Faith asked.

“No.”

“Couldn’t be that simple,” Michael said.

“It never is, is it?” the Boss agreed. “As nearly as we can tell, she was killed on site. The cause of death was a severed spinal cord caused by extreme torsion of the cervical vertebrae.”

“In English?” Faith asked.

“Someone snapped her neck.”

Faith grimaced. She had seen plenty of gruesome crime scenes, most of them far nastier than what the Boss had just described, but there was something so animalistic about breaking someone’s neck. It wasn’t the work of a sick mastermind or a mad scientist. Just a brute.

The rest of it, though—the posed nude body and the mysterious black powder—was right up her alley.

“You mentioned black powder,” Michael asked. “Do we know what that is yet?”

“No. The lab’s still checking it out.”

“When did this murder occur?” Faith asked.

“Four days ago.”

“And we’re only hearing about it now?”

“You know the rules, Faith. Three murders before we’re called, or two murders that look freaky.”

“So there’s a second victim?”

The Boss flipped the picture of Cassidy Holt over to reveal a second victim.

“Samantha Reynard, thirty-two. Found in her loft apartment this morning. Covered in white powder, also naked, also not assaulted sexually. Posed with her limbs spread like a starfish.”

“So our boy’s getting creative,” Michael said.

“We don’t know if it’s a boy yet,” the Boss pointed out.

“True, but come on,” Michael said. “It’s a boy.”

The Boss sighed. “Yes, probably. But we’re going to do our jobs and not assume anything.”

“Of course,” Faith agreed. “Cause of death for Samantha?”

“Same as for Cassidy.”

“Lovely,” Michael said. “Why is it always girls?”

“It’s not,” the Boss said. “But for this guy, it probably is.”

“A better question is why does he strip them of clothing if there’s not a sexual component?” Faith asked. “Or does the sexual component not require sexual release?”

“I mean... well, we don’t have to get into gory details just yet,” Michael deflected. “Anything else we don’t know that we should, Boss?”

“Yes. You’re taking a private flight to Chicago.”

Faith lifted her eyebrow. “We’re not flying coach?”

“No. I’m using some of the field office’s surplus to pay for a charter plane to O’Hare. You’re too much of a celebrity for us to put you on an airplane.”

Faith shrugged. “I mean, I still go to the convenience store without getting mobbed by the press.”

“Yes, but the Bureau thinks it’s too risky to have you in public. They didn’t want me to give you this case at all, but I ignored them and just found workarounds to take their excuses away.”

Faith frowned. “They’re still blaming me for the media circus surrounding West’s trial.”

“No. But they’re still pissed about it. Not to be an asshole, Faith, but they have a point, too. We’re not the CIA, but it still helps if our field agents aren’t celebrities. I know you’re not Margot Robbie, but enough people know your name and face to

make it a liability to have you in the field.”

“But you’re still sending me to Chicago.”

“Because I don’t think the liability outweighs the benefits,” he said. “But you need to be aware that there are eyes on you. So you need to do things by the book this time. And you need to be prepared for heightened media attention if it comes to light that you’re working the case.”

“Meaning we need to try to keep it from coming to light,” Michael guessed.

“I don’t know if you can,” the Boss admitted, “but you need to be prepared to have flashing lights pointed in your face, and you need to find a way to tell them to fuck off without telling them to fuck off.”

Faith chuckled. “I can promise to be as polite as you are, sir.”

The Boss slumped slightly. “I was afraid you’d say that. Just tell them that you can’t discuss details of an active case. If they press you, feed them the usual bullshit. You’re following up on leads, you’ll provide more information once you’ve made an arrest, and so forth.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Michael offered. “Maybe we can use the attention to ask the public to help us out. I know that usually means a thousand pieces of crap info to get one nugget of gold, but that’ll give the locals something to do to keep them out of our way.”

The Boss looked Michael up and down. “By God, Prince, I think you just had a good idea.”

“That happens from time to time,” Michael said drily.

“Well, whatever you need to do, get it done as professionally as you can. We need a reason to keep you in the field, Bold. Otherwise, the decision will be taken out of our hands. Now get out of here. Go catch a bad guy.”

“Hey,” Faith protested. “That’s my catchphrase.”

“Well, here’s mine. Fuck off.”

Faith chuckled. “You got it, sir. When does our flight leave?”

"Soon. Go to the airport, and someone will meet you there with a sign."

“How exciting,” Michael quipped. “Just like a movie.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed. “Except the victims don’t get to walk away after the director calls cut.”

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The jet the FBI chartered wasn't opulent, but they had legroom and a table between their side-facing chairs. It was a little disconcerting to be in a plane that was barely larger than Michael's SUV, but the takeoff was smooth enough.

"Besides," Michael said, pulling out a bottle of champagne and two glasses. "They have a mini fridge."

"You know they're going to charge the Bureau for that," Faith reminded him.

"The Bureau should know that I will milk them for every dime they're worth by now," Michael said. He poured both of them a glass and placed hers in front of her.

She sighed and took a sip.

"See?" Michael said. "You're just as bad as me."

"Grumble, grumble, go to hell," Faith said dismissively. "So talk to me. What do we think about these murders?"

"They're sick," Michael replied.

She rolled her eyes. "Astute analysis, Special Agent."

He shrugged. "That's an important observation. These are not natural ways to pose a body. If both of them were starfished, I'd say this was entirely a sex thing. You know, leaving them vulnerable and 'open.' God, I hate having to talk about this so clinically."

“McDonalds is hiring if you want a different job,” Faith quipped. “But I agree with you. I’m not ready to say that there’s no sexual component since both victims are attractive women stripped naked and left unblemished, but I agree that the poses aren’t meant to be sexual.”

“So what are they meant to be?”

“That’s an excellent question,” Faith replied, “and one we should answer. Another question we should answer is why the powder?”

“And why is the powder on Cassidy Holt black while the powder on Samantha Reynard is white?”

The two of them fell silent for a moment and studied the pictures. Turk trotted over and looked at the images himself. “See anything boy?” Faith asked.

Turk snorted and trotted back to his place in between the two front-facing seats at the front of the cabin.

“Yeah, me either,” Faith said. She cocked her head. “Actually, I do. The bodies are posed carefully, but the powder is sprinkled randomly around the victims.”

“So the powder is less important?”

“Or it’s less important that the powder be arranged meticulously. Maybe it just needs to be on the body.”

“What’s the significance of that?”

“I don’t know,” Faith admitted. “Maybe nothing. But I’m pointing it out in case it means something.”

Michael leaned back and crossed his arms thoughtfully. “The powder might not be meticulously placed, but the body was, just like you said. I think that pose matters more than the powder.”

“At least the exactness of the pose,” Faith agreed. “So tell me about Cassidy Holt.”

“She was a freelance graphic designer. Not so much an artist as a content creator.”

“What do you mean content creator?”

“Focused on practical business applications rather than making things look pretty,” Michael explained. “An artist might arrange something creatively to evoke a certain emotion or to deliver something unique. A graphic designer is trying to accomplish a business purpose. There’s a lot of overlap between the terms, but specifically in Cassidy’s case, she made her clients’ websites eye-catching, simple to understand and conducive to sales.”

“What was she doing in the Chicago Botanic Garden at night?”

“She received permission to take some pictures of the garden at night.”

“For a client?”

“If so, that client isn’t named in the file.”

Faith took a sip of her champagne and let the sparkling liquid dance across her tastebuds. “So she was alone. Our killer would have had to know that.”

“We’ll make sure to talk to the manager of the garden,” Michael said. “Chicago P.D.’s already warned him to expect us.”

“Good. What about Samantha Reynard?”

“Yoga instructor for a place called Lake Yoga. The studio’s about ten miles south of the garden. Both places are located within a mile of Lake Michigan. Not sure if that means anything.”

“It might. We’ll need to find out if anyone knew both women. Maybe one of Samantha’s students works at the garden.”

“Or maybe Cassidy Holt was one of Samantha’s students too.”

Faith nodded. “So we’ll follow up on that connection. In the meantime, we have two women in the same age group, both attractive and stripped naked, then posed. No sign of sexual assault, but I will be surprised if sex isn’t a component somehow.”

“They’re both attractive,” Michael agreed, “but both very different. Cassidy is petite and has long brunette hair and a curvier body type. Samantha is tall and athletic with a slender body type. Short hair too, close to a bob cut.” Faith glanced up at him. “What? If sex is a component of this crime, then those differences will matter. People usually have a preferred body type they’re attracted to. We have two different body types here. Both attractive, but a different kind of attractive.”

Faith shrugged. “I’ll allow the speculation. But it’s just as possible that our guy doesn’t feel attractive. He might not have had any success with women. If that’s the case, he won’t be picky.”

“I don’t buy that,” Michael challenged. “Serial killers can be indiscriminate, but I don’t think this guy’s indiscriminate.”

“He is in some ways,” Faith countered, “and not in others. Bodies posed carefully; powder scattered carelessly. Women stripped naked but different body types.”

“Good point,” Michael conceded. “What about the cause of death? Snapping someone’s neck is pretty vicious.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “It’s also clean and quick.”

“He wanted to avoid soiling the bodies?”

“Maybe. Probably. If he stripped them naked, then their forms were important to him. He wouldn’t want them marred.”

“Except for the ugly purple bruising and the misshapen lumps in their neck.”

“Everything’s a compromise.”

Michael sighed. “Well, whoever this guy is, let’s get him off the streets before more people end up exhibited like that.”

“I second that motion.”

They were met at O'Hare by a quiet, serious young man who informed them that Detective Hilary was dealing with a family emergency but would meet them first thing in the morning. He handed them the keys to a police cruiser, then left to join his partner, who waited in another cruiser.

“Must be a hell of an emergency,” Michael observed.

“Detectives at the bigger police departments tend to resent the FBI interfering in their cases,” Faith said. “Hilary might be pissed that his bosses called us.”

“Maybe. Either way, I hope he gets his shit figured out soon. This guy’s already moving fast.”

“They all move fast these days.”

He frowned at her. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

They got into the cruiser and drove to the garden. The Chicago Botanic Garden was located in Glencoe a half hour from the Airport. They reached it just as the sun dipped completely behind the western horizon. The garden had closed an hour ago, and when the three of them entered, they found only the maintenance crew poking around the garden.

A short, balding man with an enormous midsection met them in the lobby of the small gift shop just past the ticket counter. He shook their hands, and Faith resisted the urge to wipe the sweat off on her pants.

The man mopped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief and introduced himself as Grant Brower, the director of the garden. “I’ll show you the scene,” he said. “It’s been cleaned already, but it’s still roped off.”

“Can you tell me about what happened?” Faith asked.

Brower sighed. “Well, we got a call from a Miss Cassidy Holt four days ago. She said she was a graphic designer and wanted to take some pictures of the garden at night for a project.”

“Did she mention who her client was?”

“No. She just said a project. The garden is closed at night, but we frequently allow individuals or small groups after hours if they call ahead. We told her she could have

four hours to take as many pictures as she wanted but stressed that she couldn't touch any of the plants. She arrived, the four hours passed, and my night security manager realized that she hadn't left. He began looking for her to tell her it was time to go home. He found her in a small clearing near our Alpine Forest exhibit. She was... well, you saw the pictures, I'm sure."

"So she was killed on the grounds, and no one heard anything?"

"She didn't make any noise. I reviewed the security cameras too. There were no alerts and no screaming. Also, just so I get ahead of the question, the cameras show all of our employees at all times. They weren't responsible for the murder."

"They show your employees, but not Cassidy Holt or her killer?"

"They show Cassidy every now and then?"

"Every now and then?"

He reddened a little. "Well, we don't have cameras covering every square inch of the garden. It hasn't been necessary. Nothing happens here. Not even gift shop theft. People who visit botanical gardens aren't the criminal type. The worst we've dealt with are a few hippies picking flowers."

"Let's save the excuses," Faith said. "When's the last time Cassidy Holt was seen alive?"

"About ten-thirty. That's about forty minutes before she was found dead."

"And you saw no one else leave the garden until the head of security found her?"

"No one. No strangers, no unauthorized entry, none of my employees."

He stepped in front of a roped off section in front of a stand of towering spruce trees. “This is where she was found. Up until about ninety yards back, we have cameras.”

“Is there a way to get inside the park and get here without being seen by cameras?” Michael asked.

Brower sighed. “Yes. You would have to climb a fence, but it’s not electric or razor wire or anything. It’s... we never thought anything like this would happen.”

“Tell me how you would do it.”

Brower pointed east. In the distance, Faith could see a high fence made of iron or steel. It would be a challenging climb, but not very challenging. She could scale it easily.

“You go from there, then you cut north until you’re on the other side of the lily pond. Then you hug the pond for ten yards. Go behind the willow trees and loop south through the eucalyptus, then it’s a gentle zigzag.”

“Which of your employees would know about that path.”

Brower lowered his eyes. “Well... I don’t know, but you wouldn’t have to work here to figure it out.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow, and Brower pointed to a few poles with very visible cameras pointed at very visible angles toward the ground. “I imagine you could figure out how to avoid them if you paid attention,” Brower said.

“Probably,” Faith agreed.

She looked at the roped-off section. It looked spotless to her, but Turk sniffed around

curiously.

“You get something, boy?” she asked.

Turk sniffed around a moment longer, then trotted to Faith. He looked around as though something drifted just on the edge of his senses, but after another moment, he gave up trying to find it.

"I'm really sorry," Brower said. "We never imagined someone would get hurt here. We'll beef up our security procedures and get better cameras." He looked forlornly at the roped-off section. "I guess we're too late for Cassidy, though."

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Faith said. “It’s very difficult to understand how far people will go to hurt other people.” For some of us, anyway.

Brower sighed. “Well, if you need anything else, my phone’s always on. Otherwise, I wish you three luck.”

“Thank you,” Faith replied. She had a feeling they would need it.

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Detective Hilary was waiting for the agents in the lobby of their hotel early the next morning. He was a middle-aged man with close-cropped gray hair and a well-trimmed mustache. He was the same height and roughly the same weight as Michael, though possibly a little softer around the middle.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” he said. “My mother’s health is very poor right now. I had to rush her to the hospital for emergency surgery last night.”

Faith felt a stab of guilt at her cynical assumption that Hilary was pouting over the FBI’s involvement in the case. “I’m sorry to hear that. Are you sure you can work with us today? It’s all right if you need to be with her.”

He shook his head. “Thank you, but she’s all right for now. My sister’s staying with her today. Besides, I would very much like for this freak to be found sooner rather than later. I’m not interested in dealing with the next Franklin West in my city.”

Faith stiffened slightly and hoped that Hilary didn’t notice. She really hoped that West wouldn’t become the standard by which all killers were measured from now on. Jethro Trammell’s short-lived tenure at that spot had produced Franklin West. She shuddered to think what kind of killer West might inspire.

This is your fault, Bold.

She pushed the image from her mind and asked, “Can you take us to Samantha Reynard’s apartment?”

“Sure can. It’s actually not far from here. She lived in one of the newer high-rises

downtown.”

The four of them took Hilary’s cruiser to the building. It was a twelve-story building of modern construction nestled among several similar buildings within a mile of the much taller office buildings that dominated the second-most impressive skyline in the United States.

“She lived on the top floor in the loft apartment,” Hilary said, flashing his badge at the security officer and leading them to the elevator. “The body’s been taken, of course, but we’ve left the scene intact. CSI took a small sample of the white powder that was scattered over her body, but otherwise, the room is as it was when we arrived yesterday morning.”

“Who called it in?” Michael asked.

“Building super. He showed up for an annual maintenance inspection and found the door ajar. He pushed it open and saw Samantha’s legs sticking out. He said it was clear that she was naked, and when she didn’t answer to her name, he called the police. Never went in the room. Said he didn’t want people to think he was the one.”

“Does he have an alibi for the night before?” Faith asked.

“Well, security cameras showed him leaving the building at seven the night before he found her. Coroner estimates time of death for Samantha between seven and nine.”

“Got it. And nothing on the security footage that seems suspicious.”

“No, but the footage isn’t perfect. We’re thinking the guy got in through the fire escape outside her window.”

They reached the room, and Hilary led them inside. Turk immediately put his nose to

the ground and trotted around, probably looking for whatever smell caught his attention the night before.

The room was modestly but tastefully furnished. The furniture was inexpensive but good quality and arranged so that there were no right angles to be seen. The living room was dominated by a large neoprene mat in place of a rug. There was no coffee table and no television. Samantha clearly took her yoga lifestyle seriously.

The mat was covered in tape outlining the position of Samantha Reynard's body. A larger outline delineated the extent of the white powder found with her body. Faith bent low and sifted a little of the powder in between her fingers. The texture was reminiscent of baby powder. Some sort of talcum or clay?

"Did Samantha have a boyfriend?" Michael asked.

"She did. Giacomo Medici."

"Cool name."

"Samantha thought so, I guess. He was out of town at a jiu-jitsu tournament. He's on his way back now. Would've been back yesterday, but they delayed his flight because of some storm in Brazil. Obviously, his alibi's ironclad."

Faith walked around the tape. The powder sat in small drifts separated by the outline of Samantha's body. "The body was posed first, then the powder was sprinkled over her."

Hilary nodded. "It looks like the powder was the last thing the perp did."

"He probably wanted to avoid leaving footprints and fingerprints," Michael suggested.

“Have you found the clothes she was wearing?” Faith asked Hilary.

The detective shook his head. “Not hers and not Cassidy Holt’s either. The killer took it with him.”

“A trophy?” Michael asked.

“Maybe,” Faith replied. “If sex really was a motivator, then probably. But it could have just been removing evidence. Did we find any fingerprints on the body?”

“You’ll have to ask the medical examiner,” Hilary replied. “He hasn’t released a report yet. I’m going to guess no, because that’s something he’d call to tell us in a homicide case so we wouldn’t have to wait for the paperwork.”

“Can we talk to him?”

“Sure. He gets to work in an hour or so. I’ll take you there when we’re done here.”

“You said the front door was ajar,” Michael said. “Wouldn’t the security cameras have picked up our killer if he left that way?”

“You’d think so, but they only picked up the door opening slightly. No one left the room.”

“Samantha trying to escape?”

“Without screaming? I doubt it. I think the perp was going to leave through the front door then remembered the cameras and left the way he came.”

“Did you find any fingerprints or footprints on the fire escape?” Faith asked.

“No prints, but some scuff marks that CSI tells me came from rubber-soled boots or shoes.”

“Aren’t all soles rubber?”

“No. Most of them are plastic foam these days. Some are synthetic fiber. You don’t usually find real rubber unless it’s a waterproof shoe or a nonslip work boot.”

Faith nodded and looked at the outline on the floor. “So Cassidy Holt was posed hugging her knees with her head tucked while Samantha Reynard was posed with her arms and legs spread in an X.”

“Yes.”

“Black powder on Cassidy Holt and white powder on Samantha Reynard,” Faith continued. “In both cases, the killer was familiar with the security situation and managed to reach his victims, commit the murders, stage the bodies and flee the scenes without being caught.”

“He did his research,” Michael deduced.

“Yes. And he took his time. Brower might think that anyone could fool the security cameras at the Botanical Garden, but the same isn’t true here. I don’t think our killer winged it. I think he thoroughly cased both locations before he acted.”

Hilary anticipated Faith’s next request. “I’ll have my detectives look back at the camera footage and see if we can identify anyone who hung around both places a little too much lately.”

“Do that,” Faith agreed.

Michael crossed his arms pensively. “I don’t know if he planned things that well. I get casing someone’s apartment and committing a home invasion murder, but the Botanic Garden is a high-traffic public place. I don’t buy him planning to kill Cassidy Holt there.”

“He could have known her plans and taken that opportunity,” Faith offered.

“Yes, but then he’s not casing the place carefully. I suppose he could have just gotten lucky and avoided all the cameras the way Brower suggested, but why? Why risk committing the crime in a place with security officers, cleaning crew and maintenance staff?”

“Well, he did kill her there.”

“Yes, but think about it. If he wanted to truly be aware of the Botanic Gardens’ security situation, he would have had to visit several times. Cassidy only made her plans that day. Why would he plan to kill her there when he had no way of knowing if she’d be there when he was ready to strike?”

Faith chewed on her lip. “Maybe he was aware of her plans before she called the garden. It would make sense that our killer knows both victims. We should start looking into that. Hilary?”

“Yes?”

“Have your officers look through Cassidy Holt’s clients and associates. See if any of them knew Samantha Reynard. Maybe one of her students.”

“I’ll do that.”

Faith walked in a circle around the scene and tried to imagine the killer’s actions. It

was difficult to know for sure how the crime had started or where the actual murder was committed. With no blood splatter to tell her where Samantha Reynard was killed, she could only guess at the timeline.

The killer had entered through the fire escape. “Where’s the fire escape?” she asked.

“Bedroom,” Hilary replied. “Through that door.”

Faith walked into the bedroom. Like the living room, the bedroom was simple and comfortable. This room had a tv sitting opposite the bed, Evidently, Samantha watched her shows in here.

The fire escape was just outside the window on the wall opposite the door. Faith followed the killer’s path from the window around the bed to the door. She turned and saw that from where she was standing, the living room was hidden.

So he sneaked up to the living room , she thought, and hid here just around the corner.

She crouched low. From here, she could see anyone standing up in the living room, while the shadows cast by an unlit hallway at night would keep her from view.

“He waited here for his chance,” Faith deduced, “and when her back was turned, he struck. I’m thinking she probably finished her routine, then either went to the kitchen to make dinner or sat down in the easy chair. He crept up behind her, grabbed her and snap.”

“Then he takes her clothes off,” Matt continues. “Disposes of them somehow, positions her body and then sprinkles the powder on her.”

“So we have a good understanding of how,” Faith said. “What we don’t know is

why.”

They fell silent for a little while, trying to digest the mystery behind these murders. The details were important here. Why naked? Why posed. What message was he trying to send?

She imagined being Samantha, finishing up her yoga routine for the evening and basking in the sense of peace and accomplishment that would come with such an action. Safe in her own home, the one place where no one should have to worry about being targeted. Then, hands slip around her neck, and before she can scream, her lights are turned off.

Turk trotted up to them, snorting in confusion.

“Found something, boy?”

As he had the day before at the Botanic Garden, Turk looked around pensively. He was close to something, but he couldn’t quite figure out what it was.

"We'll get 'em, boy," she encouraged. "Don't worry about it."

Turk dipped his head and snorted irritably. Faith ruffled his fur, then stood straight. “How far away is the medical examiner’s office?”

“Close enough that we have time to stop for donuts and coffee if you want,” Hilary offered.

“I’m not hungry,” Faith demurred. “And we can get coffee later. This killer’s already moving fast, so we need to move faster.”

“I’m never one to turn down coffee,” Michael said, “but I agree with Faith. Two

murders this close together always means a third one coming soon. I'd rather catch this guy before that happens."

What he didn't mention was that they had yet to succeed in stopping a killer before the third victim. Considering how many mysteries surrounded this case, Faith didn't have a lot of confidence that this would be their first victory. Still, she allowed herself to hope. There was a first time for everything. Maybe this would be the first time she could solve a case without staring at the body of an innocent person murdered right under her nose.

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Hilary dropped them off at the medical examiner's office, then left for his precinct to look into the security footage and potential mutual associates of Cassidy and Samantha. The three agents identified themselves to the receptionist and were told that Dr. Test would meet them in his office.

Dr. Test was a barrel-chested man of around forty-five with a shaved head and a bushy brown beard. He reminded Faith of an old actor she'd seen in an adventure movie, but she couldn't quite remember which one.

He greeted them in a rich baritone. "Agents. Good to see you. Roger told me you'd be coming."

"Roger?" Faith asked.

"Detective Hilary. He and I are good friends."

"Ah. Well, we're hoping you can help us understand what happened to Cassidy Holt and Samantha Reynard."

He sighed, and a look of grief crossed his eyes. "I'll tell you what I can. The cause of death was the severing of the spinal cord from the brain stem in both cases. It occurred both times as a result of extreme torsion of the cervical vertebrae."

"Their necks were snapped," Faith summarized.

"Yes. The silver lining is that they would have gone out quickly. The action was completed very cleanly. They were dead within seconds and felt no pain."

“Do you think this was a practical action on the killer’s part or a sympathetic one?” Michael asked.

Dr. Test lifted his hands. “That’s where we’ll need your expertise.”

Faith clarified the question. “I think what my partner’s asking is if there’s any sign that the killer showed extra care to the bodies. Were they treated gently or cleaned up at all? Any evidence that they were touched in an affectionate or a sexual manner?”

“No sex. I can tell you that right away. There’s no bodily fluids anywhere, not even trace amounts of saliva that would come from breathing on them. Your killer wore a mask.”

“Good to know.”

“No bruising around the nipples or groin that might indicate manipulation. Both victims were touched around the hips and waist, but more on the outside. Samantha’s legs were opened, but it looks like she was grabbed at the ankles. The killer might have enjoyed the visual of two attractive naked young women, but his or her hands stayed well away from their more sensitive areas.”

“How can you tell if there are no fingerprints?” Michael asked.

“Traces of talcum powder from the latex gloves the killer wore,” Test replied. “And before you ask, no, the talcum doesn’t match the colored powder sprinkled over the victims.”

“And you still have no idea what that was?” Faith asked.

“No. I understand CSI took a sample and is waiting for an analysis.”

“Were there any defensive injuries?”

“None. No sign at all that the victims were even aware of the attack until their necks were... until the killing blows were struck.”

“So the killer sneaked up from behind,” Michael deduced.

“Yes. It appears the killer did place a hand over Samantha Reynard’s mouth before killing her. Based on the bruising around her mouth, he had to lean over her. With Cassidy Holt, there were no other injuries of any kind.”

“He probably killed Samantha while she was sitting on the couch then,” Faith surmised. “Covering her mouth was necessary to give him the extra half second to position his other hand and twist before she could scream.”

"I do want to clarify," Dr. Test said, "that we aren't sure if it's a he or a she yet. Looking at the bruising around Samantha's mouth, the killer's fingers are relatively delicate. Not necessarily female, but possibly so."

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Faith said. “Thanks for the reminder. We sometimes refer to killers with a male pronoun because in our experience, ritualistic killers—especially spree and serial killers—are almost always male.”

Dr. Test sighed. “Why is that? I mean, I understand the idea of sexual obsession. I’m just as sexual as any other man, but I don’t understand the association of sexual gratification with violence and death. Why would you fantasize about hurting a woman or forcing her to have sex with you? Not that our killer did, but...” he sighed. “I’m sorry. I suppose it’s not professional of me to say this, but deaths involving younger women affect me in ways other deaths don’t. I guess we all fixate on beauty in one way or another.”

“It’s very possible that there isn’t a sexual component to this crime,” Faith said. “We naturally gravitate toward that assumption because the victims are naked, but each time we approach it, we find nothing other than the nudity to back it up. It’s probably important to our killer that the victims are women, but if he really was this businesslike with his actions, then we can probably put sex to bed—pardon the sort of pun.”

“That could suggest that our killer is female,” Michael offered.

“It could,” Faith agreed. “Would it take a lot of physical strength to snap someone’s neck, Doctor?”

“It would take a firm motion,” Dr. Test replied, “but well within the parameters of normal female strength. If done precisely—and it was—then you could snap someone’s neck with only moderate effort.”

“That’s a lovely thought,” Michael said.

Dr. Test smiled sadly. “Ours is a bad line of work for people who like to sleep at night.”

“You can say that again.”

“What about the way the bodies were positioned?” Faith asked. “With Cassidy turtled and Samantha starfished?”

Dr. Test grimaced slightly at Faith’s marine analogies. “Beats me. I don’t really have a head for motives. I’m much better as a scientist. That’s why I went to medical school instead of the police academy. I can tell you that the positions were important to the killer because Cassidy Holt was positioned so that her body wouldn’t move out of that pose. Her head was placed in between her knees and her arms and legs were

manipulated so that by lying her on her left side with her right hand under her left knee, gravity would hold her limbs roughly in place.”

“How roughly?” Michael asked.

“If anything, she would have started out folded even more tightly. To be honest, if it weren’t for Samantha Reynard suffering the same injury, I would have said that the killer broke Cassidy Holt’s neck to make it easier to fold her into that pose.”

Faith crossed her arms and bit her lip again. “The powder means something. I think that whatever it means, it’s coordinated to those poses. Black with turtling, White with starfishing.”

“Do you have to say it like that?” Michael asked irritably. Apparently, he didn’t like the analogy anymore than Dr. Test did.

Faith ignored his complaint and stood. “Is there anything else you can tell us, doctor?”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I wish you two luck, though.” Turk barked, and he corrected himself. “You three. I have a niece who’s attending Brown this fall. I hate to imagine that there are people out there who would do something so sick to her.”

Faith didn’t point it out, but their killer was hardly the first person in history to prey on lone women. Society had come a long way from living in caves and hitting people with clubs to solve arguments, but women living alone were still the most vulnerable and preyed upon group on Earth.

And some people hadn’t left the violence of prehistoric man behind.

“I think we look into the symbolism first,” Michael said. “We can rule out sex and we won’t know if the powder’s composition means anything until we get that report back. We’re still waiting for Samantha’s boyfriend to get back from Brazil, and we’re waiting for Hilary to tell us if anyone in Cassidy’s life could help us. The poses are what we have now. We need to figure out if they mean anything.”

“How do we do that?” Faith asked. “Search for ‘what’s the meaning of murdering someone then forcing them to hug their knees?’”

Michael frowned and sipped his coffee. The three of them were eating breakfast at a café near the medical examiner’s office. Their cruiser was still at their hotel, and while that was only a few minutes away by bus, they decided to eat and brainstorm before they decided their next move.

“Maybe not the composition of the powder,” he said, “but the color. Let’s see if looking up black powder and white powder gives us anything.”

“Well, it’ll give us something,” Faith quipped, “but I don’t think it’s the thing we’re looking for.”

Michael’s frown deepened into a scowl. “Could you possibly not be a pessimist right now? We just got started. Let’s try something other than waiting around for the cops to give us a lead.”

“All right,” Faith said, lifting her hand placatingly. “I’m not trying to be pessimistic. I’m just venting. I don’t know, something about this case is just disturbing to me. More than usual. I think it’s the fact that he snapped their necks. It just feels so... clinical. But brutal too. Like they were tools to him, and he had to be careful not to make them unusable by staining them.”

“See? That’s something already,” Michael said. “That’s the beginning of a profile. That fits with the lack of sexual deviancy. You might admire a hammer for its usefulness, but you don’t want to have sex with a hammer.”

“A clumsy analogy,” Faith said, “but an accurate one. Okay, so he sees them as tools. Now let’s figure out what he’s trying to build.”

The two of them began searching on their phones for anything that might help them. The first few searches turned up the results Faith expected. Putting naked into any search essentially meant that search engines gave you porn. White and black powder, not surprisingly, brought up images of various drugs. Combining the two showed Faith a lot of pictures of people doing said drugs in various states of undress.

“Geez, people are sick,” Michael said. “Are we really that barbaric when it comes down to it?”

“I mean, I’m not condoning,” Faith said, “but I think snorting coke off of someone’s stomach is a little bit better than murdering them.”

“I know, I just mean... why are we so obsessed with sensation? Hell, forget it. I’m just an old fogey. I don’t know what I’m—hold on.”

Faith lifted her gaze from her own phone. Even Turk lifted his head and stared intently at Michael. “What is it? Do you have something?”

“Maybe. Have you ever heard of the Magnum Opus?”

Faith’s brow furrowed. “Like in music?”

“No. Like in alchemy?”

“Alchemy? Like turning lead into gold?”

“Yes. That’s what the Magnum Opus is. It means Great Work, and it’s the name of the ritual to turn lead into gold.”

“Our killer’s trying to turn lead into gold?”

“Well, I don’t know, but I found something about the Magnum Opus that talks about using different powders to use magic to transmute lead into gold.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“I haven’t really found myself,” he replied, “but it mentions here that you’re supposed to use ‘powder dark as suit for the nigredo and powder white as snow for the albedo. ’”

“Does it say anything about bodies?”

“It says that the shapes must be exact for the ritual to work. No mention of bodies, but we’ve found thinner connections before and made them work.” Seeing Faith’s skeptical look, he said, “It’s something to do while we’re waiting for a more promising lead.”

She sighed. “Okay, well, how do we follow up on this Magnum Opus?”

“Well, I found this manuscript on the website of the University of Chicago Library. It gives Professor Harold Cranston as the translator. If I look him up... he still works at the University as a Professor of Antiquities.”

“That’s a thing?”

“I guess so? It says it in his bio.”

Faith shrugged. “I guess a shot in the dark is still a shot. Let’s go talk to Professor Cranston.”

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They called the university's Division of the Humanities and learned that Professor Cranston was in the middle of a lecture but would meet with them as soon as the lecture was over. They took the bus and picked up their cruiser, then drove to the University.

They reached the hall where Cranston was lecturing just in time to catch his closing remarks. The professor was addressing a crowd of mostly bored students about the importance of symbolism. His piercing blue eyes blazed with passion, and his voice projected far more powerfully than was suggested by his diminutive build.

“You see, humans are unique among animals in that we inhabit both a physical realm—that which is composed of things we can see, touch, taste and feel—and a metaphysical realm composed of our ideas, concepts, understanding, emotions. These symbols help us understand this metaphysical realm by connecting it to the physical realm. Ever since humans developed consciousness, symbolism has been a critical means to understanding those things that exist beyond what our senses can tell us. Indeed, many researchers believe that the first sign of civilization is represented by symbols that prehistoric peoples created to embody such concepts as life, birth, death, and fertility. As you take this class, whether it be out of curiosity, passion, or just because you need to check off the Humanities requirement, I hope that all of you will gain a greater understanding of symbols and their importance in your life and in human society as a whole.”

The flame in his eyes died out, and he said in a far more businesslike voice. "If you haven't yet received a syllabus, please take one from the end of this table. If you need an add slip, please come see me. If you have not purchased the textbook, it's Harris, third edition, and yes, it has to be the third edition. Buy it from collegetexts-dot-com

unless you like paying the forty percent markup at the bookstore, but please don't tell Dean Winters I said that."

Faith heard Michael chuckle and turned to him. "Reminds me of the good old days," he explained. "Damn, I miss college."

"Really? You never talk about it."

"Well, it's not real life. I only miss it when I happen to be on a campus hearing a professor tell students to remember to pick up a syllabus." He turned to Faith. "You never went to college, did you?"

"Nope. I enlisted the day I turned eighteen."

Before Faith joined the FBI, she was in the Marine Corps. Turk, coincidentally, was also a Marine, though he served many years later than Faith. Their time in the service was done, and soon, Turk's time in the FBI would come to an end.

As for Faith? Well, she still didn't know.

The agents waited until the students filed out of the classroom before approaching Dr. Cranston. When he saw them, he flashed them a brilliant grin and shook their hands with the peculiar energy that seemed reserved for academics and public speakers.

"My office told me you had some questions for me. Am I correct in assuming that this conversation should take place away from listening ears?"

"You are correct," Faith said.

"I thought as much. Follow me."

He led them from the lecture hall into the building. “The lovely thing about tenure is that you get an office located near your lecture hall. That seems like it wouldn’t matter, but the older I get, the more I appreciate not having to walk across campus every time I need to teach a class. Did you enjoy the lecture?”

“We only caught the last minute or two,” Faith said, “but I’m hoping your expertise with symbolism can help us out.”

“I will certainly do my best.”

He ushered them into an office that Faith thought was surprisingly cramped for a tenured professor. Then again, she’d never gone to college, so how would she know?

He sat behind a desk, somehow managing to look small in spite of the cramped space. Michael and Faith sat almost cheek to cheek in the two small chairs in front of his desk. Turk looked around for a place to sit and eventually settled for sitting underneath their chairs.

Dr. Cranston folded his hands on top of his desk and asked, “So, how can I help you?”

Michael set the case file on the desk and started to open it, then paused. “I’m going to warn you, these are hard to look at.”

Cranston’s smile faded slightly. “Ah. I should have guessed. This is in regard to a murder?”

“Two murders,” Faith corrected.

His smile faded all the way. “I see. I’m so sorry.”

“Maybe you can help us be less sorry,” Faith said. She nodded to Michael, and he opened the file.

Cranston glanced at the photos and flinched. “Oh God. Oh...” He put his hand over his mouth and paled a shade. “Oh God.”

“Not very pretty, is it?” Michael said. “We need your help figuring out the meaning behind all of this.”

“Oh my God,” Cranston repeated. “Those poor girls. They’re not much older than my graduate students.”

“Cassidy Holt was twenty-eight, and Samantha Reynard was thirty-two.”

“She looks younger,” Cranston said absently. “I’m sorry. That’s not an appropriate thing to say.”

“Why isn’t it appropriate?” Faith asked.

“Oh... I don’t know, actually. I guess I... I’m just not used to seeing things like this.”

“Count yourself lucky,” Michael said. “Doing this for a living gets less and less fun as time goes on.”

Faith stepped in to bring the conversation into focus. “Cassidy Holt was killed first. She’s the brunette who was folded up like she’s going to do a cannonball into a swimming pool.”

“And that black stuff on her body,” Cranston interrupted. “Is that dirt?”

“Strictly speaking, we don’t know yet,” Faith replied, “but I don’t think so. If it was

dirt, I can't imagine the CSIs would send it to a lab for analysis. She was found in a botanical garden, so dirt is pretty commonplace there."

"Ah. And the other woman, Sarah?"

"Samantha," Michael corrected. "Reynard. Killed in her loft apartment two nights ago. Left positioned like that, arms and legs spread. Covered with white powder this time. Well, not covered. Dusted."

"Yes, I see," Cranston said, nodding. "And now I know why you came to me. You read my translation of the Magnum Opus."

"We scanned the pertinent parts," Michael said. "Is that what our killer's doing?"

Cranston nodded slowly. "It appears so. The Magnum Opus involves four shapes, four humors—usually represented with colored liquids or powders—and four elements."

"Is there any significance to posing them naked?" Faith asked.

"Possibly. Some alchemical traditions require that sacrifices be pure. Stripped of clothing, shorn of fur or hair and unblemished with makeup or tattoos. It seems that our killer may subscribe to a portion of that philosophy. I have no doubt that the shapes are intentional, though. Miss Holt was posed in the shape of a circle. I'm guessing the inner circle."

"The inner circle?"

"Yes. Here."

He grabbed a notepad and a pen and drew a circle. Around that circle, he drew a

square so that its sides just touched the edges of the circle. He drew an equilateral triangle with the bottom line joined with the bottom of the square and its vertical sides touching the top corners. Then he drew a larger circle around the triangle.

“This is the squared circle,” he explained. “Each symbol is paired with an element, and each element with one of the alchemical humors. So the inner circle is paired with earth, represented by the black humor, or nigredo. The square is paired with air and represented by the white humor, or albedo. The triangle is paired with water and represented by the yellow humor, citrinitas. The outer circle with fire and paired with the red humor, rubedo. I suspect that this second victim, Miss Reynard, was posed with each of her limbs terminating at one corner of the square. The white powder, of course, symbolizes albedo, the whitening.”

“The whitening?”

“Yes. The names of the humors are also the names of the processes required to complete the Magnum Opus. Nigredo is the blackening, albedo the whitening, and so forth.”

He took his glasses off and cleaned them nervously. “I’m afraid that this means that your killer is only halfway done. He or she no doubt intends to complete this process and that means he or she will be looking for two more victims, one for citrinitas and one for rubedo.”

Faith sighed. She wasn’t surprised to hear that. It was an obvious conclusion, but it still angered Faith to know for sure now that once more, they had a psychopath running loose looking for innocent victims.

“So this guy’s killing people to turn lead into gold?” Michael asked incredulously. “I don’t get it. Who just carries lead around? And even if he turned it into gold, he’d need a lot of gold to make any substantial amount of money these days.”

Cranston replaced his glasses and folded his hands. “He’s not looking for gold. Or she.”

“Forget the pronouns,” Faith said. “If he’s not looking for gold, then what is he looking for.”

“Eternal life,” Cranston replied.

Faith sat speechlessly for a while. After a moment, Cranston continued. “The Magnum Opus refers to the process of turning lead into gold, but that is a euphemism. What the alchemist seeks to create with this work isn’t gold, but the philosopher’s stone. That stone is said to grant its possessor eternal life. Some believed that the stone was a corporeal object imbued with magical properties. Some consider the philosopher’s stone to be a euphemism as well and claimed that there was no physical object and the alchemist would simply feel himself rejuvenated and the hand of death stayed.

“So he’s killing girls so that he can live forever?”

“That is my guess, yes.”

Faith sighed and leaned back as far as the limited space would allow. “I don’t suppose you talk to any alchemists, Doctor?”

Cranston shook his head. “The art is dead. It’s a superstition based on ancient spiritualism. I’m sure there are people out there who believe it, but they must be few and far between. And no, I’ve never met any of them. I find these superstitions fascinating, but in an academic sense. I can’t imagine how foolish you would need to be to do something like this.”

Faith stood. “Thank you for your time, doctor. You’ve been very helpful.”

“I certainly hope so,” he said, standing and shaking their hands. “I hope you find this person before he kills again. It’s just so sad how far some people will carry their delusions.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed, looking at the photos as Michael replaced them in the file. “Very sad.”

On the way to their car, they discussed what they’d learned.

“Well, this is good news,” Michael said. “We have the why now. All we still need to determine is the who.”

“Ironical that the who is the only important question.”

"Remember what I said about being pessimistic. We know this guy's preferred target, we know his motive, and we know his M.O. We're in good shape for our second day looking at the case."

“But we still need to figure out who.”

Her phone buzzed. Detective Hilary. She answered, and a moment later, said “Thank you. We’re on our way,” and hung up.

Michael looked at her warily. “Good news or bad news?”

“Good news. Giacomo Medici’s back in town. He’s on his way to the precinct to talk to us.”

“Fingers crossed he can give us a name,” Michael said. “I really don’t want to find someone positioned like a triangle tomorrow.”

The three of them headed for the precinct. Faith thought of what Dr. Cranston had said in his lecture about symbols connecting the physical world to the metaphysical. What had happened to their killer, he wondered, that he would believe that murder would earn him everlasting life? What power did these symbols hold in his mind?

And how many more “symbols” would he create before they stopped him?

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The killer used to despise the ancients for their love of obscurity. Things could never be explained simply. If the killer wished to bake a cupcake, then it was effortless to find a recipe that listed the exact quantities of the exact ingredients and provide them alongside explicit instructions about how to combine and bake the ingredients to get exactly the dessert one wanted.

But if the killer wanted to know how to summon the favor of an archdemon or manipulate the hearts and minds of others, the killer would come across such gems as ‘the heart of a virgin whose eyes have never seen the sunrise’ or ‘the bones of a dog fed honey and milk and slain over an altar of hickory.’

As the killer matured, however, it became obvious that obscurity wasn't what was truly frustrating. It was difficult. The ancients were just as specific with their alchemic recipes and thaumaturgic spells as were bakers and cooks. It's just much easier to find three eggs than it is to find the tears of a mother whose only son has died of cholic.

Of course, not all formulas require such garish substances. One would be surprised how much could be done with ordinary household spices.

But this recipe... this Magnum Opus... required more than just ingredients. It had taken the killer so long to understand, but to obtain eternal life, one needed much more than powder.

Ironically, it was the powder that had taken the killer the longest to understand. The elements were easy enough. Hell, everyone knew about them. All one had to do was read a children's book about magic to know the four elements.

The shapes were even easier, of course. They were the same shapes every infant pushed through holes in a plastic box.

The humors were the most difficult. What exactly was a humor? How did one find a ‘the blackening?’ It had taken the killer years of research to learn that the humors could be represented by anything neutral colored in the appropriate way: powders, liquids, gels, paints, confetti... anything would work.

Except it didn’t. For years. For decades.

And so, the killer fought and wept and pleaded and demanded and cajoled and bargained with every spirit the killer could contact, every shaman the killer could find, every text the killer could dig up or steal.

Nothing. No answer. Occasionally, some wizened old witch doctor would smugly tell the killer to “follow the instructions,” and the killer would need to leave quickly before the desire to throttle the life from them became overwhelming.

But finally, the epiphany had come.

The killer had been treating the ingredients as objects, the steps as a mathematical formula. This wasn’t incorrect, but it was incomplete. The objects weren’t enough. The process wasn’t enough. They were important, but only as symbols of the forces they represented.

The elements represented the forces that governed the universe. Earth was more than a clump of dirt. It was life itself! The primordial energies that birthed existence. Air was not the wind. It was the breath that strengthened life and carried its energy throughout the world. Water was the blood of the world that sustained the earth and made it fruitful. And fire was the furnace that sustained this process throughout time and space.

Similarly, the shapes were the order that could be imposed on those forces by those strong enough and discerning enough to understand and apply that order. The killer had chosen to follow the order set forth in the ancient texts, but it would have been perfectly permissible to choose any shape. A dodecahedron would work as well as a triangle, and had the killer used rectangles instead of circles, they would have worked just as well.

But the humors... that was the key to it all. That was why they had to be represented by neutral items, objects that had no innate spiritual power but instead functioned only to channel the power given them.

The humors were the will that shaped the order that imposed on the forces that, when mastered, granted eternal life.

Nigredo , the blackening, the abolition of self, the abolition of desire, of attachment, of fear, of lust, of everything.

Albedo , the whitening, the arrival of inspiration, of understanding, the illumination of things once hidden.

Citrinitas , the yellowing, the harnessing of eternity, the power of the sun that far eclipsed the limited power of Earth and the life that clung so feebly to it.

Rubedo, the reddening, to infuse oneself with limitless energy, a force that would replenish itself indefinitely, pulling all three of the others together and creating...

“Philosophum lapis.”

The killer let those words ring through the air. The name didn't really matter. They served only to identify the power the Magnum Opus unlocked.

But the killer would soon unlock it. For finally, after twenty-seven years of work, the killer had discovered the missing piece, the one never spoken of directly but alluded to frequently among the annals of those most respected in alchemy.

If one was to gain life, one had to take life.

So, the killer had taken a first life and completed nigredo . The killer had taken a second life and completed albedo.

And tonight, the killer would take a third life and complete citrinitas.

The killer took a deep breath and released it slowly. The sacrifice—like the others—was unaware of her purpose. She laughed and smiled and sighed as though her life mattered, as though she had already gained an eternity she would never know.

The killer watched her and waited.

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“You ever wonder how these people make it this far?” Michael asked.

Faith’s brow furrowed. “What? Where did that come from? What people?”

The light turned green, and Michael slowly accelerated. “I mean the killers. The people we track down. Do you ever wonder how they make it as far as they do?”

Faith's shoulders tensed. "Well, things are different now. Serial killers used to go months in between victims. Sometimes years. People had time to develop a profile, determine a motive, identify potential victims and sometimes even suspects before anyone else was hurt. We have to do all of those things rapid-fire. Honestly, it's miraculous that we manage to solve cases as fast as we do. I feel for the victims, of course, but we do the best we can, and better than anyone else could. Imagine how many victims we'd have if we didn't move as fast as we do?"

Michael glanced at her. “Are you okay, Faith? I didn’t mean what you thought I meant at all.”

She blinked. “What did you mean?”

"I meant that it's surprising that killers don't get identified and put away long before they kill. Not all killers, but the wackos like the ones we get. Like Langeveldt. That guy kidnapped people in public, paralyzed them and left them at his house until they dehydrated or had a heart attack. Or that one guy who killed soldiers and arms dealers and drew symbols in their blood. I'm just saying that's advanced mental illness. I just don't know how people who are that screwed up get away with it for so long."

“They don’t, though,” Faith said. “They lead normal lives until they snap. They might come across as weird or awkward, but do you look at every awkward person you see and wonder if they have a fetish for dropping women into wells?”

“Honestly, after sixteen years in the FBI, yes.”

“But do you really? Do you follow those people or interrogate them or try to get search warrants for their houses?”

He nodded slowly. “I think I see your point.”

She nodded. “The worst part is that most of those people are harmless. Weird people aren’t usually murderers. They’re just... well, weird. I read about a guy once who collected shrunken heads.”

“Shrunken heads?”

“Yeah, like what headhunters from those tribes in South America make.”

“Christ.”

“Exactly. You look at a guy like that, and you think he has to be psycho. But this guy lived for eighty-nine years and never so much as ran a red light. He had a wife, kids and grandkids. He volunteered at a soup kitchen and voted in every single election. He just happened to like shrunken heads, so when he got wealthy enough, he spent a lot of money to collect them and display them in a room in his house.”

“I’m willing to say that he’s not a murderer,” Michael said, “but one hundred percent that guy wasn’t all kosher. He might have been smart enough or had enough self-control to know he wouldn’t get away with murder, but I’ll bet he fantasized about it.”

Faith shrugged. “Maybe. But my point still stands. There really aren’t many truly harmful people in the world. So those that are truly harmful fly under the radar. Until they murder women, strip them naked and sprinkle colored powder on them so they can live forever.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Still, it boggles the mind how they can reserve enough brainpower to function in normal society.”

He parked the cruiser in front of the precinct, and the three agents walked inside and met Detective Hilary. He looked five years older than he had when they saw him last.

“Everything all right, Detective?” Faith asked. “Do you need to be with your mother?”

“No,” Hilary said. “I just finished talking to the boyfriend. It’s just hard to see the loved ones sometimes. Losing someone that close to you is a pain I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

“I understand that,” Faith said.

Hilary sighed and gestured to a hallway lined with interview rooms. “Anyway, he’s ready for you. He’s in room two. That’s the first one on the right.”

Michael clapped Hilary on the shoulder briefly, and then the three agents headed to the interview room to talk to Giacomo Medici.

As soon as Faith stepped into the room, she understood why Hilary was so affected. Giacomo’s shoulders were slumped, and though he wasn’t weeping now, his eyes were puffy and red with the tears he had shed. He lifted those eyes to the agents, and the depth of his pain seemed to emanate from his gaze.

Faith recalled the time when Franklin West had beaten David nearly to death. The thought of spending her life without him was inconceivably frightening. That thought had become reality for Giacomo.

“Giacomo Medici?” Michael asked.

The well-built young man—Faith guessed he was twenty-five or so, younger than Samantha—nodded. “Yes, sir.” His voice carried a slight trace of an Italian accent.

“I’m very sorry to have to talk to you about this today,” Faith said.

Giacomo took a shaky breath and nodded. Turk trotted over to him and placed his head on Giacomo’s lap, staring up at him with his big brown eyes full of sympathy. He could have a wonderful third act as a therapy dog. Something to consider.

“How long were the two of you together?” Michael asked.

“Four years,” Giacomo said.

“Long time,” Faith observed.

“Yes. We met at her yoga studio. I was in Chicago to train with Robert Palhares.” He pronounced Robert in the French manner: Ro-bear. “I was just entering the professional world, and my instructor believed that Robert would help fill in some gaps in my game.”

“You’re talking about jiu-jitsu?” Faith asked.

“Yes. Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Robert suggested that I practice yoga for flexibility and mental fortitude. I took one of Samantha’s classes. She was a little older than me, but she was easily the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.”

“She was beautiful,” Michael agreed.

Giacomo looked away, tears forming in his eyes. His well-defined arms flexed and relaxed as he squeezed his fists reflexively. It wasn't hard to see why Samantha was attracted to him.

“Did you two live together?”

He shook his head. “No. I wanted to move in with her, but she wanted to take things slowly. She... I think she wasn't as sure about our future as I was. I knew the moment I saw her that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I think she thought that since I was younger, I would lose interest. But we would have been married eventually. Of this, I'm sure.”

Faith shared a look with Michael. Now came the hard part. She leaned forward and folded her hands. “Giacomo, I know this is hard, but can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Samantha?”

He sighed again and began to rock back and forth. “I don't know. She was so kind to everyone, so giving. She was the person who if you had a problem, she would stay up all night talking to you to make you feel better. She would visit her friends with food, and she would volunteer at nursing homes and hospitals. She was such a kind person. I can't understand why anyone would do this.”

“Did she mention having problems with anyone? Anyone new in her life who made her feel uncomfortable?”

He frowned and nodded. Faith's ears perked up.

“A student,” he said. “In her class. Sometimes, the men, they take these classes because they like to see the pretty girls bend their bodies in a sexy way. You know?”

“I can imagine,” Michael said with a slight smile.

“So sometimes, she has to tell people, ‘Hey, eyes forward’ or ‘Look at me, not her.’”

“You mean she catches men leering at women and tells them to behave themselves?” Faith said.

“Yes. Like that. Usually, the men, they just stop coming. I would be embarrassed if I was caught staring. I never thought anything of it, though. I mean, all men look, right? And Samantha is beautiful. I am sure that many men looked at her and wished they could be with her. That is what happened to me. But I didn’t think any man would go so far. I guess I was a fool. I just...”

His lower lip trembled, and he hung his head. Turk whined softly and nestled in closer.

“Did she have any trouble recently with an inappropriate student?”

Giacomo nodded. “His name was Oliver, I think? He would stare at the women all the time. He didn’t care that she warned him to stop. He would just stare. Samantha let him stay for three months, but when she saw him taking pictures of the girls, that was the last straw. She kicked him out.”

“When was this?”

“A month ago. I didn’t think he’d do anything, though. He was a creep, but he was very timid. He didn’t seem like he would be so violent.”

So many serial killers came across as timid. Faith didn’t point that out, though. “How did he react when Samantha kicked him out of her class?”

“Like that. Like timid. She said he turned red and looked at his shoe and only nodded when she talked to him. She said she felt bad for him because he looked so embarrassed, but she couldn’t feel that bad because he was her age. He was old enough to know better.”

“That’s definitely old enough to know better,” Michael said. “So has she seen him again after kicking him out?”

Giacomo stiffened a little, then nodded.

Faith and Michael shared another look. “When?” she asked.

“He still goes there.”

Her eyes widened. “To her class?”

“No, to another instructor’s class. There are five teachers at the studio. Samantha teaches the evening class. Oliver started going to the afternoon class.”

“You don’t happen to know anything about Oliver? Where he works, where he lives, anything?”

Giacomo shook his head. Then he lifted his eyes to Faith. There was pain there, but there was a hardness behind the pain. “If I knew where he worked or lived, I wouldn’t have come here to talk to you.”

Faith nodded. “Giacomo, I promise you, revenge is a dish best never served at all. I know how much you’re hurting right now, but please promise me you won’t do anything foolish.”

“I can’t,” he said. “I don’t know where the person who killed her is.”

“We don’t know who he is yet,” she said. “We’ll talk to Oliver, but not all stalkers end up murderers.”

Still, this was a damned good lead, their best one so far. If they could establish a connection between Oliver and Cassidy, then they would have their first true suspect.

“Someone ended up a murderer,” Giacomo said.

His words were soft, but Faith picked up the slight accusation there.

“Yes,” she agreed, “And we’ll find them, whoever it is. I promise.”

The three of them left Giacomo there and headed to Hilary’s office. When they reached the detective, Faith said, “Detective, I need a list of everyone named Oliver who attends classes at Lake Yoga.”

“Samantha Reynard’s school?”

“Yes. We might have a lead. Looks like Samantha caught a guy named Oliver taking candid pictures of the female students. She kicked him out of her class, and he started taking the class right before hers.”

“Huh. Any connection to Cassidy Holt?”

“That’s one of the things we want to find out.”

Hilary nodded. “I’ll get you that list. In the meantime, if you want lunch, there’s sandwiches and donuts in the break room.”

“Donuts for lunch?” Michael asked.

Hilary smiled drily. “We’re police officers. There’s always donuts.”

The three of them headed to the break room. Faith was hungry, but she hoped their lunch would be cut short. For the first time since taking this case, she felt excited. They were finally doing something.

And if they were lucky, they would stop this alchemist before he completed citrinitas.

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Faith was halfway through a turkey club when Detective Hilary returned with a name. “Oliver Pennington. Pharmacist for St. Paul’s Hospital in Glencoe.”

“Wonderful,” Faith said, tossing Turk the rest of her sandwich. The big dog happily snapped the sandwich out of the air and swallowed it in two bites.

Hilary set a printout in front of the two human agents and sat across from them. “Thirty-four years old, has been a dues-paying member of Lake Yoga for fifteen months.”

“Fifteen months?” Michael asked.

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” Faith said. “He started taking Samantha’s classes six months ago.”

“I called the studio. It looks like they track memberships, but not which classes their members take. It’s an open studio. The dues pay for everything, so you can pop in whenever you want.”

“Have any complaints been filed against him?”

“None. The woman I spoke to mentioned that Samantha had asked him not to come to her classes anymore, but apparently no one else complained, and Samantha wouldn’t say why she’d asked him to stop coming.”

Faith shared a grim look with Michael. That decision fit with the kind and

sympathetic person Giacomo described. It was unfortunate how many well-meaning people unknowingly facilitated the actions of killers.

Well, they didn't know Oliver was the killer yet. He was a person of interest at the moment, nothing more.

"What's the connection to Cassidy Holt?" she asked.

"That's pretty thin," Hilary admitted. "But Cassidy was seen at the hospital for a twisted ankle, and Pennington filled her prescription for Percocet."

"They give Percocet for twisted ankles?" Michael asked incredulously.

"They do if you tear ligaments," Hilary replied.

"Okay, torn ligaments is a little more serious than a twisted ankle."

"Well, she tore them twisting her ankle."

"Not important, fellas," Faith interrupted. "That's the only verifiable connection with Cassidy Holt?"

"Yes. It's worth mentioning that the hospital is only a mile away from the Botanic Gardens."

"That gives him access to Cassidy," Michael said. "And if he was stalking Samantha, then odds are, he knew where she lived."

"I think we have enough to go talk to him," Faith said before cautioning, "let's not try to shove him into a box until we have a conversation."

Hilary lifted a finger. "I hate to be a pessimist, but right now, we don't have enough to make him talk."

"Seriously? You don't think he's a suspect at this point?"

"I don't think we can make him talk," Hilary clarified, "but I might be able to convince a judge to get me a search warrant on his property. If we can find evidence of him taking pictures of women without their consent, then we can bring him up on menacing charges and make him talk to us whether he wants to or not."

Faith frowned. "I'm not trying to be judgmental, Detective, but I don't want to be involved in a handshake deal with a judge. If we do this, we do this aboveboard."

"It will be aboveboard," Hilary insisted. "We know this guy's a creep. Even if he's not the killer, he needs to have it made clear to him that stalking women and taking pictures of them without their permission isn't okay. As far as the judge, I've solved over one hundred cases with this department, and some of them I solved because I got a hunch, and the hunch led me the right direction. Some of the others I solved because I got a hunch and it led me the wrong direction but I was able to figure that out quickly and stop wasting time."

Faith could understand Hilary's argument, but she still wasn't convinced. "I still think we should go talk to him first, and then if he acts fishy, we can look into a warrant."

"What if we split the difference?" Hilary suggested. "I go get that warrant while you two go talk to him at the hospital."

Faith's eyes narrowed. "Why is this so important to you?"

Hilary's lips thinned, and when he replied, there was more emotion in his voice than Faith had heard from him before. "I want this guy," he said. "After thirty years with

Chicago P.D., I'll admit that I've become desensitized to a lot of things, but some coward sneaking up behind women to break their necks over some pagan ritual is something I haven't become desensitized to. I don't like the women of Chicago feeling like they have to look over their shoulder to feel safe in their own homes. I don't like the idea of a Franklin West copycat terrorizing my neighbors."

"He's not a Franklin West copycat," Faith snapped. "He's nothing like Franklin West."

The vehemence in her voice surprised her. Evidently it surprised Hilary and Michael too. Hilary blinked, and Michael shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Hilary looked like he wanted to argue the point or explain himself further, but he chose to let the debate drop. "All right. Be that as it may, I want this creep brought in. I've seen too many people slither out of an arrest because they fell back on the 'no warrant, no talky' line. Maybe that's not something you've run into before, but I have. I've seen people die because we didn't take the steps needed to back a suspect into a corner. You don't have to agree with my methods, Special Agent, but you're in my city, and I am urging you to trust that I know what I'm doing."

Faith didn't think that Hilary's experience led to the conclusions he had derived from it, but she didn't want to argue anymore. As long as he didn't do anything that would cause trouble for them later, she would swallow her pride and play nice.

"All right. As long as you get me a clean warrant, then that's fine with me."

"Oliver's dirty," he replied. "So any warrant we get on him will be clean."

"Sounds good to me," Michael said quickly. "I have the hospital plugged into the GPS already. Let's go, Faith. Thank you, Detective."

He led Faith and Turk out of the precinct. Faith could tell he was upset, but she didn't

press him until they were in the car. “You’re mad at me.”

“Not mad,” he insisted. “Concerned. That little snafu over West. What was that?”

Faith was a little taken aback by that. She knew he felt awkward about that, but she expected him to scold her over her resistance to the warrant. “I just... I really hate people acting like West is the reason everyone kills. When have we met any killers who mimic West?”

“I know of at least one,” Michael said.

This is your fault, Bold.

Faith looked away. “Do you think this killer is like West?”

“I don’t think Hilary was arguing that he was.”

He pulled onto the freeway and accelerated to merge with traffic. A driver in a lifted pickup started to speed up to cut him off, but braked hard when he saw that it was a police vehicle. Michael kept an eye on him until he was sure the pickup wouldn’t try anything stupid, then continued.

“I think Hilary was saying he didn’t want a prolific spree-slash-serial killer in Chicago. West happens to be the most prolific and well-known serial killer alive right now. It would be like someone saying they don’t want the next John Wayne Gacy in their town.”

Faith frowned. Michael was right. Obviously right. Clearly right. She shouldn’t have needed to hear him say that. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. You might want to kick an apology Hilary’s way, but it can

wait. I'm just concerned that you might still be fixating on him."

"Do you have an issue with how I've been performing on this case?" she asked.

"I have an issue with that smarmy-ass question," he said. "I'm concerned because you're my friend, and I want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm okay," she insisted. "I just made a mistake. Look, it's... grating... to hear people treat him like a celebrity. I'm not very happy that he's been given celebrity status like he's a damned movie star. But it's not a big deal. It just rubbed me the wrong way to hear Hilary say that. Especially arguing for some sort of handshake deal with a judge."

"I don't know if handshake deal means what you think it means," Michael replied, "and I also don't think that Hilary's suggesting anything illegal. I think he knows a judge who trusts his judgment, not a sleazeball whose palm he can grease." He glanced at her. "Seriously, why does this bother you anyway? You're normally the one stepping outside of the rules to get something done."

She sighed. "Upper management is trying to get me sidelined to a desk job when Turk retires next month. The media blew up the story of my mistakes with past cases to try to sensationalize the West case even more, and now the brass is worried that I might be a liability in the field because I'm more well-known now."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Well, no one's recognized you here so far, so I'd say they're mistaken."

"Yes, but if we get a complaint saying we obtained an illegal warrant to talk to a suspect, then it's going to make the probably end of my field career a certain end."

Michael nodded. "I get it. I understand now. But I still think you're worrying too

much. And at the end of the day, it's about protecting the innocent and catching the bad guy, right?"

Turk barked firmly.

"See?" Michael said. "He gets it."

Faith chuckled. "You're right. I'm sorry. I just hate feeling like I'm walking on eggshells."

"So many roads are paved with them," Michael said.

They reached the hospital a few minutes later. As Michael pulled into the parking lot, Faith noticed a man matching Oliver's prescription about to enter a pickup truck.

"Hold on, Michael," she said. "I think that's him."

"It is? Shit. Hold on."

He swung the cruiser around and pulled behind the truck. Faith rolled down her window and said, "Oliver Pennington?"

The man jumped and turned to her, eyes wide. "Wh—what do you guys want?"

"I'm Special Agent Faith Bold with the FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince, and my K9 unit, Turk. We have some questions we'd like to ask you."

"Oh... Um... I don't know. I really don't know anything. I don't think so, guys. Sorry."

“You haven’t heard why we want to talk to you yet.”

Oliver was trembling slightly. He looked ahead of his truck, then back at the cruiser.

“I just don’t know anything that can help you. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t know anything about Cassidy Holt or Samantha Reynard?”

At the mention of Samantha Reynard’s name, Oliver jumped. His demeanor changed suddenly. “You guys need to get the fuck out of my way! I told you I don’t want to talk to you. It’s illegal for you to block my truck like that.”

Michael’s phone buzzed. He checked the text, then nodded to Faith. “Warrant went through.”

“Outstanding,” Faith said. “Oliver, I’m going to ask nicely. If I have to ask again, it’s not going to be nearly as nice. Will you please come with us so we can talk?”

Oliver looked green. He looked at the cruiser, then at Faith. She saw his eyes change and warned, “Don’t do it, Oliver.”

Then he bolted. Faith sighed and got out of the passenger seat. “Go get him, boy.”

Turk moved like a blur. Faith and Michael sprinted to keep up, but there was no human on Earth who could outrun an athletic German Shepherd.

Oliver certainly wasn’t one of them. Turk outstripped him easily and ran in front of him, causing Oliver to skid to a halt. Faith and Michael flanked him, their weapons drawn.

“Oliver Pennington, you’re being detained on suspicion of criminal menacing. At the moment you’re not under arrest, but that’s a courtesy at this point. We have a search

warrant for your apartment, and Chicago P.D. is executing that warrant now. I think we know what they're going to find."

Oliver held Faith's eyes for a moment. Then he sighed. His shoulders slumped, and when Faith asked, "Are you going to come talk to us," he nodded.

"Wonderful," Faith said, holstering her weapon and pulling out her handcuffs. "Let's go."

Oliver offered no more resistance as she led them to her cruiser. He didn't seem the type to have killed two women in such a brutal way as Cassidy Holt and Samantha Reynard were killed. But then, Franklin West didn't seem the type to have bound over thirty people and cut them to ribbons until they bled to death.

Faith really hated that she had just compared Oliver Pennington to Franklin West.

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Faith and Michael observed Oliver from the other side of the two-way mirror. After being so concerned about staying within the confines of the law, she felt a little guilty for the way she had detained Hilary. It was walking right on the edge of proper procedure, but if things went south with the search or the interrogation, a good lawyer could spin it to make her look really bad.

She really did owe Hilary an apology.

“He’s sweating,” Michael said.

“You think we should turn down the temperature in the room?”

He stared at her for a moment. “I don’t mean he’s literally perspiring, Faith, I mean he’s nervous. Are you sure you’re okay? You seem off.”

She sighed. “Yes, I’m fine. Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind right now.”

“Well, shut off the parts that aren’t focused on the case. I don’t mean to be a prick, but we’ve got a job to do.”

“I know. You’re right.” She paused a second, then added, “Prick.”

He chuckled. “There’s the Faith I know.”

The door opened, and Detective Hilary entered. His lively step and the slight smile on his face told Faith that the search had gone as hoped.

“We have hundreds of photographs and videos of a lot of women who will be very unhappy to learn of said photos and videos,” he announced to the agents. “Giacomo was telling the truth. Our boy here’s a creep.”

“Good to know,” Faith said, relieved that their gamble had paid off. “Now let’s go see if he’s a murderer.”

“I’ll hang back here,” Hilary said. “I tend to intimidate suspects.”

Michael gestured to Turk. “Bet you’re not as intimidating as this guy.”

Hilary grinned. “I am almost certainly not.”

The three FBI agents walked into the room. Almost immediately, Oliver Pennington said, “I want a lawyer.”

“That’s a good idea,” Faith said, “because Chicago P.D. found a lot of pictures and videos of the women you’ve been stalking.”

Oliver flinched and cast terrified eyes up at Faith. “But... they had no right to do that! Who complained? Did Sam say something to them?”

“Who’s Sam?” Michael asked innocently.

Oliver’s mouth opened and closed like a fish. Then he said, “It’s... I... how... why would you guys get a warrant without talking to me?”

He was whining, almost like a child. Faith stifled the look of disgust that played at the corners of her lips. Turk made no attempt to hide his distaste, snorting in contempt at the man.

“Seems like a good thing we did,” Michael said. “You clearly aren’t in a mood to cooperate.”

“I’m not obligated to incriminate myself.”

"That's true. You have a Fifth Amendment right not to admit to taking sexually explicit pictures of women without their consent. The problem is that those women have a right to not have their privacy violated by a sick asshole who thinks it's okay to treat them like objects. We decided to defend their right. You, of course, have the option of defending your right."

“Who’s Sam,” Faith asked, much less innocently than Michael had.

Oliver’s eyes flicked between the two human agents. He was clearly trying to decide if it was worth trying to lie to them. When the K9 agent growled softly, Oliver’s eyes flicked his direction, and he decided it wasn’t worth it. “Sam is my yoga instructor.”

“Is your yoga instructor?”

“Is... was my yoga instructor. One of them. I haven’t been to her class in a while, but she’s one of them.”

“Until she kicked you out of her class, right?” Michael asked. “Because of your little habit of taking pictures of women without their consent?”

Oliver paled further, something Faith would have sworn was impossible if she hadn’t just seen it with her own eyes. “I didn’t hurt anyone,” he insisted.

“Why do you bring that up?” Faith asked. “I didn’t ask if you hurt anyone.”

He blinked. “I mean, I didn’t... I just...” He blinked again. “I want a lawyer.”

“Before we get you one,” Faith said, “I should tell you that Samantha Reynard and Cassidy Holt are dead.”

He flinched. “What? Sam was killed?”

“That’s interesting. I said she was dead. You said she was killed.”

He shifted anxiously. “Well, I assume she is since you’re asking me about her. Why would you care unless it was murder? But I didn’t do it, okay?”

“Tell me what happened between you and Sam.”

“Sam caught me... thought she caught me staring at some of the girls in the class. I didn’t mean to stare, but sometimes the poses put me in positions that make it look like I’m staring.”

“Got it,” Michael said sarcastically. “It was an accident.”

“Look, that’s all it was,” Oliver insisted. “She asked me not to come to her class, so I stopped. Ask the other instructors. She was the only one I had trouble with.”

“Must have been embarrassing to have her call you out like that,” Faith observed.

Oliver lifted his hand as far as the shackle would allow and pointed at Faith. “I know what you’re trying to do. I didn’t kill her.”

“Talk to me about Cassidy Holt,” Faith said. “How did you know her?”

His eyes shifted again. Turk caught the movement and growled. He began to tap the table, then finally sighed and said, “If I talk to you guys, will you promise not to trick me?”

“Trick you?” Michael asked.

“Into saying anything that could get me into trouble.”

“We won’t trick you,” Faith said. “We don’t trick people. We ask honest questions and expect honest answers.”

“Yes, but...” He sighed. “Damn it. What did you find in my apartment?”

“According to the police detective who conducted the search, hundreds of photographs and videos of women taken without their knowledge or consent.”

He slumped forward and dropped his head into his hands. “Oh shit,” he hissed. “Damn it. Fuck, I didn’t hurt anyone. They’re just pictures. Why would women dress like that anyway if they didn’t want guys to notice?”

“Grow up,” Michael said contemptuously. “You’re thirty-four years old. You’re seriously going to try to pull that crap? You know they didn’t want you taking pictures of them. That’s why you did it without asking and only when they didn’t notice.”

“They’re just pictures! I was never going to do anything to them!”

“Cassidy Holt,” Faith said, trying to bring the conversation back to the subject at hand. “How did you know her?”

Oliver looked like he was going to be sick. He tapped on the table and squirmed in his seat.

“You already admitted to taking pictures, Oliver,” Faith said. “The police already found the evidence. If Cassidy Holt and Samantha Reynard show up in any of those

pictures, we'll find out. All that remains to be seen is if you'll cooperate with us or make things difficult."

"On that note," Michael added. "If you aren't the murderer, then cooperating with us will make life much easier for you. Once you prove to us that you're not a killer, we lose interest. Then your case becomes a P.D. case over a peeping Tom."

"I thought I was innocent until proven guilty."

"That's the assumption the court makes when you go to trial, yes. But it's our job to catch murderers. Right now, you look like a murderer. So we're going to try to catch you. Jump off of this hook, Oliver, if you can."

Oliver took a deep breath and released it in a heavy sigh. "Cassidy Holt visited the pharmacy. I filled her prescription and got her address that way. She was hot, man. I mean, she was hot hot. I've always liked petite girls, so I visited her home a few times and got some pictures of her coming out of the shower."

Faith controlled her visceral reaction to that admission. She was grateful now that she had given in and allowed Hilary to get his warrant. "Did you kill her, Oliver?"

"No!"

"Maybe you tried to make a move on her?" Michael said. "She rejected you, you got upset, things got out of hand."

"No! I never tried to make a move on her."

"Maybe she caught you?" Faith asked. "In front of her house. Threatened to call the police. You knew what would happen if they found your collection, so you killed her to silence her."

Oliver scoffed. “Oh yeah, I committed murder to keep her from telling the cops I take pictures.”

“Sarcasm is not your friend here, bud,” Michael advised.

Oliver began to shake. “When did they die?”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“When did they die? I want to know if I have an alibi for their deaths so I can prove I didn’t kill them.”

Faith and Michael exchanged a look. “Fair enough,” Michael said. “Cassidy Holt died five days ago. Samantha Reynard died two days ago.”

“At night or daytime?”

“Night.”

He slumped forward, releasing his breath in a whoosh of air. “Oh, thank God. Thank God.”

Faith’s heart sank. “You have an alibi?”

“Yes.” He lifted his head. The relief on his face was palpable. “Yes, I have an alibi. I was taking video of other women both nights.”

Michael scoffed. “Oh, boy.”

“Hey, it’s better than murdering people, right?”

“What a lofty personal standard you set.”

“So those videos will prove that you couldn’t have been at the crime scenes,” Faith said, “the murder scenes, I mean.”

“Yes. Let’s see, five nights ago, I was at Georgia’s house. She had her boyfriend over, and she left her window open a crack, so I got to see them doing it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Michael exclaimed.

Faith lifted her hand to quiet him, then asked, “And two nights ago?”

“I was at the gym. Margot was there, and she looks just like the famous girl with the same name. I found a hole in the girls’ locker room and managed to get a camera through into the showers.”

“You realize that’s classified as sexual assault, right?” Michael said. “You’re going to have to register and tell every neighbor you ever have that you’re an offender.”

“But I’m not a murderer. I won’t spend the rest of my life in prison.”

“Good point,” Faith admitted. “These videos are time stamped?”

“Yes! And you can’t edit the timestamps.”

“You can, but cybercrimes will be able to tell when the video was actually created,” Faith said. “Okay, we’ll follow up.”

They left the room and rejoined Hilary to find him looking through the footage they’d recovered. He lifted a grim face to the three of them and began to turn his laptop around.

“I don’t need to see the videos,” Faith said. “Just tell me if his alibi checks out.”

“It checks out,” Hilary said.

She sighed. “Shit.”

“We’ll get a creep off the streets, at least,” Hilary said.

“And guys like that escalate,” Michael pointed out. “He’s a ticking time bomb who we just defused.”

“That might be true,” Faith allowed, “but we have an active missile out there zooming in on its next target. I’d much rather we stopped him.”

“We’ll get him, Faith,” Michael promised. “We always do.”

“I know we’ll get him,” she said. “But will we get him before he sprinkles yellow powder over another woman’s dead body?”

Michael didn’t have an answer to that.

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Lorraine Hayes closed the library door and took a deep breath. The cool, lake-scented air filled her nostrils and relaxed the knots in her shoulders. She smiled. She loved it here. Chicago was the best damned city on Earth no matter what her sister in New York said.

She headed around the building toward the small walkway that led from the library to the Chicago River. She could hear her sister scolding her for walking home alone at night in a big city, but the path was well-lit, and the river might as well have been a highway. In fact, most of it was more canal than river.

But it was still beautiful, and even though the lights were artificial and most of the path was paved with concrete, she still felt immersed in nature.

She giggled at herself for that. Immersed in nature. Because a body of water happened to be a few feet away from her. In the middle of the third-largest city in America. In full view of the skyline.

Well, whatever. She was a city girl. If she wanted to live in the boondocks, she could move to Wyoming or something.

She giggled again, then smiled dreamily as she imagined a buff bronzed cowboy pulling her behind him onto his horse and carrying her off to some cabin in the wilderness where he could have his way with her as much as he wanted.

She sighed. Maybe one day, she'd meet a man who would sweep her off her feet. Probably not a cowboy, though. That was a fantasy that she admitted was probably not as cool in real life as it was in her dreams. Horses smelled, and she really liked

internet and supermarkets, so living off the grid or in some rural town with a Wal-Mart thirty minutes away where everyone did their shopping wasn't her idea of a good time.

Maybe she'd meet some cute grad student or researcher at the library. Hell, she wasn't picky. She'd settle for a handsome teacher taking his elementary school kids to the library for one of their story days.

She could hear Frankie lecturing her again, trying to tell her that a strong woman didn't need a man to fulfill her.

"Well, that's all well and good, Frankie, but sometimes I like to have sex."

She said that much louder than she intended to. She looked around, red-faced. Fortunately, no one was around to hear her. While rarely empty, this particular path was seldom-traveled, since it was on the less crowded side of the river.

She chuckled and shook her head. Confident that she was alone, she said, "Well, it's true."

A branch snapped behind her. Her face blanched, and she whirled around. She saw no one. She stood, frozen in place for several seconds before warily turning and continuing her walk. Just to be safe, she decided to be quiet for the remainder of the journey. She didn't need her private thoughts aired out on the Internet tomorrow.

Another branch snapped behind her. She turned around, but once again saw nothing. A squirrel, maybe?

No, a squirrel wouldn't snap a branch like that. A bear? Did bears come into the city? She'd never heard of it happening, but maybe one of them had wandered this way.

Through one of the largest metropolitan areas in America? Across multiple highways? Fat chance.

Then, it occurred to her that a person could have stepped on a branch and snapped it.

The pathway didn't seem so safe anymore. For the first time, she wished that she'd driven to work like every other person in America.

"Hello? Who's there?"

No answer.

"If someone's there, I'd really appreciate if you showed yourself, because I'm getting really creeped out right now."

No answer.

Maybe an acorn fell.

She clung to that thought and the relief it brought. That made sense, right? An acorn could have made that sound, falling from a branch and hitting the ground. If there was a person, they'd probably make more noise, especially if they were walking off the path.

She turned around and continued walking. A few yards later, the path transitioned from concrete to packed dirt. That made her feel even more isolated, more vulnerable. Her heart pounded, and her hands trembled.

I just need to get home, she thought. I'll get home, pour myself a drink, laugh at how stupid I'm being, then take my car to work. Who cares about emissions? I'm not helping the environment by saving the quart of gas per day it takes me to get to and

from the library.

She quickened her pace, moving at an awkward gait that was somewhere between a fast walk and a jog. Part of her brain screamed at her to run, to stop messing around and get to safety now.

But if she did that, she would be admitting that there was a threat. There wasn't a threat. Everything was fine. She needed to calm down. She was alone at night, and she was imagining the worst, but everything was okay. There was no need to panic like this.

Another branch snapped behind her, and she whirled around. "Who the hell..."

Her voice trailed off when she saw the figure rushing toward her. For a split second, she didn't acknowledge what she saw. That couldn't be real. She was imagining things.

Then panic overwhelmed denial. She turned and ran. She opened her voice to scream, but before she could, one hand grabbed the crown of her head, and another grabbed her jaw. The hands twisted viciously. Lorraine heard a snap, much like the sound of the branches that had snapped earlier.

Then the lights went out.

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Faith forced herself to eat the last of the rubbery orange chicken. The food wasn't great, but to be honest, it wasn't any worse than any other Chinese takeout place. She just wasn't hungry. But she needed fuel, and allowing her irritation to starve her wasn't smart. So, she swallowed the chicken and forced the last of the rice to follow it.

Michael had finished his food already. She was pretty sure nothing could stifle his appetite. Likewise, Turk had downed the last of his food and now slept contentedly in between the two mattresses of their room.

Today had been a disappointment. They had no leads, no suspects, and no idea who their killer was or when he would strike next.

What made today especially frustrating was that it wasn't entirely unproductive. In fact, they'd learned more on their first full day working this case than they had learned about entire cases in the past.

They knew their killer's motive. They knew his M.O. inside and out. They had an almost completely thorough understanding of the crime scenes. They knew what he was going to do next.

But they didn't know who the killer was. She could tell herself all day that it wasn't fair for her to expect herself to know that after only a day and a quarter of work, but fair didn't do anything to protect the next victim who even now could be dead and naked with yellow powder sprinkled over her body.

"We need to know what that powder is," Michael said. "If there's anything unique

about it, it could lead us to our killer.”

“We need to know who knew both victims besides Oliver Pennington,” Faith replied. “That powder could be colored sand for all we know. I feel like if there was something unique about it, we would have heard already.”

“I feel the opposite. If it was ordinary, we would have had answers within hours. Instead, we’re coming up on a week since it was lifted from Cassidy Holt’s body, and we have nothing. It’s got to be something rare.”

“And if it isn’t?” Faith asked.

“Can you please stop being negative?” he snapped. “What do you want me to say? If the lead doesn’t pan out, then everyone will die, and we’ll be failures?”

“I’m fine with being optimistic, Michael, but I’m not just going to act like everything’s okay when it isn’t. I can’t just convince myself that everything will work out when I don’t know for sure that it will.”

“Well, it’s not helpful to just assume that everything’s going to work out poorly.”

“I’m not assuming , Michael! I’m trying to plan ahead!”

“So tell me a plan, don’t just throw your hands up in the air and say, ‘Well, I hope everything works out, but it probably won’t.’”

“Okay,” Faith said tersely. “Sounds good. I’ll be cheerful and bubbly all the time. Never mind that there are women out there at risk of being murdered so a psychopath can cast a spell to obtain eternal life.”

“You’re right, Faith,” he said sarcastically. “This is much different from literally

every single case we've ever worked ever. How are we going to handle this totally unique situation? God, how is it possible that we don't have all the answers right now?"

"The longer we don't have answers, the more people die!"

"Yes. That's true. That's the damned job, Faith. The same job you've been working for eleven years."

"Well, I'm sorry I haven't gotten used to the fact that I can't save everyone."

"Me too. Because you're a lot less effective when you're petulant."

Faith turned away from him and pressed her lips together so they wouldn't tremble with anger. After a moment, Michael sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that in anger."

Faith picked up on the meaning behind that. "But you still should have said it?"

He sighed again. "Yes. It's the truth. Look back on the cases we've worked. You're at your best when you can distance yourself from the emotions of the job and focus on the process. When you can't, we end up with situations like when Turk bit an innocent man in the subway or when you were nearly suspended for committing home invasion against another innocent man. It's been a while since you've been this depressive, and I'm concerned. I understand that you're going through a lot of stress right now. But—and I don't mean this out of anger or frustration—but if you aren't in a place to put emotion aside, then maybe it's a good idea for you to take some time out of the field."

Faith stiffened but stifled the angry retort. She looked at the wall and said nothing, not quite trusting herself to speak. Michael remained silent, not apologizing further

and not attacking her.

What hurt the most was that he was right. The stress was getting to her. Turk's pending retirement, her possible forced "retirement," the upcoming move with David that might or might not be the death knell of their relationship, therapy with a doctor who was hell-bent on allowing her to keep absolutely nothing to herself, West's trial and a new murderer who might be obsessed with her... it was all too much.

But pulling away wasn't the answer. That was the same as giving up, and Faith wasn't a quitter. If she took a step back now, she wouldn't take another step forward. Turk was retiring in a month, and if that date came while she was sitting behind a desk, she'd stay behind that desk.

She looked at Turk, resting peacefully in between the mattresses. She wondered if he would have trouble with retirement, or if he'd be just as happy running through the park chasing butterflies as he was chasing bad guys. Would he even understand that he was retired, or would he think he was just waiting for a new case? Would he just be happy to be with Faith no matter where he was and what he was doing? Maybe she'd be just as happy pulling nine-to-five work and spending her free time with her dog and her boyfriend.

But she wasn't there yet, and as long as she was still a field agent, relaxation wasn't an option for her. Still, she needed to balance her emotions better when working a case. Michael wasn't wrong about that.

"I apologize for my moodiness," she said. "The stress I'm going through now is a lot, but I shouldn't let it impact my work."

"I don't know if that's something you can control, Faith," he replied gently. "And if you can, I don't know if it's something you should control. You're only human. That's something you've always had trouble dealing with, but eventually pushing

yourself past your limits catches up to you. We've both seen dozens of agents burn out hard at the end of their careers. I'd just hate to see that happen to you."

Faith nodded, then said, "Let's take things one step at a time. I'll pull my emotions back in regard to the case. I'll be patient with the process without slowing down or just waiting for things to fall into place. I'm going to leave everything else for after, and I'd appreciate it if you did the same."

He met her eyes, and she saw the concern in his gaze. "I'll be all right," she assured him. "I've dealt with worse and pulled through. As for the burnout, I promise I'll step away on my own terms long before the stress goes that far." She was almost certain that she couldn't keep that promise, but she needed him to focus on the case as well, and if he was too concerned for her, then he wouldn't be.

Michael's expression made it clear that he didn't believe her, but his words made it clear that he would back off anyway. "Sounds good. So, without pessimism or fear, let's look at the case. What's our next step?"

Before Faith could answer, her phone rang. Detective Hilary. Her blood froze. These calls were rarely good news.

She steeled herself for the coming blow and answered. "Hello?"

"We got the report on the powder," Hilary replied.

She nearly collapsed with relief when she realized it wasn't another body. "I'm going to put you on speaker," she said. She looked at Michael and said, "He's got the report on the powder."

"Huzzah," Michael replied.

Faith switched the phone to speaker and said, "Go ahead, Detective."

"I'm sorry to say it's not good news. The powders are both generic pigmented mica powder. The kind you can get anywhere: craft stores, beauty shops, online art websites, you name it."

Michael sighed. Faith frowned. "It took six days to figure out this is the stuff that sells for ninety-nine cents a jar at Hobby Lobby?"

"I'm no happier than you are," Hilary said. "But I don't control how fast the lab moves. Sometimes they'll have results in a day, sometimes it takes a month."

Faith sighed. Her fear had come true. The powder was nothing special, and it wouldn't help them find their killer any more than learning that the killer wore cotton clothing.

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news," Hilary said when she didn't reply after a moment.

"It's not your fault," Faith said.

"Well, I'm still sorry."

The two agents chuckled bitterly at that. "Us too," Michael said. "Any news on the contacts?"

"Nobody associated with both of them," he replied. "Except for Oliver, and he's got an alibi. My officers are checking on some of the others associated with one or the other, but so far, they all have alibis too. We'll keep looking, but at this point, I'm thinking it's a dead end as well."

Faith rubbed her eyes. “All right. Thank you, Detective.”

“Yep.”

He hung up, and Michael said, “At the risk of sounding like a hypocrite, this really sucks.”

Faith continued to rub her eyes. “Yep. Very much.”

“Phooey. So what’s our next step?”

Faith shook her head. “I guess start looking for crackpots talking about the Magnum Opus online and see if any of them are in the area. Maybe one of those crackpots will be willing to kill to achieve eternal life.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah. We can do that. Damn it, though, we’re just going to end up with a lot of nerds.”

“Only one of those nerds has to be the killer. Let’s avoid pessimism and do our best.”

Michael chuckled. “That’s fair. All right. I’ll start—”

Faith’s phone buzzed again. Hilary. Maybe he’d found something else in the report that would help.

“Go ahead, Detective.”

“Damn it all to Hell.”

Faith frowned. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“What do you think?” he said. “I hung up with you, and two damned minutes later, dispatch called me. They got a call for a naked woman murdered on the banks of the Chicago out by the Willis Branch of the library. Caller was out walking his dog, and the dog started barking like crazy and led him to the body. It’s covered in yellow powder, so there’s no mistaking that it’s our killer. God damn it.”

Michael slumped further upon hearing this. Faith’s head began to ache. She took a moment to compose herself before saying, “All right. Thank you for letting us know. Send us the coordinates, and we’ll meet you out there.”

“Okay. Maybe your dog will find something. If the little lap mutt picked up on the scent, maybe there’s something there Turk can use to find our guy.”

Faith tried to allow this to encourage her, but she was too upset to feel anything positive at the moment. “We’ll see you there.”

She hung up and placed her head in her palms. Michael stood and squeezed her shoulder. “Come on,” he said. “We have a job to do.”

She allowed the flash of irritation his words brought up to pass, then stood. “Yep. Let’s go catch a bad guy.”

Turk perked up at those words. He lifted his head and barked firmly. Faith smiled slightly. “What would I do without you, boy?”

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“How do you handle it?” Faith asked. “How do you accept that you can try your hardest, do everything right, push yourself past your limits and still fail to stop killers?”

Supervisory Special Agent Gordon Clark shrugged. “Depends on the day.” He sipped his coffee and explained. “Some days, it’s enough for me to know that fewer people die because I did my job than would have died if I hadn’t. Some days, I have to satisfy myself with seeing the looks on the killers’ faces when they know they’re caught. Some days—and keep this between you and me—I go home, put on an old John Wayne movie, and get gloriously drunk.”

Faith chuckled. “I could never get into John Wayne. He’s got a couple good movies, I guess, but usually, he’s just unbelievably good at what he does. Where’s the struggle? Where’s the pain? I can’t watch a movie about a guy who waltzes into town and effortlessly beats everyone, then rides off into the sunset. No offense.”

"None taken, but you are watching the wrong movies. I'm going to send you a list of movies you should watch. But before we get sidetracked, the most important answer to your question is that some days, I don't handle it. I don't accept it. Some days, I'm just angry and moody and sad, and I want to tear the world apart or give up and curl up into a ball."

“But you still do your job,” she pressed. “How do you do that without letting it affect you?”

Less than a week ago, Faith had been dragged over the coals and placed on probation by the Boss for her aggressive takedown of a person of interest in the Vampire of

Twin Cities Terminal case. She was angry, but as angry as she was, she knew the decision was fair, even lenient. Most other agents would have been fired had they pulled that kind of stunt.

“That’s the thing. It does affect me. But I do my job anyway.”

She pursed her lips, not satisfied with his answer. He set his coffee cup down and folded his hands in front of him. “Can I be frank with you?”

She smiled wryly. “If I say no, will you listen?”

“No.”

She chuckled and said, “Well, you can be frank with me, but fair warning, if I don’t like it, I’ll pout about it.”

He laughed. “That’s okay. You can pout. It’s not the worst thing you’ve done.”

Her smile faded. “Gee, thanks for that reminder.”

He shrugged. “I never promised that I’d always be nice. But what I was going to say is that you are a great agent, but you have a really hard time dealing with setbacks.”

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. Gordon wasn’t the first person to tell her this. “The problem is that when setbacks occur in our line of work, innocent people die.”

“Yes.”

She waited for him to expand on that point. When he didn’t, she said, “But that’s not acceptable.”

“True. It’s also unavoidable.”

“But... we have to be better than that!”

“Yes. But we can’t be.”

His tone was calm, almost flippant. “I can’t accept that answer,” she said, her growing irritation reflected in her voice.

“I know. That’s my point. You need to figure that out, or you’re going to collapse. Either you’ll finally push the Boss too far, and he’ll stop covering for you—”

“Covering for me?”

"Yes. The brass wants you fired. He's the reason you aren't. We can talk about that later if you want, but let me finish this point. Either you'll push too far and get fired, or you'll go too far and get killed before Prince can save you"—she flinched at that, but Gordon kept going—“or you’ll burn out and fall into despair. I’ve seen those three things happen to lots of officers when I was with LAPD. I’m sure you’ve seen it happen to agents here.”

“But how? How do I become okay with this?”

“You don’t. You accept that sometimes you won’t be okay. You’ll make mistakes. You’ll miss opportunities. You’ll fail to solve cases in time. Sometimes, people will die because of that.”

She looked away, her lower lip trembling and threatening to push out. Apparently, her body had taken the threat to pout literally.

“It sucks, Faith. But believe me, not accepting sucks worse and gets more people

killed.” He lifted his coffee and sipped. His eyes got a faraway look, and Faith wondered what memories were flitting through his mind right now. “It’s not easy. It never will be. But you have to do it. It’s the only way to keep your head above water.”

“Faith? We’re here.”

Faith stirred and turned to Michael. “Right. Sorry. I was remembering a conversation Gordon and I had once.”

“Oh yeah? What about?”

She smiled softly. “Letting go.”

Michael nodded. Then he solemnly lifted the cup of coffee he’d taken from the hotel and poured a little bit on the ground next to the cruiser. “That’s for you, Gordon.”

Faith burst into laughter. The laughter shocked her as much as it shocked Michael, but it felt good to laugh, even if it didn’t dispel the bleakness of what they were about to do.

“What’s that for?” Michael asked.

“Because you’re cute,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes.

He chuckled, then quipped, “Thanks, but I’m married.”

You have a romantic history with him, correct?

Turk barked impatiently, and Faith pushed those thoughts from her mind. “All right. Time to go do the worst part of our job.”

“Second worst,” Michael corrected. “The worst is interviewing loved ones.” He looked sideways at her. “Which is something I could have kept to myself.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

“Are you okay?”

“No.” She got out of the car and opened the door for Turk. “Let’s go do our job anyway.”

Michael nodded approvingly, and the three of them walked to the scene. Detective Hilary was already there, directing plainclothes officers to put a cordon up around the strip of path where the crime occurred. When he saw the agents, he lifted a hand in greeting, then looked down at the body on the ground.

This woman was in the same age range as the other two victims. She was also attractive, but once more of a different body type. In her case, she was of medium build with a mop of curly red hair over a round face.

She was also naked. Her legs were spread the same way Samantha Reynard’s were, but her arms were pointed straight above her head with the fingertips touching. Yellow mica powder was scattered haphazardly over her body.

“Lorraine Hayes,” Hilary informed them. “Thirty. Worked at the library. I sent officers to her house, and it looks like her car’s there. She only lives a mile from the library, so I’m thinking she walks to and from work. Did, anyway.”

“Alone?” Michael asked incredulously. “At night?”

“We’ll call her coworkers in the morning,” Hilary said, “but that’s our best guess. This is a relatively safe part of the city. I wouldn’t recommend anyone walk alone anywhere at night, but I also wouldn’t expect this to happen on a public path here.”

“You’ve cleared the guy who called in her body?” Faith asked.

“He’s submitted fingerprints and a DNA sample,” Hilary replied. “Strictly speaking, he’ll remain a person of interest until those samples clear, but he’s definitely not our guy.”

“We haven’t found DNA or fingerprints on the other two victims,” Faith said. “Did we find any on Miss Hayes?”

“No,” Hilary said. “It’s just a formality. He’s not our guy because his neighbors already confirmed that he left his house at nine to walk his dog. I guess the neighbors had a problem with the dog barking all the time, so sometimes he walks her at night to help her sleep. It’s ten o’clock now, and rigor’s already set in, so that means she was killed no later than eight o’clock. He couldn’t have been here. The only reason we’re doing DNA and fingerprints is that my captain’s a pain in the ass.”

He sighed. “Sorry. I’m just pissed at the situation. I shouldn’t be bitching like this.”

“No need to apologize,” Faith said. “I’m not having the best of days myself.”

Hilary shook his head. “You guys have been working on a profile for this guy, right? Can you tell me what the posing and the powder means?”

“We’re pretty sure this guy is trying to obtain immortality,” Michael explained. “He’s trying to complete an alchemical process called the Magnum Opus. This is step three of four.”

Hilary sighed. “Well, at least we know we’re only waiting for one more victim.”

That didn’t reassure Faith. To be fair, Hilary didn’t look very reassured either.

The detective sighed irritably. “Who the hell is this guy? How do you kill three people—two of them in broad daylight—and leave no footprints, no fingerprints, no DNA, no witnesses, nothing. It’s just insane. There’s not even a connection to the victims. He’s like the invisible fucking man.”

The agents didn’t say anything. Both felt the same frustrations, and neither felt it would be helpful to lecture him the way Michael had lectured Faith.

Turk whined softly, and Faith said. “Go hunting, boy. See if you can pick anything up.”

Turk trotted away dutifully, nose to the ground. Faith looked down at the body of Lorraine Hayes and wondered what the poor woman’s last thoughts might have been. Was she caught unawares the way Cassidy and Samantha were, or did she have time to see the danger coming for her?

Michael answered that question a moment later. “Hey, Faith? We have footprints.”

Faith and Hilary both lifted their heads in excitement. “We do?” Faith asked.

Michael waved them over. They jogged to where he was standing, and he pointed at the ground. “This is Lorraine Hayes,” he said, pointing at the daintier of the prints. He pointed at a larger but less well-defined print. “And this is our killer. If we follow the prints...” he walked further from the body. “We see that the killer entered the path here.” He turned around and started back toward the body. “He walked at a fairly swift pace. So did Lorraine. Right here, he stopped, and began to sprint. You can see that because of the lengthening strides.”

He walked ahead ten yards and said, “This is where Lorraine started running. So they were about ten yards apart when Lorraine saw him. Within another ten yards, he’d closed the distance and killed her. Her body was positioned close to where she died, not exactly the same place, but close enough that we can deduce that he stripped her, positioned her and poured powder over her in the same place. He didn’t move the body at all.”

“He caught her quick,” Hilary observed.

“My guess is she was frozen in terror for a second or two before she started moving,” Faith said. “She didn’t have time to get away or call for help.”

Turk barked, and the three of them turned toward him. He stood at the edge of the trees bordering the path. “What is it, boy?” Faith asked as the three of them approached. “What do you smell?”

Turk took a hesitant step into the trees, then put his nose to the ground. Faith held her breath, but a moment later, he lifted his head, shook it and growled irritably.

Faith sighed. “That’s all right, boy,” she said. “You did your best.”

“I’ll get officers to look here and see if we can find our guy. Judging by the footprints, I’m thinking he cut the tread off of his soles so we couldn’t identify the shoe, but we can get a shoe size at least and extrapolate height and weight from there. This is good evidence.”

Faith wasn’t sure if he was trying to convince himself or the two of them. She looked back at the body of Lorraine Hayes and fought the urge to give into despair. She was determined to follow Gordon’s advice and accept that she couldn’t save everyone. She was determined to follow Michael’s advice and see the positive in the evidence that they had found at this crime scene.

But it was hard to do that while she was staring at the body of yet another innocent woman whose life had been taken while they chased their tails looking for the killer.

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Lillian Martin sipped her wine, a chianti—West’s favorite—and watched the news on her tv, a brand new discount smart tv to replace the one she had smashed a couple of weeks before.

She really needed to find something to take her anger out on besides TVs.

“At least I’m not in a hotel anymore.”

She had rented an apartment four miles away from Faith Bold’s apartment, far enough that it was unlikely they’d run into each other at the grocery store, but close enough that if Lillian felt a need to drive certain points closer to home, she could do it.

If the news was anything to go by, she would need to drive those points closer to home.

The news anchor was reporting on the murder of an electronics store clerk who had a tv placed into his hollowed-out abdomen with the message This is your fault, Bold taped to the top. And somehow, the news, the police, the FBI and the general public had all decided that this was probably unrelated to the West case and to Faith Bold in general. "Experts" believed the man was targeted by thieves who had staged the gruesome murder to try to hide behind the West case and throw the police off the scent. They pointed to the stolen smart TV and the empty till as evidence of that.

Lillian stared at the stolen smart tv and resisted the urge to crack it in half over her knee. She shouldn’t have stolen the damned thing. That was her mistake. That’s why they were able to put this off as a simple robbery.

But the cash she didn't have a choice about. She didn't have a job. She'd gotten the apartment by forging documents. As long as she paid rent, that wouldn't be a problem, but if she was going to pay rent, she either needed a job, or she needed to steal.

She sighed irritably and tossed back the rest of her glass before pouring more wine. She wanted to tear the place apart. She wanted to scream until her throat bled. She wanted to find Faith Bold, tear her eyes out, shove them down her throat, then stomp on her throat until both the throat and the eyeballs popped.

But that wasn't what West would do. West would evaluate the situation, identify mistakes, and make a plan that would avoid those mistakes in the future. So that's what Lillian would do.

"Yeah, except that West would become so fucking obsessed with that bitch that he would get himself thrown into prison for the rest of his life."

She could feel her hands starting to shake. She was close to seeing red.

She took a deep breath and drank the entire glass of wine in one gulp. The headrush and the slight wave of nausea that followed dulled her anger and allowed her to think.

Killing the clerk wasn't a mistake. In fact, it was a stroke of genius. It was garish and shocking. She needed to be both to get Faith Bold's attention.

The mistake was stealing the tv and the cash. She could avoid the first mistake by finding something other than TVs to break. Maybe she could get a punching bag and just hit that whenever she was enraged. As for the cash...

She sighed and poured more wine. "God damn it."

She really didn't want to get a job. It wasn't the idea of work that bothered her. She wasn't lazy. But if she worked, then she would have less time to focus on breaking Faith Bold and finishing what West and Trammell couldn't. And she would have to find a way to keep her anger under control. She wasn't sure if she could. After all, losing her cool at work was what had landed her in the mental hospital anyway.

But West had pulled her out. He had shown her that there was a way to satisfy her violent urges without going haywire and getting herself in trouble. He was every bit as violent as she was. He loved the feeling of blood spurting from his victims, loved the sound of their terrified screams, loved the godlike power that came from taking one of these pathetic, irritating little fucking animals and showing them in their last moments how utterly worthless they were as anything more than a toy for his amusement.

She loved thinking of West's piercing blue eyes gazing down at the helpless animal he'd captured. She loved thinking of her own knife joining his as they tore that animal apart. She loved imagining the taste of that blood on their lips as they kissed.

She moaned softly and flinched. "None of that right now," she said, downing her latest glass of wine. "Work now, play later."

She had to get a job. She could work mornings at a retail store. Maybe a coffee shop.

No, bad idea. If she had to see cranky people face to face first thing in the morning, she would end up in a mental institution again within a week. She would get a job with customer service. If she didn't have to see the bitches screaming at her, she could squeeze a stress ball to death and keep her perky voice and smile.

And she would remind herself that it was all for a reason. It was all for a purpose. She could be patient. She could take her time and make sure that the next time she called to Faith Bold, that whore would have no choice but to pay attention.

She poured herself another glass of wine, closed her eyes and sipped. She imagined West's lips pressed against hers and pretended the wine was blood.

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Faith leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. Her second cup of coffee sat empty on the desk next to her. Michael's fourth had been finished hours ago, but he'd refused to drink more lest his heart give out. At his age, heart problems from excess caffeine and lack of sleep were a legitimate concern.

Yes, because he's so much older than you.

Michael was forty-one, and Faith was thirty-four. Younger, but hardly young.

Her thoughts were wandering. She stood and poured herself a third cup of coffee from the fresh pot on the counter. "You want some more?" she asked Michael.

He shook his head. "No, thank you." Then, a second later, "What the hell. Sure, I'll take another. Wouldn't be the worst way to go."

Faith poured him a cup too and returned to the table. Turk slept peacefully in between their mattresses.

"Must be nice," she grumbled.

"What?" Michael asked.

"To be a dog."

"Ah. Yeah, it looks pretty damned sweet, I won't lie."

They had spent the night going over the new evidence they'd found and comparing it

with what they knew already. The police were still analyzing the footprints, but the agents had ballparked that the killer would be between five-five and five-seven and between one hundred twenty and one hundred fifty pounds. The shoe prints weren't clear enough to tell them if it was a woman or a man, so they still didn't know that, but they had at least the beginning of a picture of the killer's physical appearance.

Michael had gone a step further, theorizing that the killer had to be athletic because he had gone from a standstill to a sprint within a few strides, something that was difficult if you weren't in peak physical condition.

But those height and weight ranges put the killer dead average for a woman and only slightly below average for men. The athleticism was above average, but not so much that they could limit their pool of suspects to, say, professional athletes.

Looking at the crime scene hadn't yielded anything more useful than the footprints either. They seemed to disappear when they were off the path. Maybe because of the layer of leaf litter, or maybe because the shoes had no tread to make marks in the dirt. Whatever the reason, the footprints seemed to materialize on the path, then disappear when they left the path.

"We know the killer didn't drive there," Michael said out of nowhere.

Faith looked at him. "What's that?"

"He didn't drive there." He straightened, excited to have finally found another thread to pull. "The footprints go in the same direction from arrival to departure. He comes out of the trees ten yards behind her, catches her, kills her, stages her, then continues the same direction before crossing back into the trees nine yards from the body."

"He could have doubled back once he reached the trees," Faith pointed out.

“Yes, but the library security cameras show that there were no cars in the lot when Lorraine Hayes left, and still no cars when she was killed.”

“He could have parked on the side of the road.”

“Maybe,” Michael allowed, “but I don’t find that likely. The road wasn’t empty. I feel like someone would have reported a stalled car. Maybe I don’t have empirical proof, but the most logical conclusion is that he walked there.”

“Okay,” Faith said. “Let’s say he walked there. That means he either lives close, or he uses public transportation.”

“I’m going to say public transportation,” Michael said. “The three crime scenes are spread out around the metro area. I suppose he could walk there, but we’re talking three to five hours one way between each site.”

“Call Hilary and have him start looking through camera footage from the buses and trains,” Faith said. “Specifically, all of the buses that stopped near the crime scenes near the times the murders were committed. If we find the same person in all three locales, then we’ll have a suspect.”

“Will do.”

Michael called Hilary, enthused by the possibility that they’d actually found a lead. Faith was slightly encouraged, but not so much as Michael. This was something to do, but she wasn’t as optimistic as Michael was. Somehow, it seemed too easy to find the killer this way. That wasn’t logical of her, though, so she dismissed her fears and tried to think of what else might be useful.

Turk had caught something at all three crime scenes. Something he recognized as being present in all three places, but not strong enough that he could follow it. With

the powder being the same powder one could find everywhere that sold art supplies and no bodily fluid of any kind left on the bodies or anywhere else at the crime scenes, Faith didn't even know where to take Turk to look for a suspect.

But there was something there.

She sighed and ran her hands through her hair. This happened so often during their cases. They would put pieces of the puzzle together, but there would be a black hole in the middle of that puzzle, right where the face of their killer was. They would run in circles around the one piece of evidence that would solve the case, but it wasn't until they came across one or two more bodies that they would find what they needed to put the case to bed.

Faith very much didn't want to come across another body. She didn't want the killer to have the satisfaction of killing the final victim and completing the Magnum Opus, even if all that waited for him upon that completion was the crushing disappointment that came from realizing that no eternal life waited for him on the other side.

Practically speaking, letting him kill his final victim was bad because it would mean that he might disappear. He might never act again, and he might never be found.

So it would be better for him to keep killing so you can find him faster?

She frowned and sipped her coffee. I'm trying, Gordon, but damn, it's hard to stay positive.

"Okay, he's going to look at the footage," Michael said.

"Good," Faith said absently.

"Everything okay?" Michael asked.

She gave him a dry look. “Guess.”

He chuckled softly. “Yeah, fair enough.”

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Let’s say he’s using public transportation. Why is he roaming so far? The Botanic Gardens are forty minutes from the library by car, and Samantha’s apartment is ten minutes away. Figure double that time if he’s taking the bus, plus the time spent waiting for the bus. That’s another thing too. He’s just waiting at the bus stop with a bag of a murder victim’s clothes?”

“I believe that,” Michael said. “If he’s cool enough to stage two bodies in public, one of them at a Botanic Garden with security patrols, then he’s cool enough to wait at a bus stop with a backpack.”

“Fair enough,” she replied. “Still, even if he’s central to all three locations, he’s ranging far for his victims.”

“Maybe he wanted them specifically. Maybe it had to be these women.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Or maybe it had to be those locations. Maybe he chose his victims because they happened to be near where he planned to stage the bodies.”

Michael frowned. “But why them as opposed to any number of other women? And why would Samantha Reynard’s loft apartment be important?”

Faith sighed. “Good point.”

“So if it’s these women in particular, then why them? No sign of sexual deviancy at all, and so far, no indication that he knew any of the victims well. Except that he knew where Samantha Reynard lived, which suggests to me that he knew her, at least.”

“So maybe one of her students,” Faith suggested. “Maybe she was intentional, and the other two were victims of opportunity.”

He shook his head. “No, killers don’t change their behavior like that. They’re either intentional from the beginning or not intentional from the beginning.”

“Usually, yes, but we’ve already determined that this killer is strict about some things and not strict about other things. He’s strict about the poses of his victims but not strict about the distribution of powder.”

“That’s the only real example we have, though. And maybe we’re wrong that he’s not strict about the powder. He’s using specific colors and matching them to specific symbols matched to specific elements. Maybe it just doesn’t matter how much powder you use as long as it’s the right kind and present on your victims’ bodies.”

“So maybe it doesn’t matter who your victims are, but it just matters where they were killed.”

“Or vice versa,” he said. “It’s a shot in the dark, but victim one was a long, straight-haired brunette, victim two had short blonde hair, and victim three was a curly redhead. Maybe victim four will have black hair.”

“Maybe, but with no connection between the victims, that doesn’t help us. We don’t know which dark-haired victims to warn.”

He frowned. “Yeah. Damn it. I just don’t get the apartment. The Botanic Gardens and the river I get, but why would a loft apartment matter? That’s why I don’t think it’s the location. Or if it is, I don’t know what the hell the meaning behind it is. Let’s say it is the location. We have the nigredo victim in a garden, the albedo victim in an apartment, and the citrinitas victim on a path next to a river. Where would the rubedo victim be?”

Faith shook her head. “I don’t know.” She yawned suddenly and deeply.

“I think we should get some rest,” Michael said. “It’s four in the morning already. We’re on our last legs, and we’re about to fall apart. I think we should at least try to grab a few hours of sleep. Maybe when we wake up, we’ll be able to think more clearly.”

Faith didn’t want to sleep, but they had been spinning their wheels for hours now. And she was tired. She had no choice but to agree with Michael. “All right. Tuck me in?”

“What?”

“Nothing. I was joking.”

“Where the hell did that joke come from?”

“No idea. Forget it, I’m just tired.”

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “You definitely need sleep. You’re getting old, Faith. Your mind starts to wander after twenty hours awake.”

“Is that gray hair on your temples?” Faith asked.

“Screw you.”

“Looks nice. Distinguished.”

“Just for that, you can tuck yourself in.”

Faith chuckled and headed to the bathroom to change. Her mirth faded quickly,

though. A part of her enjoyed these late- night brainstorming sessions with Michael. It reminded her of the good old days.

But this wasn't for fun. Their killer had already murdered another woman. He was one step away from completing his Magnum Opus. In Faith's experience, the closer a killer got to accomplishing his goal, the faster he worked. They might have less than twenty-four hours before another life was taken. It was Faith's job to make sure that didn't happen.

But as she lay awake, sleep eluding her despite her exhaustion, she feared that the last piece of the puzzle would remain missing until the killer himself placed it.

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Faith's eyes opened. She was in Dr. West's office. That surprised her.

Why did that surprise her? She tried to turn and found her head was bound to the back of her chair. When she tried to lift her arms to remove the bonds, she found that they were tied to the sleeves of the chair as well. The chair itself wasn't the upholstered easy chair that West kept in his office but a rough-hewn wooden chair without a cushion.

That's why she was surprised. She'd had this dream many times, but the setting was wrong. The chair was the same. The ropes were the same. But the room was different. She should be in a barn lit only by a crack in the wall behind her. Ahead of her should be a tray with rusty, pitted knives and saws and, beyond that, a door. Instead, she faced a high-backed, claw-foot leather chair. Sitting on that chair wasn't Jethro Trammell, the crazed killer that had kidnapped, bound, tortured and nearly killed her but Dr. Franklin West, the equally crazed killer that had tortured her psychologically for months before trying and failing to kill her friends.

Dr. West was reading a book, but Faith couldn't tell what the book was. That made sense. She'd heard somewhere that the part of the brain that could read words shut down during sleep, so you couldn't read anything in a dream.

Why was she thinking about that right now? What was going on?

Dr. West set the book down and looked at Faith. He smiled pleasantly, the same benign look he gave Faith during their sessions together. "Hello, Faith. How are you feeling today?"

“Why am I here?” she asked. “Why aren’t we in the barn?”

He shrugged. “This is your dream, Faith. You tell me.”

Faith had an answer to that question, but she hated it. Still, it was only a dream. The real Franklin West was languishing in jail, waiting for the eventual end to the trial that would see him convicted of multiple murders and sentenced to multiple life sentences somewhere dark and cold and hidden from the rest of the world.

“I suppose I need your help.”

“It might be more effective to call me,” he replied. “After all, you’re only talking to yourself right now. Incidentally, you should probably ask your new therapist why part of your psyche is represented by a man who nearly broke you mentally, emotionally and physically. That can’t be healthy.”

The taunt in his voice caused anger to flash through her, but she controlled herself. If she was going to have this dream, she might as well try to bend her subconscious to help her. “I’m trying to figure out this killer. I can’t figure out how he’s choosing his victims.”

“You know, I read somewhere that a journalist interviewed Ted Bundy and asked him how he chose his victims. He told the journalist that he never chose a single one of his victims. They chose him.”

“I don’t think that was Ted Bundy.”

West flipped his hand. “Maybe not. It doesn’t matter. The point is, what did those victims do to leave themselves vulnerable to him? It’s worth noting that Bundy almost never forced his victims to go with him.”

“This killer’s victims were alone,” Faith replied. “Cassidy Holt was in a botanical garden at night and far from security. Samantha Reynard lived alone in her apartment. Lorraine Hayes walked home from the library at night down a secluded path. Are you saying we should encourage people not to be alone?”

“If you think that would help, then yes. But that’s trying to stop a flood by putting a log across a waterfall.”

“That’s the answer, though. He’s preying on women who are vulnerable. And he’s killing them quickly before they can fight back or call for help. So he’s a coward.”

“Perhaps,” West replied. “Or perhaps the killing itself isn’t important.”

“If it’s not important, then why do it?”

West clucked his tongue and shook his head. “Come on, Faith. Even as a stand-in for the baser aspects of your personality, I’m not going to make it that easy for you. You know the answer to that question. You tell me. Why kill them? If he doesn’t need to, then why go to the trouble?”

She thought a moment. “He wouldn’t. Unless not going to the trouble caused more trouble.”

“Ah!” West exclaimed. He leaned forward in his chair and grinned at Faith. “Now we’re getting somewhere. But what trouble could letting them struggle cause?”

“Well, they’d call for help. Or they’d escape. They would be able to identify him.”

“Maybe, but I think it’s even simpler than that.”

Faith thought a moment. Their killer was trying to achieve immortality. Eternal life.

The idea that someone could believe in something so foolish was ludicrous, but Faith had met many killers insane enough to believe many ludicrous things.

So, let's say this killer was a true believer and really thought that he would gain eternal life by following this ritual. Once he had eternal life, nothing would matter, really. He could go to prison. He could be announced to the world to be a murderer, and so what? He'd outlive everyone and everything. He could languish in prison for a thousand years and walk from the rubble when the society that imprisoned him collapsed.

But until that point, the ritual had to be completed. Otherwise, this was all for nothing.

The ritual was what mattered. The Magnum Opus.

"They'd interrupt the ritual," she said, "and they'd make it far more difficult for him to complete it."

"Yes!" West shouted, excitement pouring from his eyes and crazed grin. "That's the answer. You see, Faith, killers don't kill because we enjoy death. Even the ones that enjoy death don't really enjoy it in that unadulterated form. There's always a reason. For Trammell, it was the delight of watching little things bleed. For me, it was the knowledge that I had utter and complete power over my victims. For Kenneth Langeveldt, it was a chance to pretend that his past mistakes hadn't taken from him the only thing that truly mattered.

"And for this killer, it's the fear of death that motivates his taking of life. He must complete this ritual. He must survive.

"But he also has self-control. He doesn't act wantonly because he knows he will be caught. No, he prepares carefully. He ensures that he leaves no trace of himself

behind. He chooses victims who are separate from the herd, and he culls them swiftly. I daresay the most frustrating part of his method is when he strips them of their clothes. Imagine the fear in his mind as he struggles to unbutton, untie or unzip an article of clothing, the muffled curses as they snag on a fingernail or a stone, the furtive glances over his shoulder as he finally tears the underwear off and can get to the important part of the ritual.

“Your killer is a coward, Faith. You’re not wrong. But it’s not his victims he fears. It’s failure.”

He grinned. “In that way, he is much like you. You never feared Trammell. Not the death he would bring you, anyway. You feared being made to feel smaller than he was. You never feared the pain I would cause you. You feared being unable to stop me. You don’t fear this killer. You fear that he’ll beat you, that he’ll complete the Magnum Opus and leave you with nothing more than the chance to clean up his mess.”

Faith ignored West’s feeble attempts at goading her. She found that increasingly easy to do the longer he languished in the prison she had sent him to. “I think I have what I need. Thank you, West.”

She expected the West avatar to shout in rage at her for ignoring him, but he only laughed. “I’ll see you soon, Faith. Very soon.”

“You’re in prison,” she retorted. “You won’t see me except in your own nightmares.”

“I have many names, Faith. Many faces.” As though to prove his point, his body twisted, bulging and growing until the creature that stood before her wasn’t Franklin West but the hulking seven-foot giant Jethro Trammell. “I am Legion,” he said in Jethro’s lilting tenor. “And feel free to imprison me as much as you want. I’ll only show up again with a new face and a new name.”

His smile faded. “And make no mistake. I will break you.”

Faith woke to Turk licking her face. She sighed and sat up, ruffling the dog’s fur. “Sorry, boy. Was I making noise in my sleep again?”

“Yeah, you were,” Michael’s voice called. She looked over to see him tying his shoes. “It sounded like you were having a really good dream. Judging by the look on your face, I’m going to guess it wasn’t as fulfilling as it sounded.”

She rolled her eyes and decided not to rise to his bait. “I think we should explore the alchemy side.”

He frowned. “Isn’t that what we’re doing?”

“No. Not really. We’re looking at the killer. I think we should look at the ritual.”

“The ritual? Yes. The rubedo comes next.”

“Yes, but I mean holistically. The killer wants eternal life. That informs every decision he makes. He takes public transportation because he doesn’t want to risk his car being seen near the crimes.”

“Or he doesn’t have one,” Michael suggested.

“Maybe,” she admitted, “but he also chooses victims who are alone and kills them before they can call for help. He moves quickly, does what he needs to do, then vanishes. There’s no lingering to admire his work and no lingering to admire or ‘enjoy’ his victims.”

“So he doesn’t want to get caught. That doesn’t seem all that esoteric to me.”

“My point is that he’s trying to keep himself from dying.” A thought occurred to her. “I think he might be terminally ill. I think he’s trying to complete this ritual because he thinks it’s his only chance.”

“I get what you’re saying, but what exactly should we be doing differently?”

“We need to learn more about alchemy. We need to understand the philosophy thoroughly to get a better idea of who our killer is.”

“So you want to go back to talk to Dr. Cranston?”

She nodded. “I think that’s a good place to start.”

He shrugged. “Well, that’s a better idea than my complete lack of ideas. I’ll call the university.”

Faith changed quickly. Michael glanced her way once, then hurriedly looked away. Faith hadn’t stripped completely naked, but she felt a blush climb her cheeks. She’d changed in front of him without thinking. She wasn’t trying to catch his eye, but she should have gone to the restroom or at least warned him to look away.

Well, she could worry about that little trespass later. She needed to catch a killer right now, not explore her latent feelings for her best friend.

Michael hung up the phone just as Faith finished dressing. “Is it safe to turn around now?” he asked, a little testily.

“Yes, sorry. I didn’t think.”

After a brief pause, he said, “Fair enough. Maybe we both agree to change in the bathroom from now on, though.”

“Fine with me,” she said. “Again, sorry.”

“No worries. Anyway, I called the university. Cranston’s out of town today. He’ll be back in two days. We can wait for him, or we can talk to another instructor, Nina Verbeck. She’s a historian, but she’s working on a book on alchemical traditions.”

“That works for me,” Faith said. “A fresh perspective would be nice.”

“Perfect. I’ll give her a call.”

He dialed the number and Faith tried to imagine her killer as a sick, terrified, desperate man rather than a calculating murderer. It strained credulity, but Faith had encountered killers of that sort before. When pushed far enough, people would do anything to save their own life.

Even take the lives of others.

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Michael pulled into the driveway of the stark Victorian home, and Faith suppressed a shiver. Nina Verbeck wasn't in the office today, but she was happy to see the agents at her home near the university. Faith just didn't expect the home to look so much like a vampire's lair.

"Wicked Witch of the West vibes," Michael muttered. "Why is it that all professors have a creepy streak?"

"It's not like it's the only Victorian home on Earth," Faith said, partly to herself. "And someone has to study the creepy subjects."

"It's fine that it has gables," Michael said about the house, "but maybe paint it something other than Gargoyle Gray and maybe trim the grass?"

Indeed, the grass was overgrown and bunched like weeds. The paint wasn't really gray but a dirty, faded white with equally dirty and equally faded black shingles. It looked gray, but what it really looked like was old and uncared for, like a mind left to rot.

Boy, I am full of joyful thoughts today, aren't I? Faith thought. She looked at Turk, hoping that the shepherd's perpetual joyfulness would cheer her, but Turk watched the approaching house warily, his shoulders tense.

"Yeah, me too," she said to her K9 partner.

Michael parked the cruiser in front of the porch and looked at Faith. "How much do you want to bet she has some kids in a cage in the basement that she's fattening up

with sweetbreads?”

“I know you’re trying to make a Hansel and Gretel joke,” Faith said, “but it fell very flat.”

“Whatever.”

The three of them got out of the car and walked up to the house. Turk trotted softly, his body coiled like a spring, ready to strike at any moment.

“Stay calm, boy,” Faith said. “Let’s give Miss Verbeck the benefit of the doubt.”

“Maybe she’s a crazy cat lady,” Michael said. “Is Turk going to have problems with cats?”

“No, he’ll be good.”

Actually, Faith had never seen Turk around a cat. How had that happened? She looked at Turk. “You’re good with cats, right?”

Turk looked at Faith like she was crazy.

The door opened before they reached it, and Nina Verbeck stepped onto her porch. She was of medium height and medium build, with severe features softened by an eager smile that seemed too wide for her face.

“Hello!” she said. “Welcome, agents! I’m so excited to talk to you!”

Faith and Michael exchanged a look. They rarely met anyone so enthusiastic to talk to them. Still, she wasn’t wearing a pointy black hat or floating on a broomstick.

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with us,” Faith said.

“Of course!” Nina said, “I’ve just made some tea. Fresh chamomile with ginseng and peppermint! An excellent tonic!”

“Thank you,” Faith said.

Nina led them inside, practically bouncing with excitement. Faith was relieved to find that the inside of the house looked a lot more like an ordinary home than the lair of the Baba Yaga. The décor was what Faith referred to as Grandma Chic: flowers, pictures of seascapes and rolling hills with trite inspirational phrases and pastel furniture with soft cushions and an abundance of pillows and blankets.

Nina didn’t appear to be old enough to be a grandmother. She was a little older than Faith, but not much. Maybe around forty.

Still, she moved and talked with a joyful fussiness that calmed Faith considerably. She almost felt silly for being afraid of her because her house was a little raggedy on the outside.

Nina poured three cups of tea and said, “So! You want to know what your killer could possibly want with alchemy.”

“Yes,” Faith replied. “We’re trying to get an understanding of how he thinks so we can hopefully head him off before he kills again.”

“Well, I’ll certainly help any way I can,” Nina said, sitting down and sipping her tea. “You have to move fast, of course. He’s only one step away from completing the Magnum Opus.”

Faith frowned slightly. As far as she knew, the details of the case hadn’t been

released to the public. “How did you know that?”

“I deduced it, dear!” Nina said cheerily. “The news reports were very clear. Three women found in different poses with different colors of powder on their naked bodies. I, of course, am very familiar with the tenets of alchemy and the formula for the Magnum Opus.” She straightened in a manner that reminded Faith of a peacock ruffling its feathers. “It was obvious to me right away that the victims were dealt with as sacrifices to create the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Let’s start there,” Faith said. “What specifically does the killer expect to happen? He’ll take his fourth victim and then a glowing rock will descend from the sky and grant him eternal life?”

Nina laughed. “I doubt that. Well, he might expect that, I suppose, but more than likely, he doesn’t know what to expect. The literature really isn’t clear on how the Philosopher’s Stone manifests itself. In early records, the Magnum Opus was seemingly believed to be exactly what it appears to be on the surface, a way to turn lead into gold. In fact, it was the Chinese who first suspected that the Magnum Opus could be a tool to gain eternal life.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “The Chinese?”

Nina smiled. The toothy grin reminded Faith rather disturbingly of a shark. “This is a little-known fact that I will be exposing to the general public when I release my book, but yes. In nearly every aspect, the true power of alchemy was discovered first by the Chinese. The West didn’t arrive at the same conclusions for hundreds of years in most cases.”

“You sound like you believe in this,” Michael said, semi-seriously.

Nina sipped her tea and gave him a conspiratorial look. “Let’s just say I think the

universe hides secrets not easily explained by science.”

Michael and Faith exchanged a look. Faith wasn't sure that they'd be content to leave it at that. Something was poking around in the back of Faith's mind about Nina. She wasn't sure what it was, but she was beginning to feel suspicion that went beyond simple wariness.

“Is our killer following a Chinese tradition?” Faith asked.

"Oh no. Goodness no. No, he is Western all the way. I'm simply pointing out that the Western understanding of alchemy is limited. The Chinese are the ones who truly understand the secrets. At least, they were the first to learn the secrets. The West lagged behind, and I'm convinced I learned the truth only by accident."

She sipped her tea and said, “For example, the alchemical formula to produce aqua vitae , the healing serum that can mend even fatal wounds with only a sip, was initially created by Western alchemists to get themselves drunk without waiting for alcohol to ferment. Imagine their shock when they drank it and found their wounds closing and their aches and pains fading from their bodies!”

“You really sound like you believe this,” Michael said.

Nina sighed. “I suppose since you press me, I can't say that I believe a simple ritual will grant one eternal life. But I do believe that the spiritual traditions of the ancients had some tangible benefit to their lives. Else why would so many have believed in them for so long? You're talking about traditions that were a central part of cultures ranging from Britain to Japan for several times longer than the United States has existed as a nation, traditions that survived the rise and fall of multiple empires and remained relatively unchanged in practice. The earliest Western texts on turning lead into gold are nearly identical to the most recent texts detailing how to find eternal life. It's fascinating. The result changes, but the method of achieving that result stays the

same. It's one of very few cases in history where the reverse isn't the case."

"So back to the killer," Faith said. "Why is he killing people? Do all alchemical traditions call for victims to be sacrificed?"

Nina sipped more of her tea and shook her head. "No. Some require animal sacrifices. Many call for the summoner to spill his own blood. A few even call for the alchemist to prepare all four humors, then stab himself through the heart so that he dies on top of the prepared symbols. Then he will awaken as an eternal spirit. Much like the ancient tradition of vampirism. In fact, there are some scholars who believe that vampirism is the result of an ancient ritual designed to create demons while the Magnum Opus is an ancient ritual designed to create angels."

"But the tradition our killer is following," Faith said, trying once more to bring the conversation back into focus. "Is one that requires human sacrifice."

"Now that is interesting," Nina said, wagging a finger as though instructing a student. "There are no traditions that explicitly call for sacrifice of the human variety. However, the traditions of the Early Renaissance hint strongly that the humors must be attached to the *vita vi*. The life force. This led many practitioners of the art to assume that sacrifice was required. And, as is so often typical of human societies, the sacrifices preferred were virgin girls."

"Are there records of the sacrifices being posed naked in the shapes of the symbols?"

"Not posed, but always naked. In Western tradition—in fact, in many traditions—the naked form of a young female is considered the pinnacle of beauty. This really isn't surprising when one considers how patriarchal most human cultures are. What do men value more than the female form?"

Nina was clearly more interested in talking to someone about alchemy than she was

in helping them catch the killer. Faith was beginning to wonder if they were wasting their time. She would try a little longer to coax some useful information out of her, but if Nina kept insisting on following rabbit trails, Faith might cut her losses.

“Our victims weren’t virgins, though,” Faith said. “So what criteria might he be following?”

“Specifically,” Michael asked, “what will he look for in his next victim?”

“And what kind of person is he in general? Who should we be looking for?”

"Well," Nina said, sipping her tea. "The next victim will be a woman like the other women. Probably of similar age and attractive in appearance. And as for the kind of person?" Her eyes grew almost dreamy. "They will be brilliant, inquisitive, curious. They will eschew blunt mathematical knowledge and concern themselves with the hidden truths of the world. And, of course, he might be a she . I find that the female mind is often more open to the hidden truths than the male mind."

The alarm in Faith’s head rang again, a little louder this time. She looked at Michael and saw the same question on his face.

But surely, they couldn’t have found their killer by accident like this, could they?

Turk got to his feet suddenly. He stared at the winding staircase that led to the second floor of Nina’s house.

“Got something, boy?” Faith asked.

Turk trotted to the foot of the stairs. He sniffed at the bottom step, then bounded up to the second floor.

Faith looked at Nina. The woman didn't seem perturbed in the slightest by Turk's actions. "Do you mind if I join my dog?" she asked. "Just to make sure he doesn't get into anything he shouldn't?"

"Oh, there's nothing up there that will hurt him," Nina said, "but if you insist, you can join him."

Faith looked at Michael. Michael nodded, and she got to her feet and headed to the stairs. Behind her, she heard Michael ask Nina, "So what got you into alchemy in the first place?"

As Nina launched into a monologue on her introduction to the "hidden science," Faith looked up the stairs where Turk had vanished.

Had he identified the same smell that lingered at the crime scene? Could Nina be the alchemist she was looking for?

Heart pounding with fear and anticipation, Faith ascended the stairs.

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As soon as Faith reached the top of the stairs, all sound seemed to fade. It was as though a felt blanket was draped over the floor. The downstairs had been clean, but here a layer of dust lay over everything, not so thick as to make it feel abandoned, just neglected. The air felt heavier, too, thick and musty. It seemed to Faith that she had entered the lair of some old shaman who had delved so far into his mysteries that he maintained only a tenuous connection to the mundane world.

Or she. Faith recalled the medical examiner's warning that their killer could be a she, and they shouldn't assume he was male just because serial killers usually were. Faith had assured him that they only used male pronouns for convenience, and she wouldn't let that assumption color her investigation, but that hadn't been entirely true. She had been looking for a man. Maybe that hadn't hindered her, really, but she now wondered if Nina were as innocent as she seemed.

As a matter of fact, she didn't seem all that innocent. She all but admitted that she believed in alchemy, and she expressed a great deal of admiration for the practice. Faith wondered if she admired the killer. Of course, she also wondered if Nina could be the killer herself. It didn't seem like such a stretch.

Turk trotted ahead of Faith, stopping every few seconds to sniff the air and the ground. That elusive smell that he was tracking was here, but still elusive, still faint. Or maybe, like Faith, it was a feeling Turk followed rather than a concrete sense.

He walked into a room. Faith followed and saw that it was a bedroom. The bed was made, and the furniture decorated in a similar manner to the first floor, but also covered in the thin layer of dust that covered everything here.

Maybe the first floor had looked the same until Michael called and asked to speak to her. Maybe Nina had polished up the ground floor to hide the fact that she cared little for the appearance of her house, that it had ceased to matter to her whether her home was presentable to strangers. None of this confirmed that Nina was anything other than eccentric, but eccentric people made eccentric killers, and Nina was obsessed with alchemy.

Turk stuck his nose under the bed but found nothing to hold his interest. He tried the closet and found nothing there either. He snorted irritably and stood still with his head cocked, concentrating.

“Take your time, boy,” Faith encouraged. “Make sure you find whatever it is.”

Turk gave her a slightly irritated look at the somewhat contradictory instructions. Faith decided to stay quiet and let him work.

He trotted from the room, and she followed. Rather than explore the other rooms on the second floor, he returned to the stairs. A second flight led to a hatch in the ceiling that presumably led to Nina Verbeck’s attic.

Faith’s heartbeat quickened when Turk climbed that flight of stairs and pressed his nose to the hatch. Faith reached instinctively for her gun, then drew her hand back. Then she drew the gun anyway. Maybe Nina wasn’t the killer herself. Maybe she was harboring him.

Turk didn’t seem that concerned, though, merely interested. He stood, tail wagging, and waited for Faith to push the hatch open.

He jumped through, and Faith followed. Here, finally, was a level of dust that indicated not even a cursory interest in cleanliness. There was no ambiguity at the cobwebs that dominated this room.

Faith was about to call Turk back downstairs when he barked and trotted to a large chest of drawers that sat on one wall. He stopped in front of the chest and barked again.

Faith holstered her weapon and walked to the chest. “You got something boy?”

Turk barked again and looked at her. Heart pounding, she pulled open the top drawer.

And everything fell into place. The drawer was filled with little glass vials. Each glass vial was filled with a different color of mica powder. Faith noticed that one vial was missing of black, one of white and one of yellow. With a chill, she saw that a red vial was absent as well.

Nina Verbeck was their killer. She had left Michael downstairs with their killer.

“Shit.”

She slammed the drawer shut and drew her weapon. “Go to Michael, Turk. Now.”

Turk shot off like a bullet, barking and flying down the stairs. Faith followed as quickly as she could. When she reached the second floor, she heard Nina scream. “Hey! What is this? What is he doing?”

Faith reached the first floor and rushed to the kitchen to see Turk standing protectively in front of Michael, snarling at Nina, who pressed against her wall, her face blanched in fear.

Michael looked questioningly at Faith. Without taking her eyes off of Nina, Faith said, “We found mica powder. A lot of it. Guess which colors were missing vials?”

Michael’s eyes widened. He turned to Nina, who had grown almost translucent with

fear.

“You want to talk to us, Nina?” Faith asked, her voice low and deadly. “Or should we take you somewhere and make you talk?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Now see, that’s a lie,” Faith replied.

Now that she knew who Nina was, she wasn’t afraid of her anymore. She might think herself a witch or a sorceress or a witch doctor, but all Faith saw was a murderer.

Nina’s eyelid twitched. “The powder is for an artwork.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of powder.”

“It’s a large artwork. I’ll show it to you. It’s in my garage.”

“And you just happened to need black, white, yellow and red?”

"Yes. It's an oil painting of the Magnum Opus, seven feet by six feet. Those are the primary colors of the Opus, so they must be well-represented."

“And the interest in alchemy? The belief that there are forces at work in the universe that science can’t understand?”

Nina blinked. “That’s not... I don’t mean to say I believe that I can kill people and obtain eternal life. I thought I said that. I just mean that there might be benefits to understanding ancient philosophy.”

“And you knew that the killer had completed nigredo, albedo and citrinitas ,” Michael

said. "I don't buy that you just guessed that based on the limited information the news released."

"Oh, for God's sake," Nina said brittlely. "If the news said that a man was found with a wooden bat and a small cork ball covered in white leather with red stitching, it wouldn't take much of a leap to assume that he was a baseball player."

"Baseball's a bit more common of an interest than alchemy," Michael pointed out.

"But I'm an expert in alchemy! Of course, I'm going to be better equipped to identify alchemical rituals than the average person!"

"Exactly," Faith said. "There's not a lot of you around. And you have the same powders used on our victims."

"Many people do! Mica powder is a base for pigments, dyes, even paints! Come! I'll show you what I've used mine for!"

"I'll accept that you've used some of your powder for art. But you used it for something else too, didn't you?"

"No! For God's... did you just come here to accuse me of murder?"

"We came here to understand our killer better," Faith replied. "I think now we do."

Nina began to tremble. "Listen," she said, struggling for calm. "You've made a mistake. I am using mica powder for my artwork. I am studying alchemy to write a book. I am certainly not murdering women as part of some absurd quest for eternal life."

"Why are you killing them?"

“I’m not killing them! You can’t possibly believe that.”

“I believe I found some pretty damned compelling evidence.”

Nina’s eyes narrowed. She looked shrewdly between the two of them. “Then why haven’t you arrested me? If you’re so certain, why are you still talking to me?”

“I’m giving you a chance to prove that I’m wrong,” Faith said. “Tell me why I shouldn’t suspect you?”

"Because your only piece of evidence is that I have mica powder in my attic!"

“And you have a fascination with alchemy and a deep understanding of the Magnum Opus,” Faith added. “And you were very careful to point out that our killer was a she.”

“Almost as if you were offended that we would have thought such a brilliant work was completed by a man,” Matt added.

“That’s preposterous! My feminism has nothing to do with this murder! The victims are women! If I hated men, I’d kill them, wouldn’t I?”

Faith decided to drop the bomb. “My dog placed you at the scenes.”

Nina flinched. “What? That’s impossible.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“It’s not only possible,” Faith said, “it’s certain. At all three scenes, he picked up a scent. He picked up that same scent in this house.”

“The mica powder!” Nina said. “That’s what he’s smelling!”

“Not the mica powder. Your mica powder.”

“That is not true,” Nina insisted. “Please. You can’t really believe this.”

“Can you confirm your whereabouts for last night?”

Nina flinched again. Faith held her gaze until she swallowed and said hoarsely, “No.”

Faith had heard enough. “Nina Verbeck, you’re under arrest for the murders of Cassidy Holt, Samantha Reynard and Lorraine Hayes. If you come quietly, then we’ll be gentle with you. If you don’t, then I have a K9 unit that I am more than willing to use.”

Nina shivered. “This is a mistake,” she whispered.

“We’ll talk about that,” Faith said. “Please place your hands on top of your head.”

Nina began to weep and complied with Faith’s instructions. Michael stepped forward and cuffed her, giving Faith another questioning look. Are you sure?

Faith returned a look of her own. Sure enough.

She wasn’t certain. Not after talking to Nina. She seemed frightened but not exactly guilty. That could just mean she was a sociopath afraid of justice or a terrified alchemist afraid of having her spell thwarted.

The missing red powder flashed in Faith’s mind. She looked sternly at Nina and said, “Did you take a fourth victim? Where is that red powder.”

To her surprise, Nina lifted her head and assumed a dignified expression. “I have never found even a first victim. I’m not sure why you’ve suddenly decided that I’m

guilty, but I have nothing to say to you.”

Faith stepped in front of her and met her eyes. “If we find a fourth body that you could have saved by being honest with us, I will make sure that the first seven hundred years of your everlasting life are spent staring at the sun through a pinhole.”

Nina shivered but kept her cool. Mostly. “I have done nothing wrong. I am being maligned for no reason.”

“Well, the jury will decide that,” Faith replied. “Let’s go, Michael.”

The four of them headed toward the police cruiser. Faith felt odd, though. There was none of the usual triumph that came from catching a killer. Had she made a mistake after all?

Michael helped Nina into the cruiser and walked to the driver’s seat. Faith tried to calm herself by reminding herself that she was taking Nina in for questioning right now. If the questioning revealed that she wasn’t the killer, then she would just be another red herring.

But it would leave a victim still in danger. Faith felt a touch of guilt at the thought, but she hoped very much that Nina would turn out to be their killer.

Then she wouldn’t have to wait to hear of another woman sacrificed to a fantasy.

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The killer reveled in the power that filled him. The sun blazed warm overhead, his sun. His power. His strength. The energy that created life now coursed through his veins.

All that remained was to strengthen the vessel that contained it.

Nigredo was complete. The understanding of life was his. Albedo was complete. The understanding of energy, of the deep secrets of the universe was his as well. Citrinitas was complete, and the sun infused him with strength.

All that remained was rubedo , the reddening, the fire that would harden the clay of his body, hone the steel of his will, temper the knowledge of his mind.

Then he would be eternal. Then he would be everlasting.

The killer opened his eyes and walked outside. His neighbor lifted a hand in greeting, and the killer returned the gesture, paired with a smile. He was in a wonderful mood. Perhaps when he finished, he would bring his neighbors some of the cookies he'd baked the night before.

He headed for the bus stop and chuckled softly. It would be nice to use his own vehicle again. Those little comforts of the first world were missed terribly when they were forsaken.

Then again, perhaps he'd leave it behind. Perhaps he'd go on a pilgrimage. The world would soon be his oyster, after all. He had all the time in the world. Maybe he would take advantage of that freedom to slow down and truly discover all there was to

discover.

The bus arrived, and he boarded, showing the monthly pass he'd bought. The bus driver started stoically forward and closed the bus door as soon as the reader chirped to tell him that the pass was valid.

The killer took his seat and wondered what he would learn next. There were other alchemical formulas. One would allow for him to obtain endless riches. He didn't need that, not yet. He made good money and had a sizable nest egg. He could take a sabbatical of several years, and as long as he spent conservatively wouldn't need to replenish his coffers for a while.

There was another spell that promised to make him irresistible to women. He wasn't concerned much with that one either. He had never been particularly interested in sex, and during the brief period of his life where he'd been curious about it, it was the male form that attracted him.

He realized with a touch of sadness that once the Magnum Opus was completed, there would actually be little left of alchemy to explore. These fleeting pleasures were just that: fleeting. What he was about to obtain was eternal.

So he would become a scholar. He would learn. He would travel, and he would experience. If he came across a desire, he would look into fulfilling it, but for the time being, he would just learn all there was to know about the fascinating world he called home.

He felt a pang in his chest and grimaced. The pain didn't fade as fast as it usually did, and when it sharpened, a thrill of fear ran through him.

No. Not yet, damn it. It's supposed to take several months more. Not now, not when I'm so close!

The pain intensified again, and he gasped, suddenly frightened. He prepared to shout for help when the pain finally relaxed.

One of the other passengers, a young man of around twenty or so, asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” the killer replied breathlessly. “Yes, I’m fine.” He forced a smile. “Just had a twinge of pain is all.”

The young man’s eyes fell to the fist the killer clutched to his chest. The killer pulled his hand away and repeated, “I’m all right.”

The young man didn’t appear convinced, but he wasn’t going to press a stranger for information he didn’t want to give. He looked away and put his headphones back into his ear.

The killer released a breath and tried to return to his anticipation of the future, but the joy had gone from his thoughts.

That was closer. That was too close. Damn it, he needed to move quickly.

Soon , he reminded himself. You just have to complete rubedo. It will be over soon.

Then another, more terrifying thought took him. What if I don’t find a sacrifice? What if there’s no one there?

There’s always someone there, he scolded himself. Sacrifices are everywhere. I only need to take the first one available. Then...

Then what? Then how did he get the sacrifice to the place of fire?

“Damn it,” he whispered.

He pulled the cord that announced his intention to stop. The driver pulled lazily to the next stop, and the killer exited. His cheeks burned with frustration.

He would need to act tonight. He had planned to act tomorrow so he could prepare the venue for his sacrifice, but he didn't know if he'd have that time. He needed to move now.

It's okay , he reassured himself. You're only a mile from your house. Just walk back and get the car, then drive somewhere. Grab the sacrifice, then go to the place of fire. It's okay.

He couldn't stay calm, though. He feared at any second the pain would return and that this time it wouldn't go away.

The sun still blazed overhead, but it didn't bring the strength it had before.

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Nina Verbeck maintained her dignity until Michael shackled her to the table in the interview room. Then, as the three agents left the room, she called, “Wait! Where are you going?”

“We’ll be back,” Faith promised.

“But—”

The door drowned out whatever protest Nina was going to make. The agents walked to the other side of the two-way mirror. Detective Hilary waited for them, his hands folded across his chest.

“This is her?” he asked.

“That’s her,” Faith confirmed.

“You’re sure about her?”

“Not one hundred percent,” Faith admitted, “but we found mica powder at her house, and small quantities of black, white, yellow and red are missing. She is obsessed with alchemy and seems to actually believe in it. She also sounded a little offended when we referred to the killer as he and made a point to say that the killer could be a she.”

“So she was bragging.”

“Sure sounded like it,” Michael confirmed.

“Hmm.”

He seemed unconvinced. “You think we’re on the wrong track?” Faith asked.

Hilary sighed. “No, I don’t think so. It’s just different from what I expected. I don’t know, maybe I was biased toward a male too. Did she give a reason for stripping the victims naked?”

“She kind of danced around all of her answers,” Faith said. “That’s another thing that made me suspect her. She wouldn’t really give a straight response to anything. The information we did get we had to almost force out of her, and she was clearly not happy providing it. The final nail in the coffin though was Turk. He identified the smell that he had found at the crime scenes and led me to the mica powder.”

Hilary seemed encouraged by that. “So it’s not just any mica powder. It’s the mica powder that was used at the scene.”

“Looks that way,” Faith said.

“Well, go ahead and talk to her,” Hilary replied. “Maybe we’ll get lucky, and she’ll tell us what we need to know.”

The three agents returned to the room. Turk trotted to Nina’s side and watched her closely, his body once more coiled like a spring. Nina looked at him and trembled slightly.

Michael began the conversation. “Okay, Nina. We’re going to talk now. If you play nice and tell us what we need to know, then this can be a cordial conversation, and we can get you comfortable and get out of your hair. If you’re difficult, then we get difficult. I promise you, it’s in your best interests not to be difficult.”

Nina didn't respond. After a moment, Faith said, "We have the evidence, Nina. We have the mica powder, we have Turk's nose—"

"His sense of smell is admissible in court?" Nina asked incredulously.

"Oh yes," Faith said. "Absolutely."

Strictly speaking, Turk's nose wasn't really evidence, but the mica powder was, and hearing that a K9 unit had identified the same scent at Nina's house as was present at all three crime scenes would likely impact the jury's opinion.

"Not to mention your attitude surrounding the whole thing," Michael said. "You didn't act horrified at the idea that three women were killed to complete some spell. You didn't act sorrowful or upset or saddened. You acted excited. Almost like you were glad someone was finally completing the Magnum Opus."

"I didn't act sorrowful? That's your argument?"

"More that you acted happy about it. You couldn't wait to talk about the traditions the killer was following. Like it excited you to share the details of each murder and how they applied to alchemical traditions."

"You two don't get excited when you come across serial killers whose actions match your personal theories and experience."

"No," Faith said. "Never."

Nina turned to Michael and found the same cold expression on his face. She looked away with a slight pout. "I suppose it's a trait that's more common in academia. Obviously, I'm not happy that women were murdered. But..." She lifted her hands as far as the shackles would allow, which wasn't far. "This is history! And it's history

that I've dedicated fourteen years of my life to studying. It's..."

"Exciting?" Faith offered after a moment.

Nina didn't reply.

"I wonder how you'd feel if your neck was broken and you were stripped naked, posed and sprinkled with powder?" Michael said. "Would it be exciting? Would it be history?"

"You don't have evidence that I've committed a crime," Nina insisted. "You have evidence that I'm an unpleasant person in your opinion. I'm sorry to know that you feel that way about me. I didn't intend to come across that way."

"You were very keen to point out that the killer could be a woman," Faith reminded her. "In fact, you seemed almost offended that we behaved as though we were certain the killer was a man."

Nina didn't respond, but the way her lips twitched told Faith she had struck a nerve.

"So you have to admire the killer, at least," Michael said. "Otherwise, why would you want us to think of the killer as a woman? Why would you brag about the fact that a woman was more likely to commit the crime?"

Nina rolled her eyes but didn't respond.

"See, this is being uncooperative," Faith said. "This is the kind of thing that leads to multiple life sentences with no parole. I'm not going to lie and act like we can plea deal you down to fifteen years, but we can get you possibility of parole. You might be out in time to spend your golden years in comfort. You might even be able to get medium security instead of maximum. Trust me, there's a massive difference."

Nina took a deep breath and released it slowly. “It’s not a crime to have a fascination with the macabre. There are people who collect human skulls or preserved fetuses.”

“And I guarantee you, those people get talked to any time something odd happens in their neighborhoods,” Michael replied.

“Well, you’re not talking to me. You’re accusing me. You arrested me.”

“Because we don’t just have a fascination in your case,” Faith explained. “We have evidence.”

“Mica powder that smells like whatever your dog found at the crime scene.”

Faith frowned slightly. The more that was repeated, the thinner their evidence sounded. A spark of doubt flitted across her mind. She glanced at Michael and saw the same concern on his face. They needed more if they were going to charge Nina. They needed her to confess to something or let something slip that could give them more concrete evidence.

Faith decided to try a friendlier approach. “You know, you’re right. We haven’t given you a chance to explain your side of the story. Let’s go back to the mica powder. You said you were using it for an artwork, right?”

Nina sat up straighter. Her eyes took on an almost desperate excitement. “Yes! Yes, that’s true!”

“Do we have pictures of that art?” Faith asked Michael.

“Yep. The police sent some to me a few minutes ago.”

He pulled the pictures up on his phone and showed them to Faith. Faith nodded, and

Michael turned the phone to show the images to Nina. Nina frowned. "I told you it was a depiction of the Magnum Opus."

"See, here's what's interesting, though," Faith said, pointing at the first image. "See this girl? Dead ringer for Cassidy Holt."

"I didn't—"

"And the blonde looks an awful lot like Samantha Reynard," Michael said.

"Listen—"

"And this one," Faith said, swiping to the third image. "This one is what really makes me wonder. The curly red hair, the build, the birthmark just below her belly button on the left side: it's very hard for me to believe that it's coincidental that you have an almost exact image of Lorraine Hayes on your painting."

Nina's face was white as a sheet, and Faith felt some of her confidence return. "Do you have an explanation for that, Miss Verbeck?"

Nina began to tremble. "It's just a painting. I didn't mean anything by it."

"It's not just a painting," Michael corrected. "It's a painting of our victims."

"But..."

"How did you know Cassidy Holt?"

"I didn't. Lots of women are of average height and petite build with long dark hair."

"How many women have birthmarks like the one Lorraine Hayes has?"

Nina's lip trembled. "It was an aesthetic choice."

"An aesthetic choice to paint three women who match our victims down to their birthmarks? I don't buy it."

"You don't have to buy it," Nina replied. "It's the truth."

"Okay," Faith said, lifting her hands placatingly and speaking in a gentle voice. "Let's give you the benefit of the doubt for a second. Where were you last night?"

"Last night?"

"Last night. Between... what time does the library close, Michael?"

"Seven o'clock."

"Let's say between seven and nine o'clock."

"I was home. Eating dinner."

"Can anyone verify that?"

Nina's shaking grew more pronounced. "No," she said softly. "I live alone. My nearest neighbor is a quarter-mile away. You saw my house. It's surrounded by trees."

"What about two nights before that when Samantha Reynard was killed?"

Nina pressed her eyelids shut. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "I was home."

“Alone?” Michael asked.

Nina nodded.

“And no one can verify that?” Faith asked.

She shook her head.

“What about three nights before that when Cassidy Holt was murdered?”

She took a deep breath and released it slowly. “I was home.”

They sat silently for a while. Faith broke the silence. “Can you see where we’re coming from, Nina? We have a woman with mica powder, including quantities missing of the type used on the murder victims. We have a painting that looks damned close to a portrait of the victims precisely as they were found—including locations—and we have no alibi. We have this same woman showing great excitement at the killings and getting offended when we suggested the killer was a man.”

Nina didn’t speak for a while. Faith glanced at Turk. Turk kept a watchful eye on her but didn’t seem particularly aggressive or perturbed. Well, that made sense. It wasn’t like Nina was a threat to them. Even unshackled, there wasn’t much she would be able to do to the two agents.

Finally, Nina took a deep breath. When she opened her eyes, her face had regained some steel. “You have no real evidence. You have nothing placing me at the crime scene. You have circumstantial evidence mostly based on the fact that you don’t like me. I understand your desperation to make an arrest, but I am the wrong person to arrest.”

“Sure looks like you’re the right person,” Michael said.

“Then I would like a lawyer,” Nina replied.

“We can go that route if you want,” Faith replied, “but if we do, then there will be no deals. There will be no leniency. We will be pushing for consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole, and we will ask that you be incarcerated in a maximum-security facility.”

“I’m sure you’ll do whatever you must to obtain what you believe to be justice,” Nina said brittlely, “but any further conversation between us will take place in the presence of counsel. May I please have a phone to call my lawyer?”

Faith and Michael shared a look. It was Nina’s right to have a lawyer, of course, but that would complicate and delay everything. This trial would be a minor sensation, and it would take months to make any sort of progress and possibly years to convict.

And Faith wasn’t sure they had enough. Could she take the stand and convince a jury that Nina Verbeck was the murderer on the strength of a painting, some cheap powder and Turk’s nose? She wasn’t sure.

“Last chance to do this the easy way,” Michael said.

“I’d like my phone call now,” Nina said, her voice filled with dignity.

The two agents shared another look. Then Michael sighed, and the two of them stood. “We’ll talk to the police about your phone call,” he said. “I’m sure they’ll accommodate you momentarily.”

They left the room and went to the other side of the two-way mirror. On the way, they passed an officer carrying a cell phone. Hilary was nothing if not professional.

When they walked into the room, Hilary shared, “You had me worried for a moment. If that painting hadn’t been clearly one of our victims, I would have thought you two had the wrong person.”

Faith pressed her lips together and looked back through the mirror at the seated form of Nina Verbeck as she waited for the officer to dial her lawyer’s number. “Yeah,” she said. “Me too.”

When she arrested Nina, she was absolutely certain that Turk had found their killer. But now? It just seemed very thin on reexamination. As Nina said, they had a lot of circumstantial evidence.

But did that evidence prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Nina was the murderer?

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Lana Argyle leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. Her head throbbed. Who would have thought that it would be so damned difficult to code a menu page? And why the hell did Jeremy want the damned menu to scroll? Would it be so terrible if it just remained stationary like every other menu in every other game ever made?

“If only they knew...” she muttered.

People would lose their minds if they understood how difficult making video games was. Everyone complained when the latest release of their favorite franchise was delayed by a month or two, but they didn’t understand that those delays came about because computer programming was fickle as hell. You could animate an entire action sequence with stunning resolution, intricate movements and expansive landscapes, and then when you coded the character opening a door, it could turn the entire sequence into glitching colors and pixelated shapes. Then you had to go back to the damned beginning and recode the entire thing just so that adding `myCharacter.exe:door {open}` wouldn’t destroy the architecture of the entire level.

“Rinse, repeat, rinse, repeat, rinse, goddamned repeat,” she grumbled.

She had been working on this menu for four hours of overtime so far because she would be damned if she had to go back and rewrite the entire startup sequence just to have the menu scroll. If she did that, it would almost certainly screw up the menu functions, and she’d have to rewrite that code, and God forbid the chain reaction that would follow.

“Maybe Jeremy should write the damned menu himself,” she said darkly. “Then I can watch him pull the last few strands of his hair out of his ears.”

She chuckled to herself at the rude joke, then deleted a line of code and added another. If all went well, this would separate the action of clicking the menu from the action of clicking the character, who, incidentally, just had to twist her hips and giggle when the player's finger slipped.

“Why does it all need to be porn?” she muttered as her fingers flew across the keyboard. “Why does it always have to be flipping porn?”

She was exaggerating, of course. The character was dressed like a schoolgirl with a short skirt, thigh-high socks and a blouse that exaggerated her bust, so sex was definitely a part of the design, but it was a far-cry from porn, and in fact, the character's appearance and movement was rather tame compared to a lot of other games. She was just pissed that she was still here at nine o'clock at night!

“And people wonder why nerds don't have a social life.”

She could have one too. She was tall and slender with raven-black hair and pale skin. She didn't mean to be arrogant, but she could land just about any guy she wanted. You know, just as long as they were okay with never seeing her.

She ran the code and tested the menu's functions. And of course...

Wait. It worked? It was working?

Hardly able to believe her good fortune, Lana ran the code again and tested each function.

It worked! Holy shit, it was working! Nothing was breaking! No error messages popped up! She could navigate the menu, and every function worked the way it was supposed to!

She threw her hands into the air in celebration. “God be praised! Hallelujah! Buy your lottery tickets today, folks!”

She quickly saved the code, then ran the automatic backup so that an extra copy would be preserved in her personal cloud storage. Technically, she wasn’t allowed to do that, but she wasn’t about to let her hard work disappear because of a hard drive glitch that corrupted her data.

The backup would work without her needing to be there to watch it, so she grabbed her jacket and headed for the door. “Thank God that’s over.”

She checked her phone. Nine-oh-six. She could be home by nine-thirty if she caught the nine-fifteen train. It would be a stretch, but she was pretty sure she could make the station by then. She might have to jaywalk, but whatever.

She considered calling Gavin and seeing if he wanted to go out for drinks, but she was just so tired. Gavin was cute, and it had been a while since Lana shared a bed with anyone else, but damn she needed sleep. Seven weeks straight of twelve-hour days six days a week had taken it out of her. She’d call Gavin tomorrow, and if he had gotten tired of waiting and moved on to someone who actually had free time, then she’d just hit up the club and wait for someone hot to come talk to her.

She stepped off the elevator and lifted her head to see a blur coming her way. Something hit her so hard that she felt her feet lift off of the ground. She landed on something soft, or maybe she was just too dazed to feel her head smack against the tile floor.

Her breath came in harsh gasps, but she couldn’t seem to pull in any oxygen. Lights and colors danced and swirled around her, but darkness closed in on her vision. She felt her arms lift and her body drag across the floor.

Then the darkness covered everything.

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Faith finished the last of her sandwich, crumpled up the wrapper and tossed it into the wastebasket.

“Two points,” Michael said absently.

They had just left the interview room with Nina and her attorney. The interview was essentially a rehash of the first one, but with an angry balding man shouting at them about how abusive this entire travesty was the entire time.

It hadn't changed anything. Nina Verbeck was still under arrest for the murders and awaiting her arraignment the next morning. Michael, Faith and Turk were eating dinner at the precinct because after a day of interviewing a suspect, arresting a suspect, interviewing a suspect, filling out paperwork and putting together an initial plan of action for the courtroom shenanigans, then interviewing a suspect with her lawyer, they were too exhausted to go anywhere else.

And here we sit drinking coffee so we can have crappy sleep tonight , she thought, drinking the passable brew the Chicago Police Department's 5 th District kept in their breakroom. I wonder how many law enforcement officers die of heart attacks before the age of fifty.

“Oh,” Michael said. “Before I forget, Ellie wants to invite you, David and Turk over for dinner the weekend after we get back. So this weekend, I guess.”

She scoffed. “You think so? I have a feeling we'll be dealing with court stuff for the next two weeks. We have an arraignment and probably an extra hearing or two to deal with motions by the defense, not to mention the arguments in conference

rooms.”

Michael smiled. “Aww, is someone upset they might have to talk to lawyers?”

“Are you not upset?”

He shrugged. “Not really. I’ll just fly Ellie out here if it looks like we’ll be a while. You should fly David out.”

“Yeah, but I want him to actually like me. Seeing me after dealing with attorneys all day might make him rethink moving in with me.”

“Better get him used to it now,” Michael suggested. “He’ll have to learn to deal with you when you’re angry.”

She looked at Turk, who sat patiently in a corner of the room waiting for his humans to tell him it was time to leave. When he caught Faith’s eye, he got to his feet and trotted over to her. She ruffled his fur and said, “What do you think, boy? Did we get her?”

“We got her,” Michael answered. “Her lawyers will try to argue that we’re making her fit the profile, but that painting cinches it up. It’s the birthmark, really. That proves that she was painting the victims and not just some random girls.”

Faith lifted her eyes to his. He smiled, but there was tension behind his smile. “You’re not sure either, are you?”

He pressed his lips together. “It looks pretty damned convincing. She was practically salivating over the details of the murders. She had the powder, she had the painting that is absolutely of the crime scenes, she loves alchemy... what are we missing?”

Faith shook her head. "I don't know, but I feel like we're missing something."

He sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that."

"You feel it too," she pointed out. "That's why you look tense."

Michael tapped his finger on the table and didn't answer for a moment. When he did, he said, "It's definitely not the most iron-clad case we've made. I guess I'm in the same boat as Detective Hilary. If we didn't have the painting, I'd say Nina's probably not our killer. But we do have the painting, and I just can't see how it's a coincidence."

"Maybe she found crime scene photos," Faith said. "She could have hacked into a database to get them."

"Maybe for the first two," Michael said, "but not the third one. Not Lorraine Hayes."

"Maybe she has a friend in the crime lab who got her the pictures?"

"And she'd rather stand trial for murder than say that?" Michael shook his head. "No, she makes sense as a murderer."

Faith leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "Does she?"

Michael frowned. "She makes sense to me. What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about the method of the murders. We have someone scaling a fence at the botanical gardens, climbing a twelve-story fire escape up and down, and chasing a girl in a forest path. The killer broke all three of their necks, and Lorraine, at least, was prepared to defend herself."

“She was running away, not trying to defend herself.”

“Yes, but why?” Faith pressed. “She outweighs Nina. She’s younger than Nina. The killer wasn’t carrying a weapon.”

“The killer didn’t use a weapon, but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t carrying one.”

“Yes, but the killer grabbed each victim and quickly twisted their necks. We have talcum powder from the first two victims to indicate where the hands were positioned. I don’t see the killer holstering or dropping a weapon, then grabbing their neck and twisting. And I know that Dr. Test said that a woman could snap someone’s neck, but could a woman snap someone’s neck while that person was running? Even if we say that Nina could overpower Lorraine, I don’t think she could overpower Lorraine right away. There would be a struggle, and there wasn’t one. The killer grabbed Lorraine, twisted, and lights out. He would have had to be significantly stronger than Lorraine, and that means he would have to be a he.”

“So why would Nina argue with us and say that the killer could have been a woman? Why would she be miffed that we assumed it was a man?”

“Because she’s arrogant. And she has an unhealthy obsession with alchemy and probably with the murders. As she would put it, she’s not a pleasant person. But I’m starting to have serious doubts that she’s a murderer.”

Michael frowned at Faith. Then he sighed. “Damn it.”

“You have doubts too,” Faith deduced.

He lowered his head to his hands. “Yes. Damn it.” He lifted his head again and said, “So what do we do? We already arrested Nina. We’re going to bring her up on charges tomorrow.”

“That gives us tonight.”

“Tonight to do what? Damn it, Faith. If it’s not Nina, then the real killer’s probably out there right now.”

“I know. I’m as aware of this as you are and just as pissed off. I just... she looked good. She looked good to you too.”

“She looked really good.”

He tapped his fingers on the table again and stared through the window at the night sky. Turk was standing now. He could sense the tension in the room and was watching both humans closely to see what was wrong.

“It’s that painting. It’s too good. It’s too much to be coincidental. A birthmark? That’s more than just the same body type and hair. You have to see someone naked to know what their birthmark looks like.”

Faith pursed her lips and rubbed her chin. Michael was right. The painting was the most powerful piece of evidence they had that Nina did, in fact, commit the crime.

But now that Faith had thought about the unlikelihood of Nina Verbeck possessing the athleticism to perform the physical feats of the murders, she couldn’t shake the doubts from her head. “The red was missing too,” she said, “but we haven’t found a red victim.”

“You want to talk to her and see if she can tell us where the red victim is?”

Faith crossed her arms. “She’ll just deny that she knows anything about it. Whether she does or not, she’ll say she doesn’t.”

“We could offer her a plea deal again.”

“Not with the lawyer present. The DA isn’t going to go for a plea deal in the case of someone who murdered three people this brutally.”

“He might to ensure we find the other body.”

“I doubt it. If Nina’s the killer, then either there will be no more victims, or we’ll figure out who the fourth is with or without Nina’s help. Finding the body can happen after Nina’s sentenced to multiple life.”

“So no,” Michael said tersely. “You don’t want to ask her.”

“No,” Faith agreed. “I want something concrete, damn it. I want a hair follicle, a fingerprint, DNA, an image on a security camera, fucking anything that can help. That’s the part that really pisses me off. Nina’s right. All we have is circumstantial evidence because that’s the only evidence there. The shoe prints were made as generic as possible, the killer wore gloves and a mask, there’s no security footage or eyewitnesses until after the fact. We have nothing but circumstantial evidence.”

“Killers have been caught that way before. I think we have enough to catch Nina. That painting...”

“That painting isn’t enough to make me confident that she’s our guy.”

“It was up until a moment ago,” Michael said. “Not being a dick, just looking for clarification. What changed? Just the fact that Nina’s small?”

“Yes,” Faith said, “and that matters. If our suspect isn’t physically capable of committing the crime, then she didn’t commit it.”

“It’s not like she dropped a boulder on their heads,” Michael countered. “It would be difficult for Nina to commit these crimes, but would it be impossible? She’s not buff, but she’s not obese either. She could scale a fence and climb a fire escape if she was properly motivated.”

“Could, yes,” Faith admitted. “But a lot of things have to go perfect.”

"A lot of things have to go perfectly anyway for these killings to work."

“But Lorraine’s murder wasn’t perfect. The killer didn’t mean to be seen before he caught up to her.”

“So what do we do?” Michael asked. “Where do we go from here? Do we release Nina and say we don’t have enough evidence?”

Faith sighed and pressed her hands to her eyes. “Damn it. I wish... Well, wishes were horses, beggars would ride, yadda yadda.”

“I don’t think yadda yadda is necessary if you complete the phrase,” Michael observed. Faith glared at him, and he shrugged. “Just trying to lighten the mood.”

"Not really looking for light right now," Faith said. She tapped her finger on the table. "That's another thing that makes me think Nina's not the killer. Our killer's a coward. On the surface, the crimes don't look cowardly, but if you examine them, they are. He's going through this elaborate process because he feels he has to, but he's doing it as quickly as he can, and he's leaving as little evidence as he can. He definitely wouldn't invite two FBI agents and a K-9 to his house where he keeps the powder he's using to complete the spell and a painting of the crimes he's committed."

Michael frowned again. “Okay. You’ve convinced me now. Damn it. So we release Nina, but then what? Where do we go next? I know I’m asking that a lot, but I’m not

coming up with an answer. A nice Faith Bold stroke of brilliance would be great right now.”

Faith would have loved one of those herself, but nothing came to mind. “We need to go back to the beginning,” she said. “We need to look at the case from the very start and rebuild our profile. We’re missing something key. That final piece that will tell us exactly where to look.”

“But you’re sure it’s not Nina?”

She paused for a long time before saying. “Don’t release her yet. It could just be cognitive dissonance. Let’s rebuild our profile and then look at it again. Worst-case scenario, she spends a night in jail, and we send her home with our apologies in the morning.”

“Fine with me,” Michael said with a sigh. “But I’m getting coffee and snacks if we’re going to stay up late. You want anything from the convenience store?”

“Whatever you get is fine.”

“The spiciest chips they have and guava juice. Got it.”

Faith managed a half-hearted smile at Michael’s half-hearted joke. She looked at Turk, who continued to watch her intently. “I wish you could talk, boy. I wish I knew exactly what you smelled at the crime scenes. Then I might know if we caught the right bad guy or if he’s still out there putting someone’s life in danger.”

She looked out the window at the lights of the city and hoped that in one of the dark corners the lights didn’t reach, an innocent young woman wasn’t breathing her last.

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Michael returned fifteen minutes later and handed Faith a coffee and a bag that contained an orange juice, a protein bar, a bag of roasted peanuts and a blueberry muffin. She looked up at him and said, "Does Ellie know you eat like a five-year-old?"

"Where did you grow up that five-year-olds eat protein bars?" he asked. "But yes. Also, if you want something different, you can go shopping next time."

"You got coffee, too," she pointed out. "The break room actually has some of that."

"Ditto," Michael replied. He sat across from her and bit into his own protein bar. "So, starting from the beginning."

"Yes. I'll start though so you don't have to chew with your mouth open."

He rolled his eyes and gave her the finger.

"Just saying," Faith replied. "So, the key to this is the Magnum Opus. That's this guy's entire focus."

"Yep. Got that."

"So the details matter. That's why he's following every instruction to the letter in each murder despite his cowardice."

"So we're looking for missing details," Michael summarized.

“Yes.”

“So we should start by looking at the details we have.”

“Excellent work, Michael,” she said with a hint of sarcasm.

He rolled his eyes again but didn’t flip her off this time.

“so we know that the shapes matter. Inner circle, square, triangle.”

“And the outer circle is left.”

“Yes. The colors matter too, the ‘humors.’ Nigredo, albedo, citrinitas, and rubedo.”

“And those are matched to the shapes.”

“Exactly. Nigredo with the inner circle. Albedo with the square and citrinitas with the triangle. That means rubedo is the outer circle.”

“All of which is great but doesn’t lead us to our killer.”

Faith sighed. “No. It doesn’t.”

Michael leaned back in his chair. We know our next victim will be positioned in the outer circle. Probably folded backwards with fingertips to toes or something.”

“Something like that,” Faith agreed. “And red mica powder will be spilled on her.”

“Are we sure the victim will be a her?”

"Reasonably. The sacrifices usually call for a virgin girl, according to Nina.

Obviously, these women aren't virgins, but the killer's taken women each time. Even if the only reason for that is to easily overpower them, I think we can assume the victim will be a woman."

"Makes sense. Not that it matters anyway, I guess."

Faith sighed again and sipped some of her coffee. It really wasn't any better than the coffee already at the precinct.

"So what's missing?" she said. "What else is unique about the crimes?"

"Different locations," Michael said.

Faith sat up a little straighter. "Yes. Yes, I think you're onto something. Each murder was committed at a different location. Cassidy at the Botanic Gardens, Samantha in her apartment, and Lorraine Hayes on a path by the river."

"Or just a path by her job," Michael said. "And Cassidy just happened to be alone at the gardens."

Faith deflated a little. "Yes. That's possible, too."

"It's the fact that Samantha was killed in her apartment," Michael said. "That's what makes me think the locations were just opportunistic and the victims are what matter. The issue is that the only thing I could speculate on with any certainty is that the next victim will have black hair."

"Which narrows it down to probably a million women or so."

"Not necessarily," Michael said. "Most people who have black hair actually have dark brown hair."

“So it narrows it down to... what would you say? A few thousand?”

This time, Michael deflated. “Yeah. It doesn’t really help.”

Faith shook her head. "If the victims mattered, then why not kill all of them in their homes? They all lived alone. The killer put himself at risk, killing Cassidy in the Botanic Gardens and Lorraine Hayes on a public path next to the Chicago River less than fifty yards from a busy road. The locations matter. I just don't know why yet. But that's the key. If we figure out why the locations matter, then we might be able to figure out where the next location is, and we can maybe predict where the killer will take his next victim. Then we can have the locations watched. It's clumsy, but we might catch our killer that way. At the very least, we might keep him from acting."

“Yeah,” Michael said, a little encouraged. “Okay. Let’s brainstorm then. If we assume the locations matter, then it matters that nigredo took place at the gardens, albedo took place at the loft apartment, and citrinitas took place by the river. So why those locations with those humors? And where will rubedo take place?”

Faith rested her chin on her hand and thought for a moment. It seemed random, but it wasn’t. There was a purpose to those locations. Dr. Cranston had told them that each humor and each shape mattered for each part of the process. But he hadn’t mentioned the location.

Then Faith remembered. “The elements!” she cried out.

“The what?” Michael asked.

“The elements,” she said. “Dr. Cranston mentioned the four elements as well as the four shapes and the four humors.”

“Did he?”

“He did. We just didn’t think about it because we didn’t see the connection at the time. There was nothing to tell us how the poses of the bodies and the colors of the powder indicated the elements. But that’s the key! The locations are the key. They’re the connection to the elements.”

Michael’s eyes widened. “Holy shit. You’re right. That makes sense. The Botanic Gardens are associated with Earth.”

“And the loft apartment with air and the river with water,” Faith said. “That leaves fire.”

Michael grinned. "So the next murder will take place somewhere with fire. Or having to do with fire. A firehouse, maybe?"

Faith shook her head. “That’s pushing it too far. There will be firefighters at a firehouse, and they will have security cameras watching the area. Besides, firefighters try to stop fire. If anything, a firehouse would be associated with water.”

“Okay, so where—”

The door opened before Michael could finish his question. Detective Hilary poked his head into the room, his face lined with worry. “Guys, we have something.”

A chill ran through Faith. “Another body.”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?” Michael said.

“Come with me.”

Hilary ducked out of the room. The two agents shared a brief look with each other then rushed to follow him.

Hilary led them to the bullpen. A group of officers were crowded around Hilary's desk watching something. Hilary leaned over the computer and rewound the footage while explaining, "We have a woman who was kidnapped less than fifteen minutes ago from an office building in downtown."

"Downtown?" Michael said. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. The security camera captured this footage."

He backed up, and Faith leaned over the desk. The footage was a brief clip of the building's lobby. The camera didn't capture the entire lobby, but in the upper right corner of the video, Faith could see a masked attacker waiting for the elevator. The elevator opened, and a tall young woman with long, jet-black hair stepped out.

The attacker lifted something that looked like a club or sap and swung it at the woman. The weapon collided with the side of her head, and she dropped to the ground. Faith's lips thinned grimly as the attacker stooped and dragged her toward a side door and off the camera.

The attacker was masked, making it impossible to identify him, but it was a him. "You were right," Michael said. "The killer's a man."

"You were right, too," she replied. "She has jet-black hair."

"He didn't kill her there, though," Hilary said. "We have officers on scene now, and no body."

"That's good news," Faith said. "He's taking her somewhere else."

“But where and why? And are you sure it’s our guy?”

Faith’s lips thinned more. It could be an unrelated crime. It could have nothing to do with their alchemist.

But there was no doubt that the young woman in the video needed help. Faith didn’t have anywhere else to look, and if she could help this young woman, then she would.

“Sure enough that I think we need to find her ASAP,” Faith said. “And I know where he’s going to take her.”

The killer breathed deeply and gripped the wheel of the van tightly. When he released the breath, he relaxed his hands, but his heart continued to pound. He felt a transient pain in his chest and whimpered with fear.

Come on. I’m so close. I’m so damned close!

This whole thing was a clusterfuck. He had been so scared that he’d made a lot of stupid mistakes. He drove around for a while with no idea where he was going to go, then, for some reason, he just decided to pull into the parking lot of the first building he saw.

In downtown.

At an office building.

On a major boulevard.

He took another deep breath that had a similar lack of effect on his pounding heart.

He didn't even think about the damned cameras. He'd been so careful at the garden, but he didn't even think about it now. Then he'd looked up and saw that stupid camera that had caught him knocking the girl out. What a damned fool.

It's okay. Just finish rubedo and it won't matter. Worst case, you're in jail for a while.

"Which really kinda sucks," he whined.

His victim stirred, and he froze and watched her in the rearview mirror. Didn't even tie her up, you idiot.

She slumped again, and he released another breath he'd been holding. Damn it, his hands were shaking.

"Just a little bit," he said. "We just need to get to the location of fire, then we can complete the process, and I'll achieve eternal life."

Had the police seen him? Were they on their way?"

He shivered and squeezed and released the wheel again. "It's okay," he told himself. "It's okay."

A flash of pain struck his chest. He gasped and pressed his right hand to the pain while his left continued to drive. He felt a wave of nausea—something that only accompanied the worst of the pain.

Worse was the pain forming in his left arm.

"No," he said. "Not now, damn it, not now."

He smacked his chest hard, once, twice, then a third time. When he hit it again, he felt

something slide inside of him, and the pain subsided. He froze, certain that it would return at any moment, but all he felt was a dull ache.

He took another deep breath and stifled sobs. He just needed to finish this one job. Then everything would be okay.

The location he had chosen was perfect. Not only did it fit for rubedo , but it was close by. He wouldn't be vulnerable for long.

Damn it, if only he'd had a day or two longer. He could have done this without his car. He could have taken the right precautions.

Instead, he'd rushed everything, and now the police were almost certainly following him.

His victim stirred again. He looked at her and wondered if he should stop the car to knock her out. Or maybe he'd just kill her now.

No, he couldn't do that. He needed her alive until right before the ritual.

He pulled the car to a stop and opened the back door. The victim asked in a slurred voice. "What's... what's going on?"

Instead of answering, he pulled her toward him, wrapped his arms around her neck and squeezed. She struggled for a few seconds, then went limp. He pushed her back into the car, then got back in the driver's seat and sped off.

"Soon. Soon. One more time, and it will all be over."

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All eyes turned to Faith. “Where?” Hilary demanded.

She sighed. “I don’t know exactly where, but it will have to do with fire.”

“Fire? Like a firehouse?”

“No. Like something associated with the element of fire.” She briefly explained the elements that each murder location represented so far and her belief that this final murder would take place somewhere associated with fire. “Firehouses are places that actively fight fire, so it wouldn’t be there.”

“Where though? A gas main?”

Faith shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Hilary sighed. “Damn it, agent, when you said you knew where he took her, I thought you knew where he took her.”

“Maybe a place that burnt down?” Michael suggested. “If there’s nowhere that’s actively connected to fire, maybe a place that’s been damaged or destroyed by fire.”

“That could be it,” Faith said. “Are there any abandoned or lightly trafficked buildings in Chicago that have been damaged by fire?”

“You’re aware that there was a Great Fire of Chicago, right?” Hilary asked irritably.

“There’s no need to be sarcastic,” Michael said, coming to Faith’s defense. “Let’s

make a list. The most likely places will be abandoned and burnt recently. We can order them in descending order from most recent to oldest fire and most empty and remote to least empty.”

“Not necessarily remote,” Faith clarified. “I think he’s desperate.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He rushed this one,” Faith said. “And he kidnapped her instead of looking for an opportunity near the scene of the murder. That’s why he was caught on camera when he’s never been caught on camera before.”

“You’re sure he just didn’t get unlucky?” Hilary asked.

“I’m sure. At Samantha Reynard’s apartment, he nearly walked into the hallway but stopped when he remembered the cameras. Tonight, he stood in full view of a camera for several seconds waiting for the elevator.”

“He was wearing his mask, though,” Hilary said. “He wasn’t afraid of being recognized.”

“The kidnapping thing, though,” Michael interjected. “Faith’s right. He’s never taken a live victim before. He’s always killed them as quickly as possible. This is different.”

“He’s desperate,” Faith insisted. “I think he’s terminally ill. Michael and I discussed this earlier before we went to Nina Verbeck’s house. He’s sick, and he’s trying to complete the Magnum Opus before his disease kills him. That’s why he’s moving quickly with each murder. I think something happened after Lorraine Hayes was killed. Either his symptoms escalated, or he had a medical episode or something, but he thinks he’s running out of time. He’s scared, and it’s making him sloppy.”

“So he might not be far away is the point,” Hilary said.

“Yes. In fact, he’s probably close to the building where he picked the victim up.”

“Okay. I’ll say a five-mile radius,” Hilary said.

He typed some commands into his computer. A moment later, dozens of tags popped up on the screen.

Faith’s heart sank. “Please don’t tell me those are all the buildings that could fit our profile.”

Hilary sighed. “I’m afraid they are. Damn it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Michael said, turning around and lacing his hands behind his head. “And that’s just what’s within five miles. If our guy’s willing to drive freeways, there could be hundreds more.”

“Fires happen,” Hilary said, almost defensively. “There are probably fewer buildings that haven’t suffered fire damage at some point or another.”

“Let’s narrow it down,” Faith said. “Get rid of those that have suffered minor damage. Leave behind buildings that have been condemned or abandoned because of a fire.”

That erased about twenty results but still left dozens behind. Faith swore. “Damn it. How many results is that?”

“Forty-five.”

She dropped her head, then lifted it and steeled herself for the nearly impossible task

ahead. “Okay. Then we need eyes on all forty-five locations. How soon can we get officers there?”

“Are you serious? That’s at least ninety officers. The precinct only has half that number. We can cover the top half of the locations, but not all of them. It’ll take at least a half hour to borrow from the other precincts.”

“God damn it,” she swore. “Okay, let’s get the ball rolling then.”

“That’ll be too late for the victim,” Michael said.

“Well, it’s better than doing nothing,” Faith snapped. “Give me the top two locations. Turk and I will take one, and Michael can take one of your officers with him. Get the other pairs out to the other locations as fast as you can.”

“I don’t want you going alone,” Michael interjected.

“I’m not alone,” Faith said. “I’m with Turk, and I’m not going to entertain arguments right now. You’re right, it’ll take too long to coordinate the police response, so we need to get to everywhere we can.”

Michael sighed. “All right.”

“Top location is a theater,” Hilary said, “Like a stage theater, not a movie theater. The Walter Calloway Theater on Baker and Mulberry.”

“Text me the address,” Faith said, rushing from the bullpen with Turk at her side.

Her heart pounded. She could hear West’s taunting laughter in her head.

“You fear that he’ll beat you, that he’ll complete the Magnum Opus and leave you

with nothing more than the chance to clean up his mess.”

“Go to Hell, West,” she said through gritted teeth.

“I’ll only show up again with a new face and a new name.”

“Well, this name is going to be stopped before he kills that girl.”

Faith and Turk jumped into the cruiser. Faith started the car and put the address into the navigation software. The theater was nine minutes away. Faith switched on the lights and siren and peeled out of the parking lot. She’d make the theater in five.

Her mind echoed with Trammell’s lilting tenor, West’s taunting laughter, Kenneth Langeveldt’s crazed grin. The rage and sickness of dozens of killers ran through her mind, but each taunt only fueled her determination.

She would rescue that woman before the Magnum Opus was complete.

Or she would die trying.

Lana stirred. Her head felt thick, and her tongue moved furrily in her mouth. She moaned and tried to open her eyes, but she couldn’t. Or maybe she could, and the swirling lights were all she could see.

Was she blind now? She’d heard that if you hit the back of your head hard enough, you could be blinded temporarily or even permanently. Something to do with how the nerves in your eyes connected to the back of your brain.

A voice cut through the swirling lights. “Not now. Not now. Not now , damn it!”

This was followed by the sound of something smacking something else. It sounded like a fist hitting flesh. Was he hitting her? Was he saying not now, as in don't wake up now?

No, she couldn't feel anything. Even if she didn't feel pain, she would feel the impact.

What did she feel?

She concentrated on that sense. She felt something soft underneath the right side of her body, like a cushion. She could feel movement too when the cushion tilted slightly.

A car seat? That would make sense. She had been knocked out and dragged from the building.

So she was in someone's car, and he was taking her away for...

Nothing good. She was an adult. She knew what men did when they kidnapped attractive young women.

Then she remembered the murders. They were all over the news. Girls stripped naked and posed in weird shapes with powder sprinkled over their bodies.

That brought her all the way to wakefulness. She opened her eyes and realized that she was indeed in a car. She was belted into her seat, but she wasn't bound.

She looked ahead and saw her kidnapper. He looked to be about fifteen to twenty years older than her, with receding gray hair and liver spots on the exposed scalp. He was slamming his right hand into his chest—that was the noise she heard—and weeping. Through his tears, he was saying, "Not now. Not now."

If she was careful and slow, she could get to him before he saw her. She could fight him and crash the car. Then...

Then he would be seat belted, and she would be thrown through the window.

He spun around, and any secrecy she might have had was a non-issue. His eyes flew open, and he pointed at her. "You stay still! You move, and I'll fucking kill you!"

His voice cracked with desperation. Lana's mind raced. He was going to kill her. That was obvious.

But he needed to take her somewhere first. Somewhere, he could pose her in whatever weird shape he wanted this time.

So he needed her to be calm until then. Damn it, if only she could think of a way to get out of here without killing herself.

When the car stops , she thought. When the car stops, I'll make a run for it.

In the meantime, maybe she could get him to relax and drop his guard a little bit. "What's your name?" she asked.

He glanced at her briefly and didn't reply. She was about to ask again when he finally said, "Edgar."

"Edgar," she repeated. "I'm Lana."

"I don't care."

What a lovely person , she thought drily.

Well, duh. He was a murderer.

“What are you going to do to me?” she asked.

“I’m going to complete rubedo ,” he said. “I’m going to live forever.”

She had no idea what ruby dough had to do with living forever, but the guy was clearly crazy. “Are you sick?”

As though on cue, Edgar grimaced. He hunched over the steering wheel, the veins in his neck building. A hissing sound escaped his lips, and after a moment erupted into a hoarse cry. His right hand came to his chest, trembling. "Please," he whispered. "Please, not now. I'm so close. Please."

Maybe I’ll get lucky, and he’ll die before he can kill me.

“You should see a doctor,” she said. “They can help you.”

Edgar barked laughter. He grimaced again, then after a second, he sighed with relief. His hand trembled again as he pulled it away from his chest and put it on the wheel. "No, they can't," he said, his voice thick with exhaustion. "They've tried. It's too late. My heart function is at forty-five percent. Or it was five weeks ago. They told me I need a heart transplant soon because it's going to decline further, and when it dips below thirty percent, I'm at high risk for heart failure."

He looked at her. “Congestive heart failure. Can you believe that? I’ve eaten well and exercised my whole life. I’ve watched my weight, gotten good sleep... the whole kiboodle. But I have congestive heart failure because I have some stupid genetic issue that makes it so my body can’t digest certain kinds of fat. Instead, it decides to linger in my pericardium and my arteries. Would’ve loved to know that years ago, but what are you going to do?”

“And you think killing me is going to save you?”

He slumped slightly. “I’m sorry. I really am. I just have to complete the Magnum Opus. I need a sacrifice for rubedo , and you were the closest person to me when I stopped.”

How lovely. Lana was going to die because she needed to work late to program a damned start menu for a stupid mobile game that was probably going to sell a thousand copies before users got fed up with it. “Listen, I wouldn’t be a good sacrifice,” she said. She thought desperately for a reason and said, “I... I’ve had sex. I’m not a virgin. Gee, nice going, Lana.

As expected, Edgar was unfazed. “I don’t care. You don’t need to be a virgin. You need to be unsoiled. That means I can’t get blood on you.”

Lana got an idea. She lifted her finger to her mouth. If she could bite down hard enough to draw blood, then—

“No! Don’t you dare!”

Edgar reached behind, grabbed the back of her head and slammed her forward. Her head hit the center console, and the world exploded into darkness again.

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Faith pulled her cruiser in front of the theater six minutes later. The extra minute hung in the air like a billboard, flashing in her mind like neon.

You're late! You're late! You're late!

There was one other car parked in front of the burned-out building: an old minivan with faded paint and a rear bumper that hung dangerously off of the car. Faith wondered how many officers had seen that vehicle and decided that it wasn't worth their time to give the owner a ticket. How many people could have caught their killer and stopped him before it was too late?

No, that wasn't right. He took public transportation for every crime before now. Looking at the van, Faith guessed that was why. She was letting her thoughts run away from her. She needed to stay in control. A woman's life depended on it.

She reached a chainlink fence and quickly scaled it. Turk whined, unable to climb the fence himself.

"Hold on," Faith said. "I'll get you through here, just don't bark, please."

In most situations, Faith would want Turk to bark and announce their presence, but in this case, she feared that would only frighten the desperate killer into acting more quickly.

If he hadn't acted already.

She dropped to the other side and tried to lift the chainlink. It lifted only slightly. She

cursed and bent down, grabbing handfuls of the fence and grunting with effort as she pulled it upward. It lifted an inch or two, but not nearly enough for Turk to get through. She looked around for a gate, and with a sinking feeling, she saw that it was locked with a thick chain and an even thicker padlock.

Why the hell did they lock abandoned buildings? Why not just bulldoze them the moment they were condemned? For God's sake.

Turk whined and stuck his nose through the bottom of the fence in a futile attempt to push himself through.

"It's no use, Turk," Faith said. "You won't fit."

She looked behind her at the building. Maybe she should continue on her own and have Turk wait here. Every second mattered.

But she'd gotten herself nearly killed that way more than once. Going by herself was how Trammell caught her. Other killers had hurt her, bound her, nearly murdered her. Other victims had almost died because she wasn't careful.

With a sinking heart, she turned back to the fence. She'd have to either figure out a way to get Turk inside or she'd have to climb back over the fence and find another way in.

She thought a moment, then pulled her multitool from her pocket. The wire cutter in the pliers wasn't designed to cut through the thicker links of the fence, but the steel used for these fences was the cheapest metal you could buy. It probably wasn't even steel, just some inexpensive aluminum alloy.

She closed the wire cutters over a link and squeezed. The fence held. She gritted her teeth, and the link slowly, slowly bent.

Then snapped. She pumped her fist in victory, but then it occurred to her how many of the links she'd have to cut to get Turk inside.

Don't waste time being daunted , she thought. Just keep working .

She moved on to the next link. After an unbearable moment, it snapped. She moved on to a third, and this one took a touch longer than the second. She pulled on the fence and found the links barely moved. She'd made very little real progress.

Images flashed through her mind of the victims, the ones she couldn't save. She struggled with the fence, each link seeming to take forever to cut.

Lorraine Hayes lay with her legs spread and her arms pointed above her head. Her eyes were open, and her sightless eyes stared up into the night.

SNAP. She moved on to another link.

The woman had been tossed into the dumpster after death. Her body was stiff with rigor, and her eyes wide with terror.

SNAP. Another link.

Grimes had been cut open, and the word Vengeance was written above him in his own blood.

SNAP

The kid looked like he'd been torn apart by a wild animal. His nearly exsanguinated body sat slumped in the chair, and cuts covered him from head to toe.

SNAP

The woman had clearly been left in the well for a while. Her body was bloated and covered in green and blue splotches where gangrene had set into her flesh.

SNAP

Gordon lay on the floor in a pool of his own blood. His service weapon lay a few yards away. He had tried hard to defend himself, but he had come up just short.

SNAP. Faith snarled in frustration and grabbed the fence. With a grunt of effort, she pulled. The severed metal bit into her hands, but she ignored the pain and pulled back hard, stretching the hole wider and wider until—

With a soft yelp of excitement, Turk jumped through. Faith released the fence and leaned over, putting her hands on her knees. Her shoulders and arms burned, and her breath came in gasps, but she forced the exhaustion down.

“Come on, boy. Let’s go find our killer.”

The outside of the theater was charred in an uneven pattern. Faith could see exactly where the flames had traveled, scorching parts of the structure and leaving others relatively untouched. One of the untouched portions of the facade proudly announced ALLOWAY, all that remained of the building’s name.

She jogged to the entrance, but it was completely blocked. The exterior of the building seemed mostly intact, but inside, much of the structure had collapsed. The front doors were blocked by piles of burnt wood, shattered drywall and twisted metal.

She jogged around the side of the building, gun drawn. Turk followed, his nose to the ground, but he didn’t smell anything yet. Or, like Faith, all he could smell was the acrid, acidic tang of ash and charcoal.

One side of the building dead ended in another pile of rubble. Faith felt panic creeping to the edges of her mind. She'd been outside of the building for fifteen minutes already. The killer could have finished and be on his way out of here. Her only hope was that he had been as stymied as she was.

But he was already inside. He might have been stymied, but he was already inside. Damn it, she was going to be too late.

"No!" she snapped, loudly enough that Turk's head whirled her direction. She sighed and said, "Never mind. Come with me."

She ran to the other side of the building, moving at a dead sprint. Turk followed at what for him was an easy jog. The other side wasn't blocked, but there were no entrances for the fifty yards that stretched from the entrance to the rear of the theater.

The back of the theater consisted of a dirt lot with piles of what Faith guessed used to be props and stage equipment. Now, they just looked like haphazard piles of indiscriminate rubble.

More importantly, Faith still couldn't find a damned way in. The back door only opened a few inches when she pushed it. Behind those few inches was more rubble.

Had the killer blocked the way in? Had he tried to keep Faith out because he knew someone was coming for him? He might have realized he was on camera and decided to take precautions.

She pushed hard, but the door didn't budge anymore.

"Damn it!" she hissed.

She looked around and found an open window on the second floor. It didn't seem

possible that the killer could have gotten in through there.

But it didn't matter. Faith needed to get inside.

An even more horrible thought occurred to her. What if this was all a waste of time? What if the van was abandoned, too? What if there was no one here, and Faith was putting all of this effort to scout an empty building?

She had been here for twenty minutes now. Surely most of the other locations nearby were being patrolled as well. If they had found anyone, they would have told her. Could they have been wrong? Could the killer have gone somewhere else entirely? Could this kidnapping be unrelated to their murder, and now two killers were getting away with their crimes while Faith and her colleagues were chasing their tails?

Turk barked, and Faith blinked and looked at him. He looked at the second-floor window pointedly, then looked back at her.

She smiled grimly at him. "You're right, Turk. Enough second-guessing. Time to catch a bad guy."

She looked at the window. It was about ten feet off the ground, not especially high. If she stacked some debris, maybe two feet tall, she could jump and reach it and pull herself in. Then Turk could jump into her arms, and she could help him in too.

She ran to the nearest pile. This looked like old prop furniture. It also appeared recently disturbed. A couple of the couches rested on their legs in front of the pile. It seemed unlikely that it could have just been left there. Maybe the killer had moved it to get himself and his victim into the building.

She dragged the couch underneath the window and tested her weight. It splintered almost immediately, the right legs snapping cleanly through the middle. She nearly

fell, only just catching herself to keep from falling.

Well, if the killer had used that one, he had used every last bit of its structural integrity. She dragged the other couch to the window.

This couch wasn't very steady, but it would hold well enough. She crouched low and jumped up. Her hands caught the edge of the window, and she quickly lifted herself up and through, grimacing against the fatigue in her upper body.

When she was inside, she turned around and called Turk. Turk hesitated for a second, then jumped up. She caught him and carefully pulled him in through the window.

"Good boy," she said. "Let's go get him."

They were in a narrow hallway with doors on either side. Faith drew her weapon again and looked through the rooms. They were all empty.

The second floor was in somewhat better shape than the first floor appeared to be, though. That seemed odd to Faith, but she wasn't going to waste time wondering what kind of fire would have done that.

The hallway ended at another hallway. Behind her were restrooms, and ahead was a door marked MEZZANINE. She checked the restrooms and found more fire damage. The stalls were all twisted, the plastic bubbled and cracked and the metal bent. The porcelain was blackened, and there were holes in the ceiling through which Faith could see the stars. The moisture those holes had allowed in had left spreading growths of black mold on the ground. The smell assaulted Faith, and her nostrils flared.

But Turk reacted oddly. He stiffened and turned back the other way. His face wore the same expression it had when he was investigating the crime scenes.

Faith's heart leapt. "Do you smell something, boy?"

He looked back at her, then looked ahead for a moment.

"What is it?" she pressed. "Go get it, Turk."

Turk looked back at her again. After a moment's more hesitation, he started forward. Then he barked and sprinted forward.

Yes!

"Go get him, Turk!" she called.

She sprinted after him. Turk pawed at the door marked MEZZANINE, and when Faith opened it, he shot through, nose to the ground.

She followed him, and despite Turk's nose, she saw the killer before he did.

He was below them on the charred main stage of the theater. He was cursing and grunting softly to himself as he dragged something onto the stage.

Not something. Someone. In his arms was the limp body of a woman in her late twenties. She was tall and slender with long, jet-black hair.

She wasn't moving. Her head lolled listlessly to one side while her killer dragged her onto the stage, grunting with effort. Faith saw a touch of red in the pocket of the jacket he wore and recognized the red mica powder he would use to complete rubedo.

She was too late.

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Faith took a deep breath and pushed it out through her nose. She felt very small.

She didn't want to do this. She didn't want to be an FBI agent anymore. No one had prepared her for this. She would fight bad guys and bring them to justice. She would learn to solve crimes and stop killers before they could take another life.

But she hated this. This was the worst damned part of the job, and no one had taught her how to deal with it.

"Just be calm, sympathetic and patient," Michael said. "Get through this part, then we'll go grab a drink or twelve."

She chuckled and tried to smile at her handsome partner, but as cute as Michael was, he couldn't cheer her up right now. "I can't," she said. "I can't do it. Can you do this part, please? I'm sorry, I just can't."

"I can," he said, "and if you ask me again, I will. But... this is stuff we have to do, Faith. Just hold your head up high and do your best, okay? The sooner you learn how to get through this part, the better."

She sighed and forced herself to calm. She was a U.S. Marine for God's sake. She could handle it. She took another breath and said, "All right. Let's go do it."

Michael nodded approvingly, then knocked on the door. The door opened a moment later, and Faith's resolve shattered.

Faith knew that the woman who answered the door was thirty-nine years old, but she

looked almost fifteen years older. She looked at the two agents with tears streaming down her face. She wasn't weeping anymore, but the tears were still falling. Faith had a feeling they would fall for a while longer.

Faith opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. A lump formed in her throat. This sucked so much. This hurt so much. That poor woman. Why the hell were people so cruel?

Michael rescued her. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Davisson. I'm Special Agent Michael Prince of the FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Faith Bold. We were wondering if we could ask you some questions about Hannah."

Hannah Davisson had been murdered one week after her nineteenth birthday when a serial killer that Faith and Michael were hunting had lured her into his vehicle and driven her out to the woods beyond town. They had found more of her body than they had of the other victims, but that didn't seem like much of a silver lining right now.

Mrs. Davisson closed her eyes and nodded. Then she broke into sobs. Tears swam in Faith's own eyes as Mrs. Davisson sunk to her knees, weeping with grief at the knowledge that her only daughter was gone. She would never see her again.

I'm sorry, Faith thought. I'm so sorry. We tried. We tried to get to the killer before he took anyone else. But we were too late.

Faith blinked tears away as she saw the killer drag the lifeless body of... Faith realized she didn't know the girl's name.

I'll find out , she thought. When I apologize personally to her family.

But first, she had a job to do. She lifted her handgun and aimed it at the killer.
“Stop!”

The man jumped, dropping his victim. He stared at Faith in shock, his mouth open and his eyes wide.

“Put your hands above your head and back away slowly!” Faith called.

The man stood stock still, his expression unchanging. Turk barked firmly to emphasize Faith’s command.

“Do as I say!” she called down. “Or so help me, I swear I will shoot you!”

The man remained riveted to the spot. Faith’s finger tightened around the trigger.

But she wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t fall that far. She wasn’t broken yet.

“Sir, you are under arrest for the murders of Cassidy Holt, Samanthan Reynard, Lorraine Hayes and the young woman you brought into this theater.”

Remembering reinforcements, she pulled her phone from her pocket, keeping her gun trained on the killer, and quickly dialed Michael’s number. He answered, and she quickly said. “He’s at the theater. I need medical and backup ASAP.”

She hung up before Michael could answer and put her phone back in her pocket. “I have backup on the way,” she said. “Surrender now, or things will go very badly for you.”

The killer blinked. Then his eyes narrowed shrewdly. Faith saw the killer’s intentions and said, “Don’t try it. You move, I will shoot.” That was an action she could justify considering the situation.

The killer looked at her. Then he looked somewhere to his left. “Don’t try it,” Faith warned again.

He bolted. Faith shot a split second too late, and the bullet buried itself in the soft wood of the stage. She swore and rushed toward the other side of the mezzanine, where a stairwell led down to the first floor. Turk outpaced her and quickly ran down the stairs. Faith followed.

She was halfway down when one of the steps snapped. She cried out and fell through, falling eight feet to the floor and landing heavily. She grimaced with the pain, but quickly got to her feet.

The killer was nowhere to be seen. Fortunately for her, Turk’s nose still worked just fine. He sprinted toward the back of the auditorium, barking. Faith followed him, shouting ahead, “You need to come quietly! If you hurt me or my dog, I’ll shoot. This isn’t worth it!”

“This is everything!” a voice shrieked.

A moment later, the killer tackled Faith. He tried to kick the gun from Faith’s hand and slammed his fist into her nose. Her vision swam, but she clung to the pistol, and the two of them grappled for the gun.

With a growl that close to a roar, Turk leapt from the mezzanine. He landed heavily, and Faith watched with bated breath to see if he’d get up.

That was a mistake. The killer hit her again, and this time, she stumbled back, releasing her gun.

The killer lifted the weapon, but Turk leaped into the air and clamped his hands around the killer's wrist. The man cried out and fell on top of Turk.

Faith put her hand against one of the chairs and sat down, struggling to gather her thoughts. Her ears rang, and her vision swam. Damn it, pull yourself together!

Turl yelped, and Faith snapped back to alertness. She rushed the killer, and this time, it was she who forced the gun off of its target. A few yards away, Turk got unsteadily to his feet and shook his head.

Faith drove the killer backwards, but after a few steps, he twisted the gun from her grasp and stiff-armed Faith. She flew backwards as though she had been thrown.

Turk dove low this time, grabbing the killer's ankle and dragging him to the ground. The man cried out and fired, but the bullet went wide and poked a hole in the roof above.

Faith rushed forward and grabbed his wrist before he could aim the weapon at Turk. She got her first good look at the man responsible for killing these women. He didn't wear his mask today, another mistake borne of desperation.

He was older. That surprised Faith. She'd chased older killers before, but they had either avoided a physical confrontation, or they'd been massive specimens of humanity. This killer was athletic but slender, almost wasted.

But he was strong. Faith fought with all her might to keep the gun pushed away from Turk, but even his one arm was all she could handle. With his other hand, he fought off the snarling Turk, and after a moment, he shrieked and pushed both Faith and Turk off of him.

He leveled the gun, but Faith kicked upward. The toe of her shoe caught the killer's wrist and sent the gun flying. He started toward it, but once again, Turk leaped on top of him and dragged him to the ground.

Faith got to her feet and prepared to join the fight when a moan caught her attention. She looked toward the stage, her eyes wide. The woman was groaning and rolling to her side, her eyes opening blearily.

The victim was alive! She was still alive! He had knocked her unconscious, but he hadn't killed her yet!

The killer noticed this too. He released a sound like a train whistle and shook Turk off. The dog's teeth tore grooves in his arm, but he didn't care. He ran toward the stage, moving at shocking speed.

Faith knew that if he reached her before she reached him, he would snap her neck before Faith could stop him. She sprinted toward him, angling herself so she could cut him off before he reached his would-be victim.

It was close. Damn it, it was close. His hands extended like claws. The woman reached a sitting position. She swayed in place, using one hand to rub her head, not entirely aware of what was going on.

Faith cried out and dove for the killer's waist just as his hands reached the victim. She dragged the killer to the ground and leaped on top of him. She rained blow after blow down on him, grunting with the effort as she tried to render the killer unconscious.

The killer shrugged off her strikes like they were nothing. He caught her wrists and pulled her downward, driving his forehead into Faith's. Their heads connected with a sound like a bowling ball hitting pins.

Her head buzzed. She saw the world spin as she fell to her back, stunned. Blackness swirled on the edges of her vision, and she gasped and rolled over, struggling to remain conscious.

She heard a growl and, a moment later, another yell. She forced herself onto her knees but could go no further. Her vision swam dangerously.

As her sight focused, she saw the victim slowly coming to. The victim got to her feet and stumbled backward, nearly falling from the stage as she watched Turk fight the killer.

Turk gave up trying to overpower the killer. Either the man was on drugs that gave him superhuman strength for his size, or his desperation lent a force that he wouldn't have otherwise. Whatever the reason, Turk avoided a contest of strength, instead using his superior speed to dart in and out, snapping at the killer's ankles and calves, leaping to nip at the killer's flailing arms, and finally, when he saw the opportunity, leaping into the air and planting all four paws on the killer's chest. He pushed off of the killer, somersaulting in the air and landing easily on his feet.

The killer fell backwards, and Turk turned to Faith. Faith must have looked worse than she felt because Turk's eyes widened with concern. He left the killer and rushed to her side, barking urgently.

"I'm fine," she said. Her voice croaked, and she took a breath to steady it. "I'm fine, go get him."

She heard a cry and turned toward the victim. The woman was staring at the killer, her face white. Faith heard another cry and realized it wasn't the victim making that sound but the killer.

She turned back to the killer and found him on one knee, clutching his chest. His face was red, and his eyes were wide with terror.

"No!" he gasped. "No! Please no! Not now! Please, I was so close!"

He extended the hand not clutched to his chest toward Faith. His fingers grasped as though Faith might extend her hand and save him from whatever was happening to him right now.

“Please!” he cried. “Help me! Please, I’m not ready! I’m not—”

He cried out, and fell forward, his head pressing into the stage. He gripped his chest and gasped. Faith got to her feet, but blood rushed to her head, and she had to stop to regain her balance before she could go to his aid.

He took a huge breath, then shouted, “PLEASE!”

Then he fell onto his back. His hands clawed at the air. He writhed and shook for a few seconds longer.

Then he stilled.

Red powder trickled down his chest from the vial that had broken in his death throes. The rubedo was complete.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:56 pm

“Look straight ahead for me, please.”

Faith complied. And, of course, the paramedic immediately shone a blinding white light into her eyes. She grimaced and squinted, and he repeated calmly, "Look straight ahead for me, please."

“I’m doing my best,” she growled, “I would just like to retain my ability to see, so maybe don’t blind me the moment I look where you tell me to.”

The paramedic had no doubt handled hundreds of uncooperative patients before. He took Faith’s snappishness with the patience of a saint. “I know, I’m sorry. We just need to make sure you’re not concussed.”

“I’m not concussed.”

“I know. I just need to make sure.”

Faith frowned. The other option was to go to the hospital and get an EEG. She didn’t want to end up shanghaied into an overnight stay, so she forced herself to cooperate. After a moment, the paramedic nodded and switched off his light.

"You're fine," he said. "Bruised up, and you have a nasty cut on your right hand that I'll need to disinfect and bandage, but I can do that right here. You'll be happy to know you don't have to go to the big scary hospital."

Faith glared at him. “Has anyone told you that you have crappy bedside manner.”

“Almost everyone,” he replied with a slight smile. He lifted his first aid kit to the stage and said, “Has anyone ever told you that you get grouchy when you’re in pain?”

She chuckled in spite of her irritation. “Yeah, almost everyone.”

“Well, that’s a natural reaction, so it’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“That was better,” she said. “Keep it up, and you’ll get your five-star review.”

He chuckled and cleaned her hand with iodine, soaking up the disinfectant with the gauze. “Your K9 is fine too. He doesn’t appear to have been injured. Tough dog, especially for an older K9.”

Faith felt a pang at that. She looked over at Turk who sat next to her, watching her closely. He didn’t look old to her. He seemed like a puppy. She couldn’t believe he’d have to retire in three weeks.

She put that worry aside for a more immediate one. She looked over to the gurney a few yards away. The black-haired woman was strapped to the gurney, talking to Michael, who stood over her with his hand on her shoulder. "How's the victim?" she asked.

“She definitely has a concussion,” the paramedic said, wrapping her hand carefully. “She was hit really good in the head a couple of times. We’re a little worried about a brain-bleed, but if she has one it’s not bad yet. Worst-case scenario, she has a minor surgery to manage the swelling. But the short answer is that she’ll be okay.” He glanced her way. “Physically, anyway.”

“And the killer?”

The paramedic’s eyes hardened. “Dead,” he said. “Where he belongs.”

Faith nodded. She couldn't help but agree. The paramedic taped her bandage closed and said, "All right. You're all set. Are you the kind of person who's going to bite my head off if I tell you to take it easy for a week?" She glared at him, and he chuckled. "Well, then I won't say it. Have a good evening, Special Agent."

He walked away and helped his partner get the victim transported out of the theater. Faith looked over at the other gurney. A white sheet was draped over the body of the killer. The paramedics assigned to him were taking their time wheeling him out of here, an unconscious show of disrespect to a man who deserved none.

Turk nudged her, and Faith stroked his fur and smiled at him. "Good job, Turk. We did it. We saved her. We caught the bad guy."

Michael walked over and sat next to Faith. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Right as rain," she replied. She chuckled. "I haven't said that in a while."

"I assumed you grew out of it," Michael said. "It's nice to hear it again. Maybe I should come up with a catchphrase."

"Be my guest." She looked back to see the killer finally being wheeled from the theater.

"We don't have an ID for him yet," Michael said. "He didn't have a wallet, and there was no paperwork in the van out front. The would-be victim is Lana Argyle, twenty-eight years old. She's an app developer. I guess she was working overtime on a new video game that she described as something called weeaboo bait. I have no idea what that means."

"Me either," Faith said. "She should ask for a raise after this."

“She has informed me that it’s her intention to quit in dramatic fashion.”

“Good for her.”

“Hope so. I don’t know if I’d throw away a source of steady income before finding another job, but I also don’t work... wait... I do work overtime.”

“If you ever quit in dramatic fashion, you have to tell me so I can watch it.”

“I’ll send a mass email to the whole field office,” Michael assured her. “Everyone can see me truly give the Boss what for.”

She chuckled at that and looked around at the empty theater. “I guess we should leave too.”

“I don’t know, I was kind of hoping to catch the last act,” Michael quipped.

She rolled her eyes and got to her feet. Her vision swam, and she stumbled. Michael quickly got to his feet and steadied her. “Are you all right?”

Her hands were strong around her shoulders. She felt a flush climb her cheeks, but when she looked at Michael, she remembered David and Ellie. That was the future. Whatever reminiscences she was having about Michael right now was the past.

“I’m good,” she said. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

Detective Hilary lifted his glass and said, “To a life saved.”

“To a life saved,” Faith and Michael repeated.

They tilted their glasses back. The beer wasn't Faith's favorite—too sweet—but it was alcohol, and she figured if she drank enough of it, it would dull the aches and pains in her body and help her sleep on the plane ride home.

The four of them—Turk included—sat in a small conference room at the precinct. Their flight didn't depart until the evening, so they joined Hilary in celebrating the successful closure of their case.

Turk barked and lifted his head. Faith chuckled at him and reached down to ruffle his fur.

“Did you guys ID the murderer yet?” Michael asked.

Hilary nodded. “Edgar Finch. Forty-five years old. He was a chemist for Dillon Laboratories in Calumet. Quit his job a month ago. Apparently, he was dying of congestive heart failure. He was on the transplant list, but I guess he wanted to find another way.”

“So was he always crazy or did he fall off the rails when he learned he was dying?” Michael asked.

Hilary shrugged. “Who knows? I used to wonder about the criminals I hunted. If they were always criminally inclined or if something happened to push them over the edge. Nature versus nurture, I guess. I don't wonder anymore. I guess I'm getting cynical in my old age, but the way I see it is that people are made up of choices. Some people might have a harder time making certain choices than other people, but if you're sane enough to hold down a job and pay your bills, then you're sane enough not to murder people.”

“I get what you're saying,” Michael said, “but he didn't just kill people. He followed a ritual. And he did it for a purpose too. He wasn't just enjoying the chance to kill

people, he was trying hard to save his own life. Faith, you said he was begging for help at the end, right?”

The image of Edgar’s hand extended toward her flashed across her mind. She sipped some more of her beer and nodded. “Yes.”

“It seemed like he really believed this ritual would save him,” Michael finished.

“Maybe,” Hilary allowed. “But why was his life worth more than Lana Argyle’s? Why was it worth more than Cassidy Holt or Samantha Reynard or Lorraine Hayes?” He shook his head. “No, he made the choice to kill them and put his life ahead of theirs. And I can’t sympathize with that.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah. You’re right. I’m not arguing that anyone should sympathize with him. Hell, it’s not like he’s the only wacko I’ve ever seen either. Sometimes I just wonder how their heads work. The wackos, I mean. I just wish I knew which screws were loose in their heads so maybe we could figure out how to screw them back on before they turn into killers.” He sipped his beer. “I guess we all feel that way every now and then.”

Hilary nodded. “The worst part is that his transplant would have come in this week.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really. I talked to his doctor earlier this morning. His transplant was scheduled to arrive in three days, and the surgery would have happened that evening. His doctor was adamant that if he had taken it easy and avoided stress, they would have been able to remove the defective heart, clean out all the excess fat and give him the transplant. Might not have given him an extra forty years, but the doctor was pretty sure he could make it fifteen. That’s a lot better than what he got.”

“Staring death in the face is hard,” Faith said. “You think you have what it takes to meet your end with dignity, but when it’s there, when it’s real ... it’s hard.”

She thought of Trammell’s wicked smile. Let’s see how you bleed, little girl.

She promised herself she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of screaming, but she had. She had screamed. She hadn’t begged, but she had pleaded silently for the pain to end.

“Still not an excuse,” Hilary said tersely.

"No," Faith agreed. "No, it isn't."

“What about Nina Verbeck?” Michael asked. “How did she manage to know exactly what to paint? Did she know Edgar?”

Hilary chuckled at that. “No, but she knew one of the crime scene photographers.”

“Ah.”

"Yeah. Kid took a few classes with her, and when she found out where he worked, she decided it would be fun to convince him to give her some crime scene photos. When we searched her house, we found a whole box of them. Murders, overdoses, accidental deaths... bunch of macabre stuff."

“How did she convince him to do that?” Faith asked.

“How do you think.”

Michael made a face. Faith sighed. “See, that’s what I can’t understand. How do otherwise normal people glorify killers? How do sensible people look at someone like

Edgar Finch or Franklin West or Jethro Trammell and admire them? I can understand pitying them to a point, but to admire them? To take joy in what they do?"

"Maybe it's just a milder form of the same mental illness," Michael suggested. "Nina glorifies violence. Not enough to kill people, maybe, but enough to seek it out. What's weird to me is that she didn't tell us that one of the CSIs took the photo."

"She told us," Hilary said, "on the advice of her lawyer. Once we showed up with the photographs, we had more than just mica powder. Photos of the dead victims are a little more serious, no offense to you guys."

"But why not tell us? Did she actually like the kid?"

"That I don't know. She told us that she hoped we wouldn't find the crime scene photos because she didn't think we'd believe her about the crime scene photographer."

"To be fair, we wouldn't have."

"Neither did we. If the kid hadn't confessed, she'd still be our number one suspect. Well, not now, but you know what I mean."

"How much time can she get for that?" Faith asked.

"Not much," Hilary said. "She'll get sacked from the university for sleeping with a student, but it's a much bigger crime to provide crime scene photos than it is to receive them."

"Even if she's soliciting them?"

"Who's soliciting? They were in a consensual adult relationship, and she mentioned

how much she liked his work. He gave her some of her photographs and she took them, not understanding that it was illegal or intending to use it to harm anyone.” Seeing Faith’s look, he added, “I’m not saying I believe it. I’m saying that’s what her lawyers will argue. No, she won’t get time. Don’t worry, though. It’s unlikely she’ll ever work in academia again. She’ll have to hope this book does well for her.”

“It will,” Michael said. “Books like this always sell. A step below Nina Verbeck on the spectrum of sickness is people who consume the kind of stuff she creates. There’ll be people who don’t care about what she did to get her information. They just want to see blood.”

“As long as they’re not spilling blood, that’s fine with me,” Hilary said. “You want to be a sick fuck? Go ahead. Just don’t make that anyone else’s problem.”

"Here, here," Faith said.

Turk barked agreement.

They finished their drinks and shook Hilary's hand, then left for the airport. They still had three hours until their flight, but they might as well spend that at the airport. Somehow, being there allowed Faith a sense of closure. They were in the process of leaving. The case was over. She could put this one in her past and move on from it.

But what was she moving back to? With Edgar Finch’s reign of terror over, her thoughts returned to the mysterious killer that had murdered the electronics store clerk in even more garish fashion than Finch had murdered his victims.

This is your fault, Bold.

She didn’t believe that a new Franklin West was out there prowling the streets, obsessed with breaking Faith’s will.

Or was it only that she didn't want to believe?

She looked out the window of the airport shuttle. The sky was overcast, a flat gray that the residents of Chicago likely didn't notice anymore considering how many days a year enjoyed the same weather.

Somewhere under a different sky, another killer was plotting his or her next murder. Would they blame Faith for this one too?

Trammell's voice echoed with the words from her dream. I'll only show up with a new face and a new name.

And make no mistake. I will break you.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:56 pm

Lillian's heart pounded with excitement. She really needed to get that under control. It was all right to enjoy herself, but she needed to keep her cool.

West always kept his cool. Even when he was taking a life in his hands, he kept his cool. Gods didn't lose control.

She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. Slowly, her heartbeat calmed. She opened her eyes and grinned. "Okay. Let's get this done."

She started the engine and pulled from the parking lot. She liked this car. It wasn't too fancy, but it was comfortable. The air conditioning worked, and the radio worked, and it was fast enough that she could drive it on the highways no problem. It was an older car, but that was fine. It wasn't so old that it would attract attention.

The owner of the vehicle slid to the side in the backseat. Lillian frowned and swore. She pulled to the side and parked the car, then quickly got out and crossed to the passenger side, glancing furtively around.

There were no cars around at the moment, but this was Philly. There was no such thing as a deserted highway here. Someone would come soon enough.

She opened the rear door and pulled the body to a sitting position. The body tried to roll out of the vehicle, and Lillian stumbled backward, nearly falling.

"God damn it, would it have killed you to eat a fucking salad once or twice?"

She looked around again, afraid someone would have heard her outburst. No one

showed their faces in the somewhat distant apartment building behind her.

She quickly cinched the body down into the seat, tightening the belt and spreading the legs to distribute the weight so it wouldn't slide again. She rushed back into the driver's seat, cheeks burning.

Damn it, she had lost control again. Only for a moment, but she needed to stop that. One of these times, she would make a mistake and get caught. She couldn't afford to make mistakes, not until she finished with Bold.

"This'll be a good one," she said. The thought caused a grin to spread across her face. "Betcha dollars to donuts, this gets her attention."

She pulled back out onto the street, her embarrassment gone in the excitement of screwing with Faith "the Whore" Bold's mind again.

She couldn't wait until she could tell West all about what she was doing to Faith. She could imagine his approving smile, the admiration in his voice when he told her that she was the greatest woman he'd ever met.

"So much better than Faith Bold," she said.

She began to bounce in her seat, unable to contain her excitement. This little message would be waiting for Faith when she got back from her case. There would be no way for anyone to claim that it was some robbers trying to throw the cops off the scent. Lillian would make it very clear that there was only one purpose for her actions.

She would break Faith Bold. She would do what West couldn't.

And when West learned of her victory, he would understand that the two of them were meant to be together.