



So Insane (Faith Bold #9)

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Category: Horror

Description: When a caver is found dead deep in a cave, it is clearly the work of a serial killer. The dangerous hunt for a killer deep underground will require FBI Special Agent Faith Bold and her K9 German Shepherd, Turk. But are they walking right into a killer's trap?

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Tyler felt adventurous, like when he was back in high school, and he and Len Grant would get into all sorts of mischief, sneaking into the neighbor's backyard to swipe beers from their outside fridge or nearly breaking their legs, daring each other to jump from the third-floor balcony of the abandoned Aspen Star Motel. They managed to survive all that, but to this day, Len still sometimes complained about his ankle.

Of course, Len grew up. He got a girl and a “real” job and lived in Denver now doing a nine-to-five and spending his money on baby clothes and more recently toddler clothes. He was a full-fledged adult, and the adventures that occupied him now were weekly coffee dates with Jennifer and the occasional theme park visits they took with Dustin, trips that Dustin would never remember but that would no doubt constitute the focus of Len and Jen’s empty nest wistfulness when Dustin eventually spread his wings and flew from the nest.

Len and Jen. Heh.

His amusement at that childish rhyme was as good an indication as any that Tyler himself hadn’t grown up yet. He had, literally and figuratively, never left his nest. Tyler’s parents had moved out of town, too, but Tyler still lived in their house and sent them rent sporadically. He still stayed up late eating potato chips and drinking cheap beer, splitting his free time between binging anime and playing video games. At twenty-nine years old, he had to admit that he didn’t look like a teenager anymore or even a twenty-one-year-old college kid, but he still felt like one.

Of course, all of that would change once the new distribution center opened. This tiny town, as unimportant and useless as it might be, happened to be located conveniently between Spokane and Boise and right next to the 95. Rather than ship lumber, granite

and the various metals—precious and otherwise—that still trickled out of the mountains west to Oregon or south to Boise and then east to Butte, shipping companies could take a direct route hugging the mountain range, shaving hundreds of miles and thousands of dollars of fuel per shipment.

And the jobs would take Granger from being one of a million tiny little towns that seemed to exist for no reason other than to exist to an important economic hub. Aside from the jobs the center itself would bring, there were the obligatory highway expansions and refurbishments that would come along with it and the multitude of service and entertainment jobs that would follow after.

Granger, like Len, was growing up.

The sun, still low in its journey, sent light but no warmth over the early morning mountain chill as he hiked. He headed toward the construction site, although so far, no construction had started. They were still clearing the ground where the massive warehouse and parking lot would be built. The building itself was supposed to have nearly three acres of floor space. Tyler shook his head. That was an obscene amount of building.

As he grew close, he was surprised to hear machinery. The week before, the excavators had accidentally uncovered an old mineshaft. Usually, that meant a halt to any kind of work until a survey team could be sent in to determine if there were any structural integrity issues in the surrounding bedrock.

Then there were the rumors of ghosts. Of course, the construction crew was mainly out-of-towners, so they didn't know the place was supposed to be haunted. Not that it would matter if they did. Business was about the most adult thing Tyler could think of and had no room for superstitions and fairy tales. Still, safety was a very real consideration. Even if the powers that be didn't particularly care for the health of their employees, the lawsuits that would follow any kind of accidental death were the

stuff of nightmares for land developers.

Well, maybe they had fast-tracked the survey and determined that everything was safe.

When he reached the site, he saw that there were only a few backhoes and one bulldozer. From a distance, the echoes of the mountains made it seem like far more activity was taking place. He saw perhaps a half-dozen men in hardhats. The machines seemed almost lazy as they tore apart the ground and created piles of gravel and soil.

Caution tape covered a gash on the wall of the excavated earth where the entrance to the old mine was located. It was only forty or fifty yards from where he stood, and all of the construction was another hundred and fifty to two hundred yards away. More than enough distance for him to reach the mine without being seen.

Again, that sense of adventure came over him. “You ready to get into some trouble, Len?” he asked.

He chuckled at himself. Len would get a kick out of hearing that Tyler was talking to him when he wasn’t there. He could almost see his friend’s easy smile, hear the sarcastic lilt in his voice as he said, “I knew you liked me, man, but I didn’t know you were in love with me like that.”

Then again, Len was grown up now. Maybe he’d just chuckle politely while texting his wife about the grocery list. How time flew.

Tyler pressed his back against the dirt and edged his way forward, keeping his eyes on the machines and the crew as he slowly navigated down the steep slope toward the mine. No one turned to look at him, and when he reached the caution tape, he immediately slipped under it and into the gash.

As he scrambled away from the entrance and into the darkness, déjà vu hit him pretty hard. He thought of Len and how the two of them would likely be hushing each other and pushing one another for each imagined noise the other made. The surprisingly adult thought came to him that those friendly squabbles were just their way of reminding each other that they weren't alone.

"Don't worry, Len," he said to the air. "They won't hear us."

He pulled a flashlight from his pocket, pushed the switch on, and then hit the back twice to get the light to stop flickering.

As he made his way over the uneven tunnel floor, Tyler could hear strange noises coming from within. Creaking and moaning echoed through the dark corridors like an old black-and-white horror movie.

He really wished Len were with him. They would have been laughing about how creepy it all was, and the laughter would stop it from being creepy.

"Hey, Len, that moan sounded like your mom."

"Screw you, Tyler," he said, deepening his voice to sound like Len's.

"Weird. Your mom said the same thing to me last night."

"I wouldn't know. I was too busy banging your sister."

"That explains why she was crying this morning."

He continued to banter with his absent friend as he worked himself deeper into the mine. The flashlight flickered again, increasing the already macabre atmosphere. "Getting' spooky in heah," he said, affecting the exaggerated Brooklyn accent that

always left Len rolling in laughter.

A rush of cold air blew from one of the shafts to his left. Tyler shivered, not just from the cold. His flashlight flickered again, and he grunted irritably as he smacked it hard.

Too hard. The torch flew from his hand, skittered across the ground and went out. Tyler's smile vanished, as did every good feeling he had.

If Tyler had survived long enough to make it to the surface, he would have thought that this was the moment he grew up. It occurred to him quite clearly that a man who was five weeks away from his thirtieth birthday had no business sneaking around in an abandoned mine shaft like a damned high schooler trying to find an outlet for raging hormones and latent fear of adulthood.

"All right, Len," he said, no more humor in his voice, "time to stop being stupid."

He dropped to his hands and knees and shuffled slowly along the floor in the direction of the dropped flashlight. The moaning coming from all around him no longer seemed exciting or even spooky. It was downright terrifying.

"Come on," he said softly. "Where are you, you bastard?"

How was there no light at all from the surface? He had been walking for two minutes. There was no way he had made it so far into the mine that it should be so dark.

He tasted copper and realized he had bitten down hard enough on his cheek to draw blood. He opened his mouth and the click his teeth made when he closed it again echoed through the chamber like a gong.

"Come on," he whispered again. "Come on, I know you're around here."

Finally, his fingers fell on a smooth, cool cylinder of metal. He made a sound halfway between a cry and a groan and leaped to his feet, fingers fumbling with the buttons. No light came when he clicked the on switch, so he swore under his breath and unscrewed the back of the housing.

There was the problem. The batteries had been knocked loose. He pushed first one down, then the other and carefully screwed the back on.

He took a deep breath and clicked the button once more. When a beam of light revealed a perfectly ordinary cavern and not a swarm of bats or a pile of bleach-white, splintered bones, he moaned again in relief.

He laughed at the sound that escaped his mouth, and said giddily, “Hey, Len, that’s the sound your mom made when I was with her last night.”

“Really? Sounds like a scared little wimp whining because he’s afraid of the dark.”

“Screw you, Len!”

His glee had returned, but beneath it was the very mature realization that he needed to get out of here and fast.

As often happened with such realizations, this one came too late to save him. He turned around and took two steps back the way he came.

Then strong arms wrapped around his chest, and before he realized what was happening, he was yanked backwards so forcefully his feet left the ground. The flashlight clattered to the ground. The beam flickered, then went out.

A soft breeze blew through the mine, carrying with it a soft moan that rose to a piercing shriek.

Then the cave went silent.

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“Don’t tell me you don’t like dogs,” Faith said. “I don’t know if I can trust a man who doesn’t like dogs.”

“I like them well enough,” West said, “Just as I like elephants and zebras and tigers and crocodiles. Like elephants and tigers, I have no desire to own one.”

“Owning a dog is a bit different than owning an elephant,” Faith pointed out with a wry smile.

“Is it? Both creatures are intelligent. Both are self-aware and experience similar emotions as humans. They can even become mentally ill. Plenty of captive dogs and elephants show symptoms of anxiety, PTSD, depression, even personality disorders. There are studies that suggest that elephants really do have extraordinary memory that might even be superior to humans in some instances. And dogs are known to recognize members of their litter that they haven’t seen in years.”

“So you think it’s immoral to own a dog?”

"No," he clarified. "I just don't have an interest in owning one myself. I suppose as a psychologist, I have a hard time interacting with an intelligent being without being keenly aware of that being's mental and emotional traumas."

“And are you keenly aware of my mental and emotional traumas?”

He smiled. “Would you like the polite answer or the honest answer?”

Faith laughed, but she couldn’t help but feel a little disturbed as well. She was a

generally private person where her emotions were concerned. She accepted that part of Dr. West's job was to see those deep-seated emotional traumas and help Faith work through them, but she couldn't help but feel a little like a bug under a microscope. "Well, just for the record, you don't own me."

His smile widened, baring twin rows of perfectly white teeth. "Noted."

Faith opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling.

She had started to feel like the last girl in a horror series, the one that, against all odds, ended up being the last person to survive. She had endured a seemingly endless assault of death, destruction and sorrow, but she always emerged triumphant. The killer was always caught, and Faith always rode off into the sunset, her trusty dog by her side.

And that was how it was supposed to be. She was Special Agent Faith Bold, detective extraordinaire, darling of the FBI and champion of justice, one of the people who were supposed to show up at the end of the movie along with the flashing lights, not one of the hapless victims left to rot in the wake of the killer's rampage.

Instead, she lay alone in her apartment, her body bruised and battered, her mind ravaged. Once more, a crazed murderer had beaten her nearly to death. Once more, she had come in, guns blazing, just like a hero should, and once more, the villain had reminded her that movies were just that and real life didn't discriminate between good and evil.

This time, though, she lived not because the other hero had rescued her but because the killer had decided he wasn't done with her yet. He wanted her to know that he did own her after all, that she lived, died, thrived and wasted at his pleasure. He would

kill her when he was ready, but not before he had broken her, worn her down so that nothing was left of her but skin and bones, a bleached skeleton wrapped in the shroud of her own empty existence.

With little to do but think and remember, she remembered Jethro Trammell and Franklin West, Donkey Killer and Copycat Killer, master and apprentice though as far as she knew, the two of them had never met. The only connection they shared was an affinity for torturing people to death and a special interest in a once brash and confident FBI agent.

She could see Trammell's leer, hear his shockingly high-pitched lilt as he said, Let's see you bleed, little girl, just before slicing the tendons of her right knee in half.

She could see West's kind smile, his almost self-effacing condescension, as though he was aware that he was a perfect stereotype of the Freudian therapist, right down to his wire-rimmed glasses and sharply pointed goatee. She could see his contemptuous sneer as he stared down at her beaten body and lamented that she was far from the challenge he hoped she would be. She could hear his voice as he said , I want you to look around and see nothing but the shattered remnants of your life, and only when all that is left is ash and splinters do I want you to admit defeat .

These images tortured her, but they paled in comparison to the knowledge that Turk was out there somewhere in West's clutches.

If he was still alive.

She imagined Turk being shot in the shoulder but continuing to attempt to protect her. She imagined him shot in his legs, saw them buckle underneath him. She imagined him shot in the head, in the torso, over and over, trying and inevitably failing to protect his handler, a woman whose obsession with the past had endangered him in the first place.

It occurred to her that West wouldn't shoot Turk. That would be too simple for him. West wasn't a killer so much as he was a sadist. He would want Turk to suffer. He would want to hear the yelps and cries, hear the growls as Turk tried to maintain his courage. He would want to see Turk struggling to fight, growing weaker with every second, his expressive eyes showing the growing frustration, then desperation, then finally resignation as West foiled every attempt at escape and revenge. He wouldn't allow Turk to die until every ounce of fight was gone from him, until he finally accepted that he was completely and utterly at West's mercy. West didn't want to be the devil. He wanted to be God.

Faith rolled out of bed, gritting her teeth against the aches and pains that still troubled her. She had spent four weeks in the hospital and now two at home, and the broken bones had healed, but the bruising would linger for another month. She felt far older than her thirty-three years. What was that old movie quote? It ain't the years, it's the miles? Something like that.

She went through the motions of making herself breakfast. Dr. Gunner had told her that it was important to get into a routine. Doing so gave the body and more importantly the mind something to focus on other than pain.

Well, she had followed the same routine religiously since returning home. Fall asleep, have nightmares, wake up, stare at the ceiling, get out of bed, make breakfast, shower and hopefully not collapse on the couch weeping before Michael showed up.

Speaking of Michael, he was either early this morning, or she had woken late because she had just finished her pancakes and bacon when the doorbell sounded. She smiled faintly and threw a few more strips of bacon on the griddle. Michael would refuse breakfast when she offered, but he would eat it when she set the plate in front of him anyway.

If anything in her life could be said to be a silver lining after all of this, it was

Michael's steady presence as she healed. Just before going after West a second time, Michael had all but confirmed that he no longer considered Faith a friend after Faith's obsession over the Copycat Killer had led her to accuse Michael's fiancée, Ellie, of being the killer herself. Ironically, West had turned out to be Ellie's ex-husband, so in a way, Faith was on the right track.

Not that Michael would ever understand that or that Faith would ever expect him to. The fact that he was here at all was a miracle.

Faith could use all the miracles she could get.

She opened the door and managed another smile, though it disappeared from her face nearly instantaneously. "Bacon's almost finished grilling," she said, "pancakes will be another few minutes."

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"Coffee's in the pot," she said, ignoring him. "It's that Jamaican stuff you like."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Blue Mountain? That stuff's like a hundred fifty dollars a pound."

"You better not waste it, then," she said, pouring two mugs and handing Michael one.

Michael looked like he wanted to protest further, but in the end, he just sipped the coffee and sat down. When Faith handed him a plate of pancakes and bacon, he dug in just as Faith knew he would.

She sat across from him and forced her own food down. She hadn't really been hungry since she woke up in the hospital two months ago.

“Any news on West?” she asked.

Michael sighed. “Faith, I’m not doing this anymore.”

“He has Turk, Michael.”

He lifted his eyes to hers, and she saw in his gaze the certainty that he no longer had Turk but instead had left him buried somewhere in the wilderness.

Faith refused to believe that.

“I couldn’t tell you about West even if I wanted to,” Michael said. “You know that. Even if you weren’t suspended, the case would still be off-limits to you.”

She pressed her lips together. It was hardly a surprise that Special Agent-in-Charge Grant Monroe—known affectionately as the Boss to the agents of the Philadelphia Field Office—had suspended Faith following her consistent and flagrant disregard of his instructions to lay off the case, but it still hurt.

“If we hear any news about Turk, I’ll tell you,” Michael said gently. “So far, we haven’t heard anything.”

She nodded and shoved a forkful of pancakes into her mouth to stifle the lump in her throat. “How’s Ellie?” she asked.

He sighed. “The same. She’s all right with me helping you out, but she’s not interested in hearing your apology. Or anything from you at all.”

"Is she really okay with you helping me out, or is she just tolerating it because she feels she has no choice?"

Michael met her eyes and said, “Faith, if my wife didn’t want me here, I wouldn’t be here.”

Faith paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. “You guys got married?”

“Yes,” he said, “last month.”

Faith’s heart twisted in her chest. She realized now that she had held onto the lingering hope that she and Michael might become friends again after all of this, but hearing that Michael and Ellie had married and he hadn’t even bothered to tell her beforehand killed that hope.

She managed a smile and said, “That’s good. Congratulations. I’m happy for you two.”

“I would have invited you,” he said, “but Ellie. Well, that’s gonna be a while.”

“Yeah, no, it’s okay. I get it. I’d hate me to if I were her.”

“She doesn’t hate you, Faith. She just...”

His voice trailed off. Apparently, he couldn't think of a convincing enough lie. The silence was too much for Faith after a moment, so she said, “How’s work? They given you a new partner yet?”

He shook his head. “No, they haven’t mentioned anything. That new kid, Rosa, might end up working with me. Until you get reinstated, of course.”

Faith’s smile faded. The Boss had made it clear to her that if she was caught interfering in the Copycat Killer case again, she wouldn’t be back.

“They won’t reinstate me,” she said. “My career in the FBI is over.”

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Both of them paused, shocked to hear her admit it out loud. Michael recovered first. He narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. “You don’t get to give up, Faith. You fucked up, and you’ll pay the price for that, but you’ll be back.”

“I’ll be back in the FBI, but I’ll never go into the field again,” she said. “Best case, they’ll stick me in evidence and let me play around with body fluids and scraps of fiber. Worst case, I’ll end up in Quantico filing paperwork and getting fat watching daytime soaps on a portable tv.”

She shrugged and sipped her coffee again, “but it’s fine. I had a nice run. Shit happens. Tell me about this new girl, Rosa. She prettier than me?”

She smiled teasingly, and Michael rolled his eyes. “Jeffrey Rosa is a decent-looking young man, I suppose,” he said drily, “and he’s a lot more timid than you were when you started, which bodes well for me. I’m too old to handle another big personality.”

She chuckled. “I think you’ll do just fine.”

His phone rang then. He sighed, and when he saw the number, he rolled his eyes. “The Boss. Duty calls. At least it's not on my honeymoon this time.”

An uncomfortable image of Michael and Ellie together, arms wrapped around each other, lips pressed together, crossed Faith’s mind. At one point years ago, Michael and Faith had been an item. Those days were long gone, but the thought of Michael in love with someone else still seemed strange to Faith sometimes.

Michael’s eyes widened, and when he said, “Is it Turk?” all thought of Michael, Ellie,

West and everything else vanished. Faith stood so quickly she knocked over both of their coffee mugs. Michael, equally stunned and excited, didn't react other than to back away from the trickle of hot liquid. "We're on our way. Faith's allowed to come, right? Outstanding. We'll be there soon."

He hung up and grinned at Faith. "Fortune favors the Bold once again."

"Oh my God!" Faith exclaimed.

She threw her arms around Michael and held him tight, weeping uncontrollably. "It's him? He's alive? He's all right?"

"It's him," Michael confirmed. "Vet says he's skinny and bruised up, but otherwise none the worse for wear."

"Oh my God!" she cried again. "Which vet?"

"Which one do you think? David just got to work and found Turk resting on the porch."

A transient touch of discomfort slipped across Faith's mind. She and David hadn't spoken much in the past two months. Actually, they hadn't spoken at all after a brief visit in the hospital and an even briefer phone call when she was released. She wasn't sure what it would be like to see her (possibly ex-) boyfriend after so long.

But that didn't matter right now. Turk was alive. He was alive, and if he was alive, then there was still hope.

On an impulse, she kissed Michael's cheek hard and said, "Thank you."

He chuckled. "For what? I didn't do anything."

“For being here,” she said.

He froze briefly, no doubt remembering when he wasn’t there for her. The second time she had gone after West, she had called him first, and he hadn’t answered. He had arrived, of course, but too late. She had already gone after him alone.

Just answer the phone when I call.

After a moment, he pulled her tighter into his embrace. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

When Faith saw Turk sitting on the table in the exam room, she nearly collapsed. Turk’s fur was matted in some places and scratched bare in others. His ribs stuck out prominently, and his legs looked almost spindly compared to the powerful dog she knew, but when he lifted his head and his eyes widened with instant joy, she knew that her dog had come back to her.

He barked and malnourishment or no, he leapt off of the table and bounded to Faith with the exuberance of a puppy. She dropped to the floor and opened her arms wide, and Turk jumped into them, barking and licking her exuberantly while she wept and held him close.

“Hey, boy,” she said. “Hey. I’m so glad to see you. I missed you so much.”

She held him for a long moment, laughing and crying as he licked her face like he never expected to see her again. Probably he hadn’t.

She held him at arm's length and beamed into his expressive, earnest brown eyes. It alarmed her how easily she supported his weight. He must have lost thirty pounds at

least. But the light in his eyes and the toothy grin told Faith that was all right. He was back with Faith now, and everything would be okay.

“Everything will be okay,” she repeated, liking the sound of those words, liking even more that she believed them. She pulled Turk close again and breathed deeply. She giggled and said, “You smell like a sewer, boy.”

He barked happily, and she laughed again and just held him for a moment. When Turk barked and tried to pull away from her, she released him. She saw the reason for that a moment later when Michael stooped down and picked him up. “Dang, Turk,” he said, “I need to follow your diet.”

He barked and took his turn, licking Michael half to death. Michael, not normally a fan of dog kisses, endured these with a smile on his face. Faith saw tears welling in his own eyes and giggled again.

"Christ, you need a bath," Michael said, holding him at arm's length. "You smell like something died on you. Does this mean you did our job for us and killed the big baddie?"

Faith's smile faded slightly. She wanted desperately to hope that West could be dealt with so easily, that he could simply vanish as though he had never existed in the first place. Her longstanding desire to be the one who vanquished the Copycat Killer was no more. She just wanted him gone.

She couldn't be sad for longer than a moment, though. Turk leaped out of Michael's arms, and though he wobbled a bit when he landed, he quickly gathered himself and leaped back onto the table just before the door to the exam room opened.

Faith's breath caught in her throat when she saw him. Her skin went hot and cold in waves, and when she swallowed, her tongue felt thick and twisted in her mouth. She

had reacted the same way when she first saw him, completely overwhelmed by the sight of him. He was a hero, a prince, “a knight in shining armor.”

She brushed the memory of West’s words away like a fly and managed a smile as David approached her. “Hi, David,” she said shyly.

“Hello, Faith,” he replied.

There was a moment of awkward silence between them. Then Michael, perhaps recognizing he was the third wheel in the room, said, “I’m gonna head to Morning Glory for some coffee. You guys want anything?”

“I’ve had mine already, thanks,” David said.

“I’m good too, thank you,” Faith added.

Michael shrugged. “More for me. Be back in ten... thirty minutes.”

He left, and an awkward silence settled over the room again. Faith looked down at her hands and found her fingers twisting the front of her shirt into knots. She forced them to separate, then forced her eyes back up to David's. "How have you been?" she asked.

“I’ve been good,” he said, “work’s been keeping me busy. I had a lot of patients to catch up on.”

Faith shifted her feet uncomfortably and nibbled at her lower lip. A month before West put Faith in the hospital, Faith had discovered a note left with the body of her colleague and friend Gordon Clark, West’s most recent victim. That note had threatened David, Michael and Ellie explicitly as West revealed for the first time his desire to break Faith’s will.

After reading that note, Faith had pressured David and Ellie into leaving Philadelphia temporarily. David had complied on two separate occasions, the first time for two weeks and the second time for nearly a month before he finally insisted that he had to return home. The last conversation Faith had with him before going after West, he had made it clear how frustrated he was with her for interrupting his relationship with his patients.

“How are you?” he asked, breaking another uncomfortable silence. “You look good.”

She laughed. “Don’t lie, I look like I feel, and I feel like shit.”

“No, you don’t,” he said, “Well, you don’t look like shit, anyway. I can’t help how you feel.”

His tone was light, but Faith could detect a hint of bitterness behind it. She lowered her eyes again and was grateful when Turk barked and gave them an excuse to break away from each other.

“You came just in time,” he said. “I was just about to take a look at him.”

He moved to the table and said, “All right, boy. Let’s see what the damage is.”

David was a competent veterinarian. Faith wasn't surprised that Turk trusted him, but it still impressed her how the big German shepherd complied with him, allowing him to check his fur, look in his ears and eyes, and palpate his body for any sign of broken bones, internal bruising or herniated bowels. Turk seemed unfazed by the vet's touch, though every so often, he would stiffen as David found another bruise.

She was in the hospital when David returned. He had visited once, but Faith was under the influence of a lot of morphine and didn’t remember much other than that he had seemed eager to leave during the entirety of his brief stay. When she was

released, he called her briefly to congratulate her on her recovery and promised to get together soon. It felt to Faith more like a perfunctory well-wish from a distant relative than the words of a concerned boyfriend.

Did they even have a relationship now? She didn't really want to broach the subject. She didn't want to know the answer.

You know the answer , she thought. You just don't want to hear it.

“All right,” David said, “there’s some moderate bruising, especially around the abdomen, but nothing seems to be out of place. We’ll want to take some X-rays just to be sure.”

Turk whined, and Faith placed a hand on his paws. "Don't worry, boy. I'm right here."

Turk calmed immediately, his big brown eyes gazing trustingly at hers as David readied the machine. Faith saw that trust, and her heart broke from guilt. It was her fault he was here, her fault that he was injured in the first place. She had led him into danger because she needed to capture West herself. If Faith wasn't in the picture, Turk would probably be trotting around Quantico in the company of a grizzled old K9 instructor, the only danger he faced the chance that the cafeteria's meatloaf might disagree with him.

“It'll all be okay,” she said, more to herself than to Turk.

David took X-rays of the dog's legs and feet to check for any problems or injuries that might have gone undetected through touch alone. Afterwards, he placed the stethoscope against Turk's chest, listening to the heartbeat with a focused intensity that reminded Faith of why she had been so drawn to him in the first place.

David took a large, boxy camera out of a cabinet and put it against Turk's head. The

dog waited patiently. "You can't usually do this," he said, "because dogs won't let you. Usually, we have to sedate them."

She nodded, struggling for something to say and finding nothing. She hated this. After months apart from the man she thought she loved, she was here with him now, but instead of feeling close to him, she felt farther than she had when thousands of miles separated them.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, David finished up by injecting Turk with some vitamins and antibiotics.

"I have some swabs to run, and I want to see if anything changes after those injections I gave him," David said. "I'll need a stool sample too, before he leaves, but the X-ray should tell me if he has parasites or not. He has a broken tooth, but I don't think it needs any treatment. No dentin is exposed. The X-rays will tell me if there's anything else we need to be concerned with, but overall, it looks like Turk is more or less in good shape, other than being pretty severely underweight. I'll put a diet together for him too."

He moved to leave, and she caught his hand. "Thank you, David. I really appreciate it."

He stiffened for a moment, then relaxed and squeezed her hand. "Of course. I should be back in fifteen minutes or so."

He released Faith's hand and left the room. She stroked Turk's head and asked with smile, "Did you leave a nice souvenir in West's leg?"

Turk's eyes hardened. He growled menacingly, and Faith laughed just as menacingly. "Good," she said. "I hope it hurt."

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Clara wanted him to carry her, and she thought that had to be the stupidest thing possible for her to want. But the ropes around her knees and wrists and the cloth around her face meant that even if she wasn't blindfolded, her attempts to keep up with almost no mobility past a grotesque shuffle would eventually result in her falling flat on her face.

She had no idea what this man would do to her if she fell. So, as stupid as it sounded, she would have preferred the man carry her to wherever he planned to do whatever he planned to do to her.

When the kidnapper had first started leading her, she felt the occasional wetness of mud or grass against her ankles. The air was warm and light, and she heard what she thought was wind and what she knew were birds.

For some time now, though, she'd felt nothing but hard dirt beneath her feet. Things had become eerily silent, too, except for almost ethereal sounds of creaking or moaning like a haunted house soundtrack low in the background.

She tried to take in as much detail as possible, trying to commit every moment of this terrible experience to memory so that maybe later if she ever managed to get out alive, she could assist the police. In television shows, there was always some brilliant detective who figured it all out because of a tiny detail. But what detail could she describe when she was blindfolded and led God knows where or maybe He doesn't? "I heard birds officer!" "Wonderful. We know you were on planet Earth. We'll start the search there."

It hit her forcefully that it didn't matter whether she remembered anything or not.

She'd never have a chance to tell the officers anything. She was never getting out alive.

She might have wept at that thought if not for the way the man jerked her off balance. She stumbled forward, then fell onto hard ground, some sort of rock covered in dirt. There was another useless detail. "Officer, I just remembered! There were rocks and dirt!" "Wonderful, Miss Sharpe. We've narrowed it down to somewhere on land. We'll keep you posted if we learn anything else."

She felt his hands on her body and wondered when her life would flash before her eyes. She had heard that was actually a thing. A week ago, she had watched a documentary with her boyfriend about shark attack survivors. The man in the documentary said that when the shark pulled him under the water, he saw images of his childhood flash through his mind as clearly as though he had gone back in time. She hadn't paid much attention after that. She was too busy enjoying a chance to be alone with her boyfriend.

It hit her suddenly that she would never get married, never have kids, never get to watch them grow, never get to tease them about their own boyfriends. She would die here, Trevor would move on and some other woman would have his children and steal the life that would have been hers if she had just listened to him and gone to California with Gina instead of some stupid bullshit soul-searching cave dive in the mountains just outside of Granger.

She started to sob, but stopped when the kidnapper flipped her onto her back and hissed, "Quiet. Don't move."

He reached down and untied her blindfold. He was so careful and gentle with his movements that she nearly retched. Why bother being gentle? You're just going to hurt me anyway.

It took a moment for her eyes to focus. When they did. She saw she was in some sort of underground cavern. So she was still in the cave. That was good. That was a useful detail.

Again, not that it mattered since this would probably be the last thing she saw.

The cavern was lit by candles whose flickering yellow-orange light lent an ethereal glow. She could make out the figures of several beams placed throughout a dirt tunnel, supporting its overhead walls. Torches ensconced in the beams lit the tunnels. Their light contrasted with the dimness of the candles in the room made it feel as though she lay in a pool of darkness surrounded by light.

At first glance, she couldn't even make out the features of the man standing over her in the deep shadows cast by the light around him. She struggled to focus on any defining feature that might later help identify him, but all remained hidden in darkness.

Why are you even bothering? She thought. You're going to die. Who cares about identifying him?

"I'm going to release you now," the kidnapper said.

His voice was raspy, and his delivery was stilted and oddly inflected. It sounded as though he hadn't spoken in years and wasn't yet comfortable with it.

That was a detail that also might come in handy later, but Clara didn't fixate on his tone. The words were far more interesting to her. "You're... you're letting me go?"

"I'm releasing you," he repeated. "I'm going to take off the bonds holding your wrists and knees together. If you try to hurt me or escape, I'm going to hurt you very badly. Do you understand?"

She shivered. Of course, he wasn't letting her go. That was too much to hope for. "I understand," she said softly.

"Good," he replied.

He lifted her to her feet, and when she saw that he was barely her own height and of slight build, she nearly considered trying to fight him in spite of the threat.

But his hands were as strong as vises, and he moved her as though she were made of cotton. When her hands and legs came free, she didn't fight or run but stood uncertainly, waiting for him to speak again.

He stepped back and nodded. "All right."

"All right, what?" she asked cautiously.

"Run," he said.

The light flickered and shone over his face, revealing enormous, bright blue eyes and ghostly pale skin. He looked barely human. More like some kind of monster from a horror movie. She shrieked and backpedaled but didn't run. Where was she supposed to go?

Perhaps sensing her confusion, the killer explained, "You have to find your way out. That's the game. You have to try to escape."

She sobbed, terror crawling through her veins and crushing her heart. The kidnapper took a step toward her, and she shrieked and sprinted through the tunnels.

The torches showed her that the tunnels were smooth-walled and devoid of stalactites or stalagmites or any other kind of natural formation. It was manmade. That could

also prove helpful.

She repeated the details she knew as she ran. Pale skin, huge blue eyes, manmade cave . If she could get out, if she could win this demented game and escape, she could tell the police enough for them to find him and stop him. She could see Trevor again, could have the life she dreamed of.

She fought back panic as she reached a dead end. She looked around wildly and found another tunnel leading off to the left. She sprinted down it, tears streaming from her face as she rushed along. She had no idea where she was going, but she had never had any idea where she was going, so it didn't really make a difference. All that mattered right now was putting distance between herself and that freak.

She reached the end of this tunnel and turned right down another one. She felt as though she was running upward, but she had no idea if that was a fact or just another desperate hope.

She turned another corner and tripped over something wet and sticky. She fell with a cry, then cried out again when her elbows and knees crashed against the ground. She forced herself to her feet, her arms and legs shaking from the force of the impact. She turned to see what she had tripped over.

A sound like a teakettle about to boil escaped her mouth. She lifted her trembling hands to ward off the vision in front of her, but it remained where it was, the perfect and incontrovertible truth that she was right to believe she'd never leave this place alive.

The man in front of her had died maybe a week ago. Enough skin still remained on his face that she could see the terror in his sunken eyes and peeled back lips, but a chunk of his right cheek had sloughed off where her foot had struck it.

Clara screamed then, the sound echoing throughout the walls of the cave and returning to her ears as an echo of demonic laughter.

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Faith closed her eyes and allowed the warmth of the water to ease the soreness in her muscles. Of all of life's simple pleasures, warm water was easily the most rewarding. That was something that most Americans wouldn't understand unless they had fought overseas.

She laughed as she recalled an exchange with one of her comrades in Afghanistan. Staff Sergeant Decker was the company heartthrob, and even Faith hadn't been immune to his charms. Of course, they had only slept together the one time, and it hadn't worked out very well, but for a moment, Faith allowed the boyish and arrogant Sergeant to know her better than most got to.

This particular exchange took place a few months before their ill-fated tryst. The company had rotated back to Germany for a few weeks of leave, and Decker and Faith had enjoyed their first warm shower in months.

Not together. That was too bad, Faith thought. If they had showered together, then Decker might have had a chance to finish what he didn't start until later.

Anyway, Faith and Decker had met downstairs to join the rest of their squad for dinner, and Faith had giggled at the beatific smile on Decker's face.

"Did one of the concierge girls join you in the shower or what?" she asked.

He grinned at her. "No, don't worry. I'm still saving myself for you. I'm smiling because the only thing better than a nice pair of tits is a nice, warm shower."

Faith couldn't agree more. It was only with reluctance that she shut the water off and

left the shower, wrapping herself in a towel.

Briefly, anyway. Turk waited for her outside the shower, and he had other plans.

"Turk!" Faith cried as he snatched the towel from where it hung at her waist, leaving her naked except for the towel wrapped in her hair. She glared at him but then laughed. "Well, that broken tooth isn't causing you any problems at all, is it?" she asked. She was already dry anyway, and only wrapped the towel around herself out of habit.

She walked to the big dog and crouched down, cradling his head in her arms. "You're all better, aren't you?"

He whimpered in response and nuzzled her. "Hey," she said, "you keep that up, and David is going to get jealous."

She winced as the lighthearted moment disappeared with thoughts of David. She had no idea if he'd be jealous at all anymore. Part of her wasn't even sure how she'd feel about things if he was jealous. Obviously he wouldn't be jealous of Turk, but if she showed up with another man to Turk's next appointment, a part of her wondered if David might not simply be relieved. A part of her felt that she might be relieved to simply dispense with the thought of romance at all. The part of her that felt capable of love seemed to have died when Trammell cut her. Now all she was left with was the memory of the love she once had for Michael and a love for David that she was increasingly beginning to feel was simply acting out a wish that she was someone she wasn't.

You feel guilty, so you attach yourself to a knight in shining armor so he can tell you that you're wonderful and beautiful and perfect, just like every little girl wants to hear.

Faith rose, smiled sadly at Turk, and made her way to her dresser. She pulled on her bra and panties and then headed to the closet. "Turk," she said softly as she pulled her shirt over her shoulders, "you can't keep pretending like what happened with West didn't happen." She buttoned up the shirt. "Because it happened." She sighed and retrieved a jacket from the closet. "You might not want to talk about it, but I want you to know that if you ever do feel like it, I'm here for you."

She slipped on the jacket and fastened the buttons before turning to face him. The sadness haunted her gaze as she took in his form, so strong and...

And normal.

The dog was just normal. He was the same Turk he always was. He looked at her with gentle, loving eyes. Happy eyes. Eyes that bore no hint of the scars that West must have left him. She thought of the haunted look he wore when she first met him after the original Donkey Killer had nearly killed them both. It had taken him weeks to even begin to recover. This time, only a week later, he seemed completely fine.

"It's okay," Faith said softly. "I understand." That was a lie, but it was all she could think of to say. She stepped forward and reached out a hand to gently pet his head and neck. His soft fur felt reassuring against her fingers as they closed around it gently.

She stood and glanced in the mirror and then froze. She wore her white blouse and her dark blue slacks. She wore her dark blue jacket as well. She'd dressed for work. She almost undressed, but the automatic, habitual way she'd gone about getting ready felt reassuring.

"We need to get back to work, boy," she said. She looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. She didn't look traumatized. She looked normal. The Boss would tell her she wasn't ready. The Boss would recount all of the reasons she needed more time. He would try to reassure her while adamantly refusing to allow her to go after Dr.

West. He would do all of those things, but there was no way he could deny that she appeared ready.

"I look ready because I am ready," she said adamantly. She could sense rather than see Turk tense up at the admanance of her voice and, sure enough, felt him brush against her leg a moment later. She reached a hand down and scratched between his ears without taking her eyes from her face in the mirror. "We're ready, Boy," she said, "aren't we? Wanna go catch a bad guy?"

The Boss stared at Faith with all the warmth of Antarctic bedrock. Faith had known him long enough to know that he truly did feel sorry for her, and the fact that she wasn't in a federal prison for her repeated and flagrant disregard for his instructions was as good a sign as any that he bore some affection for her.

But he was about as far from happy with her as she was from the dark side of Neptune.

"Would it be worth my time to remind you that you're suspended?" he asked, "or should I consider the lack of news regarding you to mean that you've just gotten better at hiding your illegal behavior?"

Though expected, his words stung her deeply. She pressed her lips tightly together to keep the hurt from her gaze and said, "I have been resting and recuperating from my injuries, as ordered."

"And now you're here, even though I told you that you were suspended indefinitely."

"Well, it's been nine weeks," she said, "I wanted to ask you if you would consider lifting the suspension."

“And I would do that because...?”

Faith tried to think of a reason that would make sense, but after all that had happened, she couldn't think of one. So she decided to go with the truth.

“Because I need this,” she said, “because I've been stuck doing nothing for nine weeks, and all I've been able to think about is getting back to work.”

“That's not true,” the Boss said. “Try again.”

Faith bristled, but then, he had no reason to trust her anymore, did he? Realizing that cut her even more deeply.

And while what she had said was the truth, it wasn't the whole truth.

“No,” she admitted, “not all of it.”

“No is also my answer,” the Boss replied. “Go home, Bold.”

“Boss, I have twice found Dr. West when no one else was able to. Not the New York Office, not the Marshals, not Desrouleaux and Chavez, no one. Only me. I am the right choice for this case. You know it.”

“What I know, Bold, is that you twice chose to pursue West without backup.”

Faith pursed her lips. The second time, she had called for backup. She didn't say anything, though. She didn't want Michael to get in trouble for not alerting the Boss to her intentions.

“All you had to do was pick up the damned phone,” he continued, “and West would be in custody. We would have given you the credit for the case, and you'd go back to

being the Bureau's favorite little star. Now, you're the Bureau's biggest headache."

"Sir, I can—"

"I beg you not to finish that sentence," he said, though his tone suggested more of a command than a plea. "At this point, I no longer care if you understand that no means no. I'm just going to take steps to prevent you from being capable of ignoring me."

A chill ran down Faith's spine. "What do you mean?"

"I'm transferring you, Bold. I don't know where yet, or when, but it will be somewhere you can't jump the fence and go chasing squirrels anymore, and it will be as soon as possible. You are on suspension until that happens, and we are watching your apartment and tapping your phone, so we'll know if you try to do anything else like this. We're going to let you keep Turk. He's being officially retired from field duty—meritoriously, since we can't hold him accountable for the flagrant misbehavior of his handler. That's my parting gift to you, Bold, in gratitude for eight years of flawless service and two years of continuing to capture killers in spite of spending your free time making it almost impossible to catch the most prolific killer of them all."

Faith took the news better than she expected to. Probably because she did expect the news. The Boss had warned her enough.

But she couldn't allow it. It wasn't right. Even considering her mistakes, it wasn't right to essentially fire her like this.

"Sir, I would like to formally protest both this suspension and the pending reassignment," she said, "I would also like to protest Turk's forced retirement. As you can see, he is perfectly fine."

Turk barked firmly in agreement.

“If you’re serious about Turk, I’ll have a review board examine him. If they find him fit for duty, he’ll be assigned another handler and get to work through his last year of eligible field work.”

Faith frowned. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I don’t give a single shit what you meant, Bold. Which brings me to the first point. Denied and denied. You’re suspended until further notice, notice you’ll receive when I’ve determined whether you’ll go to records or to training or to custodial work or to spit shining shoes for actual field agents.”

“You misunderstand me, sir,” Faith said, keeping her voice even. “I’m not formally protesting to you. I will be formally protesting to the Internal Affairs Division.”

The Boss actually laughed at that. It was the first time she had ever heard him laugh. It wasn’t a pleasant sound. “There are easier ways to go to prison, Bold,” he said. “Just let me press charges against you, and we’ll expedite the case and have you locked away by the end of the month.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Faith said. “I will not only have my protest denied, I will most likely be discharged and then charged with obstruction of justice, interfering with a federal investigation, and a dozen other minor charges. I’ll be convicted, and I’ll go to prison, probably for a long time.”

The Boss’s glare deepened. “And you’re about to tell me why I don’t want that to happen.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” she agreed, “because it will torpedo your own career.”

“I torpedoed my career a long time ago, Bold,” he replied.

“But you didn’t torpedo your agents’ careers,” she answered. “You might never have a chance at Deputy Director, but you’ve built a solid reputation as one of the best SACs in the country. Agents compete for a chance to work for you because working for you all but guarantees an upward career track. That will change entirely when they learn that you allowed your best agent to operate as a vigilante.”

“You are utterly insane, Bold,” the Boss said softly. “You’re completely off the rails.”

Faith ignored the interruption. “There goes Desrouleaux’s chance at investigative instruction at the Academy. Chavez can take the short train to being a jaded lifetime junior field agent. Michael will never make supervisor, and SAC will be something he carries his lunch in. Or, you can reinstate me, we can catch West—together this time. If you don’t believe that I mean that, I can show you plenty of scars that will prove I do.”

“Get out of my office,” he said, “and pray to God, I don’t have you arrested for trying to blackmail me. You don’t want to be transferred? Fine. You’re fired, effective immediately.”

“Okay,” she said, “my first phone call will be to the Philadelphia Sun. ”

He stared silently at her, his eyes as black as the void. “To be clear, Special Agent Bold, you’re threatening to take the entire ship down with you if I make you walk the plank. That about sum it up?”

“Yes,” she said.

Faith’s stomach twisted inside her. Bile rose in her mouth, and she clenched her jaw

to keep from retching.

Never in ten years as an agent had she ever considered anything like what she was doing now. Never in ten years as an investigator had she ever thought she would be sitting across from her SAC, threatening to blackmail him if he didn't give her what she wanted.

You're a parasite. West had said. You're a weak, selfish, insecure, terrified little bug .

Bile rose in her stomach again, and she gripped her knees until her knuckles turned white.

The Boss stared at her for a long while, standing stock still, his eyes boring unblinkingly into her. When he finally spoke, the tenderness in his voice surprised her. "Faith, please. Listen to yourself. Is this who you want to be? This transfer is for your own good. I'm angry with you, and that colors the way I've presented it, but the right thing to do for you right now is to pull you away from fieldwork. You're broken, Faith. This is the only way I know to save you. You've been a great field agent. Hell, you've been by far the best agent I've ever worked with. You deserve to ride off into the sunset. You deserve a chance to recover at least a little of what you've lost. Please give yourself that chance."

Once more, there was a long silence. Finally, Faith said, "This is the only thing I can be. Until West is brought to justice, I can't stop thinking about him. I can't stop hunting him. I can't stop searching. You can have whatever opinion you want about me as an agent and as a person, but I will never forgive myself if I let him get away again."

"It's not your call, Faith."

"Dammit, I..." she paused, lip trembling, and took a moment to compose herself. "I

let him go, Boss.”

“You didn’t let him go, Bold, you tried to capture him and failed.”

"No," she said, "Not the last two times. I mean... I mean, Gordon asked me to help look into the Copycat Killer case.”

“He asked you to look into the case, not take over without the Bureau’s blessing.”

“I was going to say no,” she said.

His eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

“Really. He asked me to look into it, and I was going to say no because I didn’t think it would be good for my mental health to say yes. And while I was struggling with my decision, he killed again. Then I accepted the task, and while I was busy just looking through the file, as ordered, he killed Gordon. I let him go. I did what you ordered me to do, and now two more people are dead, one of them our friend and colleague. And...” she hesitated to reveal this. Up to now, she had kept the details of her interactions with West to herself.

But she had to get through to him. Her threat was valid and very real, but it was also a bluff. She wouldn’t gain anything by following through, so she needed him to relent before the Boss called the bluff.

So, she said, “When West was fighting me, he told me that he was focused on me because he wanted to do what Trammell couldn’t do. He wanted to break me. He’s been fixated on me ever since because his end goal is to destroy me and prove that he’s better than me. If I back off, then he’ll escalate. He’ll start going after Michael. He’ll go after Michael’s wife and my... boyfriend.” Her stomach twisted again when she realized she had nearly said ex-boyfriend.

“When that doesn’t work, he’ll grow more flagrant. A lot of people are going to start dying, Boss. A lot faster and very badly.”

The Boss sighed and slumped back in his chair. “Jesus H. Christ the Third,” he said, chuckling bitterly. “You two are just the perfect couple, aren’t you?”

Once more, his words wounded Faith, but she was used to being wounded by now and barely even flinched. “He seems to think so. Boss, I acknowledge that my actions were wrong and that much of this situation we find ourselves in is my doing. But a lot of it isn’t. A lot of it has to do with West’s obsession with beating the agent that Trammell couldn’t beat.”

“So why isn’t he going after Prince? Prince killed Trammell, who, sorry to remind you, had pretty badly beaten you when you went after him.”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “Maybe it’s because I found Trammell, so he sees me as more of a challenge than Michael.” The Boss’s lips curled up in disgust, and she said, “I’m not being arrogant, Boss, I’m just offering my opinion as a detective.”

“Next, you’re going to tell me that he’s attracted to you,” the Boss said.

“No,” she replied. “He’s not. I don’t think he’s sexually attracted to anyone. I think it’s as simple as he said it is. He just wants to prove he can break me mentally and emotionally.”

“So wouldn’t that mean he’ll retire? You leave field work and go fly a desk in Quantico, he rests on his laurels and until we break his door down—and we will find him eventually—he grins at your picture and thinks ‘what a good boy I am for breaking agent superstar.’ Sorry to be an asshole, Bold, but that sounds like a fair trade to me.”

“That’s not what he’ll do,” she said, “He doesn’t want to win. He wants to play the game. Oh, he wants to win eventually, but not yet. He wants me to suffer more first. That’s why he didn’t stop the first time I walked away.”

The Boss frowned. Faith could tell that he saw her point and hated that he did.

“That’s why he killed Gordon,” she said, the realization dawning on her. “That’s why he left me that note. He was angry at me for walking away from the case, and he made it personal so that I would have to keep hunting him. Boss, it’s all about me. It always has been.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised to hear you say that,” he replied.

The insult was half-hearted this time, and Faith knew that the Boss was close to giving in. He was seeing things from her side, possibly for the first time.

She pressed her advantage. “You need me on this case because you need him to know that I haven’t given up. You need him to know that I’m still fighting, or he’ll come out of hiding in the worst way possible just to get my attention.”

He averted his eyes and frowned as he considered her words. She continued to press. “If you transfer me, I have to protest it through every channel I can, if for no reason other than to delay the day when West learns that I’m out of his life and decides to end other lives until I come back in. Please. Don’t do this.”

A third long silence settled over them. It ended when the Boss leaned back in his chair and shook his head. “I don’t know what’s worse, Bold. The thought that you might care so little about your colleagues that you’d use them as bargaining chips in a bid to save your own career or the thought that you intrigue a serial killer so much you have to have a career just to keep him from murdering people. All right. Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to release a statement welcoming you back to

the department and explaining briefly that you returned from a leave after nearly apprehending the Copycat Killer. That should keep your name in his mind for now. You, however, are going to be nowhere near that case. You are going to be in this office filing paperwork and restocking office supplies.”

Turk barked in protest, and Faith interrupted. "Boss, I need to be in the field. Please. I can't be cooped up anymore. Even if you don't want me looking for West, put me on something. Anything.”

“So you can be out of my sight and free to hunt West again?”

“Michael can keep an eye on me.”

“Michael doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

Those words bit straight through Faith’s emotional defenses. She leaned back in her chair, shoulders slumping, jaw going slack. He had assured her that he would only get a new partner while she was on leave. It occurred to her now that he was hoping that her leave wouldn’t end, that his temporary partner could be his permanent one.

“He asked for a new partner?” she asked tonelessly.

“He assumed he would be getting one,” the Boss said. “At the time, I assumed the same thing. So I asked him how he felt about it. I won’t tell you exactly what he said. That’s his business. I will tell you that if you want any chance at all at being in the field, you need to convince Prince to come with you. Otherwise, I will chain you to a damned desk personally and bolt that desk to the foundation of this building. Clear?”

Faith managed a soft, “clear.”

“Good. Now get out of my office.”

Faith felt numb. She stood and saluted the Boss, a gesture he didn't return, and left the office. She made it outside and slumped onto a bench. Turk sat next to her and rested his head on her lap.

She looked down at him, expecting his usual sympathetic gaze. What she got instead was a look of pure steel. Turk barked firmly, not a comforting bark but a bark that said feel sorry for yourself later. We have a job to do.

She smiled down at him. "I love you, Turk. You know that?"

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Michael felt good. The morning felt peaceful and effortless. It felt comfortable sitting at the kitchen table with Ellie. She had made French toast with butter and cinnamon and served it with clotted cream, something that looked and tasted to Michael like a cross between buttermilk and sour cream but that somehow complemented the toast perfectly. The short robe she wore hugged her curves in all the right ways, and she blushed as she caught his gaze. The sun streamed in from the window, casting a warm light across her face, and he smiled, remembering the night before.

“Have I ever told you you look absolutely stunning?” he said.

She laughed lightly. "Didn't you get enough this morning already?"

"I always have room for a second helping," he said.

"Well, we're already having breakfast at eleven o'clock because of all the helpings you've already had this morning." He loved how she blushed slightly as she said the words. He loved all of the back and forth, the innocent but not so innocent teasing that people in new relationships enjoyed. In a way, their relationship was new.

He looked down at the ring, and his smile broadened. Her blush deepened, and she lifted her hand and turned it over. "Oh, this old thing? Why, it's nothing. Just a trinket from some detective who's hopelessly in love with me."

“Hopelessly,” he said, grinning.

She giggled and held the ring up to the light, beaming. After a moment, though, her smile faded.

Michael's smile followed suit. No doubt, she was remembering the first man who had given her a ring. He pushed his plate away and asked, "How are you doing?"

She smiled brightly and rolled her eyes. "The same as when you asked me an hour ago and when we first woke up. By the way, asking that in the middle of afterglow was kind of strange."

"Come on, be serious," he pressed.

She smiled a little more sedately now and stood. "I am being serious," she said as she laid a hand on his and kissed his cheek. "Now how about that second helping?"

"I don't want to hide from the subject," he said.

"I'm not hiding from it," she said. He couldn't hear irritation in her voice, but a lot of the flirtatiousness was gone. "I don't want to dwell on it, though. I mean, what more can we do? I gave the agents everything I could remember, and then they asked me questions over and over, and I remembered more. There's nothing more I can do."

"I'm not talking about what you can do," he said.

"I know," she said and put a hand on his shoulder, using it as leverage to slide into his lap. She cupped his cheek and kissed him. "And I'm fine. I really am, baby. I left him a long time ago, long before I understood what he was. I don't think about him anymore. I mean, I hope they catch him, and I hope he goes to prison, but I don't think of myself as associated with him."

"How do you feel?"

"Like I want my life to stop revolving around him," she said sharply. He lowered his eyes, and she sighed and said, "Look, I appreciate it. I'm glad you're concerned for

me. It means a lot, but the best thing we can both do right now is move on. There are over sixty people looking for him between the Bureau and the Marshals, and that's not including all of the local authorities that are looking for him between here and Ontario."

The most recent sighting of West had been in Niagara Falls when Faith had gone once more on her own to capture him. On her own because Michael hadn't answered his phone when she called. He hadn't answered his phone because he was fed up with her and wanted to go a day where...

Where his life could stop revolving around her.

He and Faith had been romantically involved for barely a year, but he had loved her in some form for all ten of the years he'd known her. Most of that time, his love was no more than the brotherly love that all long-term partners in law enforcement held for each other, but lately, his love felt more like the love he felt for his father during his last, cancer-ridden months of life: a combination of achingly wistful memories of when things were good sprinkled among the endless oppressive reality of the grief that loomed over every passing moment until the disease finally freed them both.

"I know what you mean," he said.

They sat in silence for a long moment. Finally, Ellie broke the silence, reaching for Michael's hand and squeezing it. "Hey," she said, "Look at me."

He lifted his eyes, and the strength and love in hers was a beam of light in the darkness of his mind.

"I'm wearing your ring," she said. "I'm here with you. And you're here with me. Not with... anyone else."

He smiled and squeezed her hand back. “Yes, I am,” he said, “and there’s no place I’d rather be.”

His phone rang then, because of course it did. Ellie’s smile faded softly, and when Michael reluctantly looked at the number, he wasn’t at all surprised to find that the caller was Faith because of course it was.

He considered just letting the call go to voicemail, but considering what happened the last time he did, he didn’t think that would be a good idea.

“Go ahead,” Ellie said, “It’s okay.”

She smiled, and in her smile, he could see clearly how not okay it was, but he didn’t have a choice. He was trapped. Until the cancer in Faith’s mind finally killed her, Michael was a slave as surely as he had been when his father took ill nine years ago.

He managed a smile of his own, then stood and walked outside.

He answered, and the first thing he heard was Turk’s enthusiastic bark. A wave of relief washed over him. She was just calling so she and Turk could say hi. She wasn’t going to ask him for anything.

“Hey, Michael!” she said after a moment. “Turk just wanted to say hi.”

He was so relieved that he actually smiled. “Hi, Turk. How’s your neurotic basket-case of a mother doing?”

Faith laughed. Then she shattered Michael’s hope. “Actually, not so good.”

His smile vanished. He managed by some miracle to keep his tone lighthearted when he said, “What is it? What do you need?”

“I need a partner,” she said.

The corners of his lips turned down. “A partner for what?”

“A case.”

His lips stretched into a complete frown. “The Boss reversed your suspension?”

“Conditionally on your agreeing to work with me, yes,” she said.

Her voice was tense, and Michael wondered if the Boss had told her what he had said the last time they talked about Faith.

“What are your thoughts on Bold, Prince? Is she salvageable?”

Michael’s heart broke, but he had to say it. “Honestly, sir... no. I don’t think so. She left too much of herself in that barn where Trammell hurt her. She held on as long as she could. I think if West hadn’t come into the picture, she would have been all right, but—” he lifted his hands and let them drop into his lap.

The Boss nodded and sat down. He scratched his chin and stared pensively over Michael’s shoulder. After a moment, he said, “What if we give her the case?”

Michael blinked in surprise. “Sir?”

“The West case. What if we give it to her.”

Michael stared in shock. “Sir, you can’t be serious. He nearly killed her twice!”

“Yes, but she was acting on her own then. If she were on the case, that would mean you were on the case. That would mean she wouldn’t go after her on her own and not

even just the two of you and her K9. You'd have the National Guard surrounding him if you needed to."

"Sir, this is..." Michael didn't finish the sentence. He was fairly sure that the Boss would take the words insane, stupid, foolhardy and irresponsible poorly, and Michael couldn't come up with any other words at the moment.

"The thing is, she's right," the Boss added.

"Right? For God's—" Michael took a breath and said, "Look, I love Faith more than anyone, but are you serious, sir? Everything she's done related to that case has been bass-ackwards."

"But she's right," he insisted. "At the very least, she's not wrong. She was the one to determine that West was the killer."

"Yeah, after spilling state secrets to him for nine months."

"Still, it was her deduction that led to the Copycat Killer's identification. If nothing else, the fact that she's forced him into hiding has likely saved lives. And on that note, she has also found him twice."

"And then nearly gotten herself murdered."

"A problem we won't have with you reining her in."

"Boss..." Michael paused. He had nearly said what he was about to say dozens of times over the past year or so, but each time he had stopped himself.

This time, he didn't.

“Boss... I think it would be best if you assigned me a different partner.”

The Boss's eyes widened. He sat up straight and regarded Michael gravely. “It's gotten that bad between you two, huh?”

Michael sighed. “It's... Like I said, sir. I think she's broken. I don't think there's enough of the Faith Bold we once knew left to save. I would like to say I could rein her in, but the truth is, I could rein in the Faith I used to work with. This other Faith... I don't think there's any reining her in, sir. I think we bench her before she commits any more flagrant fouls.”

The Boss didn't answer right away. Finally, he sighed and nodded. “You're right. Of course you are. I just...” he chuckled. “Well, I like her. She reminds me a lot of me. I'm not saying she's right to go off the reservation like walking through a revolving door, but I can't help but admire her spunk. And no one can deny she's probably the greatest detective the Bureau has seen since Ness. No offense to you or anyone else here, me included.”

“None taken,” Michael said and meant it. Faith was modest about her accomplishments, but it wouldn't be incorrect to say that Michael was little more than an assistant on most of their cases. She was the one who did all of the thinking.

Which was part of why it frustrated him so much that her thinking was consumed by West lately.

“Boss, I wish I was wrong,” he said, “but I really don't think I am.”

“No, you're not wrong,” the Boss said. “I already admitted that. I'll work on a transfer for her. I'm thinking a training position at Quantico. Somewhere there are a lot of eyes on her. Something she can do that keeps her active but doesn't give her a chance to do anything stupid again. In the meantime, you take some time off. You

deserve a few weeks with your new wife without worrying about Bold.”

Michael felt a pang at that. He hadn’t told Faith that he and Ellie had married. Ellie had made it clear she wasn’t invited, of course, but it was Michael’s decision to not even tell her. He wasn’t sure how Faith would react, and he didn’t want to deal with it at the moment.

And now, he didn’t have to. For a little while, at least. “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll look into a partner for you in the meantime. Maybe the Rosa kid. We can put the two of you on some financial crime crap while his ears dry. He’s a hero-worshipper, and you’re a lovable old grump, so I feel like you two will get along just fine.”

“Thank you,” Michael said drily.

“No,” the Boss said, standing and taking his hand. “Thank you. I’ve allowed my affection for Bold to affect my judgment. I’m glad I had you here to set me straight.”

Michael managed a smile, even as his stomach churned with guilt.

“Michael?”

Michael blinked. “Sorry, Faith. I’m on vacation with Ellie. I can’t help you right now.”

“Michael, please!” Faith begged. “I need this! I can’t be cooped up anymore!”

“You’re a big girl, Faith,” Michael said, a touch of acid in his tone. “You’ll be fine for a few more weeks. Your rib still needs to heal, anyway.”

“It’s not West,” she says. “The Boss told me that he doesn’t want me going after him, and I agreed.”

“You agreed the last dozen times too,” Michael pointed out. “That didn’t stop you.”

“I know,” she said, “but this is different. I... I don’t want what happened with Trammell to happen again. I’ll stay away this time. I’ve learned my lesson.”

“That’s good,” he said, “and I wish you well, Faith. I really do, but—”

“Michael, please. If you ever loved me—”

“How dare you!” he shouted suddenly, so loudly that he turned back toward the garage door, hoping Ellie didn’t hear. He lowered his tone and hissed. “How dare you? If I ever loved you? Faith, you lying, manipulative little...”

He stopped and tried to calm himself. The best he could manage was silence.

“I know,” she said softly. “I know. And I’m so sorry. But please. Please help me. Please give me a chance to prove I won’t betray you again.”

He was silent for a long moment. Finally, Faith tried a tentative, “Michael?”

“Fuck you,” he said viciously. “You...” He shook his head. “Fine. I’ll be at the field office in an hour.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, nearly sobbing with relief. “Thank you so—”

He hung up and threw his cell phone across the room. The case was one of those military cases designed to withstand artillery shrapnel, so it was unharmed when he picked it up.

He almost wished it had just crumbled to dust in his hands.

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In an ironic sense, Michael's silence on the flight was a good thing. Not because it gave Faith time to think but because the pain his anger caused her motivated her to focus on the case so she wouldn't have to dwell on his hatred of her.

Maybe hatred was too strong a word. He certainly didn't hate her the way she hated Franklin West.

What the right word might be, Faith didn't know. She just knew that she felt like everyone else wished she would just go away.

I want you to look around and see nothing but the shattered remnants of your life, and only when all that is left is ash and splinters do I want you to admit defeat.

Faith would never admit defeat. As long as West lived free, she would have a reason to live.

But that didn't mean that her world wouldn't burn to the ground around her in the process. She would get West eventually, she knew that. But how much of her life would be left by the time she finally did?

The rumble of the first few seconds on the runway after landing felt profoundly reassuring, and Faith even felt the familiar thrill she always felt at the outset of a case. It was good to know that for now, at least, some of who she used to be remained.

This case seemed more irritating than interesting, though, although anything other than chasing after West would make her feel that way. The truth was there might be no case at all. There were two missing persons, and there was no link between them.

In fact, if it weren't for the recently escaped convict in the area, chances are this case would never have reached the FBI.

Faith didn't mind, though. Typically, missing persons cases were resolved to be nothing more than unannounced travel, a flight of fancy, or a spontaneous decision to abandon one backyard in favor of one that appeared greener. With any luck, the resolution would come quickly, and she and Michael could get to work on a real case.

The real case.

Perhaps she was only dreaming to think that she could convince Michael to help her find West, but it was a somewhat more lucid dream than her attempt to convince the Boss to assign her the case officially. West, after all, was Michael's fiancée's ex-husband.

Wife. His wife's ex-husband.

Her lips thinned a little at the reminder that he hadn't told her about their marriage. She pushed her irritation away quickly, however. The point was that Michael had a personal reason to want West apprehended as fast as possible. She could use that to convince him to join her. With the two of them working together, she had no doubt that they would catch West in short order.

If Michael answered his phone.

The airstair door opened, and Faith pushed those thoughts to the background of her mind and followed Michael from the plane.

They disembarked from the small FBI jet, and a man in a cheap suit met them a few yards from the plane. "Detective Charlie Jones," he said with a nod. He had a scruffy look to him, one she'd seen countless times before on the faces of people with twenty

to twenty-five years on the job. Law enforcement agents who didn't explode into a supernova or condense into a black hole of depression and alcoholism or some other substance abuse settled into a dim white dwarf, continuing in a state of mediocrity until they reached retirement. Then they fell into depression and alcoholism.

That didn't necessarily mean they weren't good detectives.

"Good afternoon, detective," Michael said. "I'm Special Agent Michael Prince. This is my partner, Special Agent Faith Bold and our K9 unit, Turk."

Turk barked formally. Jones nodded equally formally. "Pleased to meet you." He looked at Faith and said, "I heard about you. You're the woman who caught that creep who was poisoning people on the subway."

The Vampire of the Twin Cities Terminal was one of Faith's more memorable cases. She and Michael had investigated a series of murders where the victims were poisoned with an industrial solvent and staged so that their bodies were hidden in plain sight, an attempt by the killer to illustrate how little humanity cared about each other.

"That's me," Faith said. "Us. Me, Prince and Turk."

Jones nodded. "Well, we're happy to have you."

Faith lifted an eyebrow. "We?"

Jones hooked a thumb at the two waiting cars. Four uniformed officers and a man of similar age and appearance to Jones but wearing a much nicer suit stood in front of one of them.

Detective Jones led them toward the waiting men. He didn't introduce the officers but

gestured to the man in the nice suit. "This is Matt Kinzel. He's a U.S. Marshal who works out of the Boulder office."

"You're here because of the fugitive," Faith said.

"Yes," Kinzel replied. "Ferris Tooley. We got reports about break-ins at four locations between where he escaped and here."

"You think this guy is involved with the missing persons?" Faith asked.

Kinzel said, "He was in for kidnapping."

"Excuse me, marshal," Michael said, a slight edge to his voice. "I'm afraid I was called to this case rather abruptly, and I didn't have time to review any of the details. Could you please enlighten me about the missing persons and the kidnapping?"

Kinzel lifted an eye at the two agents, and Faith felt heat creep up her neck. First impressions were key, and Faith and Michael had just given the impression that they were unprepared and disorganized.

"Two people have gone missing in the mountains behind Granger," Kinzel replied. "Tyler Stone and Clara Montpelier. No connection between the victims that we can find. They were both last seen near the area of the construction site."

"Construction site?" Faith asked.

"Norwesco's building a distribution center just outside of town," Jones explained. "They broke ground a few weeks ago."

Northwest Shipping Company was the largest freight company in the Western United States. Faith wasn't sure why they'd build a distribution center in a small town on the

foothills of the Rockies, but she wasn't a businesswoman. It didn't really matter anyway. What mattered was the missing persons.

"Do you have Tooley's cell?" Michael asked. "Maybe he got stupid and texted someone his plan like he did last time."

Faith recalled the Tooley case now. He had tried to kidnap the daughter of a state senator for ransom, but thanks to texts recovered from an associate's phone, they were able to locate and arrest him.

"It's on its way from Florence," Kinzel replied.

"Florence?" Faith asked. "The supermax." The United States Penitentiary Florence was what was known as an administrative maximum prison, the only facility of its kind that remained. That the government allowed people to know about anyway.

Kinzel nodded. "The senator whose daughter he kidnapped was a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee."

"Ah."

"Fool around and find out," Jones interjected.

Kinzel nodded. "He was on his way to court. The prison staff didn't notify the Marshals Office, so it was just a corrections officer driving the van. They stopped for gas, and when the officer got back in to drive, the prisoner was gone."

The story didn't make much sense, and she imagined it was a whitewashed version of events that put the Marshals in the best possible light. She didn't challenge him, though.

"Do these victims fit Tooley's MO?" Michael asked.

Kinzel was silent.

"There's our answer," Faith said.

Kinzel said, "But he's desperate, and his kidnapping MO is to take victims as leverage."

Ultimately, the marshals had managed to get help from the FBI to catch their fugitive. That was all this amounted to, but Faith couldn't really moan about it since five dozen marshals were currently helping the FBI look for West.

"So this is a manhunt," Michael said.

"The Marshals Office will be handling the manhunt," Kinzel informed them. "We would appreciate it if you two—" he glanced at Turk "—you three, would lead the search for the victims."

"We can do that," Faith said.

"Wonderful," Kinzel replied. "I'll be borrowing Mr. Jones—"

"Detective Jones—" Jones corrected.

Kinzel's lips thinned slightly as he regarded the slovenly detective. "Detective Jones... for a while. However, if you need anything, I am sure the Granger Police Department will be happy to assist. As soon as I no longer require Detective Jones, he will be at your disposal."

Jones smiled slightly at Kinzel's patronizing tone, but there was more humor than

irritation in his smile, another sure sign that he had settled into a holding pattern he intended to fly until he earned his pension.

"Thank you," Faith said. "We'll keep you posted."

"I understand," Michael said.

Faith tried to give the couple a reassuring smile. Michael absolutely understood. Mrs. Stone was worried for her son's safety and trying desperately not to let on that her son was a failure to launch. Her husband was trying not to say, admit, or face that his son was a disappointment to him.

It was interesting to Faith how much appearances mattered, even during matters of life and death.

"Tyler was going to get a job at the new distribution center," Mr. Stone said, "and he was excited about the future. He wouldn't just pack up and leave."

He spoke with more emphasis than necessary, trying to convince himself as much as anyone else. Nobody had asked yet if he might go on a trip or leave the area. Faith had a feeling that Mr. Stone suspected that Tyler had just jumped ship rather than make that last leap into adulthood.

"Can you tell me what Tyler likes to do?" she asked.

Mr. Stone spoke up first. "Tyler loves hiking in the mountains and exploring. He likes those video games. He used to go out with his friends, but they're all moved away now with jobs and families and everything."

“Anything illegal?” Faith asked.

Mr. Stone frowned. “Why would you ask that?”

Faith pondered how to phrase the answer, but Michael took care of it.

“Oftentimes, underemployed young people will seek alternative means of employment,” Michael said, “up to and including illicit means. If Tyler was involved in such activities, it’s possible that he may have associates who could provide information on his whereabouts.”

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Stone said. “He wasn’t involved in anything illegal. Our son is not a criminal.”

Said the mother of every criminal that ever lived, Faith thought. “So he never engaged in any illicit behavior.”

“Well, nothing serious,” Mrs. Stone demurred. “Just some harmless fun.”

"Harmless fun?" Faith asked.

"You know," Mr. Stone replied, "what kids do. Dares and stuff. Break a mailbox. Sneak into someone's backyard, drink some beer from their cooler. That kind of thing."

"He did that with his friends," Mr. Stone insisted. “When he was much younger. Our son is many things, but he is not foolish enough to get involved with drug dealers or thieves or any other kind of criminal element.”

"When was the last time you spoke to Tyler?" Michael asked.

"I sent him money last month," Mrs. Stone said, avoiding eye contact with her husband when she did. He frowned slightly but said nothing. "He was doing fine. He wanted to get clothes so he would look good when he interviewed for the job."

Faith nodded. "And he seemed happy, excited for the future?"

The woman nodded, and Faith said, "Excuse us, please. Can I bring you some water or some coffee?" Both of them shook their heads. "Very well," Faith said. "We'll be back in a moment."

She and Michael walked from the room, and she said, "Without Tooley, this is just a case of someone lost in the woods."

He nodded. "I'll be anything it's the same with Ms. Montpelier. They'd have people doing a sweep of the forests."

"They just want Bureau resources behind the search for this guy," Faith said.

"Well, can you blame them?" Michael asked.

"No," she said, "I'm just saying."

Michael sighed. "Well, chances are we'll have this wrapped up in a few days. One way or another."

Faith could hear the frustration in his voice. "Thank you," she said. "For coming. I know it was hard—"

"Just..." Michael waved his hand like he was shooing her away. "Just don't, Faith. Let's focus on the case and get back home, okay?"

Faith lowered her eyes and nodded.

“Should we grab a coffee from the break room so it looks like we stepped outside for a reason?” Michael asked.

Faith nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

They were at the Granger Police Station. The only Granger Police Station. Faith and Michael had twice been assigned to rural locales, first in Morgan County, Missouri, then, in their last case, western Iowa, but Granger, Idaho was by far the most isolated locale Faith had ever been to. The town itself boasted a population of one hundred twenty-nine, spread out over three and a half square miles of reasonably flat and thinly forested land right off of US 95 and just west of the Rocky Mountains. The police station had seven rooms. Two of them were bathrooms, and one was a break room. Aside from a conference room, the lobby and a single jail cell, there was the interrogation room that Faith and Michael were now using to question the parents of Tyler Stone, twenty-nine.

They got their coffee and headed back to the interrogation room. Mr. and Mrs. Stone happily answered the usual slew of questions to the best of their ability, telling the agents absolutely nothing helpful. Apparently, Tyler enjoyed playing video games and hiking. His only friends lived hundreds of miles away, and he didn't associate with anyone in town. It was looking an awful lot like a tragic accident rather than a criminal disappearance.

Trevor Hart was of little more help at first. Carla Montpelier's boyfriend was able to provide an ironclad alibi for the day of Carla's disappearance—he was working at the local market—and Carla, like Tyler, was an avid hiker. She was a very experienced hiker and spelunker and would often go on spontaneous solo trips into the woods.

“So why is this one different?” Faith asked him.

“She always calls,” he said. “She has a satellite phone, and she always calls to let me know she’s safe. She’s called me every night she’s been out before. It’s been three nights now, and nothing.”

Michael and Faith shared a look. “When was the last time you spoke with her?”

“The day she left. We...” his lower lip trembled. “We had a fight. She said she needed some time to be by herself, so she left. I keep thinking if we hadn’t fought, if I had just given in, maybe she wouldn’t have gone out, and maybe she wouldn’t be...” his lip trembled again. “She’s all right, right? I mean, you don’t think she’s...”

For the second time, he couldn’t bring himself to say the word. Neither could Faith. “We haven’t lost hope,” she said, “and neither should you.”

He brightened a little at that, and Faith had the sickening feeling that she had just lifted him up to drop him down even harder.

Michael ended up being the one to find the lead. “You said she was a spelunker as well as a hiker. Where did she like to go cave-diving?”

“Well, I don’t know about diving,” Trevor said, “but she liked to explore the caverns just outside of town.”

Faith’s ears perked up. “Caverns?”

Trevor nodded. “There’s an extensive network of caves underneath Grass Mountain. Well, it probably extends under a few peaks, but the most popular entrances are on Grass Mountain.”

“And which one is Grass Mountain?” Michael asked.

“It’s the one with no trees or plants on it,” Trevor said. “I guess the people who named it have a sense of humor.”

Faith and Michael shared another look. They had a place to start now. “Thank you, Mr. Hart,” Faith said. “We’ll be in touch.”

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Kinzel apparently didn't need Jones for long. He apparently didn't need himself for long, either. Both men were available to escort Faith and Michael up Grass Mountain that very afternoon.

"Shoulda thought about the caves," Jones said, showing not a shred of guilt. He had probably forgotten that emotion years ago. "Probably got lost in there."

"It seems likely," Kinzel said tersely. He didn't seem to be as free of remorse as Jones.

Faith wasn't interested in judging them, though. Not that she had any moral ground to stand on, even if she did want to judge. "How far do these caves extend?"

"Who knows?" Jones said. "The parts the tourists are allowed into are something like eleven miles all told."

"Eleven miles?" Faith exclaimed.

"Well, not eleven miles in one direction," Jones elaborated. "They twist and turn a lot. But yeah, I remember reading somewhere that there are twenty-something miles of caves and eleven of them are considered safe to explore, not including the mine. Although, I don't know if the mine ever actually went all the way to the cave network. Anyway, the point is it's pretty easy to get lost down there."

"Let's not assume our missing persons are dead until we find bodies," Kinzel said. "At the moment, this is still a search and rescue."

A search and rescue with no search parties, no medical support and no vehicles , Faith thought. Tell me about that bridge you're selling again?

Jones showed less restraint than Faith. "If this were a search and rescue, marshal, I would have someone a few rungs higher than you on the ladder telling me to screw off and come back with coffee. And I'd have people a few rungs higher than them—" he hooked a thumb at the back seat where Faith, Turk and Michael sat, "making sure everyone knew they were in charge without actually doing anything."

Michael chuckled at that. Kinzel looked at Faith, and she lifted her hands.

He sighed but didn't say anything to confirm or deny the claim.

The old Bronco jounced and jostled its way up the rough mountain road for another ten minutes before Jones pulled to a stop. The four of them got out and stood in front of a small entrance, maybe seven feet by three feet. It amazed Faith how unimpressive the cave appeared from the outside. In her mind, she expected a giant gaping maw from which unholy moans and whispers would emerge.

Turk walked to the entrance of the cave, then gingerly stepped inside, going no further than the light shone. He sniffed around, looking for clues, and Faith marveled at his bravery.

That thought occurred an instant before a noise, exactly like a moan, emerged from the cave. Turk yelped and rushed to Faith's side. Faith's skin crawled, and she barely suppressed a flinch.

Jones chuckled and said, "Yeah, we call this the Spirit entrance. Kind of arbitrary since you can hear these noises from any entrance. The wind blows through the tunnels, and when it comes out, it makes this kind of low moan as you heard. Of course, the locals all choose to believe that it's haunted."

“Haunted? By what?”

“We can talk about superstition later,” Kinzel interrupted. “We have a case to focus on right now.”

“Superstition is often rooted in fact,” Faith countered, “and I’d like a chance to determine if these suspicions might lead us to the facts of the case.”

Kinzel glowered but fell silent.

“Haunted by ghosts,” Jones said, “Miners, spelunkers, hikers, disobedient children, you name it. This is basically the town legend. At some point, everyone who dies ends up here for the express purpose of exhaling every time a newcomer shows up. I guess when you’re dead, you’ll take whatever humor you can get.”

“When was the last disappearance attributed to the ghosts?” Faith asked.

“No idea. Like I said, it’s become the catch-all bad guy for the town. No one knows for sure what’s real and what isn’t.”

“Hmm,” Faith said. “Can we go inside?”

Jones looked toward the horizon. The sun was a sliver, just barely peeking over the edge. As they watched, that sliver disappeared. “Not a good idea,” he said. “We can be out here first thing in the morning with some uniforms to start a thorough search, but even with flashlights, I wouldn’t want to be in those caverns after dark. It’s too easy to lose track of where you are.”

Faith looked into the darkening entrance and wondered what Tyler’s and Clara’s last thoughts might have been as they realized that their lives were coming to an end. They were less than five miles from their homes, but they might as well have been on

another planet.

“Got anything, Turk?” she asked.

Turk snorted and dipped his head, a sign of frustration and a clear answer to Faith’s question. She sighed and said, “All right. Let’s head back down.”

On the way down, she thought again of their victims, lost in that underground maze. She wondered if their cries joined those of the other ghosts now.

They returned to the police station, and Kinzel led them to the conference room. A map of Granger and the surrounding territory was spread out on the table.

“We have teams staking out the roads here, here, and here.” Kinzel placed pins on the map near the 95 and state highways 13 and 14. “Granger PD is focusing on the backroads and forest trails.”

“Is anyone watching the cave system?” Faith asked.

“Not at the moment,” Kinzel replied. “We’ll be investigating during daylight hours.”

“We’ll stake out Spirit Cave,” Faith said. “If Tooley really is kidnapping people for ransom, then the caves seem the most likely place to do it.”

“I can’t see him doing that successfully,” Jones replied. “He’s not a local. He wouldn’t know the first thing about this cave system. He would get lost in there.”

“Frankly, he probably is,” Faith said, “and when we start looking through the cave system in earnest tomorrow, we might find him then. But for tonight, I want eyes on the entrance in case we catch him, or anyone else, entering or exiting.”

“You’re not going to find anything in the dark,” Jones insisted.

“Turk’s nose works in low light too,” Faith assured him.

“We’ve had dogs all over the mountains since before you arrived,” Kinzel countered.
“They didn’t find anything.”

“They’re not Turk,” Faith replied simply.

Kinzel’s lips thinned. “Is Turk some special breed of German Shepherd with an unusually powerful nose?”

“Are you some special breed of asshole with an unusually snarky tongue?” Michael fired back.

Faith lifted a hand for calm and said, “Marshal, you asked for our help in this case. We’re offering it to you. I suggest you accept it. We all lose in a pissing contest.”

Kinzel’s lips thinned further, but he nodded curtly. “Very well. I’ll be here coordinating. If you find anything, call me immediately.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Marshal, sir,” Jones said with a playful grin.

Michael turned around so Kinzel wouldn’t see his smile.

“You two can take the truck,” Jones said, “I like my Jeep better anyway.”

He tossed Faith the keys. She caught them with one hand and said, “Thank you. We’ll head out now.”

When they left the room, Michael asked. “You sure you don’t want to wait until

morning?”

“No,” Faith said, “We have two people missing.”

“We have two people dead, Faith,” Michael replied. “Let’s be reasonable.”

“That doesn’t mean that we give up,” she countered. “Miracles happen. Even if they don’t happen in this case, there’s a chance we could at least catch their murderer.”

“I’m just worried that we’re going to end up sleep-deprived and not functional in the morning,” Michael said. “I’m not trying to whine about needing sleep, but the reality is we do need sleep, and there have been cases in the past where not getting enough of it has threatened our judgment.”

“I understand that,” Faith said, “but Tooley will almost certainly know that as well. Or whoever the killer is. They’ll be moving at night when they know we’re less likely to look. So we have to look.”

“All right,” Michael said, “that’s fine with me. Maybe we just take turns sleeping when we get to the top.”

“Sure,” Faith said. “That works.”

She didn’t anticipate needing sleep that badly, but if Michael needed it, he was welcome to it. Faith’s larger concern was his general disconnect from the case. It seemed to her that he had checked out and was only here to do the minimal amount of work necessary to solve the case and go home so he could get back to Ellie and away from Faith.

She told herself that she was just being paranoid, but when they reached the old SUV and Michael immediately leaned back in the passenger seat and closed his eyes, she

couldn't help but wonder if this was his way of avoiding her. When Turk also closed his eyes and settled in for a nap, she decided she really was just being paranoid and let it go.

She looked out the window at the narrow sliver of crescent moon remaining. Tomorrow, the sky would be lit only by the stars, a breathtaking sight but a useless one as all of the stars combined couldn't offer enough light to dispel the shadow that fell over the landscape.

It occurred to her for the first time how truly sheltered urban environments were. In Philadelphia, night was never truly night. It was darker than the day, of course, but it was never hard to see where one was going. There were lights everywhere—streetlights, headlights, signs and even the glow of interior lights shining through windows and curtains.

She switched the Bronco's brights on, and a swath of road ahead illuminated enough for Faith to navigate around potholes and over the small rocks and ruts that lined the mountain road. It wasn't enough to banish the darkness, but it was enough to see where she was going.

That would have to suffice.

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Dawn under the mountain was not signaled by light, but by scent. The dew moistened the air, cooling it and driving it underground where it would remain before the afternoon's warmth lifted it out, creating the sighs and moans that those above believed to be the ghosts that haunted these tunnels.

The dweller knew that those tricks of the wind were only tricks and nothing more. The ghosts here spoke, but not with sound. The dweller felt them as an impression, a pull or a push in the right direction. Not everyone could feel those pushes. In fact, the dweller was firmly convinced that none but himself knew what the wraiths of this place wanted.

At the moment, though, it wasn't the will of the wraiths that led him but the scent of the girl he had kidnapped. Like most people, she wore a combination of perfumes, makeups and deodorants that all but shouted her presence to any of the predators lurking nearby.

The dweller knew of several of those predators—bears, cougars and coyotes—that hunted nearby, but none, not even the bears, entered the caves. Even if they did, they would have no reason to attack a prey so worthless as the girl. They had far larger and more nutritious animals to worry about.

The dweller, though, hunted not for food but for justice. That was worth the effort he had to expend to follow the girl through the endless maze of tunnels and caverns and shafts that man and nature had conspired to build.

He moves calmly, occasionally stopping to pick up the echoes of her footfalls or sniffing the air to ensure he followed the freshest scent and avoided backtracking

through tunnels he'd already navigated.

He heard the echo of a cry from a nearby tunnel and headed toward it. He sniffed and recognized this tunnel as the one where he'd left the last trespasser. A smile stretched his lips. She had found his body, it seemed.

Footfalls echoed through the tunnel. The dweller stopped to listen, focusing on every sound that filtered through to his ears. His hearing, like his sense of smell, had sharpened to inhuman levels after twenty years living underground, and he was able to determine the exact tunnel the latest trespasser was taking.

She was doing better than the one before her. The man had simply run in circles before finally giving up and collapsing to the floor. The dweller almost waited to kill him. It was a mercy more than a judgment to end the life of someone so pathetic.

This one was not nearly so pathetic. She was wandering certainly, but each turn brought her closer and closer to the exit. If he let her, she would find her way out and escape.

Of course, he couldn't let her escape. She had trespassed. She had defiled this place. Still, a part of him wished that he could show mercy. It was truly impressive when one of the outsiders managed to find their way out of his dwelling place.

He listened a moment longer to determine her route, then turned around. He didn't hurry. He had no reason to. He knew the tunnels intimately. He could have worn a blindfold himself and been perfectly fine weaving his way through the web of paths available to him.

He walked toward a ventilation shaft and hoisted himself upward, shimmying through the narrow hole and working his way toward the surface. He was a few yards from the entrance when he detected another smell and stopped.

A dog. Not a coyote, but a dog. Dogs gave off a cleaner odor, closer to that of an outsider than that of a coyote.

The police were looking for him. Well, not him, specifically. They had no way of knowing who he was. They were looking for the killer, however, and if he shimmied out of a ventilation shaft and walked back into the caverns via another entrance as he planned, they would deduce who he was easily enough.

He made a noise halfway between a growl and a click, a sign of irritation. The noise was soft enough that not even the dog would have heard it, but it was the dog's nose and not his ears that he needed to be wary of.

He fell silent and let his ears and nose work. There were two people with the dog, a man and a woman. They spoke to each other, but even with his sharp ears, he couldn't make out what was said.

He focused on the other sound, the footfalls of the trespasser. She was moving quickly, more quickly than he had anticipated.

He would need to hurry after all.

He shimmied his way back down the shaft. When he reached the tunnel, he began to sprint, weaving his way through the mine toward the natural caverns where the trespasser was nearing the surface.

He found her just as she reached one of the cave network's many openings. She cried out with relief, and the dweller growled again. If she alerted the police, it would mean real trouble. He rushed her, and just before she left the cavern, he grabbed her and pulled her back. She opened her mouth to scream, and he slammed her head into the cave wall. It made a sound like a pumpkin splitting, and the trespasser fell silent and slumped. He wrapped his arms around her and dragged her deeper, heart pounding.

He fell silent again, listening and sniffing. The dog and his handlers remained where they were. He detected no sign that they had heard him. Slowly, he relaxed, and when he was certain that he wouldn't be followed, he stood and dragged the trespasser deeper into the dark.

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“What’s the hardest part about being an agent?”

Faith considered the question before she considered the question. Dr. Franklin West, at first glance, looked like the stereotype of a psychologist. He was warm, kindly, pleasant, good-looking but not particularly attractive. He projected exactly the kind of caring, fatherly demeanor that a medical professional should.

That didn’t necessarily mean she couldn’t trust him, but it didn’t tell her much about who he was behind the soft smile and gentle eyes. She decided to try a probing question of her own first.

“What’s the hardest part about being a therapist?” she asked.

His smile widened slightly. "Establishing trust. Patients tend to be very wary and closed-off when they first meet me. Unfortunately, that makes my job very difficult if not impossible to do. The problem is that trust is not something that can occur immediately, not at least to the degree necessary to address one's mental health. So, I find that I spend more time getting to the point where my patients feel they can trust me than I spend getting to the root of the problem."

“So you’re saying you can’t help me if I don’t talk to you,” she summarized.

“I’m saying that, and I’m also saying that I understand if it takes a while before we reach that point. I am a complete stranger to you, and I’m asking you to share vulnerable secrets.”

“So if I don’t tell you what the hardest part of my job is, you won’t hold it against

me?"

"I won't hold anything you tell me against you," he replied. "That's not my job. I'm not a judge or a jury. I'm most certainly not an executioner. I'm a medical professional here to determine if you need help with your mental health, diagnose the problem or problems if they exist, and work with you on a plan to solve those problems. However, as I said before, to do that effectively, we need to trust each other. I need you to answer my questions completely and honestly, and you need to believe that the advice I provide is intended only to help you. Otherwise, we risk completely missing the point, as it were."

"So we should work on establishing that trust, then," she said, "before we get into the 'point.'"

"Of course," he said. "So what will it take for you to trust me?"

She smiled wryly. "If I answer that, then you'll just alter your behavior to meet my expectations."

His smile widened again. "So what it will take for you to trust me is for me to reveal myself as trustworthy without needing input from you."

"Essentially, yes."

"Well," he said, "that leaves us little room for anything other than pleasant small talk. Which I am perfectly willing to engage in. However, in order for me to trust you, I need to know that you'll reciprocate."

"Meaning that since you answered my question, I need to answer yours."

"Essentially, yes," he replied.

She chuckled and leaned back on the couch. She thought a moment longer, then said, "Projecting confidence is the hardest part."

"And why is that hard?"

"That's technically a second question," Faith replied, "but since you answered that question as well, I'll return the favor. Projecting confidence is difficult because the overwhelming majority of an investigation is spent not knowing the answers. You can't know the answers until you know the right questions, and those questions take time to determine. But I can't tell a grieving family member or an irritated police officer that I'm still trying to figure out the questions and don't even know where to look for answers. I have to act as though I am completely certain where to go next, even when I'm as lost as they are."

"That must place a lot of pressure on you, especially when the murderer you are chasing is still actively killing people."

Faith's smile faded slightly. "I think we'll move on to casual small talk now. If that's okay."

"Of course," Dr. West replied. "So tell me about yourself. The parts of yourself you'd feel comfortable sharing with a relative stranger during casual small talk, of course."

Michael tapped Faith on the shoulder, pulling her from her thoughts. She turned to him, and he handed her a cup of coffee. She took it and sipped gratefully. The arrival of morning had brought a wave of exhaustion to Faith. She regretted not taking advantage of the opportunity to sleep last night when Michael took over the watch.

Turk seemed completely unaffected by his own all-nighter and continued to listen

intently, pausing every few moments to sniff the ground and the air. He looked as though he had found something, but each time Faith asked if he smelled something, he snorted and dipped his head in the negative again.

She allowed the brew to settle and revitalize her, then asked, "Have you heard anything from Kinzel or Jones?"

He shook his head. "Nothing yet. Jones is pretty sure that Tooley pulled a runner."

She nodded. "I hate to say it, but that seems most likely. Either he ran into the caves and got lost just like Tyler and Clara, or he's somewhere in Canada right now. I'm leaning toward the latter. That being said, when do the police plan to start looking through the caves?"

"Jones is sending a team after breakfast. They should be here in two hours or so."

"Wonderful," Faith said. "Fingers crossed we can put this behind us and go home soon."

Michael frowned at her. "Even if that means we find them dead?"

Faith thought of reminding him that if they were dead, it wouldn't matter when they found the bodies, but he had a low enough opinion of her already, and it wouldn't help her case if she said she wanted this case over with quickly so she could convince Michael to help her hunt West. So, she said, "No. I hope we find them alive, of course, but I'm being realistic. The probable explanation is that they got lost, wandered around, and are either dead or trapped underground. I hope the latter is true, but at this point, it doesn't look likely. It also doesn't look all that likely that these are murders. We have no reason to believe that Tooley is responsible for these deaths other than the fact that he happens to be a convict. He was never convicted of murder, and neither Tyler nor Clara had money, so I can't see why he would kidnap

them. I can definitely see why he would have run north as soon as possible.”

Michael shrugged. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“But?”

“No buts. I just don’t trust anything that makes sense anymore because as soon as I start trusting it, it blows up in my face.”

Faith lowered her eyes and nodded. “Yeah, I get that.”

Michael didn’t reply. He sipped his coffee, and after a moment, he said, “I’m thinking when the police get here, we start talking to the townspeople. It’s a small enough town that they should know our victims. We can’t rule out the possibility that someone in town is responsible for the killings.”

“Maybe,” Faith allowed, “but I don’t think so.”

“Why not? If he is using the caves, then that would require local knowledge to accomplish effectively.”

“If he’s using the caves,” Faith reminded him. “If there’s even a killer to begin with. But yes, I agree we should talk to the townspeople. I just don’t want to make any assumptions going into it.”

“Fair enough,” Michael replied. “How are you feeling?”

Faith lifted an eyebrow in surprise. She hadn’t expected Michael to show much interest in her feelings.

“I’m fine,” she said, “hanging in there. You?”

“I’ve had better days,” he admits, “but I’m learning to live with disappointment.”

She lifted her coffee cup. “I’ll drink to that.”

Michael looked as though he had something else to say, so when Faith finished her drink, she said, “Okay, what is it? What else is on your mind?”

“I’m a little more worried about what else is on your mind,” he said.

“Nothing but basketball, coach,” she joked. “I just want to show those Kansas boys what’s what.”

“I’ll pretend I understand what you’re talking about if you answer my question honestly,” he said.

“Well, if you were more specific with your question, I might be able to answer more directly.”

Michael frowned slightly. “Is your mind on this case, or is your mind on West?”

Faith felt somewhat irritated by the question, considering only the day before, he had seemed checked out of this case himself. “My mind is on a lot of things,” she said, “and West is one of them, just as I’m sure he is for you. He hurt me, captured Turk, threatened you and your wife, and killed our friend and colleague. So just like you, I think about him from time to time, and I hope he’s caught sooner rather than later. To ask me not to think about him is as unfair as asking you not to think about him.

“My focus , however, is on this case. Screwing this case up isn’t going to help anyone find West any faster. I’ve tried doing things my way, and believe me, I learned my lesson. I don’t have a choice but to play by the rules now and hope for the best.

“And I do think we’ll get him soon,” she lied. “We have the Marshals on it, not to mention our best agents, not to mention every citizen in America who watches The FBI’s Most Wanted. We’ll find him, and he’ll answer for what he did.”

“So suddenly, you’ve gone from being impatient and desperate to be the one who makes the collar yourself to being nonchalant about it and willing to let whoever’s running the case get there when they get there?”

Her lips thinned. “Not so suddenly, Michael. There were six weeks in the hospital, a missing dog, the least fun conversation with the Boss that I’ve ever had, the probable loss of my boyfriend and the alienation of my best friend’s new wife and possibly my best friend in between being impatient and recognizing that I need to let this go.”

“That’s a great point, Faith,” he replied, “and I wish I could just take you at your word on the subject, but you’ve suffered a lot before and still made the same mistakes.”

“What do you want me to do, Michael?” she snapped. “Do you want to set up a spy camera that follows me everywhere I go? Do you want to hypnotize me and read my thoughts?”

“I don’t mean to be a dick about it,” he said, “but you don’t get to be angry at me.”

“So you get to be unfair and suspicious and catty and cruel, and I just have to grin and bear it?”

"Yes," he said, "Right now, yes. After everything that's happened, yes. But look, I'll take you at your word for it. You say you're focused? Fine. I believe you. Or, at the very least, I'll act like I do until you show me enough that I don't have to act. Deal?"

His phone buzzed, and he said, “Hold on. It’s the Boss.” He stepped away to answer

the call.

He was probably checking in on her. It was don't trust Faith season, and the fact that from their perspectives, Faith knew she deserved it didn't make it easier to stomach.

Michael returned a moment later. He seemed upbeat, far more relaxed than before.

"Good news?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "They got a tip on West. Gas station attendant in North Dakota saw him gas up then head south. Good news, since north would mean Canada."

Faith felt a knife pierce her chest. So the Boss wouldn't even talk to Faith about West, but he was giving Michael up-to-the-minute information? Michael was calling her out on her focus when he was just as distracted as she was, and for the exact same reason.

And the tip was bullshit. There was no way West would run. Why would he? He had already hidden close to home, and in plain sight, twice, while running from multiple agencies. The only person who had found him was the person he had specifically led to find him, and he had beaten her badly both times. He had no reason to be anywhere other than close to wherever Faith was. That meant Philadelphia. Hell, it was more likely he was here in Idaho than in North Dakota heading south.

But she didn't air any of these thoughts. From Michael's perspective, she didn't have a right to, and right now, it was more important to her that she and Michael get along than that he admit she was right.

"That's good," she said. "I hope they get him."

"Yeah," he said, "Me too."

His shoulders tensed, and he wouldn't meet her eyes. Faith finished the coffee, clapped him on the shoulder and headed back to the car.

They weren't going to find West. Not until they let Faith run the case. He knew her better than anyone else, but she also knew him. She knew how he thought. He had taken advantage of her trauma, her arrogance, and her grief to manipulate her, but she really had learned the lesson about combating him emotionally. From now on, she would remove her emotions from the equation and treat him like any other suspect, and when she did that, it would take no time at all to predict his next moves and catch him.

He really was a simple creature after all. He was a bully, and Faith was his target. If she could make herself appear vulnerable without actually making herself vulnerable, he would rear his ugly head out of whatever lair he watched her from, and she would squash him like the bug he was.

Not personally, though. Hand to hand was, evidently, not her best option for taking him down. She would learn that lesson, too, and make sure she had backup when she caught him. He might be able to beat Faith on her own, but there wasn't a killer on Earth who could stop Faith Bold and Michael Prince together.

Just ask Jethro Trammell.

Turk barked eagerly, and Faith's mind snapped away from West once more. He barked again, and she and Michael jogged toward him from opposite directions. When Turk decided they were close enough to follow, he bolted down the mountain.

Faith and Michael glanced at each other and started after him. Turk had to stop several times to wait for them. The poor bipedal agents couldn't maintain nearly the same pace down the steep slope of loose dirt and rocks.

Faith looked around and saw nothing but rocky crags and steep slopes. “Where are you leading us, boy?” she asked.

Turk barked, and Faith swore she could detect a hint of exasperation in his call.

“We’re moving as fast as we can, boy,” she said.

After five minutes of running—well, of Turk running and Faith and Michael cautiously scrambling—they reached a ledge sheltered on one side by a massive boulder. A narrow walking trail led from the ledge downward, but Faith focused on what was on the ledge first.

Not much at first glance. Just a fragment of a candy bar wrapper. It was this that Turk barked at eagerly. Not much, but enough to show that someone had been on the mountains recently. Probably as recently as last night.

They had a lead.

She called Kinzel and told him the news.

“Can you send me the GPS coordinates?” he asked with barely controlled excitement.

“I can,” she said, “but the only way up here is a narrow footpath, and I don’t know where that footpath begins.”

“Send me the coordinates anyway. Maybe Jones will recognize something. In the meantime, you three follow that footpath. If you find anything of note, call me. I have a feeling that Tooley is still in the area.”

“I think you’re right,” Faith replied. Surprisingly.

“Good work, agents,” Kinzel said. “Be careful. He’s considered armed and dangerous.”

“He’s gonna have to be real dangerous,” Michael said.

“I’m sure you’ll be more than capable of handling yourself,” Kinzel said with just a touch of sarcasm.

He hung up and Michael said, “Nice guy.”

“Have you ever met a marshal who wasn’t full of himself?” she asked.

“Sure. There are the meatheads who think they’re Marines. No offense.”

“None taken. We don’t like poseurs either.”

They started down the path, Turk in the lead, nose to the ground as he continued to track their thief.

And possibly their killer.

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“Here’s your Chardonnay, Mr. Hancock,” the waitress said.

West smiled up at her and received a million-dollar grin in reply. No doubt this lovely young woman had earned many a tip by flashing that smile at lonely, desperate middle-aged men.

“Dr. Hancock, dear,” he reminded her.

She paled slightly as her tip reduced itself by half in her mind. She recovered quickly, widening her smile and pushing her chest forward slightly so the collar of her already low-cut blouse widened a touch further. People were so predictable.

“Of course, I’m so sorry.” She flicked her head playfully and said, “Sorry, I had a paper due last night, and I was up until three in the morning finishing it. Kind of ditzy today.”

“That’s perfectly all right, dear,” he said. “My niece is in college right now. I understand how demanding that schedule can be. You’ve been lovely.”

She smiled, relieved enough that she straightened and allowed her blouse to close once more. “Have we decided what we’re going to order today?”

He found it intensely fascinating, the social convention of treating every decision as a collaboration. We weren’t going to decide anything. We weren’t going to order dinner. He would decide what he was going to order.

Yet somehow, the assumption—accurate in nearly every case save his—was that it

would inspire some connection between them if she treated this interaction as a mutual endeavor and not simply a functionary receiving instructions to relay to other functionaries.

Most likely, the girl was unaware of this. Most likely she only wanted a good tip and was acting "cute" so he would feel affection toward her.

Still, it was another sign of how helpless people were when you separated them from the herd. "I believe I'll have the Chilean Sea Bass."

"Excellent choice, sir," she said, as she would have if he had ordered a head of lettuce drizzled with ketchup. "The fish was caught just this morning."

"Thank you, dear," he said, "I'm sure it will be exquisite."

She took his side order—seasonal roasted vegetables and rice pilaf—and promised a second glass of Chardonnay to be delivered with the fish.

He thanked her again, then, just to keep up appearances, watched her hips sway as she walked back toward the kitchen. As he expected, she glanced over her shoulder to see if he was watching and smiled coyly when she caught him.

So predictable.

He turned back to look out at the Pacific and allow his mind to return to the only woman—the only person at all—he considered worthy of his reflection.

Bold was stronger than he expected. When he kidnapped Turk, he expected that to be the final blow. Instead, she had recovered and even planned to ask for permission to go after him again as soon as she was physically healed. She grieved Turk, of course. She also felt foolish and guilty and alone and abandoned, all as he had hoped, but she

hadn't capitulated. She was the only person he had met in his entire life who wasn't predictable.

Well, not entirely predictable anyway. She still proved rather easy to manipulate. She had accepted without question the return of her dog, seeming to believe that Turk really had somehow managed to escape on his own.

He looked down at his left arm, where a red welt was slowly whitening into a scar. Turk was stronger than he looked, too. Smarter as well. He had feigned sleep when West opened the cage and moved so swiftly that West barely had time to get his hand in between his throat and Turk's snapping jaws. The sap he carried in his other hand had knocked the dog unconscious without further incident, but it still impressed him how resilient these two were.

He might have to kill them after all.

He had considered killing Turk and sending Faith Turk's body, but in hindsight, that was more likely to send her into a murderous rage than to break her. He had no doubt he could handle himself in the event of any physical confrontation—hell, he had proven that twice—but he didn't just want to kill Faith. Killing someone was easy. All you needed to do to kill someone was find an opportunity, a tool, and a moment of courage. Any child could kill someone. Many children did kill people.

But to defeat someone, to make them admit that defeat to themselves, to make them know in their core that they had lost, that was true victory. That was true dominance.

Jethro Trammell, in his own brutish way, had understood that perfectly. He knew that the true liquor of the predator was not the simple destruction of their prey, but the consumption of them, the draining of their life force. The body was only a husk. The will was the true self.

Jethro Trammell had broken the will of his prey, and that was why West admired him. He hadn't lied to Faith when he said he'd been killing longer than Trammell, but it had never fulfilled him before as it did now. Trammell was an artist, and West would admit freely that he was, at the moment, only a cheap imitator.

But he would surpass the master. He would take the prize that Trammell couldn't take. He would take Faith Bold's will.

"All right, sir," the waitress said, pulling him from his thoughts.

He turned and smiled as she set the fish in front of him, leaning just far enough away to make it look plausible that she wasn't trying to invite him to look down her shirt. She set the wine carefully next to his first glass, acting as though it were perfectly normal to have two nearly full glasses of wine.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr.—Dr. Hancock? Sorry, I..." she flipped her hands. "I don't know what—"

"That's perfectly all right, dear. I am quite content for now."

"Wonderful," she said, beaming in relief again. "I'll be back to check on you in a few minutes."

West watched her walk away again, then turned back toward the gently rolling surf. He breathed deeply of the salt-scented air. He had always preferred the Pacific to the Atlantic. The Atlantic was tempestuous and stormy. Not unlike Special Agent Faith Bold.

In contrast, the Pacific was calm, smooth, and patient. Predictable. Like him.

He smiled broadly. He supposed he wasn't so far removed from humanity after all.

He took a bite of his fish. It was disappointing, rubbery and tasteless. Clearly not caught this morning or even the prior morning. It wouldn't surprise him to find out the fish wasn't fresh caught sea bass at all but instead frozen tilapia or Swai catfish.

He would tip the girl well anyway, say, twenty-five percent. He would do that because it was exactly what a lonely, desperate middle-aged man would tip a sweet, attractive, slightly ditzy young waitress who didn't mind that he stared at her ass when she walked away.

People were predictable, and for now, so was he.

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They had to be at least fifteen miles from the ledge by now.

Faith looked behind and saw only mountains and forest. To her left, far below, she could see the US 95 veering west toward Washington. To her right was a nearly vertical slope of over five hundred feet. The mountain itself—she had no idea which one it was, since Grass Mountain was at least four hours behind them—rose for what looked like another four thousand feet, ending in a steel-gray cap of granite that in a month or so would be covered with snow.

Maybe sooner than that. Today was noticeably cooler than yesterday, and she found herself wishing she had stopped by the car for her jacket before following Turk.

Of more pressing concern was the fact that today was rapidly becoming tonight. The sun hovered just above the western horizon, and the shadows had lengthened considerably over the past hour. They had maybe thirty minutes left before the sun set and maybe twenty minutes after that before darkness covered everything.

Her phone buzzed. Kinzel. He had called each hour on the hour for progress updates. Faith didn't have much to tell him this time.

“Hey, marshal,” she said, “Nothing new. No sign since the scrap of cloth a few hours back.”

Over the first six hours or so of searching, their suspect had left pretty clear signs of his journey. In addition to the candy bar wrapper, they had found a water bottle, an empty bag of chips, and a scrap of cloth snagged on a tree branch that looked like it belonged to a t-shirt.

He sighed. “Do you think you overshot him?”

“No. He couldn’t have gone anywhere but the path.”

“You’re absolutely certain of this?”

Faith looked around at the steep slope to her right and the sheer drop to her left. There was more plant life here than on Grass Mountain, but none of the warped and gnarled bristlecone pines or short, stunted grasses looked like they would be of much help to a climber.

“Unless he turned into Spiderman while we were sleeping,” she said, “I’m sure.”

He sighed and said, “Well, thank you for persevering. We’ll call it a night for now. We’ll have to send a helicopter to come get you.”

Another memory of Staff Sergeant Decker came to her. Why was she suddenly thinking about him for the first time in years?

This particular memory was of a meeting with the platoon leader. Faith had her own squad by then, and she and Decker were standing around a map while Lieutenant Faust explained their plan to sneak behind the Taliban patrol and take them out by surprise.

“Why don’t we just blow the mountain up?” Decker suggested, half-jokingly. “Can’t escape if you’re blown into a million pieces.”

Sometimes, Faith wished that she could just blow things up.

Just then, Turk barked. He started springing down the footpath. “I’ll call you back” Faith said.

She hung up, and the two agents hurried after Turk. They didn't have long to go this time. Turk made it maybe fifty yards further before he had to stop.

The footpath ended abruptly next to a jagged rocky slope that extended for over sixty feet straight up. Boulders jutted from the slope, and a small rock slide decorated the base of the footpath.

“You have to be kidding me,” Michael said, collapsing against the wall and allowing himself to slide downward to the ground. He put his wrists on his knees and rested his forehead against them.

The sun was halfway underneath the horizon now. Faith sighed and called Kinzel. While the phone rang, Turk barked insistently and stared upwards.

“If he went that way, Turk,” Faith said, “then he’s gone. We’ll have to go airborne.

Kinzel answered, and Faith said, “Hey, marshal. I hate to have to do this, but...”

Her voice trailed off when she finally saw what Turk was looking at. At the top of the ledge, snagged on a bristlecone pine, was another strip of cloth of the same color and type as the first scrap.

“Agent Bold?” Kinzel said over the phone. “Are you there?”

“Hold that thought,” she said.

She hung up and walked to Turk. “Good boy,” she said, rubbing him behind his ears. “Good boy. Stay here with Michael now, okay?”

Michael’s head snapped up at that. “What?”

“Keep an eye on Turk. I’m going to go after him.”

“Are you insane? Faith, let it go. We followed him this far, let the Marshals handle it. They can get a helicopter to look for him.”

“Through a dense forest and rocky terrain?” Faith said, rolling up her sleeves. “I don’t think so. Unless he sleeps in the treetops, they’re not finding him.”

“Well, we aren’t either,” Michael said. “It’s going to be dark in twenty minutes.”

“I’ll hurry,” she said.

“Faith, dammit!” Michael called.

But Faith had already started up the steep slope.

As she climbed, she saw the path Tooley must have taken. The boulders appeared at first glance to be inconveniently placed, but when viewed from the right angle, they formed a natural ladder leading from the bottom of the hill up to the top. She carefully made her way up that natural ladder, and when she reached the top, she saw that the footpath continued.

She called Michael, who answered immediately and said, “What the hell are you doing? Get down here!”

“I found the footpath again.” She said. “it continues west for another three hundred yards or so before veering north. I’m going to follow it and keep you updated.”

“Faith, this is a bad idea.”

“If he’s close, this could be our chance,” Faith said.

“Do I really need to tell you why this is a bad idea?” Michael insisted.

He didn't. Faith looked around at the terrain, which remained very rough. Boulders and bristlecones were strewn across the landscape, ample cover for an armed and dangerous fugitive to use to protect himself from an ambitious FBI agent.

But she had him. She could sense him just as clearly as Turk could smell him.

“Keep your phone on,” she said before hanging up. And this time answer , she didn't say aloud.

She continued along the path as the sun dipped below the horizon. The sky rapidly darkened, and Faith pulled her flashlight from her belt and switched it on. The FBI-issue torch shone a bright, concentrated beam of light ahead of her, but the moon would be completely gone tonight, and the light was of little use other than to illuminate the ground immediately ahead of Faith.

She moved cautiously, sweeping her light in front of her, checking behind each boulder and tree for sign of Tooley. After a half mile or so, the plateau once more became a narrow footpath with the slope of the next mountain rising sharply to her right and descending just as sharply to her left.

She followed this for another half mile or so when she found the cave. It looked to be a shallow, hollowed-out cavern in the side of the mountain. From where Faith stood, she couldn't see any tunnels or shafts. This cave, it seemed, wasn't connected to the network outside of Granger.

What she could see was a very surprised, stocky man about six inches shorter and six inches wider than she was. How he had managed to make his way through this terrain was beyond Faith.

But she could deal with that when she interrogated him. “Ferris Tooley,” she began. “You’re under—”

She didn't get a chance to finish arrest. With a snarl of rage, Tooley rushed at her. She swore and swung the handle of her solid aluminum light toward him. He ducked under the blow and rammed his shoulder under her armpit, sending her sprawling backward.

She landed right on the edge of the slope. Her light skittered downward, its beam arcing in a spiral as it tumbled thousands of feet below.

Tooley seemed particularly set on causing Faith to follow her flashlight. He kicked at her, and when that only succeeded in pushing her a half inch toward the edge, he dropped to his knees and put his hands underneath her waist, trying to roll her.

She brought her knee up. It collected solidly with Tooley's temple, and the fugitive grunted and fell over, bringing his hand to the side of his face.

Faith rolled to her knees and drove her shoulder into Tooley, trying to roll him onto his stomach where she could control him. The stocky man's lower center of gravity allowed him to avoid being rolled over, and with a grunt of effort, he wrapped Faith in a body lock and twisted her back onto the ground.

He lifted his hands and interlaced his fingers. Faith looked up, and in the dim light of the stars, she saw Franklin West's haughty smile. She blinked and saw Trammell's crazed grin.

I'm going to break you, Faith.

Let's see you bleed, little girl.

Tooley brought his fists down hard. Faith jerked her head out of the way, and his hands collided with the bedrock. He cried out, and Faith drove an uppercut right into his jaw.

His teeth clicked together, and his eyes rolled back into his head. He fell forward onto the ground, and Faith rolled him over, not onto his stomach but his back.

She cried out in rage and drove her fist into him over and over and over. She heard a crunch as his nose broke, but still she continued to strike him. When she finally paused for breath, Tooley's face was swollen and misshapen with bruises. His nose was nearly flattened, and blood trickled from both nostrils and a cut just below his eye.

Faith's hands shook, partly from the force of her repeated blows striking his skull and partly from her emotions. She rolled off of him and collapsed against the mountain. Tooley lay still, knocked unconscious.

She sighed and dialed Michael. "Faith? Where are you? Was that your light that fell?"

"Yes," she said, "I apprehended Tooley. I lost the light in the struggle."

"Jesus," Michael swore. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm about a mile from your position. I'm heading back now."

Tooley groaned and stirred, and Faith said, "Call Kinzel and let him know we have his prisoner. Tell him to send the helicopter."

"Already did," Michael said. "They're on their way."

“Wonderful,” Faith said, “We’ll be back shortly.”

She hung up and moved to Tooley. She rolled him roughly onto his back and handcuffed him. “As I was saying, I’m Special Agent Faith Bold. You are Ferris Tooley, and you’re under arrest.”

Tooley groaned again, and Faith yanked him to his feet. “Here’s the deal, asshole,” she said, “I need to use my cell phone flashlight to light our way back. It’s already low on battery from chasing you halfway across the Rockies. I have enough light to get back to my partner. You fuck with me, I don’t have enough light, and we end up stuck on the side of the mountain. That happens, and I just roll you down the hill and tell Marshal Kinzel that I had to kill you to save my own life. Since that just happens to be true, I would also suggest exercising your right to shut up. Sound good?”

Tooley nodded.

“Outstanding. Now walk.”

Faith pushed him forward. He stumbled to his knees, then got to his feet and trudged back down the path.

The cell phone light was next to useless. That meant that a journey that took Faith twenty minutes to complete earlier took nearly an hour. When she finally reached the ledge, Tooley spoke, the words badly muffled due to the swelling in his face.

“I can’t make it down there. Not with my hands tied.”

Faith looked down at Michael and Turk. Michael waved, and Turk started barking excitedly.

“See them?” Faith said.

Tooley nodded.

“That’s my partner, who is an outstanding shot with a handgun, and my dog, who is the most dangerous German Shepherd you’ll ever see in your life. You try to run—not that you have anywhere to go—or try to hurt me, and they’ll show you exactly what I mean. Got it?”

He nodded. “I’ll behave.”

“Good.”

She pulled out the folding knife the FBI issued to all of its field agents and realized this was the first time in her ten-year career she’d ever used it. What a day.

She sliced the bonds, and Tooley rubbed his wrists. The bruising on his face had swollen to comical proportions, and he breathed through his mouth in short gasps, his nose far too misshapen to breathe normally.

“We’ll get you medical attention when we get down there,” Faith said in a calmer tone. She hoped she didn’t sound as guilty as she felt.

Well, whatever. He had tried to kill her. Michael would have to understand if she went a little crazy on him.

Tooley nodded and said, “Thank you,” in a contrite voice, and started down the ledge.

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Michael swore and drew his weapon. He kept it pointed at the ground but remained ready at any second to level it at Tooley if he tried to hurt Faith.

Tooley moved gingerly down the slope, far more so than Faith, who had to wait several times to allow Tooley to move ahead of her. Michael saw the reason for that when both reached the ground. What he had assumed was simply Tooley's naturally moon-shaped face was actually a perfectly normal face swollen almost beyond recognition. When he saw the pulped nose and grotesquely bruised eyes, he was so shocked he forgot that his pistol was still drawn until Tooley tentatively lifted his hands.

He holstered his handgun and looked at Faith questioningly.

“He attacked me,” she explained. “He learned why that’s a bad idea.”

She looked at him, and Michael didn’t like what he saw behind her eyes. He pressed his lips together and said nothing.

Turk bounded into Faith’s arms, barking and wagging his tail exuberantly. Michael took Tooley from Faith and led him a few yards away.

He looked at the man, whose docile expression indicated he had no intention of trying to escape again. Considering how labored his breathing sounded, Michael wasn’t surprised.

The rumble of rotor blades cut through the night air. Michael pulled his flashlight out and shined it into the air, waving it back and forth like a beacon. A few minutes later,

the helicopter's lights came into view. The pilot deftly maneuvered it so its right skid rested on a wider part of the footpath a few dozen yards down the mountain. Its rotor barely cleared the mountain, but the pilot must have had military experience because he held the bird steady as a rock.

Marshal Kinzel waited for them at the helicopter. His eyes widened when he saw Tooley. "Jesus, agent Prince. What did you do to him?"

"It wasn't me," Michael said.

Kinzel's eyes widened even further. He lifted his gaze to Faith, who said, "He attacked me and tried to push me off of the mountain. I had to defend myself."

"With a jackhammer?" Kinzel asked, more to himself. He turned to Tooley. "Did you try to kill this agent?"

Tooley narrowed his eyes, which only accentuated the bruising on his face.

Kinzel's jaw tightened. "There's a beam inside the chopper next to the port side bench seat. Cuff him to that."

Michael looked dubiously at the chopper. The right skid rested just on the edge of the path. If it moved while Michael was climbing aboard, it was a long way down.

Michael shook his head and muttered under his breath, "They don't pay me enough for this." Louder, he said, "All right, Tooley. Nice and easy."

Once everyone was aboard, the pilot pulled smoothly away from the mountain and headed back to town.

Faith looked as impressed with the pilot's skill as Michael was. She tapped her

headset and asked, “Marine Corps?”

“52 nd Helicopter Squadron,” the pilot replied, “Seventeen years out of Norfolk except for three tours in Iraq.”

“22 nd Infantry Brigade,” Faith replied. “That’s some damned fine flying, sir.”

“Just another day’s work,” the pilot said, clearly pleased with the praise. “Hoo rah.”

"Hoorah," Faith said with a grin.

She turned to Michael, and her grin faded when she saw his face.

“We’ll take him to the station in Granger first,” Kinzel said. “Once we’ve questioned him, we’ll arrange transport back to the Boise office and from there back to Florence.”

He looked pointedly at Tooley, who lowered his eyes as much as he could with his face beaten so badly.

Michael leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He highly doubted he would sleep on the fifteen-minute flight back to Granger PD, but it gave him a reason not to look at Faith right now.

Come on, man , he thought to himself. He tried to kill her. You don’t think she’s lying about that , do you?

The truth was that he didn’t know what to think.

“You can understand why we have a hard time believing you.” Michael said.

Tooley looked from Michael to the stone-faced Kinzel, who stood with his arms folded across his chest and glared at him. Michael had a feeling that Tooley was in for a rough time of it back in Florence. It wouldn't surprise him if this was the last anyone saw of Tooley for a very, very long time.

Tooley seemed to understand this as well and was desperate to minimize the trouble coming his way. He looked sick, although that could have something to do with the painkillers the EMTs had given him when they landed. The swelling had gone down enough that he could speak intelligibly, but with his broken nose, he sounded like he had the world's worst cold. It would be comical if not for the subject of their conversation.

“I didn't kill anyone, okay?”

“We didn't say they were dead,” Michael pointed out.

“Oh, come on,” Tooley said, “if they weren't dead, then why would you be talking to me?”

“Why do you think?” Kinzel asked drily.

“Why the hell would I kidnap a couple of randoms?” Tooley asked, lifting his hands as much as the shackles would allow, which wasn't much. “What am I gonna gain from that? A few grand out of someone's savings account?”

“That's a few grand more than what you have now.”

“Still not worth the trouble,” Tooley said, “trying to drag a hostage across the mountains on foot. Come on, you can't think I'm that stupid?”

“Intelligence doesn’t really strike me as your strong suit,” Michael replied.

“Bite me,” Tooley spat, temporarily forgetting the precariousness of his position.

Michael shrugged and made as though to leave. Kinzel followed suit and Tooley called, “Wait! Please don’t...” he struggled for something to say but only ended up more desperate. “Look, I didn’t do anything to them, okay? I ditched the bus and hitchhiked my way to Clearwater, then disappeared into the mountains. Yeah, I ripped off a few homes in Granger— just for food—but I didn’t kidnap anybody.”

“So what was the plan?” Kinzel asked. “Run north to Canada?”

“I hadn’t thought that far yet,” Tooley said. “My plan was to get to Seattle and figure it out from there.”

“Why Seattle?” Michael asked.

“Options,” Tooley replied. “I could go north to Vancouver and disappear in Canada, I could hitch my way south to Mexico, or I could book passage on a cargo ship and head East to try my luck somewhere else.”

Michael had to admit that was a plausible reason.

“How long have you been up in the mountains?”

“Two weeks,” he said. “Since ditching the prison bus.”

“And how many other people have you seen in that timeframe?”

“Other than you and the Heavyweight Champion of the World in the next room? No one. The point was not to see anyone else.”

Michael's lips thinned slightly when he mentioned Faith. "Let's say you did see someone else," he said, "what would you do?"

"Become unseen as quickly as possible," Tooley replied.

"So you wouldn't attack them and try to roll them off of the mountain?" Michael asked.

His face paled, which was all the answer Michael needed. He leaned forward and said, "Tyler Stone and Clara Montpelier. Start talking."

Tooley's voice was practically a whine. "I don't know. Agent Bold was the only other person I saw. I... look, I didn't want to go back to Florence, okay? They have a yard underground. The only sunlight I get comes through a four-inch-wide window."

"Too bad you decided to kidnap a senator's daughter and try to murder a federal agent," Michael said.

"I didn't..." his voice trailed off, and he lowered his eyes.

"Sit tight," Michael said. "We'll be back with you in a few hours."

"Can I lie down somewhere?" Tooley asked.

Michael and Kinzel ignored him and left the room. Outside, Kinzel sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I'm too old for this all-nighter crap."

Michael nodded. "I feel you. Coffee?"

"If I have any more coffee, my heart's gonna pop," Kinzel said, "but if you bring me a croissant, I'll recommend you for the Medal of Freedom."

Michael chuckled. “You know, you’re not a bad guy when you’re too exhausted to be a pompous ass.”

“I’m sure there’s a brilliant retort floating around somewhere in my mind,” Kinzel replied, “but as you’ve observed, I’m exhausted, so I’ll have to content myself with telling you to go screw yourself.”

Michael laughed again and said, “What do you think? Quick nap, and we let him stew?”

“Yes, but I’m not holding myself accountable to the quick part.”

“Fair enough,” Michael said.

He headed to the break room and looked out the window to see the sky brightening with dawn. Faith sat at the lone table, staring pensively out the window. Turk sat next to her, fast asleep.

Michael looked at her and tried to make sense of the conflict in his head. On one hand, the woman sitting in front of him was his oldest and dearest friend, a woman he loved and had once been in love with, someone he considered a partner in a deeper way than just professionally.

On the other hand, the difference between this woman now and the woman he knew prior to the Donkey Killer manhunt two years ago was almost complete. So little of that Faith seemed to remain that he almost couldn’t believe it was the same person.

But then she turned to him and smiled, and he remembered all of their years together. His heart broke for the thousandth time, and he shuffled to the coffee maker, poured two cups and headed to her table.

“Black like your soul,” he said, handing her the cup.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the cup. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Really? Turk isn’t having any trouble.”

“Turk’s a superhero,” she said, smiling affectionately at the sleeping dog.

Michael noticed a touch of gray beginning to spread on Turk’s muzzle and thought to himself that even superheroes got old.

He was going to be forty next year. He wondered how much longer he could keep up this kind of life before it became too much.

He looked at Faith and saw the hurt in her eyes, the pain she tried to mask but never could with him. He had known her too long not to see through her cocky grin.

He always thought it would be him. If one of them snapped, he thought for sure he would be the one to go. Either he would lose his cool on a suspect, or he would finally fizzle out under the weight of accumulated depression.

Instead, it was Faith in danger, not of fizzling out but of flaming out, Faith who had lost her cool so many times it was becoming rarer for her to find it than to lose it. Faith, someone he once thought of as the strongest person he had ever known, who was rapidly losing any sense of who she was in her single minded obsession to catch the man who reminded her of the killer she couldn’t get, the one Michael had killed to save her, the one who for the first time in Faith’s life had stripped away her strength and dignity.

West wanted to break Faith, but the job had already been done. He was fighting a ghost.

“You want to tell me what happened up there?” he finally asked.

Faith sighed and rolled her eyes. “Well, my Spanish is a little rusty, but I can try telling you in that language since you won’t accept the English version.”

“I believe that he tried to kill you, Faith,” Michael said, “and I would one hundred percent rather it be him looking like that than you. I’m not saying you did anything wrong—”

“Yes, you are,” she said, chuckling bitterly. “Please don’t treat me like I’m stupid. You’re mad that I got a little carried away, but can you actually say I was carried away? I had to subdue him, and I had to do it in a way to make sure he wouldn’t try to fight back while I led him back down the side of a mountain in the dark.”

“And why were you up there alone again?” he asked gently.

“So I should have let him get away, right? You didn’t want to follow me. Once again, Michael, I had to go after a killer by myself because you couldn’t be bothered.”

He recoiled, shocked and hurt by the comment. He felt a second pang because it was true. He had given up before she did. She had found a way to keep going on when he had decided there was no way.

For the first time, he could understand how frustrated she was about the West case.

In that way, at least, she was exactly like the Faith he once knew. She was an unstoppable force, someone who would keep going long past the point where everyone else gave up.

Maybe she wasn’t broken. Maybe she was just fed up with being stronger than everyone around her.

He sighed and said, "You're right. I'm sorry."

She blinked in shock. She lowered her gaze and said softly, "It's okay. I'm sorry I kept going. I just..."

She didn't finish that sentence, and Michael decided not to press her. "I don't think it's Tooley," he said instead. "He's a prick, that's for sure, but I buy that he didn't see anyone else up there."

"So do I," Faith said. "It doesn't fit with his profile. He's all about profit. There's no profit in dragging a hostage through the mountains."

"My thoughts exactly," Michael agreed. "We're going to let him roast a bit and then see if he noticed anything we might find useful, but odds are, he'll be on the next bus to Florence."

"Good riddance," she said viciously.

Michael averted his eyes and sipped his coffee. Faith looked out the window, resuming her pensive stare. Michael was less than a yard from her, but he might as well have been a thousand miles away.

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Faith could see the compassion in Michael's eyes. It stung her terribly and brought none of the relief she expected such an emotion to bring.

Because she would hurt him again. She would hurt all of them again. Because to her, nothing mattered more right now than bringing West to justice. She hoped that Michael would join her when they returned home, but if he didn't, she would still go after him.

She had to.

Turk opened his eyes and blinked slowly. Faith looked down at him and noticed a healthy sprinkling of gray in his muzzle. Had that been there before?

She reached down and scratched him behind his ears. He closed his eyes and made a sound that reminded Faith a lot of a cat's purr, though she would never tell him that.

She smiled and said, "I'm so glad you came back to me, boy. I'm so glad you're all right."

He made another purring sound, and Faith chuckled. She dropped to her knees and hugged him tight for a moment. He leaned against her chest and looked up at her with the most beautiful brown eyes she'd ever seen. "I love you, boy."

She held him and watched the sunrise through the window until the glare became too bright. Then she stood and poured herself another cup of coffee. She hadn't slept in over two days, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could manage this pace.

As long as she had to. That was the answer. That was always the answer.

She looked at Turk and saw true compassion in his eyes, compassion not tainted with pity, which was really just contempt in disguise. "I just lost it up there, Turk," she admitted quietly. "He was trying to hurt me, and I saw West and..." Even with Turk she hesitated before admitting the next part, "and I saw Trammell. I saw the Donkey Killer, and I just lost it. I can say that it was justified, and it was. He was going to kill me. But I can also say that it was an excessive use of force because the reality was I had him controlled after the first few blows. I could have just cuffed him then. But I didn't want to. I wanted to hurt him first."

Turk didn't say anything, of course, but the love in his eyes was enough for Faith. "I don't know what I'm gonna do, boy," she said. "What happens after we get West? I'm afraid..." she hesitated again. "I'm afraid that I've made stopping West so important to me that when I finally do stop him, I'll have nothing left."

She fell silent then and stared pensively out the window.

Turk stared at her. Faith didn't meet his gaze, but she could feel his love. People had called dog's humankind's best friend for thousands of years, and they were right to do that. Turk had recovered completely from West's torture because all Turk needed was Faith. He had her, so all was right with the world, and it didn't matter to him that a man who had beaten and nearly killed him before kidnapping him and doing God knows what else to him was still out there somewhere. He was with Faith, and that was all that mattered.

Faith wished it was so simple for her.

The door to the breakroom opened, and Michael rushed in. "We got a call from the search party," he said. "They're waiting for us at the cave. They found Tyler Stone's body."

Tyler Stone's days of slacking off and disappointing his parents were over. He lay on the floor of a small cavern a half-mile or so into the cave network. He looked like a horror movie. One side of his face was missing the skin, and most of his left arm, along with part of his torso, had been picked to the bone. Faith would have believed that he died of dehydration or from falling down one of the shafts or tunnels if not for several deep wounds in his chest and abdomen that could only have come from a sharp object being thrust repeatedly into his body.

“Rats must have got him,” Jones opined. “They’re all over these caves.”

“How long has he been here?” Faith asked.

“Looks like he was left here last night,” Jones said. “CSIs followed a trail of blood down about a mile before they reached a dead end.”

“So where did he come from?” Michael asked.

“They think he was dropped down one of the old ventilation shafts the miners dug.”

“Are we in the mine?”

“No, but the mines apparently do connect to the cave network. The miners made these shafts every few hundred years ago to circulate air. The dead end is just past one of the shafts.”

“So something or someone dropped him down a shaft, then what, followed him down and dragged him up here?”

“We think so,” Jones said. “Nothing’s official yet. We found the body three minutes

before we called you.”

“Well, we know for sure that Tooley didn’t do it,” Faith said. “He was busy trying to murder me when this body was moved.”

“If I were being pedantic, I would say that only proves Tooley didn’t move the body here, not that he didn’t kill Stone,” Jones said, “But yeah, it’s probably not him.”

“So who?” Faith asked.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Jones replied.

They fell silent for a second, staring at the young man's mutilated corpse. "Is there a way to identify him without the parents having to see him like this?"

Jones shook his head. “Not legally.”

She sighed. “Well, try to get him cleaned up a little after the autopsy before you bring the parents to see him.”

“I don’t think there’s a soap in the world strong enough to clean that, agent,” Jones replied, “but I’ll tell Doctor Kleine to do his best.”

“Any word on Clara?” Michael asked.

Jones shook his head. “No, but I won’t pretend I’m expecting a happier word than this.”

They fell silent again. After a moment, Michael said, “I’ll call Kinzel and tell him Tooley’s off the hook for the murders.”

He dialed the number, and Faith looked down the tunnel. Lights were strung up every few dozen yards up to the dead end a quarter mile or so distant.

“There’s someone here,” she said.

Jones instantly grew alert. He placed his hand on the butt of his service weapon and asked, “Where?”

“No, not right here,” she said, “in the caves.”

“You think our killer is still here?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think he’s here, and I think Clara’s still here.”

“You think she’s alive?” Jones asked.

“No,” Faith admitted, “but I think he’s not finished with her yet.”

“Feeding her to the rats too?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, “I could be wrong. I don’t have much more to go on than a hunch. I just feel that our killer would have to know that the ventilation shaft led to this tunnel, which led to this cave, in order to know to bring the body here and stage it for us.”

“You think he staged it for us?”

“I think he wants us out,” she said. “Your teams, have they gone into the tunnels at all?”

“Not very far,” he said, “A few yards here and there. We’ve been focusing on the

surface stuff so far. Getting deeper into the network is a challenge.”

“But one you would have taken if the surface search yielded nothing,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“Well, I think our killer is deeper in the network, and I think he’s trying to keep us from following him.”

“What, like he lives here?”

“I doubt that,” she said, “Stranger things have happened, I suppose, but most likely, he’s just hiding out here until the heat goes away. He’s probably a local, and he’s probably waiting until eyes are off of the caves before he gets out of town.”

“So he's what, giving us our bodies, hoping we'll just decide that's enough and not try to find out how they got here in the first place?"

“I’m not sure,” Faith said, “the hypothesis definitely needs to be developed, but I think it would be worthwhile for us to get some search teams deeper into the tunnels.”

“Good luck with that,” Jones said.

Before she could ask him what he meant, Michael returned. “Kinsey’s on a bus back to Boise. He regrets that he can’t help us, but his job was to apprehend Tooley, and now he needs to make sure Tooley gets where he’s going for real this time. For what it’s worth, I think it’s his superiors pressing him.”

“That’s fine,” Faith said, “I didn’t expect him to stick around.”

“What do we think about searching deeper in the tunnels?” Michael asked. “Trying to

see where our killer might have come from?”

“Your partner just got finished saying that,” Jones told him. “Great minds, right? Anyway, what I think is that it’s a perfectly sensible idea. The problem with sensible ideas is that people need to be sensible to understand them.”

“What do you mean?” Faith asked.

“You’ll see,” he said.

Faith looked at Jones in annoyance, but Jones only sat where he had the entire meeting with his arms folded across his chest and a resigned expression on his face.

She sighed and tried again. “I’m not suggesting that we run blindly into a cave system without preparing for it,” she said. “I’m suggesting a professional and well-organized search party.”

“It’s too dangerous,” one officer, a woman around Faith’s age with a weathered appearance that made her appear significantly older, said, “Those tunnels—especially the old mineshafts—are unstable. Cave-ins happen all the time.”

“When was the last cave-in?” Faith challenged.

The woman crossed her arms and frowned, jutting her chin out in defiance. “All the time,” she repeated.

“Very well,” Faith said, “We’ll work slowly and have supplies to shore up the tunnels if we feel any of them are unsafe.

“Can’t know for sure if a tunnel’s gonna collapse until it does,” another officer, a reed-thin man with an Adam’s apple the size of a golf ball opined.

There were murmurs of agreement, and Faith said with more than a touch of irritation, “Well, I guess we’ll just have to be big boys and girls and take a risk.”

“They’ve only mapped a third of those tunnels anyway,” a third officer added, ignoring Faith. There were more murmurs of agreement, and he continued, “And we don’t have enough lights to supply an entire search party.”

“Really?” Faith said, “Flashlights? You really think we won’t be able to find enough flashlights to extend the search?”

The third officer frowned, crossed his arms and jutted his jaw defiantly forward in an almost exact repeat of the first officer’s behavior.

“I promise you,” Faith said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “We can find you enough flashlights. We’re going in that cave.”

"We're not helping anyone getting lost down there ourselves," The first officer said again. "I say we just keep looking through the surface caves. We found the Stone Boy near the surface. We'll probably find Clara there too."

“And if we don’t?” Faith challenged.

“Then we wait.”

Faith’s eyes narrowed. “Wait for what, officer?”

The officer frowned. “Agent, she’s dead, all right? Can we just admit that to each other? She’s dead. We don’t have to pretend. Either we’ll find her or we won’t, but

she's not going to get any less dead either way."

Faith shook her head incredulously. "I don't believe this," she said, "This woman was your neighbor. You all knew her for most of her life. You're really fine with just leaving her as a missing persons case for the rest of eternity?"

"Like Jillian said," the second officer replied, "we can't help anyone if we're lost ourselves."

"And how would you end up lost if we use professional lighting, mapping tools and no one leaves unless they're in groups of four or more?"

"People get lost down there," the third officer answered. "Sometimes, there's no reason why."

Faith couldn't believe what she heard. "So what, you guys are afraid the ghosts are gonna get you?"

"I don't blame you for doubting," the first woman said, "and I don't blame you for being rude. But I've lived here my entire life, and I've seen and heard things that shouldn't be real. I don't know if those caves are haunted, but I do know that when people go into those caves, they never come out."

Faith and Michael started. "Wait," Michael said, "this has happened before?"

Jones shifted in his seat uncomfortably, his earlier smug look gone. He must have just realized the importance of that information.

"When you say happened before," Faith said, "you mean that's exactly what happened, right? Not an urban legend, an actual missing persons case?"

Jones answered, "People go missing from time to time since the mines closed. Not a lot, but one or two a year."

"One or two a year?" Faith said. "Are you kidding me? And what do you guys do about it? Throw your hands in the air and say, 'Cave bad. Me no looky?'"

Jones shrugged glumly. "We look through the surface caves and the forest and everywhere we might expect them to be, but no, we don't go spelunking every time someone goes missing. A lot of times it's kids anyway, not actual kids, but college kids, you know. We just assume they run away and try to find a better life."

Faith needed to leave the room before she did something stupid. Michael followed her outside, and when the door closed behind them, she said, "What the hell did I just listen to?"

"Superstition and cowardice," he said, "alive and well in the twenty-first century."

"But one or two a year? Going back decades?"

"Superstition is powerful, Faith. All of history shows that."

"How can you be sanguine about this?" she nearly shouted. "People are being left to die!"

"I'm not happy about it, Faith," he said, "I just accept that I can't fix every problem the world has. I do what I can, and I don't allow what I can't do to destroy me."

He looked pointedly at her as he said this, and she knew he wasn't talking about this case. She flushed with anger and pressed her lips together but didn't respond.

The conference room door opened, and Jones tentatively approached the two agents.

“We’re going to call in some S&R guys from Aspen to come help out. They handle all of the rescues around the ski resort. They’re ex-Coast Guard, and they’re supposed to be very good.”

“Will they be willing to go into the scary dark cave?” Faith asked contemptuously.

Jones chuckled sadly. “Yeah, they’ll be fine. For what it’s worth—which I know isn’t much—these guys mean well. They’re just... well, I don’t know. Superstitious, foolish, stupid, all three and a bag of potato chips?”

“Do you think we shouldn’t go into the mine?” Faith asked.

He chuckled again, this time with bitterness rather than sadness. "I think that it doesn't matter what I think. I've overseen twenty-nine missing persons cases, Special Agent. Each one ends the same. Sometimes we find the body like we did with Tyler Stone. Most of the time, we don't. I'm sure you two can handle yourselves if you go looking through the tunnels, but I don't think you're going to find anything."

Faith looked at this sad, bitter excuse for a detective and wondered if she was looking into her own future. If she couldn’t stop West, was this where she would end up? She’d always imagined that West would kill her once he was done playing with her, but maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe he would just let her continue, spending the rest of her life forced to face her failures.

“Is there anyone in town who might be able to provide us with a more complete map of the cave network?” she asked, “Hopefully including the mines?”

“You can probably find a map of the mine tunnels from the state government,” Jones replied. “But that will be the mines as they were before the collapse. After the collapse... well, that was twenty-two years ago, so I doubt like hell anything looks the same as it did before. And you should consider any mine tunnels or shafts still

open as unsafe.”

“Well, our killer clearly doesn’t see it the same way,” Faith pointed out, “considering he used one of them to transport Stone’s body.”

“Well, the theory right now is that he just dumped the body down the ventilation shaft, then used the natural cave system to navigate back to...” his voice trailed off when he saw Faith’s expression. “Look, there was a guy who was trying to map the mines a few years back, before the second collapse sealed the entrance.”

“This guy has a name?” Michael asked.

“Tom Martle. He lives in Brightwater, about twenty minutes up the highway. He was doing some sort of project trying to map the entire tunnel system around Granger, and he started with the mines because no one had gone in to determine if any of the tunnels were safe, so he wanted to find out and make that information available to the public.”

“Nice guy,” Faith said.

"He was. Then he went into the mines, came back out after one day, and moved out of town the next day. Never said a word about what he found or why he stopped. The locals believe he heard the voices of the trapped miners' ghosts. They also believe the ghosts are responsible for the collapse that buried the entrance to the mine the following week."

“Of course they do,” Faith said, unable to keep the contempt from her voice.

Jones met her eyes. “Like you said, Agent Bold. Superstition is often rooted in fact.”

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Tom Martle lived on the western extreme of Brightwater just before the forest began in earnest. He lived in a very well-built log cabin, pitched and weatherproofed, on a third of an acre that included a short loop of a nearby stream. It reminded Faith uncomfortably of West's cabin on the Titmouse River outside of Philadelphia.

Brightwater itself was larger than Granger, though far from large. It boasted a population of just under nine hundred, and, like Granger, occupied a relatively flat space in between the dense pine forest to the west and the craggy Rocky Mountain range to the east. It functioned as the closest thing to a county seat the region had and included a fire detachment, a post office and a larger—though still very small—police station.

Also like Granger, it was spread wide. Each house sat on some amount of land, ranging from a tenth of an acre to a full acre for most homes, with a few mini-estates that occupied five or six acres dotting the foothills to the east. Faith wondered what West would have to say about the American tendency to live as far apart from other people as possible.

Her stomach turned. Why was she still thinking of West as a psychologist? That entire persona was almost certainly fabricated just so he could have an excuse to be close to her. She didn't even know for sure that Franklin West was his real name.

It occurred to her suddenly how easy it would be for West to disappear if he wanted to. She had found him twice so far, but what she had found was the personality he created to interact with her. She believed he was committed to that personality, at least until he was satisfied he had beaten her, but if he felt the noose closing around his neck, he could easily switch that personality off and create a new one, complete

with a new and probably radically different appearance and background.

Her heart sank to the floor. West still held all the cards.

“You think we can convince this guy to lead us through the mines?” Michael asked.

Faith pulled her thoughts away from West with an effort. “Well, he still lives near the mountains, but he’s as far away as he can be while still being near them. He looked through the mines for one day, then left without a word to his friends and neighbors. Chances are he’s not going back.”

“Unless he’s the killer,” Michael offered.

Faith lifted an eyebrow. She hadn’t considered that yet. “You think he might be?”

“Probably not,” Michael replied. “I looked into his background on the drive over. He’s worked as a compliance officer for Telly’s Grocery since leaving Granger, and according to their HR manager, he’s never missed a day of work.”

"He could be moonlighting or weekend as a killer," Faith offered.

“He could be, but it’s a stretch. Both of our victims went missing on weekdays, and the coroner’s initial impression is that Tyler was killed the day he went missing. We’ll have to wait for the full report, but it seems like a stretch that Martle is making every single shift and finding time to kill people who just happen to be in the caves when he just happens to be hunting. We’ll get his alibi, but I think he’s going to end up just being a source of information for us. Not that that’s a bad thing.”

It would be better if he ended up being the killer so Faith could know that no one else was going to die, but she supposed Martle wouldn’t see it that way.

They knocked on the door, and Turk stared intensely, tail switching back and forth. Faith frowned. That behavior didn't always mean that Turk was suspicious, but sometimes it did.

“Got something, boy?” she asked.

Turk met her eyes and snorted. Not yet.

The door opened, and a man in his mid-forties, who seemed about halfway through the transition from well-fed to heavysset, looked between the three agents. "Can I help you?"

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince and our K9 unit, Turk.”

Turk barked his usual greeting, and Martle jumped. “Why did you bring a dog?” he asked nervously.

Faith frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“I...” Turk moved forward to sniff Martle, and Martle jumped back. “I, um... I’m not really a dog person.”

“Don’t worry,” Faith said, “he only bites if I tell him to.”

Martle didn’t seem to find that comforting.

“Turk’s here just in case he happens to smell something suspicious,” Michael said.

“You aren’t hiding anything suspicious, are you, Tom?”

“Wait, how do you know my name?” Martle asked. “Why are you here? Do I need a

lawyer?”

“I can’t answer the third question for you,” Faith replied, “but the first two questions have the same answer. We’re investigating the murders of Tyler Stone and Clara Montpelier.”

Martle’s eyes registered understanding. “The two kids who went missing in the mines.”

Michael lifted an eyebrow. “How do you know their names? The story hasn’t been released to the public yet.”

“People in this area talk,” Martle replied. “I’ve had a dozen phone calls from people in Granger asking me to help look for them. But I won’t do that.”

“Why not?” Faith asked. “If my friends and neighbors went missing, I’d want to do anything I could to help.”

“I did,” he replied. “I told everyone to stay the hell out of the mines and any cave tunnel not already mapped by the state parks department. If they’re stupid enough to go poking around in there, they’re stupid enough to die.”

“That’s a rather calloused attitude, wouldn’t you say?” Michael pointed out.

“Do you go jumping into shark-infested waters to save someone who was stupid enough to jump first?”

“Yes,” Faith replied without hesitation.

“Well, you’re a better person than me,” Martle said, also without hesitation. “I told people that those mines were unsafe, but every year, there’s another moron who

wants to ignore me and prove something.”

“Well,” Faith said, “Tyler Stone didn’t fall down a mine shaft or get lost in the tunnels. He was stabbed to death. So whether he was stupid or not isn’t really relevant. He was murdered. Since we’re talking, why don’t you tell me where you were five days ago and twelve days ago?”

“I was at work,” he said, “then I came here.”

“We’ve already checked on work,” Michael said, “can anyone confirm that you were here?”

Martle gestured to his body. “Look at me,” he said, “Do I look like I can go spelunking through caves murdering people?”

Faith thought of Trammell’s hugely fat figure and West’s slight build. “I’ve learned not to judge murderers based on appearance,” she said.

“Well, then I guess the answer’s no,” he said irritably. “Should I call my lawyer?”

Faith thought a moment. She looked at Turk, who remained a respectful distance away from Martle. He was sitting now, his ears no longer pricked up, his tail wagging absently. He met Faith’s eyes, and she saw no suspicion in his gaze.

That wasn’t necessarily a reliable indicator of guilt either, but the thread linking Martle to the killings was already very tenuous. “No,” she replied, “but we do need your help.”

“How am I supposed to help you?” Martle asked, “I haven’t even visited Granger in three years.”

“But people are calling you to help look for the missing victims?”

He sighed. “Yeah, I... well, other than these two moro—these two victims—I was the last person to go into the mines. That I know of, anyway.”

“You were mapping them, correct?” Michael asked.

“I was. I quit before I finished.”

“Well, we have reason to believe that our killer is using the mines to transport his victims. It’s possible that he’s killing them there too. If you can give us a map of the mines, we might be able to find Clara Montpelier and possibly evidence of our killer.”

Martle hesitated a moment longer. “Can the dog wait outside?”

“No,” Faith said flatly. “Unless you want to have this conversation outside.”

Martle looked anxiously down at Turk. Turk met his eyes with the longsuffering patience of a dog who knew he intimidated nearly everyone he met. "You promise me he won't bite me?"

“As long as you don’t try to assault us,” Faith said, “He’ll stay at my side.”

Martle hesitated a moment longer. “Okay. Come on in, then. I was just making coffee.”

“At four in the afternoon?” Faith said, lifting an eyebrow.

“Of course,” he said, “I need to keep my strength up for my late-night killing spree.”

“I strongly advise you not to be sarcastic with us,” Michael said stonily.

Martle paled a shade and said, “Right. Sorry. That was in poor taste. I usually drink coffee in the afternoon. I got the habit from my father. This is a little late for me, but not so late I’m not going to drink it. You want some?”

Michael frowned, but grudgingly said, “Sure, I’ll take some.”

Faith rolled her eyes. “None for me, thanks.”

Martle led the agents inside. The house was almost pristine. The décor was spartan and had a rather predictable outdoor theme with a pair of oversized elk antlers, the centerpiece hanging above the fireplace, and most of the furniture constructed of pine and cedar. Martle had evidently remained a bachelor.

Martle invited the agents to sit, then returned to the kitchen for coffee. “I was mapping the mines because I figured that a lot of people were going to want to explore them,” he said. “So I thought it would be nice to give people an idea of where was safe and where wasn’t. Not to mention an idea of where the hell they were and how to get back to the surface.”

“I thought you weren’t much for physical activity,” Michael said.

“Well, I was a good thirty pounds lighter back then,” he replied, returning with the coffee.

He handed a mug to Michael, who sipped and nodded appreciatively. “Good stuff.”

“Yeah, my nephew works for some snobby chain in San Francisco,” he said. “He sends me some of their stuff from time to time. I don’t know crap-all about it, but I guess this stuff’s supposed to be some rare varietal.”

“The mines,” Faith reminded him, “you were mapping them. Why did you stop?”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “I mean, I can tell you, but you won’t believe me.”

“You don’t want to be coy with us either,” Michael said.

Martle paused a moment. He tapped his finger on the side of his coffee mug, his lips drawn in a thin line. “I heard them.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. She had an idea what he was talking about, but she still asked. “Them?”

“The voices,” he said, “I heard them.”

Michael sighed and lowered his eyes.

“I’m telling the truth,” Martle said testily. “Maybe I was just hearing things. I’ll allow that it’s a possibility, but if you heard what I heard, you wouldn’t go back in there either.”

“What exactly did you hear?” Faith pressed.

“The miners. I heard their voices. You know the mine collapsed about twenty years ago, right?”

“Yes,” Faith said.

“Well, it trapped about a dozen people. Some of them didn’t die right away. They were trapped for six days before they died. There was a rescue effort, but they couldn’t get to the miners because the tunnels surrounding them were structurally unsound, and they didn’t have the resources to shore them up in time to get to them.

They managed to get a radio down to them though.”

He shuddered, and his fingers tightened around his mug. "You could hear them," he said. "I wasn't there, obviously, but the people who were could hear them. Do you know what finally killed them?"

The agents shook their head.

“They suffocated,” he said. “They ran out of oxygen slowly and eventually suffocated. Eyewitness accounts said that at first, the miners believed they would be rescued. It wasn’t until a few days passed that they realized they were running out of air and that no one was coming for them. For the next couple of days, you could hear screaming and sobbing and pleading. Then you could just hear gasps.” He sipped his coffee and added, “They didn’t mention anything about the scratching, though.”

Faith’s ears perked up. “Scratching?”

“Yes,” he said, “Like something was trying to get out.”

“What exactly did you hear, Mr. Martle?” she pushed.

“I told you,” he said, “I heard voices.”

“And scratching?”

“And scratching.”

“And you’re sure it wasn’t rats you heard?”

He chuckled nervously and sipped more of his coffee. “Well, the scratching could have been rats and the moaning could have been air circulating through the tunnels,

but I'm pretty sure that there's no natural explanation for the words."

"Words?"

"Yep. 'We're going to die now,' 'It's so cold,' 'I can't breathe! Help!' and my personal favorite, 'I'm going to get them for this.'"

Faith and Michael looked grimly at each other. "Why didn't you report this to the police department?" Faith asked.

He chuckled again. "Report what? I went too deep into an abandoned mine and went loopy for a few minutes. I just told them not to go into the mines and suggested they fill them in and seal the entrance. Then I left."

"Why did you move away?" Faith asked. "Did you still hear the voices?"

He met her eyes. "I hear them now, Special Agent."

He downed the rest of his coffee in one huge gulp, and it made sense to Faith now why he would drink coffee so late in the day. Sleep likely brought no rest to him, only dreams of voices in the dark.

In a practical sense, however, this was the best lead they had so far. It was plausible that he had simply gone temporarily—or maybe permanently—insane, but it was also plausible that someone had been making those voices. Someone else could have been in the mines, and if that person was unhinged enough, it was plausible that they were killing the unwary who traveled too deep.

It sounded like a stretch, but it fit with what they knew, especially after learning that Tyler was moved after death.

Something else occurred to Faith. She had been operating under the assumption that the killer used the caves for his murders and then left the scene, but what if the killer lived in the caves or the mine himself? No one had been into the deeper portion of either place in decades. In the case of the caves, it was possible that no one had ever been that deep.

The idea of a crazed killer living underground reminded Faith of a horror movie she had seen once. In the movie, the killers had been subhuman mutants. Then again, how else would normal people deal with the reality of someone so insane and twisted?

Faith had met enough serial killers to know that good old-fashioned people were far more frightening than anything Hollywood could come up with.

“We need the maps you made,” Faith said.

Martle chuckled. “Would it be worth my time to warn you to stay out of those mines?”

Faith shook her head. “Not while there’s a killer on the loose.”

He sighed and lifted his coffee mug to his lips. When he found it was empty, he set it on the coffee table and said, “All right. I’ll get them for you. They’re incomplete, for obvious reasons, but I’ve marked what tunnels and shafts are safe and what are unsafe. I don’t know how accurate it still is now that they’ve been excavating, but if you insist on getting yourself killed, I won’t stand in your way.”

“Agent Bold has a knack for surviving things that would kill other people,” Michael said, “Don’t count her out just yet.”

Faith looked at Michael in surprise. It had been a while since he had shown any kind of admiration for her.

“Well,” Martle replied, “she’ll need all of the luck she can get.”

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“I still think this is a bad idea,” Frankie said.

Shawna flipped her hair over her shoulder in that frustratingly devil-may-care attitude of hers and said, “You think everything is a bad idea.”

“Not everything,” Frankie replied. “I was pretty partial to the idea of staying home and eating pizza while watching a scary movie and cuddling on the couch.”

Shawna chuckled. “You always want to cuddle.”

“Well, gee, I’m sorry I like you so much.”

Shawna laughed again and kissed Frankie on the nose. “Help me with this video, babe, and I’ll give you all the cuddling you can handle.”

She wiggled her hips a little as she said that, and Frankie wished for the hundredth time that she was more strong-willed.

She wasn’t, though, and the allure of cuddling and other associated activities was too much to resist. “All right,” she said, “but we go in only as far as the line allows, okay?”

The year before, Frankie and Shawna had gotten lost in the catacombs in France and spent a terrifying evening certain they were going to die underground before daylight brought a search team to rescue them. After that, they had each bought two thousand yards of high-strength fishing line to ensure they could find their way back to the surface if they were ever underground again.

“Of course,” Shawna said, “I’m not an idiot.”

Frankie had her doubts about that, but she had no doubts about the effectiveness of Shawna’s hips, so she didn’t protest further. “I swear to God, you’re gonna get me killed,” she muttered under her breath.

“You’ll love every second of it,” Shawna promised. “Now help me with the microphone.”

Frankie helped setup the microphone and then followed suit with her videocamera. “Okay,” she said, “we’re recording in three, two, one—” she clicked record and made a fist.

Shawna flashed the stunning smile that had won Frankie’s heart six years earlier as a college freshman and said, “Good evening, ghouls and goblins. Welcome to another haunted exploration with the Ghost girls. I’m Shawna, and behind the camera is my lovely girlfriend, Frankie.”

Frankie dutifully turned the camera toward her own face and smiled. “Hi guys.”

She turned the camera back to Shawna, who continued, “We’re here exploring the Granger Copper Mine. The Granger Copper Mine was founded in nineteen-fifty-six when a vein of ore was discovered in—”

As Shawna gave a brief overview of the mine, Frankie glanced beyond at the gaping maw of the entrance. Yellow tape cordoned it off, the yellow tape that Tyler Stone had ignored before going into the mines to die. The yellow tape that they were about to ignore themselves. She shivered and wondered for the thousandth time since meeting Shawna if this would be the last night they spent together.

She would soon regret that thought.

This mine has recently come into the local headlines due to two factors, the first being its recent accidental reopening when construction workers unearthed this entrance as part of the excavation for the coming Norwesco distribution center.”

She narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “The second is for the recent disappearances of Tyler Stone and Clara Montpelier, local residents who were last seen entering the mine. Clara has yet to be seen again, but Tyler was recently found dead and mutilated inside the natural cave network that adjoins the mine. The locals believe that the ghosts of the miners who died trapped in this cave twenty-two years ago punished Tyler for entering the mine, as they will to anyone who defiles the sanctity of their resting place.” She paused for dramatic effect and said, “Tonight, Frankie and I will explore these caverns and find out once and for all if this abandoned copper mine really is haunted. Okay, cut there.”

Frankie cut the recording and Shawna said, “We’ll put the theme there and then reopen with the two of us inside the mine. You have the line?”

Frankie set the camera down and tied the fishing line around each of their waists. They anchored the line to their vehicle, an old pickup that Frankie’s uncle had sold to her when she started the podcast with Shawna.

“Okay,” Shawna said, “last one in’s a rotten egg.”

She started forward, and Frankie caught her shoulder. “Wait,” she said, “What if we just use the drone this time?”

They had bought a drone for their investigation of a haunted cathedral last year. The cathedral was condemned and deemed unsafe, so instead of exploring it themselves, they sent a drone inside. This seemed as good a time as any to use the drone again.

Shawna sighed in longsuffering irritation. “Frankie, we have the line, we have

flashlights, we have experience in caves, we'll be fine. We're not going that deep anyway. We just need some good footage, then we'll be out and back home in no time."

"I know, but..." Frankie's voice trailed off. Shawna didn't believe a single word of what she said on the podcast. To her, this show was a fun game that she and Frankie played and were lucky enough to earn money playing. Frankie wasn't so sure. It didn't seem outrageous to her to think that the spirits of the miners might linger in the living world, deprived of anything but the horror of death. Plenty of cultures had legends where the spirits of those who died violently preyed on the living who trespassed their graves.

Shawna sighed and cast her an exasperated look. "Come on, Frankie. Tyler and Clara fucked up, got lost and either fell or got eaten by a bear. You have bear spray, right?"

Frankie nodded. "I do, but—"

"And you have the gun, right?"

Frankie had insisted over Shawna's objections that the pair carry a handgun to protect themselves. She felt the weight of the pistol in her jacket pocket, but it didn't comfort her this time. A handgun wasn't going to stop a ghost.

Shawna didn't wait for her to answer. "Then we're fine. We're not going to die in here, I promise." Seeing Frankie's unconvinced expression, she put on another smile, the one she wore when she asked Frankie if she wanted to spend the night in Shawna's dorm room after their second date. "Hey, baby," she said softly, approaching her reluctant girlfriend. She kissed Frankie just as softly, pressing her lips to hers and whispering, "I'll keep you safe. Okay?"

Frankie was three inches taller and a good twenty pounds heavier than the petite

Shawna. She also carried the bear spray and the gun, so if anyone was keeping them safe, it was Frankie.

But dammit, she couldn't resist that kiss.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. But you owe me tonight."

Shawna brightened and kissed Frankie again. "I will more than make it up to you, my love. Trust me, you'll be very satisfied with your reward."

Frankie rolled her eyes again but smiled. "All right, well, hurry up before I change my mind."

Shawna kissed her a third time, a quick peck on the cheek, then started for the entrance to the cave. Frankie picked up her camera and followed the beam of Shawna's flashlight as the two of them started into the mine.

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Clara Montpelier had fared no better than Tyler Stone. The cause of death was the same—multiple stab wounds to the torso and abdomen—and the rats had chewed through most of the soft tissue of her chest, leaving a hollowed-out gaping wound that looked like something off of the cover of a death metal album.

She was found in the same exact spot where Tyler Stone was found, dropped through the same shaft and dragged near the entrance of the cave. Splintered glass lay strewn across the surface of the cave, the remains of the cameras the police had left behind in case the killer returned to the scene of the crime.

“Were you able to recover any footage?” Michael asked Jones.

The detective shook his head. “We don’t have an internet feed like the big cities too. We were counting on the memory cards of the cameras.”

“And none of them are recoverable?”

Jones shook his head again. “He destroyed all of them. I mean, I assume it’s a he. The killer looks like he’d have to be pretty physically strong.” He looked at Faith. “No offense.”

Faith sighed and said, “I want officers stationed here twenty-four-seven.”

“They’re not going to like—”

“I don’t give a shit,” Faith said, cutting him off. “I want officers stationed here twenty-four-seven. If your officers are too cowardly, find some from Brightwater.”

“Faith,” Michael interjected, waving his palm to indicate she should tone it down.

Faith wasn’t about to tone it down. Once more, their killer had been visible, out in the open, and once more, he had eluded them. Faith had had enough of killers hiding in plain sight and getting away with it.

She and Michael had gotten the call on their way back from Tom Martle’s house. The officers assigned to retrieve the memory cards and look for footage had come upon the scene and called Jones, who called Faith and Michael.

“How long until CSI gets here?” she asked Jones.

“First thing tomorrow morning.”

She glared at him, and he lifted his hands and said, “I’ll call them and see if I can convince them to come by tonight.”

“No, you’ll tell them it’s an order, and if they don’t get their asses here within one hour, I’ll personally report them and you to the state law enforcement commission. Screw the damned ghosts. Real people are being murdered by a real person.”

“All right,” he said softly, “all right.”

Faith pressed her palm to her forehead. “Shit!”

“Faith,” Michael said, “a word?”

Faith followed Michael outside of the cave. Turk remained behind, sniffing for clues. When they were outside of the entrance, Michael said, “Look, I’m every bit as pissed as you are at this, but we need to be cool about it.”

“Cool about it?” Faith nearly shouted. “How are we supposed to be ‘cool’ about people dying?”

“We’re supposed to remember our jobs and focus on solving the case, not being upset that it exists in the first place.”

Faith pursed her lips, unable to think of a response to that.

“We’ve dealt with frustrating cases before,” he said, “We’ve dealt with incompetent local authorities before. None of this is new.”

“Is that supposed to comfort me?” she asked.

“It’s supposed to get you to think rationally,” he replied.

“So now I’m being irrational?”

“If you can convince me you aren’t, I’ll take everything back,” he replied.

She sighed and once more couldn’t think of a response. She definitely wasn’t helping anything by being angry. Still, someone needed to take charge here, and the two of them had been acting like the support cast for long enough. “I will work on controlling my emotions,” she said, “but I don’t regret taking over back there. Jones clearly isn’t going to help, and Kinzel was all too happy to take his prisoner and leave the dirty work to us.”

“To be fair, he was ordered back to Boise.”

“To be fair,” Faith said with a sneer, “that’s not the goddamned point.”

Michael’s lips thinned, and Faith felt a stab of guilt. “Look, I’m sorry,” she said,

“Why don’t you take over in there? Maybe you’ll be more ‘cool’ than I am. Just make it clear that we’re in charge, and what we say is an instruction, not a request.”

“You got it,” he replied, “Don’t worry, Faith. We’ll get this guy.”

He went back inside to talk to Jones. Faith waited outside and gathered her thoughts.

Martle had heard voices in the mine. Not moans, voices that spoke words. It was very possible he had simply hallucinated, but Faith doubted it. It made too much sense to think that someone had spoken and Martle had heard him.

Then again, that was three years ago. Was someone visiting the mines every day? If so, how had no one seen him before? Was he living in the deep part of the mine?

The thought didn’t feel as ridiculous as it sounded. People had lived in caves before. Hell, the catacombs in Paris held the remains of several underground dwellings along with the chapels and the infamous mausoleums. It didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility that someone had been living in the mines for years, probably using the cave network to venture to the surface when necessary. It made even more sense now that they had confirmed that at least one ventilation shaft led back to the mines. If a ventilation shaft connected the man-made network of tunnels with the natural one, it stood to reason that there were other intersections between the two. Considering how reluctant everyone was to visit the caves, it was also quite plausible that he had never been seen before now.

But who? And why wait until now to start killing?

And Faith believed it was only now that the killer had started murdering people. There were plenty of missing persons cases, but when she dived more deeply into the history, she found no cases where bodies were recovered showing stab wounds or any sign of murder.

It was the mine. It all came back to that. Tyler and Clara had visited the mines, not the caves. She believed the killer had some sort of connection to the mines and when the entrance was reopened, he would kill people who wandered inside. Why, she wasn't entirely sure, but if she could find the answer to that question, she would be able to find the killer.

Michael returned to the front of the cave and reported, "Okay, so CSI's gonna do their thing. They'll take fingerprints like last time and probably find some. Ditto DNA. Once more, it probably won't show up as anyone in the database. I've convinced him to send a drone up the ventilation shaft so we can hopefully follow the killer's trail. We might even get lucky enough to see him. Who knows? In the meantime, Jones is calling off the S&R team from Colorado."

"No," Faith said, "Don't let him do that."

"There's no one to rescue, Faith," he said softly.

"And no one else brave enough to go into the mines," she said, "We need them so that we don't end up going into the mines alone and get lost."

"I understand that, but how do we convince them to stay?"

"We're FBI agents," Faith said, "we're going to talk to them with authority, and if anyone wants to give us trouble, we'll make more trouble for them."

"You mean more trouble for us."

"I mean, we're going to do something, Michael, not just wait for something to happen."

"Fair enough," he said.

“I want to look into the mine collapse,” she said. “I want the names of the victims and the survivors and their families. I think our killer is connected somehow.”

“I think you’re right,” Michael said. “I’m pretty sure the voices Martle heard were real voices, or at least one person’s real voice.”

After being at odds in so many ways for so long, it was like a breath of fresh air to find that she and Michael were on the same page about this. “Go tell Jones that we’re heading back to town. I’ll call Turk.”

The nearest library was over an hour away in Lewiston, but they were able to find the Brightwater Courier —the regional newspaper—online.

The original collapse of the Granger mine occurred just over twenty-two years ago when the south tunnel collapsed, trapping twelve miners inside. Ten other miners were spared the collapse. They were the ones who alerted the authorities. The stories detailed the gory events described by Martle, including the bloodcurdling sounds of the miners suffocating to death under the collapsed tunnel.

Faith consulted the maps Martle gave them and found that the south tunnel was surrounded on one side by a half-dozen tunnels that Martle labeled UNSTABLE: UNSAFE. The other side was blank, indicating that he hadn't explored it. The nearest they could get, according to Martle, was a small cavern a quarter mile before the south tunnel that he had marked as MISC. STORAGE.

Well, a start was a start. They would have to wait for the backup from Aspen before they could start, however.

While Micheal napped, Faith looked into the names of the surviving miners. Not

surprisingly, they had all quit the mine and moved far away, some immediately, the rest trickling away over the next several years. None of them lived within a thousand miles of Granger.

She moved on to the families of the deceased and found that they, like the survivors, had eventually moved away from the memory of their lost loved ones.

Except for one man. Linus Diller's brother and sister-in-law had died in the collapse. Linus Diller still lived in Granger.

Faith called Jones, and the detective answered groggily. "What is it?"

"Linus Diller," she said, "what can you tell me about him?"

Jones made a noise halfway between a sigh and a groan and said, "Linus is the town drunk. Lovely to have to admit that we have one, but we're already coming across pretty shitty, so I guess it's not the end of the world. He has a bit of a record—mostly barfights, nothing too serious."

"Did you know that his brother and sister-in-law died in the mine collapse?"

"George and Carol? Yeah, I knew."

Faith was past the point where any level of incompetence from Jones could surprise her. She didn't even bother to ask if he had questioned Linus. "Do you have an address for him?"

"Um, yeah, hold on. Do you need the exact street address, or can I just tell you where to go?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Doesn't matter."

“Well, he lives in an old cabin on Breaker Ridge Road, just past where it turns from pavement to dirt. But at this hour, you’ll probably find him packing in as much booze as he can before Jonah Faulkner kicks him out of the Tin Can. That’s the local bar. Nice place, incidentally, if you two felt like a celebratory beer once this is all over.”

“I’ll get back to you on that,” Faith said. “What time does the bar close?”

“Two o’clock.”

That left them a little over an hour. “All right,” Faith said, “thank you.”

“Yep,” Jones said before unceremoniously hanging up.

Faith looked at Michael sleeping on the bed and debated going herself to allow him a chance to rest. If she did that, though, she’d never hear the end of it.

She woke Turk first, hoping that the noise of the big dog springing to alertness would also wake Michael. It didn’t, and Turk didn’t seem inclined to wake Michael up himself, so Faith had to do the job.

She shook him softly, and he rolled over and smiled softly. "Love you, Faith," he murmured.

A memory flashed across Faith's mind then, of waking Michael the morning after he first spent the night. They had spent the rest of that day in each other's arms, and Faith thought at the time that she could get used to waking up like that.

Apparently, Michael had once felt the same.

She shook him again, a little harder, and this time he woke fully. “What is it?” he asked.

“I found a lead,” she said, “Linus Diller. Town drunk. His brother and sister-in-law died in the original mine collapse.”

He sat up, alert now. “Where is he?”

“Jones says he’s probably at the local bar.”

“Wonderful,” Michael said, standing. “Do we like him for this?”

“He’s the only person connected to the collapse still in town,” Faith said as Michael quickly dressed. “I don’t know if he’s a suspect yet, but he’s definitely a lead. He does have a history of violence.” She filled him in on the information Jones had given her.

“Well, a barfight isn’t the same as a murder,” Michael said, “but I suppose it’s possible that he might have gone off the deep end when he heard the mine was uncovered.”

“Even if not,” Faith said, “odds are he knows something we can use.”

“Well,” Michael said, pulling his jacket on, “let’s go find out.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 pm

As it turned out, Linus Diller was not at the Tin Can. Nor was the Tin Can even remotely a nice place. Faith guessed that when you only had one option, you had to make the best of it.

Not that Faith cared one way or the other about the quality of the establishment. She and Micheal headed to the bar, Turk in between them, to see if they could get any more information on Diller before trying his cabin.

The bartender was a thickly built woman of around fifty with a lined face that looked like it would have been very pretty before years of alcohol abuse robbed it of its fullness and color. She looked dispassionately at the three of them and nodded at Turk. “Dog’s gonna have to wait outside. We don’t allow pets in here.”

“He’s not a pet, he’s a K9 unit,” Faith corrected, “and we are FBI Special Agents investigating the murders of Tyler Stone and Clara Montpelier.”

“Oh yeah,” the woman said, “my daughter works for the police department. She told me they found the Montpelier girl’s body.”

“They did,” Faith confirmed, “and we’re following up a lead on her killer.”

“Got it,” the bartender replied. “All the same, your dog’s gonna have to wait outside.”

Faith bristled, but before she could reply, Michael said, “My name is Special Agent Michael Prince. This is my partner, Special Agent Faith Bold. And our K9 unit goes where we go. Unless you want us calling our friends at ATF about a possible expired liquor license.”

Michael's instincts turned out to be correct. The woman frowned sourly but relented. "All right. What do you want to know?"

"Linus Diller," Faith said.

"What about him?"

She shrugged. "Tell me what he's like?"

The bartender laughed. "Well, he's a drunk, bitter middle-aged man whose wife left him for beating her fifteen years ago, seven years after his brother died in the mine collapse. That about covers everything."

"I hear he causes a lot of trouble here."

The bartender shrugged. "He picks fights sometimes. Not so much now that he's getting older. To be honest, I just let them go outside to figure it out. It's cheaper than hiring a bouncer."

"How often is he here?"

She chuckled. "I can't remember the last time he wasn't here from open to close." She cocked her head and said, "Actually, he's been here a lot less often the past two weeks or so."

Faith lifted an eyebrow. "Is that so?" she asked.

"Yeah," the bartender said. "He's only been here for an hour or two each night. He sips his drinks quickly, then heads home. Might have something to do with the mine being reopened. Linus is a mean son of a bitch, but he really loved his brother." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Between you and me, I think he loved his sister-in-

law a little more than he loved his brother. Don't know that for sure, of course, but it seemed to me he that George's boy looked an awful lot more like Linus's boy, if you know what I mean."

"Thank you for the information," Faith said. "We'll be in touch if we have any further questions."

"Sounds good," the bartender replied. "Name's Luann, by the way."

Faith smiled drily. "Nice to meet you, Luann."

On the way to Diller's cabin, Faith checked her pistol's load. Michael looked over from the driver's seat and frowned. "You're not planning to use that, are you?"

She cast him a sardonic look, and he said, "Considering your recent behavior, that's not an unreasonable question."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not planning on using it, no, but since two people have pointed out that Diller is violent, I think it pays to be prepared."

"Prepared, yes; anticipating, no."

"Like I said," she repeated patiently. "I'm not planning on using it."

"Okay. Just making sure."

They remained silent for the rest of the drive. Breaker's Ridge Road led them out of the town proper. Faith noted that while Breaker's Ridge Road led west and the mine itself was north of town, there were several dirt paths that would allow Diller to reach the mines without having to travel through town.

They reached the cabin a few miles outside of Granger. The road, as promised, turned to dirt, where it wound up into a small spur of the mountains. Diller's cabin was located a half mile before the foothills.

The lights were still on inside, which made sense since Diller would normally be awake at the bar at this time. Faith lifted a hand to her pistol but pulled it away when she saw the look on Michael's face. Turk growled low in his throat as they approached the door, and Michael looked worriedly at him too.

The tv was playing inside, and when they knocked, Faith could hear Diller swear. She lifted her hand to her pistol again and, this time, left it there.

The TV volume diminished, and Faith heard shuffling footsteps as Diller approached the door. He opened it a crack and cast filmy eyes on the two agents under the porchlight. "What the hell do you want?" he growled, his voice the rasp of a longtime alcoholic.

"Linus Diller?" Faith asked.

"Who the hell are you?"

His left hand was hidden behind the door, and Faith kept her hand on her pistol. "I'm Special Agent Faith Bold. This is Special Agent Michael Prince and our K9 Unit, Turk."

Diller looked down at Turk and frowned. "That dog pisses on my porch, I'm going to kick the shit out of him."

Michael rolled his eyes. Turk looked mildly amused at the threat.

Faith knew she should treat it with the same levity, but after what had happened with

West and Turk, she couldn't. Her eyes narrowed, and she said, "You put your hands on my dog, I'll make sure that's the last time you ever use them."

Michael frowned and tried to interject. "We just need a few minutes of your time, Mr. Diller."

"Like hell you do," he said. "Come back with a warrant, then we'll talk."

He made to close the door, and Faith put her shoulder into it. Diller stumbled backward, and the door flew open. "No, we'll talk now," she said, "people are dying, and I think you know something we need to know."

When Diller stumbled back from the door, she saw that his left hand held only a half-empty bottle of whiskey, not the shotgun she expected. "What the hell are you doing?" he shouted. "Get the hell out of my house!"

Though still belligerent, his eyes held more fear than anger, and Faith pressed her advantage. "No," she said, "if you want, you can file a complaint with the Philadelphia field office after you tell us what we need to know."

"I think if we both take a step back," Michael interjected, putting a hand on Faith's shoulder, "we'll agree that it's in all of our best interests to get this conversation out of the way as quickly as possible. Mr. Diller, we can talk on your porch if you would prefer, but this really is an urgent matter or we wouldn't be here at one-thirty in the morning. I'd consider it a personal favor if you just gave us a few minutes of your time."

"Not sure what the hell I'm supposed to do with that," Diller grouched, "but all right. I'll talk to you . Little Miss Psychopath can sit quietly and behave. Or can she?"

He leered at Faith, and Faith nearly struck him. Turk's low growl stopped her and also

wiped the smile off of Diller's face. "Hey now, I was only joking. I'm not gonna hurt her."

"Turk will behave as long as everyone else behaves," Michael said, glaring at Faith. "We're here to talk. That's all."

Faith gritted her teeth a moment but forced herself to nod. Diller offered a nod of his own and said, "All right then. You can sit here."

He gestured to the kitchen table where two wooden chairs sat. Faith's lip curled when she saw the questionable stains on the chairs, but Michael stoically ignored them and sat, staring at Faith until she did the same.

"All right," Diller said. He lifted the bottle of whiskey to his lips and took a long draw. A trickle of whiskey dribbled down his overgrown beard, and Faith's lip curled upward again. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"First," Michael asked. "Can you confirm your whereabouts six days and thirteen days ago?"

"You mean, did I kill those kids who went missing?"

"Did you?"

Diller chuckled. "No, they did for themselves. That mine's been dangerous since it was first built. Don't know why folks still try to explore it after two cave-ins."

"Have you been back since the cave-in that killed your brother and his wife?" Michael asked.

"Back?" he chuckled. "I never went in in the first place. My brother was the cave

guy. How do you call it? Spunkler?”

“Spelunker,” Michael offered.

“Right. Well, anyway, he was the guy who liked caves. That’s why Carol fell in love with him. She liked caves too.”

“Did you and your sister-in-law have a relationship?” Faith asked.

Diller frowned. “I thought you weren’t gonna talk.”

Faith lifted her hands placatingly. “I’ll sit right here the whole time.”

Diller scoffed but didn’t protest further. “Well, to answer your question, no, I didn’t screw Carol. Everyone seems to think I did because she was actually kind to me, but I didn’t. I loved George. I would never hurt him like that.” He frowned. “Why are you even asking about her? She’s been dead twenty-two years. So has George.”

“We believe that someone is murdering people who visit the mines,” Michael said. “We’re talking to you because you’re the only remaining family of the victims of the mine’s first collapse who still lives in the area.”

“So I must be the killer, right?” Diller replied contemptuously.

“It’s probably a good idea to avoid sarcasm,” Michael advised. Faith noted the similarity between that advice and the advice he gave Tom Martle. She also noted the similarity in Diller’s response.

He lifted his hands, and much of his attitude faded away. “All right,” he said, “Fair enough. Look, I don’t know exactly what I can tell you. The mine wasn’t shored up properly, so when they dug too deep, it caused a cave-in. Some people made it out.

George and Carol didn't."

"I'm more interested in the two people who have been murdered in the caves over the past two weeks," Faith said, "What can you tell me about that?"

"Other than that they're damned fools? Nothing. I knew the Stone Boy by reputation. He was a deadbeat loser. Spent all day playing video games or screwing around in the caves."

"So he visited the caves before?" Faith asked.

"All the time. He and the Grant boy would go in there looking for buried treasure or whatever boys do when they're up to mischief. Brought a few girls back there in high school."

"Was Clara Montpelier one of those girls?" Michael asked.

"No," Diller asked. "She showed up a couple years back when Trevor Hart came back from college. Sweet kid, from what I could tell. She liked to run around the caves, too, but as far as I know, she never ran into the Stone kid. Not that I paid much attention. The point is, no, I don't think the two of them were involved."

"You still haven't confirmed your whereabouts," Faith pointed out.

"I was here," he said. "Couple hours at the Tin Can, but..." his anger faded, replaced by a grief so deep and palpable that Faith almost felt sorry for him. "Well, I guess when they dug up the mine, all the memories came back. I might be a washed-up old drunk, but I still don't like crying in front of people."

Faith looked again at his filmy, bloodshot eyes. She had assumed he was just drunk, but now it occurred to her that he had been weeping as well.

“How do you feel about people visiting the mine again?” Faith asked.

He chuckled. “They’re fools. Like I said, that mine’s been dangerous since it opened. Would you go exploring a mine that had twice caved in and killed a dozen people? To say nothing of the folks that wander in and end up getting found at the bottom of a shaft?”

“We’re going to be looking for evidence of the murders there as soon as a team of specialists gets here,” Faith informed him.

He showed none of the fear he might have shown if he were guilty. Instead, he shook his head contemptuously and said, “then you’re a fool too.”

Michael and Faith shared a look. Turk seemed calmer now. Like Faith, he seemed to have decided that Diller was likely not their killer, but just a bitter old drunk who had never overcome the loss of his loved ones.

“Is there anyone else you think might have a problem with people going into the mine?” Michael asked

“To the point that they’d follow them in there just to kill them? No. I don’t think anyone’s that stupid.”

“Not even your nephew?” Faith asked.

Once more, there was no shock of guilt or fear. Instead, Diller laughed. “Benny? Are people saying Benny did this?”

He threw his head back and laughed again, potbelly heaving with the force of it. Michael and Faith exchanged another look, and when Diller’s laughter quieted enough that she could be heard, she said, “Why do you find that funny?”

“Because Benny ran off twenty-two years ago,” Diller explained. “Hasn’t been seen since.”

“What happened?” Michael asked.

“Well, he didn’t like my brand of discipline, I suppose. George and Carol were too soft on him, let him get away with anything. When he moved in with me, I told him I wasn’t going to allow that. He was going to do what he was told, or he was going to feel the end of my belt. I guess he didn’t like that. He stuck around a few months before he ran off. I never heard from him again. My guess is he’s somewhere out California way where everyone thinks it’s all peace and love and rainbows.”

“You don’t think he might have gone into the mines, do you?”

“If he did, then he’s nothing more than bones now,” Diller replied. “I don’t truck with none of that ghost nonsense, but people are right to be afraid. I guess I made that clear enough. I won’t say it again.”

“So you don’t think it’s possible he could still be alive and living in the mines?”

Diller looked at her in amazement. “That what they teach you in FBI school?”

“Just answer the question, please.”

“Is the answer not obvious? Come on, agent. How would he survive? Even assuming he didn’t fall face-first down the nearest mine shaft, how would he eat? How would he find fresh water? How would he do anything? And how would people not have seen him in twenty-two years?”

“A lot of the mine is unexplored since the collapse,” Faith replied, “and there are nearly twenty miles of natural caves not mapped.”

“So he just hangs out in the dark eating bats and drinking from underground pools? No, he's not there, and neither is anyone else. Not for any length of time anyway. If you got a killer in there, then all you gotta do is wait. He'll come out eventually. Or he'll never come out, and the mountains will have taken care of him for you.”

“I'd rather not wait for that,” Faith said. “Not while people are still at risk.”

“You want to end the risk? Close the damned thing. If there's one thing all people have in common, it's that they're stupid. The only way to keep people from dying in those caves is to seal the entrances so they can't get in in the first place. Otherwise, you won't need a serial killer to account for their dead bodies.”

Faith and Michael shared another look. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Diller,” Michael said, standing and handing him a card. “We'd appreciate it if you stayed in town for a while.”

“Where the hell else am I gonna go?” he said. “Ain't nothing out there for me.”

They made it just back to town when the call came. “We have two more missing,” Jones said, “a couple of kids from Brightwater. The sheriff there just called me.”

“Shit,” Faith said. She put the phone on speaker and said, “Go ahead, Jones.”

“Francis Cole and Shawna Leavenworth. Both twenty-four. They run a video blog about haunted places. I guess they were planning to do a bit on the mines. They were supposed to check in with a friend of theirs last night, and they never did. Aren't answering their phones either.”

“When were they last seen?”

"Well, the last time anyone saw them, they were on their way here. That was last night around ten o'clock or so. They were supposed to check in with their friend at eleven, but they didn't. I'm on route to the mine entrance with a few officers."

"We'll meet you there," Faith said.

She hung up and said, "Well, that rules out Diller."

"You think we have a chance to reach these ones alive?" Michael asked. "Maybe the killer hasn't found them yet."

Faith thought it just as likely that they had eloped to Canada, but she didn't reply. Michael turned down one of the dirt paths that branched off from Breaker's Ridge Road and headed for the mountain. The old Bronco jumped and bounced along the washboard road, and Michael swore a few times when a particularly large bump caused his head to bump into the roof of the SUV.

Faith kept her eye on the looming shape of the mountains as they approached. They looked bleak and forbidding, and in the light of the thin crescent moon, they seemed like enormous shadows. She could understand now why so many cultures associated deities both benevolent and malevolent with mountains.

And why other cultures associated devils with what lay underground.

They reached the mine just before three o'clock. Jones and three uniformed officers stood next to an old Ford pickup parked just outside of the mine. When the three agents reached them, Jones pointed at the front of the truck at two strands of fishing line tied to the truck's tow hooks.

"Looks like they tied themselves to the truck so they could find their way back, but—" he pulled on one of the lines, and it moved easily. "Something cut the line."

“Have you sent anyone inside yet?” Faith asked.

He shook his head. “We were going to suggest following the lines, but that might just lead us to whatever pit they fell into.”

“Or it will lead us to their killer,” Faith said. “I’m done waiting. That rescue team won’t be here until tomorrow. It might be too late then.”

“You think they’re still alive?” Jones asked.

“I don’t know,” Faith admitted, “but they might be. Either way, the sooner we find out what happened, the more likely we are to find our killer. Leave the fishing line where it is. We’ll follow it into the mine and see where the girls were when they were taken.”

“You two shouldn’t go in alone,” Jones said.

Faith had had enough of cowardice. “Stay here if you want,” she said, “We’re going in.”

“So are we,” Jones said.

Faith turned to him in amazement. “We’re going in too,” he repeated. “Me and Horace.” One of the officers nodded. “Gina and Deke are going to wait up top in case they see anything out here.”

Faith nodded in appreciation. “All right. Well, in that case, I suggest splitting up. We’re what, two miles from the cave where the bodies were found?”

“About that.”

“Perfect. I have maps of the mine tunnels.” She handed copies to Jones. “I circled the areas where the mines join the cave network. I want you and Horace to start on that end while we follow the fishing line.”

“All right,” Jones said. “That works for me.”

“Wonderful,” Faith said.

The officers left, and the two lucky enough to remain aboveground busied themselves, setting up a base camp. Faith, Michael and Turk approached the mine, their flashlights casting twin beams of light into darkness so thick it was almost opaque.

“You ready for this?” Faith asked.

“The way I see it,” Michael said, “you’re going to get me killed one day no matter what. At least if I die here, Ellie won’t have to worry about burying me.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 pm

Frankie risked a shout. “Shawna! Shawna, where are you?”

The only answer was the soft moan from deep within the caves.

Tears streamed down Frankie’s face. She wished now she had never let Shawna come here. She wished she had thrown a fit or threatened to break the camera or... God, anything, anything that would have kept her from talking them into coming here.

It seemed so foolish to Frankie that less than an hour ago, she was afraid of ghosts. She didn’t fear ghosts now. Ghosts, if they did exist, were just phantoms. The danger they faced now was very real, very solid and very dangerous.

They had made it maybe a half mile into the cave when they heard the voices. Frankie, of course, had suggested that maybe it was time for them to leave, but Shawna, the beautiful brave idiot, had thought it better to take some footage and record the moans and cries, claiming excitedly that this would be their best episode yet.

Then the killer had grabbed them. Frankie had seen him rushing toward them, his eyes huge and glassy, his lips drawn back over yellowed teeth. Her first irrational thought had been that they were being attacked by a vampire. She screamed for Shawna to watch out and, not knowing what else to do, she had thrown the camera at the vampire.

The creature caught it in one hand and brought it down on Shawna hard. Frankie would never forget the way Shawna’s teeth clicked together or how she shuddered when she fell to the ground. Thinking that her girlfriend was dead, Frankie lost

control and lunged at him, shouting and screaming that she was going to kill him.

The creature had made short work of her. Frankie was a decent size for a girl, but she was still no match for whatever it was that had attacked them. She saw a gray, leathery fist swinging her way. Then the next thing she saw was the creature's face when she woke up.

The creature turned out not to be a vampire, of course. Just a man. A grotesque, ugly, deformed troll of a man, but a man nonetheless. He had Shawna and Frankie tied up, and the only silver lining of the situation was that they still wore all their clothes.

"You need to find your way out," the man said. "You shouldn't be here."

"We're sorry," Shawna said in tears. "We won't come back here again. We promise. Just tell us where the exit is, and we'll leave."

"You need to find your way out," he repeated.

He untied Shawna then, saying as he did, "If you try to hurt me, I'll break both of your legs and make you crawl out."

Frankie tried to scream in protest only to find that she had been gagged.

Shawna looked nervously at the man. "What about my girlfriend?"

"You need to find your way out," he said again.

"Please," Shawna said, weeping. "I love her. It's my fault we're here, not hers. Please let her go. If you need to keep someone, keep me."

Frankie wept as she recalled those words, recalled the muffled screams of protest she

shouted ineffectually through her gag.

“Shawna, you idiot,” she whispered. “You fucking dummy.” Then she shouted, “Shawna! Please! Where are you?”

The man had ignored Shawna and carefully blindfolded Frankie. “No!” Shawna screamed.

Frankie couldn’t see what happened next, but she heard the brief scuffle then the cry of pain as the man fought Shawna off. “Touch me again, and I’ll make you watch while I cut out her heart,” the kidnapper said.

“Okay,” Shawna said weeping. “Okay. Just please don’t hurt her.”

“You need to find your way out,” the man said a final time. “You and her both. But you will find your way from here. I will take her somewhere else. It will be cheating if you two help each other.”

“Please...” Shawna said again.

“You should leave now,” he said, “if you follow me, I will kill this one in front of you and make you watch the life drain from her eyes.”

Shawna sobbed wretchedly and said, “I love you, Frankie. If I get out, I’ll call for help. Please don’t die. I love you so much, and I’m so, so sorry.”

With the gag firmly in place, Frankie couldn’t even say she loved her back.

That was... Frankie didn’t even know how long ago. The kidnapper had led her through the caves and released her in another cavern, giving her the same command to find her way out.

She had no idea how to do that. All she had was a little penlight she kept as backup in case her primary light went out. She didn't know if Shawna had her own penlight. She wasn't usually as prepared as Frankie was.

And she wasn't going to leave anyway. Not without Shawna. If they were going to die, they were going to die together. Or Frankie was going to die fighting that maniac as hard as she could while Shawna escaped.

Frankie wasn't religious, but she prayed then. "God, please let Shawna be okay."

The only answer she received in return was an echoing shriek that trailed off into something that sounded like laughter.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 pm

Spirit cave had smelled old and musty, the way a cave would smell if it were a horror movie and the girls really taken by ghosts. In contrast, the mine smelled mostly like dust. In a macabre way, that made it an even more accurate representation of death. Death didn't leave behind ghosts and ghouls. It left a vacuum in which things lay unused and abandoned until they were covered in enough dust and dirt to waste away, leaving behind only the fossilized impression of what they once were.

All around, Faith saw those fossils. The entrance tunnel led into a wide cavern where rusted and twisted stretches of rail bore splintered and equally rusted carts. Some of the carts were still full of copper ore. All around, Faith could see tools and piles of wire. In another cavern, they found a pile of hard hats. The hat atop the pile had the name Frank scrawled on it in permanent marker.

Faith shivered, even though the mine was no colder than the air outside. Michael squeezed her shoulder briefly, and when Faith turned to him, she found his face as pale as hers.

"I can cross cave-diving off of my bucket list now," she told him, mostly just to hear a sound other than the ever-present moaning. Her voice reverberated throughout the tunnel, and she lowered it when she spoke again, "How far do you think we've gone?"

"Not two thousand yards," Michael said, lifting the length of fishing line.

No sooner had he said that than the end of the line slipped through his fingers. Faith made it two more yards before her own line ran out, the end frayed from whatever had sawed through it.

Faith lifted her flashlight and took stock of their surroundings. They were in another cavern, this one rougher than the others. Rusted lantern hooks on the walls told her this was still part of the mine, but evidently a less used location. The walls of the earlier tunnels and caverns were sanded relatively smooth, but here, the walls were still rough-grained. Behind them was the tunnel that led to the surface. In front of them were two tunnels, one continuing straight down and the other veering off to the left.

“Okay,” Faith said, “here’s where we—”

“No,” Michael interrupted. “No more splitting up. We pick one tunnel.”

“We don’t have time to argue about this,” Faith said, “those girls could be anywhere. We need to maximize our chances of finding them.”

“Faith, I’m not leaving you,” he said. “I’ve done that too many times. Not again.”

His eyes registered fear but also guilt. Faith softened her voice and said, “I forgive you for earlier. With West. You haven’t had much of a reason to trust me for a while. I understand why you didn’t answer. It’s not your fault I didn’t wait. But I can’t wait now. We can’t wait. And I’ll be fine. I’ll take Turk, and you can take your excellent shooting skills and tough macho man strength.”

She smiled at her joke, but Michael didn’t return it. “This isn’t a good idea,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter,” she replied. “It’s the only option available to us.”

“I don’t know that I agree with that,” he said.

There was a lot less force in his protest this time, however. She smiled softly and said, “Yes, you do. Go on, Michael. I’ll be okay.”

He hesitated a moment longer, and on impulse, Faith pulled him into an embrace. She squeezed him tightly, and when he wrapped her just as tightly into his own arms, she felt her spirits lift. For a moment, it didn't matter that she was hunting a crazed serial killer underground or that she was hunting an even more crazed and dangerous killer aboveground. She wasn't alone anymore, and that was what mattered.

Turk barked, and Faith smiled down at him. She never really was alone, was she?

Except when West took Turk from you , a voice in her head reminded her.

The joy she felt for a moment vanished. She separated from Michael and said, "We'll sync our phones to share our locations."

"How's that going to help us underground?"

"They use ultrasonic frequencies to stay in contact," she said, pressing the required settings first on her phone, then Michael's.

"That still won't even be remotely accurate underground with hundreds of yards of bedrock in between us."

"It's all we have," she said, handing his phone back. "Good luck."

He took the phone and sighed. "You're crazy, you know that?"

Faith smiled. "Yep. Crazy as a fox."

"You keep telling yourself that," he said with a grin of his own. He hugged her once more, then disappeared, taking the tunnel to the left.

Faith took a deep breath and looked down at Turk. "You ready to catch another bad

guy, boy?”

Turk barked firmly. Thus encouraged, Faith started down the tunnel directly ahead of her.

The tunnel narrowed after about ten yards, becoming an irregular shaft of uncut bedrock. The lantern hooks were gone too. Faith consulted her map and confirmed that she had reached one of the tunnels that led from the mine to the natural cave system. She checked the map of the caves and found that this was one of the unmapped tunnels. From here on out, she was on her own.

A sound echoed through the caves, and Faith almost imagined she could hear a voice speaking. No wonder Martle had abandoned his project. Faith couldn't imagine being down here any length of time and not going insane.

After another fifty yards or so, she heard the voice again, and this time it was definitely a voice.

And it was calling a name.

“Frankie! Frankie! Are you there? Shawna! Girls, if you hear me, shout for me!”

Faith followed the sound. She reached a cavern with three different tunnels and waited until she heard the voice again, coming from the rightmost tunnel. “Frankie!”

She drew her handgun and held it under her flashlight as trained. She followed the beam and a few dozen yards into the tunnel, she came face to face with a man.

His eyes widened in shock. Faith trained her handgun on him immediately and shouted, “Hands in the air! Don't move!”

Turk growled low in his throat. The man took one look at him and bolted.

Faith swore and sprinted after him. “Stop!” she cried.

The man made it about a hundred yards deeper into the tunnel before Turk caught him. He leapt onto the stranger and pushed him to the ground. The man squealed and covered his head, shouting, “Don’t hurt me!”

Faith caught up to him and put her knee in between his shoulder blades. Turk released him, and she holstered her weapon and cuffed his hands behind his back. “Your hands are cuffed,” she told him, “in case you couldn’t tell. So don’t get stupid when I stand you up.”

“Please,” he said, “I’m just looking for my daughter.”

Faith’s eyes widened. “Your daughter?”

He nodded.

She picked him up and turned him to face her. Tears welled in his eyes, and he said, “Frankie and Shawna run a podcast where they investigate haunted places.”

“Yeah, I heard that,” she said, “I know why they’re here. Why are you here?”

“I’m Frankie’s father,” he said, “I’m looking for her. Please. I just want to find my little girl.”

“How long have you been down here?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, “I left Brightwater as soon as Bridget told me the girls didn’t check in. I’ve been looking through the tunnels ever since. I found their fishing lines

cut, and I just... I have to find them. They could be in danger. The police think there's a killer down here."

Faith pressed her lips together and didn't confirm or deny his suspicion. "Look, we have a professional search party looking for your daughter and her friend." That was a bit of a stretch, but it felt better than saying a few cops and two FBI agents. "I'm sorry, mister..."

"Cole. Gary Cole."

"Mr. Cole. I'm sorry, but you'll only get in the way down here. The best thing for you to do is go back up to the surface and wait with the officers there. Do you have ID on you?"

"I do."

"Okay. Good. Do you know how to get back to the surface from here?"

"Back that way," he pointed behind Faith. "Turn left at the first cavern, right at the second, then follow the fishing line."

"Good," she said. "When you get to the surface, come out with your hands raised and call out your name to the officers. Tell them you ran into me, and I sent you up there. Turk and I will find your daughter," she said, "I promise."

What she didn't promise, what she couldn't promise, was that she would find Frankie alive.

"Okay," he said. "She's a good girl. They both are."

Faith wished she could think of something to say to comfort him, but what comfort

was there to a father knowing his daughter was probably dead?

She uncuffed him and made him repeat the directions to the surface, then sent him topside. She and Turk continued deeper into the tunnel.

Faith checked her phone from time to time as she navigated the cave system. It felt as though she had been down here for hours, so she was surprised to find that only a few minutes passed each time she checked Michael's location. They had only been underground for an hour or so.

Michael, according to the location sharing app, was two hundred yards behind Faith to her left. He was still moving, which was good in that it meant he was alive, bad because it meant he hadn't found anything yet.

Faith kept her flashlight beam pointed low as she walked, illuminating only the ground in front of her. She wasn't sure if that would do much to hide her position, considering her footfalls echoed through the cavern like cymbals, but she did it anyway.

The tunnel she was walking grew narrower until it was barely wide enough to pass and Faith had to shimmy sideways to continue. She nearly turned around when the tunnel opened suddenly into a cavern about ten feet wide, six across and seven high.

She heard Turk start to growl, and her hand flew to her weapon. "Who's there?" she cried. "I'm armed."

A soft voice answered, weeping. "Please help me."

Faith swung the light toward the voice. It fell on the dirty, terrified eyes of a young

woman. Her clothes were tattered and covered in dust, and bruises covered her exposed skin.

But she was alive.

Faith holstered her weapon and said, "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. My name is Faith Bold. I'm an FBI agent, and I'm here to help you."

"Oh, thank God!" the girl said, weeping and throwing her arms around Faith. "Thank you!"

"What's your name?" Faith asked.

"I'm Shawna," she said. "Shawna Leavenworth. My girlfriend, Frankie, is still here somewhere. I've been trying to find her. He... he told us we had to find the way out. I don't know where he is or if he's still looking for us, but please, please help me find her."

"I will find her," Faith promised, "but you need to go back to the surface."

"No," she said, "not without Frankie."

"You'll just be in the way down here," she said. "It'll be easier for me to find Frankie if you're safe up top."

"No," Shawna protested. "I can't stop looking for her. I can't leave her like that. She wouldn't leave me."

Faith put both hands on Shawna's shoulders. "Listen, Shawna," she said gently. "I will find Frankie. But you won't be any help to me or to her down here. We need to get you back to the surface, then I will go find Frankie, do you understand?"

“No,” Shawna repeated, shaking her head. “I don’t know the way. He blindfolded us.”

“That’s okay,” Faith assured her. “I’ll lead you back.”

“No!” Shawna cried again, “We can’t waste that time! He’s looking for us. If he’s looking for her first, he might find her while we’re wasting time trying to get me back to the surface. We need to find her!”

Faith's heart broke for her, but she had a job to do. "We'll find her," she said, her reassurance hollow in her own ears, "but if I take you with me, it will slow me down. It's better to get you upstairs, and then I don't have to slow down so you can keep up with me."

“I won’t slow you down,” Shawna promised. “I’m not as hurt as I look. I can keep up.”

“I’m sorry,” Faith replied. “The answer’s no.”

“What if it was your girlfriend?” Shawna challenged. “Or your boyfriend? Would you leave them behind?”

Faith thought of the note West had left with Gordon’s body, the threats he’d made against David and Michael. It would be easy to use the excuse that Faith was a trained agent, but even if she wasn’t, she knew the answer would be the same.

“No,” she admitted. “I wouldn’t.”

“Then you can’t ask me to leave Frankie behind,” was, of course, Shawna’s immediate response.

Faith sighed and shook her head. She considered her options. If she took Shawna up top, then Shawna would certainly survive, but the time wasted would mean that Faith couldn't find Frankie. However, Michael and Jones still had a chance to find her. On the other hand, if she took Shawna with her, she risked Shawna getting hurt or killed and might not even find Frankie anyway.

But then again, she might. And Frankie's chances were much better with Turk's nose helping. She supposed she could tell Turk to keep looking without her, but then she was banking on his nose being good enough to keep him from falling into a shaft with no light to warn him of dangers.

So if she went topside, Turk went topside, and Frankie's chances of survival dipped considerably. If Faith took Shawna with her, then Faith was relying on her and Turk's ability to subdue the suspect before he could harm Shawna, something that might be complicated if Shawna lost her cool and tried to fight the suspect herself.

So, did she endanger Shawna to increase Frankie's chance of survival? Well, Shawna had already indicated a willingness to make that choice, and Faith knew the feeling well enough to know Shawna meant what she said.

Faith sighed and shook her head. "You do exactly as I say without question. If we encounter the suspect, you don't fight him. At all. Not for any reason. That's my job, mine and Turk's. You stay out of harm's way, and you do exactly as I say. If you can promise me that you'll do that, then I'll take you with me."

"I promise," Shawna said, "I just can't leave here without her. It's... it's my fault that we're here."

Faith knew guilt well enough to know that nothing she said would help alleviate Shawna's. The only cure for that was finding Frankie.

“All right. Follow me.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 pm

The dweller moved through the tunnels, his bare feet soft and quiet against the stone. Every so often, he clicked his teeth, judging his position by the resonance of the echo. He sniffed the air, his senses focused on his prey.

He was not blind, but sight was of little use in the darker parts of the tunnels. He navigated by memory and his other senses.

He wasn't sure how long he had been underground. His memories of his time aboveground were foggy. He remembered his parents, of course. They were the reason he was here, the reason he killed. This mine was sacred, a shrine to their deaths and the deaths of their friends. Yet people continued to desecrate their graves as though they didn't matter, as though this place was nothing more than a tourist attraction.

He thought he had fixed that problem before when he had caved in the last remaining entrance. Some of the explosives left behind were still viable, and he used them to close the mine off for good. When needed, he could still access the surface through the natural cave network.

And things were good. He survived off of the rats and food left behind by and sometimes stolen from campers and spelunkers who frequented the upper third of the caves. On rare occasions, he was forced to kill when cavers saw him, but that was rare. For the most part, he was able to live comfortably among his parents' ghosts and the spirits of the others who had died.

So many had died here, so many more than the miners who were killed when the mine first collapsed. There were thousands of spirits in this place, and they

communed with the dweller as though he were one of their own.

He'd had a name once. He couldn't remember it. The last person who had used it was Uncle, a cruel, sadistic drunk who hated him for being a living memory of his brother who had died a better man than Uncle would ever be.

He had taken his first chance. Uncle lay drunk on the couch, and he had left Uncle's house and come back to his parents.

He had become the dweller in darkness then, preferring the safety of shadow to the harsh glare of the sun. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the sun. He came close when the second one nearly reached the entrance.

Those lawmen. The police. They had nearly forced him into the light. He feared them, and because he feared them, he hated them. They were bullies, just like Uncle, bullies who refused to leave him in peace, who defended the trespassers and encouraged them to continue to violate his family's grave.

Why couldn't they just stay above where they belonged? Why did they come here to tempt the spirits and provoke the dweller? Why did they open the door to his house again and send their evil, selfish fools here to spit on the memory of his loved ones?

They deserved their suffering. The dweller couldn't suffocate them like his parents were suffocated. He had tried that once and the man he was strangling found a rock and nearly beat him unconscious with it before the dweller was able to kick him into a nearby mine shaft. From then on, he used his knife.

But he still made them fear. His parents had feared. They had screamed in fear. They had begged, and they had been left behind. He wanted the trespassers to know fear as they ran. He wanted them to feel the end coming, to flee it, and to still feel it following them, chasing them until it found them and killed them.

So he played a game. The game was one from his childhood aboveground. It was called hide-and-seek. He played hide-and-seek with the trespassers, and when he found them, he killed them.

He sniffed the air and stopped dead in his tracks. His skin prickled when the scent wafted to him again.

The dog. The dog was back. The dog whose nose—keener even than his own—had nearly forced him into the light. It was back, and so were its owners, the police. They were looking for him.

He stood stock still and listened. He heard footfalls, the trespasser he was hunting, the other trespasser, and two, no... four police.

The other trespasser was with the dog and one of the police.

Rage filled him, fury rising until he felt his lips pull back from his teeth. The police had found one of the trespassers and now protected her with the dog.

He hissed, his anger causing him to momentarily forget the need for stealth. He quieted himself and listened again.

They did not hear him. They were still going the wrong way.

All except the one with the dog. The dog couldn't smell him yet, but it had picked up traces of him left behind as he chased the first trespasser. It would soon be on his trail, and when it was, the dweller would have to flee. He could not outrun the dog, not even underground. He would have to climb into the ventilation shafts and move across the water to hide his scent. Even then, there was no guarantee that would work.

“Damned dog,” he whispered.

The sound of his own voice shocked him, as it always did. Most of the time, he forgot he could speak. It was only when hunting trespassers that he remembered his voice.

Well, he was hunting. And she was getting away. He listened to her footfalls and could tell that she approached one of the surface entrances. She had already walked nearly five miles. That was impressive. Maybe he should have seen if she wanted to stay, to dwell with him.

But no, she had not been invited. She had trespassed. She must be punished.

He moved quickly now, no longer pacing the trespasser but rushing. He would need to hurry when he found her. He couldn't take his time scaring her, watching the hope bleed from her eyes before the life bled. He would need to kill her quickly and then hide.

Unfair that one of the trespassers should escape. Unfair that someone should violate his parents' graves and get away with it.

But there was no choice. She had the police, and the police had the dog. He would kill this last trespasser, then he would destroy the cave. He would destroy everything this time. He would make it so that no one could trespass again.

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“Frankie!” Shawna cried, cupping her hands to her mouth and shouting loudly enough that the echo hurt Faith’s ears.

Faith was going to tell Shawna to stop shouting so they didn’t give their position away to the murderer, but they needed to find Frankie too, and that would be much easier if Frankie heard them and called back.

And if the murderer heard them, maybe he would try to attack them. Faith had her pistol, and she had Turk. She liked those odds.

“Frankie!” Shawna called again. “Where are you?”

They had left the mines a little less than an hour ago. In another hour, it would be dawn. By Shanwa’s best estimate, they had been in the cave for six hours. That meant they had come into contact with the killer about five hours ago.

That didn’t bode well for Frankie’s chances, but if Shawna had survived four of those hours, there was always the possibility that Frankie had too.

Turk stopped and pricked his ears, standing still and listening. Faith stopped as well. Shawna drew in breath to scream again, but Faith waved for silence.

Turk turned to the left and sniffed the air. Shawna’s eyes widened. “Does he hear Frankie?” she asked.

Faith put a finger to her lips, but the interruption apparently didn’t phase Turk, because he barked again, then sprinted down the cave. Faith rushed after him,

keeping the flashlight up so it illuminated the ground in front of Turk. She looked behind and was surprised to see Shawna keeping up.

Love could motivate you to do incredible things.

She checked her phone. There was no signal, but the location share showed Michael moving in the same direction they were, though much slower. That didn't really mean anything since she had no idea what the caves looked like where Michael was, but she allowed the thought to comfort her.

She tried her radio but got only static. "Dammit."

She should have planned for that. Oh well. She couldn't go back now.

Turk led them to a ledge and leaped easily up to the tunnel above. Faith helped Shawna up, then boosted herself up. Turk barked impatiently, frustrated that the darkness forced him to move at the pace of the humans. As soon as Faith was on her feet, he bolted up the tunnel.

And the tunnel did move up at a shallow but constant angle. The air cooled slightly, the predawn chill outside filtering downward. They were near the surface.

That gave Faith a leap of hope. If Frankie had made it to the surface, she would be okay. If the three of them caught up to her, then Faith could protect both of them. Underground, the killer had home-field advantage, but it was a different game up top. That was Faith's court.

She turned a corner and felt another rush of cool. Turk, I hope you have something.

Then Turk barked in alarm. He sprinted past the beam of her light, barking over and over.

“Turk!” Faith called.

Then an earsplitting scream filled the tunnels.

“Frankie!” Shawna shrieked. She too, sprinted past Faith, her own safety unimportant in the face of her girlfriend’s danger.

Faith swore and picked up her own pace, drawing her weapon and praying to God she reached Frankie before the killer finished with her.

She rounded another corner and saw Turk wrestling with a man holding a knife. In front of the man lay a young woman, screaming and holding her hands up to protect herself.

The man snarled and lifted the knife. Shawna shrieked.

“Hey!” Faith shouted so loudly that all three of them turned toward her in shock. She leveled her handgun at the killer and said, “Drop that knife or I drop you!”

The killer looked at Turk, seemingly unconcerned by the fact that the big dog’s teeth were sunk into his thigh. He looked back at Faith, and Faith said, “Drop the knife or I will shoot you.”

He dropped the knife. Faith sighed with relief and said, “Okay, Turk, release him.”

Turk dutifully let go of the killer’s leg.

And the killer picked him up and threw him at Faith.

The movement was so fast that she didn’t realize what happened until she saw Turk’s body hurtling toward her. She cried out and opened her arms to catch him, and as

soon as her eyes and her pistol left the killer, he rushed for the knife.

“No, Dammit!” Faith called. Turk dropped lightly from her arms and sprinted back toward the killer, who had retrieved the knife and was now leaping at Frankie.

Faith lifted her handgun and squared her stance. “Turk,” she commanded, “stay low.”

Turk looked behind and immediately flattened himself.

The killer leapt.

Faith fired.

The killer cried out, but Faith wasn’t sure if she had hit him or not.

“Come to me, Frankie!” she called. “Come—”

She saw a flash of movement and narrowly avoided a blow from the killer’s knife. Her original shot must have missed. Faith swore as she dodged another blow, the killer swinging wildly as he tried to take out this new threat.

Faith heard Shawna screaming behind her, Frankie screaming in front of her, Turk snarling as he came to her aid. She dodged another knife blow and aimed her weapon at the killer, but he knocked the gun from her hands before she could fire.

He lunged at her, but Turk reached him first, grabbing his ankle and pulling him to the ground. Faith steadied herself and aimed her light at the killer.

Then she gasped in horror.

Benjamin Diller barely looked human anymore. His skin was gray and so pale it was

nearly translucent. Faith could see the network of veins underneath the surface. His feet were wide, the toes splayed, and heavily callused. His hands were callused as well, the knuckles gnarled and hard as stone, but it was his face that was most disturbing.

The skin had pulled back around his cheeks and eyes, giving him a sunken appearance and making his eyes and teeth seem unnaturally large. The eyes themselves were filmy and gray. He wasn't completely blind because he was focusing on Turk and slamming his fist into the dog, but Faith imagined it had been quite some time since he'd been out in the sunlight. Decades of living underground had warped him, hunching his neck and back and making his limbs disproportionate.

Faith wasn't a believer in the supernatural, but she wouldn't have been surprised to pull his lips back to reveal fangs instead of teeth.

Turk, however, had actual fangs, and though Benny put up a valiant fight, Faith could tell that Turk would soon have him subdued.

"If I were you, I would calm down right now," she said. "You're only making it worse for yourself."

The killer looked at Faith and snarled, "You're stupid."

His voice was thick and raspy from decades of minimal use, but his tone was childish, so much so that Faith had to stifle a laugh. "All right, then," she said. "Try fighting and see how that goes for you."

She regretted that statement a moment later when Benny managed to get his legs under Turk. With a cry of rage and pain, he kicked Turk backwards. Faith lunged for him, but her fingertips only brushed his fur as he sailed past her.

Turk twisted in the air and managed to land on his feet, though it was a moment before he could regain traction. When Faith was sure that Turk wouldn't fall into one of the shafts that occasionally interrupted the smooth floor of the tunnel, she turned back to Benny.

Just in time. While Faith was distracted by Turk, Benny had grabbed his knife and was rushing toward Frankie.

Shawna shrieked and sprinted after Faith. Benny lifted his knife, but just as he brought it down, Faith tackled him. The knife crashed into the floor of the cave, missing Frankie by inches. Shawna grabbed her girlfriend and pulled her backwards, away from Faith and Benny.

Faith tried to hold Benny down, but he swung the knife at her, and she was forced to let him go to parry the blow. That gave him a chance to roll onto his back and kick her off of him. She lunged again, but another knife blow forced her back.

He continued to swing at her as she backpedaled, but once more Turk came to her aid.

Then a shot rang out. Benny cried out and vanished into the tunnels.

Faith steadied her light but found no sign of Benny. She heard skittering coming from above and swung her light just in time to see his feet disappear upward into one of the ventilation shafts.

She rushed forward, but when she reached the shaft, Benny had already disappeared.

A moment later, Michael arrived, his weapon drawn.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

“No,” Faith said. “I’m okay. We need to get the girls out of here. We can’t fight him as long as we have civilians to protect.”

They started forward toward the entrance. Michael led the way, weapon at the ready. Faith took the rear, and Turk flanked the two young women as they headed forward to freedom.

They rounded a corner, and Faith caught a glimpse of starlight beyond. She relaxed and said, "All right, girls. We're almost home free."

She reached for her phone to call Jones and tell him to meet them at the Spirit Cave entrance, but before she could dial, she heard Michael shout. “Hey!”

She looked up and saw Benny standing at the entrance to the cave, holding a lit stick of dynamite. He must have stashed some throughout the cave system, taken from the old mining supply.

Michael lifted his handgun, but Benny threw the dynamite first.

The stick careened down the tunnel toward them, its fuse pinwheeling sparks as it rolled downward.

"Run!" Faith shouted. She grabbed Shawna, and Michael grabbed Frankie. The five of them sprinted down the cave. Faith looked over her shoulder and saw the dynamite come to rest a few yards behind them.

A second later, the fuse sputtered, and Faith saw in horror that it was about to reach the end.

“Get down!” she shouted.

She pulled Shawna to the ground and saw Michael and Frankie hit the deck. Turk jumped on top of her and flattened himself just as the cave shuddered and lit up with a brief, brilliant flash of white.

Faith stood, and after verifying that everyone was uninjured, she turned around to see the tunnel blocked by rubble. Benny had sealed them inside.

“We need to go back to the mine entrance,” Michael said. “Benny won’t be able to cave it in with all of the police officers there.”

Faith wasn’t as confident as Michael was, but when she looked at his face, she saw he wasn’t confident either. He was only saying that for the girls’ benefit.

And it was their best chance, even if it wasn’t a good one.

They started down the tunnel, occasionally consulting the maps to make sure they were headed in the right direction.

“I think we can reach the entrance faster if we take one of these tunnels,” Michael said, pointing to a system of natural tunnels that connected with the mines closer to the entrance and avoided the maze Faith and Shawna had navigated during their search for Frankie.

“Works for me,” Faith said.

"Well, before you say yes," Michael said, lowering his voice so the others wouldn't hear, "the tunnels are narrow. If we get jumped by Benny again, it's going to be tight work fighting him. I can lead, so I have the weapon. We can keep Turk in the rear, but if he gets one of us in a bad spot, we might not be able to get out of it."

Faith considered a moment. On open ground, she was confident that she, Michael or

Turk could handle Benny, alone or together. They weren't on open ground, however. They were in a cave system that Benny knew, like the back of his hand. He had home-field advantage, and that was far from a minor concern in this circumstance.

But if he caved in the other entrances, they would be doomed. Their survival depended on getting out of this cave before he could close them in.

“All right,” she said. “Lead the way.” They reached the tunnel and found it as narrow as Michael described. If they moved carefully, they could stay on their feet, but it was painfully slow going.

Faith listened carefully as they walked. From time to time, she could hear skittering in the tunnels around and above them, but she couldn't tell if the noise was made by rats or by Benny.

The darkness was oppressive. Even with their flashlights, it seemed that they swam through a thick sea of black. Even the air seemed thicker down here. The girls whimpered and clung to each other as they followed Michael. Faith wished she could think of something to say to reassure them, but nothing she could think of outweighed the all-consuming darkness.

Then the tunnel opened up. Faith looked around and saw that they had reached the main cavern just before the mine entrance. She sighed with relief. They had made it. They would be all right.

Then a cry of rage split the air. She whirled around, but not in time to stop Benny from shoving her backwards off of her feet. She flew backwards, dropping her light in the process. It skittered to the side, its beam arcing through the darkness as it spun around.

Michael turned around and leveled his weapon at the killer, but Benny dove behind a

cart and the bullet ricocheted harmlessly off of the side. Faith got to her feet and watched as Benny rushed from car to car, remaining behind cover as Michael tried ineffectually to find a shot.

A rock sailed through the air toward Michael's head. "Look out!" Faith cried.

Michael saw the rock just in time to avoid getting bruised in the head. The rock crashed into his shoulder instead. He cried out and dropped his weapon, and Benny leaped for him.

Turk saw him and lunged, jaws snapping. Benny veered away from Michael, but as he did, he kicked the handgun across the room. It fell into a pit a dozen yards away.

Michael stood, rubbing his sore shoulder, and glared at Benny, who scrambled away from Turk, casting wide, fearful eyes on the dog.

His gaze flickered up toward the girls, and his eyes narrowed. With a cry of rage, he rushed toward them. Turk leaped in between the killer and the two women, fangs bared, ears flat against his head.

Benny snarled at the dog, his rage seeming to have overcome his fear, and lunged for him, but Turk sidestepped. He snapped at Benny's ankles, but Benny too was prepared. He leapt out of harm's way, then kicked at Turk. The blow glanced off of Turk's hip, but it was enough to send the dog flying toward the two agents.

Frankie and Shawna stood and rushed for the exit, but Benny outpaced them, shoving them to the ground, and then turning to face them. "No! You can't get away!"

He grabbed Shawna and picked her up, holding her in the air in front of him.

This time, Frankie intervened, shrieking and scratching and clawing at his eyes. “Let her go, you bastard!”

He released Shawna and pushed both of them to the ground once more.

Turk continued to keep Benny at bay while the girls put distance between themselves and the killer.

“The entrance is just behind us,” Michael said, “we can lead the girls outside, and the police can help us with Benny.”

“All right,” Faith replied. “Take the girls and get them out.”

“What are you going to do?” Michael asked.

“I’m going to stop him,” she said. Seeing Michael’s alarm, she added, “Don’t worry. I plan on surviving today.”

“You plan on it?”

“Yes,” she said. “Now go.”

He looked back at Benny, who stalked them, grinning, certain he had them trapped now. Then he said, “Okay. If you die, I swear to God, I’ll haunt you.”

“That’s not how it works,” Faith said with a smile, “but all right. Now get out of here!”

He rushed after Shawna and Frankie and led them toward the tunnel. Benny’s smile faded, and with a snarl, he sprinted after them.

Faith and Turk lunged at him, Turk leaping into the air, fangs bared, Faith diving into his waist and wrapping her arms around him. He cried out and stumbled, but managed to keep his feet, even as Turk bit into his arm.

“No!” he cried out, “You guys are cheaters!”

He threw Turk off of him and lifted his fist to hit Faith. She saw a bullet wound in his shoulder. Apparently, one of Michael’s shots had hit him after all.

She shoved her thumb into the wound, and Benny's eyes flew open wide. He gasped and backed away from her. "Owie!" he cried, “Owie, owie, owie!” His lower lip trembled a moment, but then his eyes narrowed. “You!” he cried out.

He rushed at Faith, and Turk leaped in between them, once more dancing around him, biting and snapping and just avoiding Benny's kicks and lunges.

Faith approached again, but Benny moved quickly, desperation lending him strength. He kicked out, catching Faith in her ribs and driving the air from her lungs. She collapsed to the ground, and Turk leaped in front of her at the killer.

Benny caught him in the air, and with a snarl of rage, he drove his fist into Turk’s skull once, twice, then a third time. After the third blow, Turk slumped, dazed, and Benny tossed him away.

Faith got to her feet, but her ribs burned. Benny glared at her, approaching cautiously. “I’m going to kill you,” he said. “I’m going to kill you for letting the trespassers get away.”

Faith’s ribs ached. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could fight. Benny also breathed heavily, the wound in his shoulder starting to take its toll.

He glared at Faith and said, "I'm going to kill you and your stupid dog. Maybe I'll kill him first and make you watch."

That was the final straw for Faith. She looked to her left and saw the pile of explosives she had seen when she first entered the cave.

That gave her an idea.

Faith pulled her pocket flare out of its pouch on her belt. She cracked the flare and it roared into life, fizzing and sparking with light.

Benny looked up at her, confused. Then he realized, and his eyes widened in horror.

"Now, Turk!" she cried.

Turk leaped in between Benny's legs and bit down hard on his groin. Benny emitted a sound like a teakettle boiling and fell to the ground, beating at Turk's head.

Faith turned toward the explosive bricks and tossed the flare. It arced through the air, the shadows it cast undulating across the room like wraiths.

It landed on top of the explosives and burned. Faith estimated they had less than a minute before it burned through the casing and activated the starter charge. Once the first brick went off, the others would too.

They needed to be out of the cave when that happened.

"Let's go, Turk!" she called.

Turk released the weeping Benny and sprinted after Faith. Benny struggled to his feet, but this latest wound was finally too much for him to handle. He took two

wavery steps toward them, then collapsed to the ground.

“No!” he shouted after them. “I hate you!”

Faith and Turk sprinted into the brightening light of the day. Michael and Jones greeted them with smiles, but their smiles disappeared when Faith said, “Back up! It’s gonna blow!”

The officers turned tail and ran, leaving their vehicle behind. Shawna and Frankie were already several yards past the cars, but they also turned and ran.

Faith and Turk brought up the rear and made it about thirty yards away from the cave entrance when the bricks went off. A roar so loud they felt rather than heard it slammed into their back, followed by a blast wave that knocked all of them off of their feet.

The sky lit brightly, and when Faith rolled over, she saw a burst of flame shoot from the tunnel and rise over fifty feet into the air. It disappeared in a puff of smoke, and that was when Faith felt the ground shake.

She got to her feet and watched in amazement as Benny, blood dripping from his wounds, struggled to the entrance. He paused at the mouth of the mine and leaned against the wall.

And the mine collapsed.

Rock and dirt tumbled downward. The mountain sunk inward, collapsing in on itself as millions of tons of Earth filled the cavern. Benny was visible one moment, and the next he was consumed by the rockslide.

They watched in awe as the mountain reshaped, a massive cliff replacing the slope, a

forty-foot pile of rock covering the mouth of the mine and forming a new slope that ended seventy feet below the lip of the cliff. Faith felt another low rumble as the earth settled.

Then there was silence.

“What are you going to do?” Faith asked.

Jones shrugged. “As little as I possibly can for the rest of my life.”

“Must be nice,” Michael said.

Jones shrugged again. “It’s something.”

“Who’s going to take over?” Faith asked.

“Well,” Jones said, “I’m guessing they’ll probably just merge the department with Brightwater. That makes more sense anyway. Most of the people in town are moving there after this. I don’t blame them.”

“Are you moving?”

“Yes, but not to Brightwater. I’m moving to New York.”

“Small town life not fun anymore, huh?” Michael asked.

Jones scoffed. “I wasn’t here for fun. I was here to take care of these people. They needed help, and when I was twenty-eight, I thought I could save the world. Turns out the world is shitty no matter who you save.”

Faith looked out the window of the breakroom where Shawna and Frankie were holding hands and talking with Frankie’s father. The three of them smiled and laughed, the fear that had consumed them only hours ago gone.

“It’s still worth saving people,” she opined.

Jones smiled softly and watched as the two girls piled into Mr. Cole’s sedan. “Yeah. I suppose you’re right.”

They watched the would-be victims drive away, back home to safety and comfort. When the car turned the corner out of view, Michael asked, “So what’s happening with the caves?”

“The mayor’s sealing it off,” he said. “They’re paying the construction crew to close off all of the entrances. It won’t make up for the money they’re losing now that the warehouse isn’t being built anymore, but it’s something.”

“So that’s it for Granger, huh?” Michael asked.

“Oh, people will stay behind,” Jones said. “Some people like to live apart. They can keep to their own ways without having to concern themselves with reality outside of their little bubble. I guess everyone’s like that in a way.”

Michal nodded agreement. Faith didn’t. Some people didn’t have the luxury of living in bubbles anymore. She could retire today and move to Alaska with Turk and spend the rest of her life living off of the land, but she would never be able to unremember the faces of the dead innocents she’d seen over the years, never be able to unsee Trammell’s leer or West’s contemptuous smirk or Benny’s sunken face.

Her bubble had been burst, and so had those of Shawna and Frankie. They could retreat into normalcy for the rest of their lives, but Faith was willing to bet there would still be nights while they woke up screaming, certain that they were back underground running from a murderer.

Michael had once told her that a part of her never left Trammell’s barn, and he was

right. When you locked eyes with death, death always took something. It never left you whole.

Maybe it was time for Faith to come to terms with that.

In the airplane, Michael and Faith enjoyed coffee and a light breakfast. The exhaustion of the past several days finally settled on Faith. She felt exhausted, more so than she had ever been.

She thought again of Decker, this time the day after they had been caught by the platoon sergeant just before the culmination of their tryst. They had looked at each other, and whatever Decker saw in Faith's eyes must have told him he wasn't getting another chance with her. He looked disappointed for a moment, but in true Decker fashion, his disappointment was short-lived.

He grinned at Faith and said, "Well, it was good exercise, at least."

She chuckled, and Michael said, "What's so funny?"

She shook her head. "Just remembering something an old friend said about exercise."

"Well, this is definitely the most physically active case we've dealt with so far," Michael said. "I should take a few more of these cases. I'll end up with my college body, and then Ellie will be really happy to see me when I get home."

Faith smiled softly, the most she could manage in her own weary state. "TMI," she said.

"Oh, whatever. Tell me you don't get excited to go home and see David."

Her smile faded. David was probably lost to her. She had asked too much of him, and now he was taken from her as West said he would be.

But Michael wasn't. She looked at him and said, "You were right."

He grinned. "Well, yeah, always, but what specifically am I right about today?"

"I never left Trammell's barn."

Michael's smile faded. "Hey, look, Faith, I was angry when I said that. It's not true."

"Yes, it is," she said. "It's true. I nearly died. What's more, I nearly died because I was beaten. Trammell laid in wait for me, beat me, tied me to a chair and mutilated me."

Michael shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with Faith's bluntness. To tell the truth, she wasn't remotely comfortable with this herself, but that would never change as long as she refused to acknowledge it.

"And it affected me," she said. "Deeply. I recovered physically, but the mental scars are still there, and they always will be."

He pressed his lips together and nodded. "I'm so sorry, Faith," he said, "I really am. I hate that this happened to you. If there was anything I could do to help, I would."

There was something he could do, but now wasn't the right time to ask him to help her pursue West. So, she said, "There's nothing you can do. There's nothing anyone can do. Even I can't do anything to stop it. It's a part of me now. That sucks, and I hate it, but it's the truth. I will always have been nearly killed by Jethro Trammell and badly beaten twice by Franklin West. That's just reality."

“So, I have two choices. I can let the knowledge that I’ve been hurt and that hurt will affect me for the rest of my life cause me to lose control and alienate the people who love me, destroy my career and turn me into someone selfish and disgusting, or I can accept it and do the best I can to live a good life, to care for others and to maintain the relationships that are important to me.”

“Does this mean that you’re giving up on West?” Michael asked.

Faith hesitated a moment before answering, but she kept her eyes on his when she said, “No. I’m not giving up on him. Maybe that’s wrong of me, but I won’t insult your intelligence by lying to you. I still want him, and I’ll still put myself at risk to get him.”

Michael sighed deeply and said, “Well, wherever you go and whatever you do, Faith, if you need me, call. This time, I’ll answer.”

Faith smiled gratefully at him. She reached over and took his hand in hers. He squeezed back and returned her smile. They sat like that for a long while before sleep finally overcame them, and they went to their separate bunks to nap.

“No luck on the Florida lead?”

“No, looks like that was a doppelganger,” Michael said over the phone. “You’ll be happy to know that we’re not the only agents to piss off the South African Embassy, though.”

Faith grimaced. In a previous case, Turk had misidentified a South African businessman as a suspect and apprehended him rather aggressively. That had nearly cost Faith her job. “Ouch. How bad is it?”

“Not bad. A couple of bruises when Desrouleaux slammed him to the ground. He’s not pressing charges, but we’re paying his medical bills and buying him tickets to Disneyworld.”

“That sounds like a fair trade to me,” Faith said.

“I mean, we both know Desrouleaux hits like a girl, so yeah, I’d take that trade.”

“Watch it,” Faith warned playfully.

He chuckled and said, “Well, there aren’t any more leads yet that I’m aware of, but the current belief is that he’s somewhere out of the country. The Bureau is talking to Interpol right now to see if we can get some manhunters on him in Europe. We’ll have to work on the rest of the world, but we’ll get him eventually. He can only run for so long.”

Faith was still absolutely certain that West was within a few hours of Philadelphia, but she didn’t argue that point with Michael. “Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate this.”

“No problem,” he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

She hung up just in time to hear a knock at the door. She frowned and checked the time. Who was visiting her at seven-thirty? She glanced at her new handgun and wondered if she should carry it, just in case.

Then Turk leaped to his feet, wagging his tail and barking exuberantly. He ran for the door and scrambled for the handle, trying to open it, and Faith realized who was at the door.

She smiled and walked for the door. “Hold on, Turk,” she says, “I’ll get it.”

She opened the door, and once more, David took her breath away.

He smiled nervously at her, so kind, so strong, so incredibly handsome. “Hi there,” he said, “I wanted to stop by and see how my favorite patient was doing.”

Turk answered that question himself, leaping into David’s arms and licking him with all the enthusiasm of a puppy. David laughed and carried him inside. “I guess he’s doing okay,” he said wryly. “He’s definitely got his weight back.”

“Yeah, he’s healthy again,” Faith said. “Maybe even a little chunky.”

Turk cast her a wounded look, but it passed an instant later. He leaped off of David and immediately sat in the middle of the couch. He looked expectantly at them, and Faith blushed a little. When she and David were dating, they would sit on either side of Turk and watch movies with him. Those were some of Faith’s favorite memories.

“What the heck,” David said, “I have time. How about that movie with the dog that plays football?”

“You always pick that movie,” Faith said with a laugh.

“Well, how many movies do you know that have dogs who don’t die at the end that aren’t cartoons or a live-action adaptation of a cartoon?”

“The football movie is fine,” she said with a laugh. “Do you want a beer?”

“What is it with you and beer?” he asked, “Do you never drink anything else?”

“Well, my doctor wants me to cut back on the Everclear, so for now, it’s just beer.

Unless you want coffee.”

"The coffee, too," he said, shaking his head. "You know sleep is a thing, right?"

She laughed. "Sleep is not a thing if you're a law enforcement agent," she said, "But that's cute of you to think so."

"Well, if you insist, I'll take a beer."

She returned with the beers, smiling as she saw David with his arm around Turk. It felt almost like old times.

She sat and David put on the movie. Turk, as always, grew really excited when he saw the dog. He barked and looked at the two of them as if to say, Do you see that? Do you see that other dog?

"He kinda looks like you," Faith said with a grin.

Turk looked back at the golden retriever on the screen and cocked his head in confusion. David and Faith laughed, and then suddenly, David reached across and grabbed Faith's hand. Faith's eyes widened at the suddenly earnest expression on his face.

"Let's start over," he said. "Forget about everything that happened and just start again. This time, I won't ask you for any more than you can give me. I know that it will be a long time before you can give me anything more than just a movie night here and a date there, but I'm willing to wait."

"I..." Faith stammered, "I... I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," David insisted. "It turns out, I'd rather have a moment with you than a

lifetime with anyone else. So even if we only get to see each other for a few days every now and then when you're not working, I'm willing to do that. If that means it's twenty years before I can have more, so be it."

She wanted desperately to believe him, but she had to be sure. "Are you sure you know what you're saying," she said. "It really could be a long time before I can commit anything. I... I'm not going to let go of West."

"I know," he said. "Giving up is not in your nature. You wouldn't be the woman I love if it was."

"Okay," she said, "If you're... wait, the woman you..."

He smiled softly, and when he leaned forward and kissed her, the answer to Faith's question was clear.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:43 pm

West hadn't felt excitement like this in a long time. He sometimes forgot how good killing made him feel. There was no power on Earth like the power to take a life. Life, which in all its forms had to struggle for the right to simply exist in the first place, and he could take that right at will.

And from other humans, no less. The most powerful and dangerous creatures on Earth, and at the apex of that apex of predators sat the man who now thought of himself as Franklin West.

He felt a rush of gratitude for Faith Bold. She had given him his purpose. She had given him his identity.

He smiled and inhaled deeply of the cool night air. His target lay asleep in the house in front of him. Like many war veterans, he had sought solace in emptiness. This house was built on five acres on a high desert plateau. The nearest neighbor was seven miles away, and the nearest police station was sixteen miles away. He could take his time.

He cut the phone lines first, just in case. More likely than not, the man here would have a cell phone, but a certain amount of risk made the game more fun.

When West finished preparing, he headed to a side window. He pulled his latest tools from his bag: a massive suction cup with a grip handle and a glass cutter with its own suction cup.

He listened carefully, and when he confirmed that the tv was on in the living room, he went to work, placing the suction cup on the glass and positioning the cutter next to

it. He opened the cutter to its widest arc and drew the blade slowly around the glass.

When the cutter completed the circle, he pulled gently on the handle of the suction cup. The circular pane slid loose, and he carefully lowered the heavy glass to the ground, muscles straining with the effort.

He grinned again and carefully pushed himself through the opening.

He found the man sitting on his couch. The man looked up in shock.

“Motherfu—” he began, reaching for the rifle that lay next to the end table.

He never finished the word. West, knowing this man might present a tougher physical threat than he was used to, had come prepared for that as well. He lunged forward and drove the brass knuckles on his right hand hard into the man’s jaw. He felt the crunch of breaking bones and snarled with joy as the man collapsed to the ground.

God, it felt good to be able to make noise! When he was finished with Bold, maybe he would move somewhere like this, somewhere he could kill without the threat of discovery forcing stealth and silence.

But he wasn’t finished with Bold. Not yet. And this man would be killed for a purpose larger than himself.

Working quickly, West tied the unconscious man’s wrists and ankles together behind his back. Then, with an effort, he lifted him and set him against a chair, pressing his chest against the back. He tied the man to the chair, tying the last knot just as the man awoke.

“W—What?” the man said groggily.

“Good evening, Staff Sergeant Decker,” he said with a smile. “It’s a pleasure to

finally meet. Faith has told me so much about you.”