



# So Twisted (Faith Bold #19)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

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

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

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Marcus Reeves hated animals. Seriously, he freaking hated them. So, of course, he chose a career that involved being around them all the damned time.

“What a genius you are. Just like your father.”

Marcus Reeves’ father was Damon Reeves, the former owner of a used car dealership and current most annoying resident of the Nebraska State Penitentiary. Had Marcus not managed to call in some favors from a few moderately placed individuals in the state government, Marcus would be the second most annoying resident. Probably. No one had told him he was annoying to his face, but he could see the way people looked at him.

“Still working in a cage, buddy,” he reminded himself.

He had to admit that it was a pretty big perk that he got to go home to his own apartment after this. It was a shitty apartment, the literal cheapest apartment in Omaha, but it was his, and it wasn’t a prison cell, and he didn’t have any animals within several hundred yards of where he lived since the entire complex didn’t allow pets.

Marcus had at one time been a millionaire. He had taken advice from his father, who warned him that the used car business was a racket. “Become a zookeeper instead. Animals are cheap, and people will pay a lot of money to stare at them.”

Good advice. Animals were cheap, and people did pay a lot of money to stare at them. The problem was that animals were only cheap if you didn’t care about them and didn’t mind that they died at a rate the good people of the USDA’s Animal and

Plant Health Inspection Service called “alarming.”

Well, they were alarmed enough to shut Marcus’s zoo down. He avoided the felony by calling friends and basically agreeing to publicly admit that he was a piece of shit. It cost him enough money that he sold his four-million-dollar house and moved into the shitty little apartment.

But he had an apartment. He could not express enough how much better that was than a prison cell.

If only he could get another job.

The chimpanzees rushed for him, shrieking. “Jesus!” he cried out. “God damn it!”

The chimpanzees crashed into the fence, and Marcus stared in amazement, hand over his pounding heart, as the apes screamed in frustration at the fact that their fence prevented them from tearing Marcus’s face off.

“And people think these monkeys are cute,” he muttered.

He flipped the chimpanzees the bird and moved on to the next cage.

That’s right. Marcus Reeves was no longer the owner of the Wild World Animal Adventure Park. He was the night security guard at the Council Bluffs Animal Rescue Sanctuary, a little zoo that specialized in taking animals too screwed up to live in normal zoos and making them Marcus’s problem.

But they paid him, and apparently, they were the only business in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area that was willing to pay him. He wasn’t a felon, but his friends were only moderately placed, and they couldn’t expunge the fact that he had been convicted of misdemeanor negligence and failure to comply with state and

federal animal care requirements.

“News story probably had something to do with it,” he said.

From time to time, Marcus received death threats from fine, upstanding citizens involved in animal rights activism. Because the animals were the ones who needed the damned activism. Forget about all the people who needed help. Forget about the kids starving in Africa. It was the gorillas who really need the attention.

As he had that thought, he remembered his ex-wife’s challenge to that very complaint. And what have you done for the kids in Africa, Marcus? Huh? How much did you donate?

And he, in his infinite wisdom, had grabbed his crotch and said, “I’ll donate this. How about that?”

How about a divorce? How about he gets to live alone for the rest of his life, hated by everyone except for the few who pity him?

But hey, he had an apartment.

He sighed and stopped in front of the gift shop. That was the last place he had to check before he went home. It also was one of the only places he had to check that didn’t have animals. Without needing to worry about getting attacked or spit on or screeched at, he had time to reflect on what a truly terrible person he was.

And he was a truly terrible person.

“I’ll turn it around,” he said. “I’ll fix it. You’ll see. I just need to stay clean, work on myself, do my job and be kind to people and animals. That’s all. I lost my way, but I’ll find it again. I can do it.”

He looked up at his reflection in the glass of the gift shop and forced a smile. He didn't look like he meant the smile, but he was faking it, at least. That was a start.

And he would find his way again. He wasn't a bad person. He'd just made mistakes. He could be a good person. He just needed time to—

He caught a shadow moving in the reflection. Something sleek and black and large moving on all fours behind him. He frowned and turned around, drawing his flashlight and shining it at the object.

The “object” turned out to be the sanctuary's black panther. It stalked him, moving slowly closer and growling low in its throat.

“Oh shit!” Marcus hissed. “Shit!”

This was why he wanted a gun. Damn it, he knew this was going to happen. He reached for the bear spray they gave him instead of a gun.

And because he was freaking worthless, he dropped it. It fell to the ground and clattered underneath the gate and out to the parking lot.

Marcus turned back to the cat and lifted his hand. “Okay,” he said, his voice shaky. “Nice kitty. Please don't hurt me.”

The panther stood on its hind legs and unzipped its fur. It pulled something from inside itself out and approached Marcus. The “something” looked like a stick with a box with box cutter blades on the end. Marcus blinked and tried to process what he was seeing. “What the hell?”

The “panther” lunged forward. The stick thing slammed into Marcus's neck, and the box snapped shut. Box cutters pierced Marcus's throat, severing his windpipe along

with both carotid arteries. His last thought as he fell was that he would never get a chance to be a good person after all.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI's Philadelphia Field Office approached Special Agent Julia Chavez of the FBI's Philadelphia Field Office and gave the younger agent a smile. Chavez blanched, and Faith resisted the urge to roll her eyes. For God's sake, why was Chavez so afraid of her?

"Hey, Julia," she said. "I'm heading to the Hoagie Hub for a cheesesteak. You want one?"

"Uh, uh... Yeah. Sure." Chavez blinked and managed a smile herself. She seemed a little embarrassed at her initial reaction. "Yeah, I could go for a sandwich. I'll see if Des wants to come."

Faith frowned. "Des?"

Chavez reddened. "Special Agent Desrouleaux."

"Oh, right."

It was well known at the office that Chavez had a massive crush on her partner. It was equally well-known that Desrouleaux was aware of the crush and wasn't interested but was too chicken to tell her. Faith thought the whole thing was rather silly. Just admit your feelings and move on.

Like you're one to talk .

Faith grimaced inwardly. She was planning on breaking up with her boyfriend, David, because she wasn't ready for the future he wanted. But she hadn't. Instead,

she had used her need to keep a low profile for a while as an excuse for moving an hour away to Allentown instead of moving in with him.

Then there was the little thing about her unresolved feelings for her own partner.

“Hey, Des,” Chavez said. “Faith and I are going for sandwiches. You want to come?”

She paled again. “Des” must have said no. Meaning Chavez was going to be alone with Faith.

“Um... maybe I’ll just order to go and bring one back for you?” Chavez said hopefully.

No dice. She paled further and said, “Yeah, sure. I’ll... I’ll do that.”

She hung up and sighed heavily, then gave Faith a forced smile and said too brightly. “Okay! Let’s go get some lunch!”

Do the other agents tell ghost stories about me around the campfire or something? “Let’s do it,” she replied, matching Chavez’s bubblyness.

They started out of the building, and Faith struggled not to laugh at Chavez’s stiff posture. Chavez looked around and frowned. “Where’s Turk?”

“He’s got the day off,” Faith said. “Well, from work, anyway. It’s time for his semiannual checkup, and I let David keep him for the day.”

Chavez’s demeanor softened. “You’re so lucky to have David. I’m so glad things are working out for you guys. I wish I had something like that.”

Faith stiffened a little and hoped that didn’t show on her face. “Thank you. So none



of the boys are having any luck with you?”

Chavez laughed. “It’s not for want of trying. But no, I mean... None of them are my type.”

No, you like old, cranky Louisiana boys. Aloud, she said, “Well, you should let yourself have some fun.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

They fell silent until they left the building. Hoagie Hub was across the street, very wisely choosing to open near a place where they were guaranteed a steady stream of very hungry law enforcement agents and analysts who were willing to spend twenty percent more to have their sandwich within walking distance of their desks. But hey, Faith was one of them. Who was she to judge?

Besides, today’s lunch had a purpose. That was why when they entered, Faith immediately said, “It’s on me.”

To Chavez's credit, she was a good enough agent to realize that Faith's out-of-the-blue offer of lunch came with an ulterior motive. Her eyes narrowed, and the pallor in her skin disappeared. She was in work mode now, and it didn't matter that Faith intimidated the hell out of her.

Faith grudgingly admired that even as she realized that Chavez was likely to be guarded. Faith needed her not to be guarded so she could get the information she wanted.

She’d have to be patient. She’d have to work her way into Chavez’s trust. She might even have to take her out for lunch regularly in order to soften her up enough to discuss the Messenger, the latest in a series of psychopathic serial killers who had

developed an obsession with Faith.

Faith was not good at being patient.

So, once they got their sandwiches, she sighed and said, “Okay, Chavez. You figured it out already, I’m sure, but this isn’t just a social call.”

“Really?” Chavez replied drily. “You ask me to lunch for the first time in the two years we’ve worked in the same office, and it’s not just because you want some girl bonding time?”

Wow. Work-mode Chavez was very unintimidated. Faith folded her hands on the table and said, “I need to know what’s going on with this case, Chavez. This person is trying to kill me.”

“We don’t think so,” Chavez countered. “We think he’s trying to get your attention.”

“Well, he’s got it. He brutally killed a sweet old woman who liked feeding Turk treats. Then he posed her body in front of my doorway. So yeah, he’s got my attention.”

“And you need to take it off of him,” Chavez said. “Seriously. The more attention you show, the more he’s going to escalate.”

“I don’t think so,” Faith argued. “I think he’s upset because I’m not paying attention. He’s trying to get my attention, and I’m not giving it to him. He’s going to keep escalating until he gets what he wants.”

“So what? Once you start looking into the case, he’ll stop?”

Faith opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Exactly.” Chavez sighed. “I’m not going to pretend that I understand what you’re going through. I sympathize with you. I can imagine that it’s difficult to be in your situation. I won’t claim to know how difficult. But I also know that you’re probably the best agent in the Bureau right now. So as a less experienced agent to a more experienced agent: if our positions were reversed, what would you tell me?”

Faith frowned and looked over Chavez’s shoulder. She recognized a massive black SUV pulling into the parking lot. The SUV belonged to her partner, Special Agent Michael Prince.

Michael was here. On his day off. That meant it wasn’t his day off anymore, which meant she wasn’t going to be in Philadelphia for much longer.

Which meant there was no point in lying to Chavez. “I would tell you that you’re not in the right frame of mind to be actively involved in this case. I would encourage you to let the agents assigned to the case handle it.”

“Okay, then.” Chavez smiled. Faith hated the pity in that smile. “If it makes you feel better, the killer’s gone quiet. There was a gap of a week in between the first two victims. It’s been a month since then, and there’s no more ‘messages.’”

“Don’t call them that,” Faith snapped. “They’re not messages.”

“Okay,” Chavez said. She paled a little as some of her fear of Faith returned. “Victims. No more victims. Local PD is reporting that the neighborhood watch programs are stepping up their vigilance, and they have more cops out on beat now, so maybe the guy’s in hiding. Or maybe he gave up because you weren’t giving him what he wanted.”

“Yeah,” Faith agreed. “Maybe. Do me a favor. Give my sub to Desrouleaux.”

She stood and stalked out of the shop, leaving a shocked Chavez behind at the table. She made it three steps before sighing and returning to the sub shop. “Chavez?”

The younger agent cast her a wary glance.

“I’m sorry. I’m... obviously not in the right frame of mind to discuss this case. You’re right. I need to let you and Desrouleaux handle it. It’s just upsetting to leave one serial killer behind and have another one on my ass right after him.”

Chavez smiled sympathetically. “I get it. I mean, I don’t , but I do.” She reddened. “What I’m trying to say is—”

She was saved from further embarrassment when Faith’s phone buzzed. It was Michael. “Hey, Faith, where are you?”

“Hey. I was grabbing lunch with Chavez.”

“Really? Awesome. Look at you being social. Damn it, I feel bad now.”

“About what?”

“The Boss called us in. Tell Chavez you’ll make it up to you.”

Faith was actually grateful for the chance to leave lunch. She wasn’t proud of being rude to Chavez, but she would have been irritable for the rest of the meal and Chavez had suffered enough of her grouchiness. “Sorry, Chavez. The Boss needs me for something.”

Chavez did a passable job of hiding her relief. “No worries. Catch you later.”

Faith left the sub shop and met Michael at the entrance to the field office.

. “Where’s Turk?” Michael asked.

“He’s with David at the animal hospital.”

“Is he all right?”

“He’s fine. He’s getting his semiannual checkup.”

“Ah. Well, that might be a problem.”

“It was the FBI’s idea to do these evaluations. Criminals tend not to follow our schedules.”

She was in the parking lot now, so she hung up her phone and closed the distance. Michael smiled at her, but his smile was awkward, as was the nod he gave her. Yet another thing in her life that was frustrating.

She had made the mistake of confessing to Michael that she was having feelings for him again. In hindsight, those feelings were a mixture of cold feet over the move with David, concern over the existence of this latest killer and the need to talk to someone who understood what it was like to hunt serial killers for a living.

But now things were awkward between them and probably would be for the rest of their lives. Michael was happily married, and his feet were nowhere near cold when it came to spending the rest of his life with his bride, Ellie. He was not happy to hear that his partner missed the one year they spent dating of the eleven and counting they had known each other.

It didn’t help that in one of Faith’s weaker moments, she had briefly suspected Ellie of being the Copycat Killer. By odd coincidence, she was actually not far off since the killer had turned out to be Ellie’s ex-husband Franklin West.

But yeah, that was her life right now. She was stringing along a man she wasn't sure she wanted to live with but didn't want to leave, she was boxed out of the case involving the latest serial killer who just needed to get under her skin, and her best friend didn't want to look at her. Her next few therapy sessions were going to be fun.

"How soon can you get Turk?" Michael asked as they walked inside.

"Well, I hear they have a railroad to East Philly now, so if we hurry up here, we could make the afternoon train and get there by next Sunday."

"Ha ha."

"He's at the animal hospital, Michael. It's like twenty minutes away."

He frowned at her. "Is there a reason you're being pissy?"

Her jaw clenched. She hated when he said that. She hated even more when he had good reason to.

"I just had... well, sort of had lunch with Chavez."

"And you asked about the Messenger, and she told you to back off."

Faith sighed. "Yes."

"And you're upset because she's not as terrified of you as you thought she was."

"Oh, she's afraid of me. She can just turn it off when it comes to protecting hers and Des's case."

"Des? Do people call him that?"

“Chavez does.”

Michael chuckled. “Poor kid. Rookie mistake falling in love with your partner like that.”

He caught himself and stiffened. “Shit, Faith. I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“It’s fine,” she said curtly. “Just drop it.”

They rode the elevator in awkward silence. Faith’s cheeks flamed, and she hated that he could see her embarrassment. There was so much she hated these days. The only part of her life that was completely good right now was Turk. The FBI had allowed him to continue working past the mandatory retirement age, and he was still her assigned K9 unit.

She comforted herself with the fact that she would at least get to work with him soon. Something to take her mind off of all the crap.

She kept that in mind as the elevator opened, and they stepped out and headed toward the Boss’s office.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Special Agent-in-Charge Grant Monroe, known semi-affectionately as the Boss to his subordinates at the Philadelphia Field Office, was rarely in a good mood. His normal demeanor reminded Faith of the more surly of her drill instructors from the Marine Corps.

He was in a bad mood today. He was in a bad mood most days he needed to see Faith, at least recently. Faith was a bit of a celebrity in Philadelphia due to her high-profile connection to Franklin West, the most notorious serial killer in the city's history. With West on trial and that trial being treated as the news story of the century, Faith was a media darling, which in the eyes of the Bureau meant she was a liability. She had barely managed to keep her job as a field agent by moving to Allentown, a smaller city about an hour or two north of Philly, depending on traffic, and by taking jobs that moved her far away from the city of brotherly love.

“Where’s Turk?” he barked.

Faith sighed. She should just have Turk’s whereabouts printed on a t-shirt whenever he wasn’t with her. “He’s at the animal hospital. Today is his semiannual checkup.”

The Boss scowled. “When will it be over?”

“It’s an all-day battery of tests. David’s usually pretty quick with them, but it’ll still be three hours probably.”

The Boss sighed. “We’ll have to reschedule. You two are on a flight in two and a half hours.”



“Where to this time, Boss?” Michael asked.

“Omaha.”

“Nebraska. Fun.”

The Boss glared at Michael, but apparently couldn’t determine exactly what joke Michael was trying to play at his expense. “Yes. We were personally requested by the Council Bluffs Animal Rescue Sanctuary.”

Michael lifted an eyebrow. “Iowa. Even more fun.”

"We are all truly impressed by your knowledge of geography, Prince," the Boss said. "Now, let's talk about the murder you two will be investigating."

“Hold on,” Faith interrupted. “We were requested by an animal sanctuary? People can do that?”

The Boss rubbed his temples. “Local law enforcement agreed to ask for our second opinion at the sanctuary’s urging. Would you like to know exactly which forms were filed, or can I tell you what we know about the murder?”

“Go ahead, Boss.”

The Boss reached into his desk and dropped a folder on the counter. “Marcus Reeves, forty-seven. Found in the morning by the opening janitorial crew. Looked like that.”

Faith’s stomach was nearly ironclad after over a decade of investigating brutal crime scenes, so she wasn’t put off by the image, but she could imagine that the poor janitors weren’t so mellow about it. “Looks like his throat was torn out.”

“Looks like it. Janitor almost got her throat torn out too. Turns out a panther was on the loose.”

Michael frowned. “And... that’s not the cause of death?”

“Local PD says yes. Animal sanctuary says no. They forced the issue, and the body was taken to the coroner. Local PD agreed to call us.”

“Any idea what it could have been if it wasn’t a panther?”

“Well, they wanted to call us, so I’m guessing a person.”

Faith resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Did they give a reason?”

“I don’t know, Bold. I didn’t talk to the sanctuary, I talked to the lieutenant who called in the request. Everything we know is on that page. Marcus Reeves, forty-seven, throat torn out by possibly not a panther.”

Faith and Michael shared a look. “Is everything all right, sir?” Faith asked. “I mean... is there something I should know?”

“You should know that now is a very good time for you to be out of Philadelphia for a while. Go get your dog and get on the plane. Solve this case, and hopefully by then, things will be back to what passes for normal around here.”

Faith had a strong feeling the Boss was hiding something from her, but it was probably better not to press him for information right now. She took the file and stood. “All right, sir. We’ll get right on it.”

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When they were on their way to the hospital, Michael asked, “How are things? With you and David, I mean?”

Faith sighed. “I really don’t want to talk about this right now.”

“He’s pretty upset, huh?”

It occurred to Faith that Michael thought she had broken up with him. Now she really, really didn’t want to talk about it.

But he would see David being affectionate with her and Faith returning that affection. She sighed again and said, “No. I... we’re still together.”

Michael’s eyes popped open. “Oh yeah? That’s wonderful!” He grinned. “See? I told you you two would be okay.”

“Yep. One big happy family. Can we not talk about my personal life anymore?”

“Sure, sure. But also, congratulations. It’s so much fun living with the person you love. You get to have them there all the time and—”

“Oh my God!” she shouted. “Can you stop, please?”

“Right. Sorry.”

They reached the hospital in twenty minutes on the dot. It was two-thirty, which meant Turk would be in the middle of his aerobics test. That meant he would be on the first floor in the hospital’s dog gym. David was one of only a handful of vets licensed to perform evaluations of FBI K9s, and though he had his own office in the city, he could often be found at the animal hospital testing K9s from all over the northeast or treating local units for injuries sustained on the job.

Turk was on the treadmill when they approached. He barked when he saw Faith and jumped off the treadmill easily, tail wagging as he trotted to her. She squatted down and wrapped her arms around him. “Hey, buddy! Who’s a good boy?”

“Not me,” a rich baritone replied. “Not around you, at least.”

Faith stood and accepted a second embrace from her boyfriend, Dr. David Friedman. He was wearing the cologne Faith had bought him for his birthday, and he smelled absolutely delicious.

And he looked absolutely delicious. Seriously, it wasn’t fair. In another life, David could have been a Hollywood heartthrob. Even going on two years together, she was still stunned by how handsome he was.

If only that was enough.

“You’re here early,” David said when they separated. “Is that good news or bad news?”

She sighed. “Bad news. We got a case in Iowa-slash-Nebraska.”

David’s face fell slightly. “I guess I’m eating ribeye by myself tonight, huh?”

“I’m sorry,” Faith said. “I wasn’t supposed to get assigned to a case today, but... well, the Boss didn’t come out and say it, but—”

“But you need to lay low, and something’s going on which means you need to lay especially low. I get it.”

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“I get it. I really do.” He smiled again. “Relax, Faith. It’s okay. I knew what you were when I fell in love with you. Besides. It just means you’ll make it up to me when you get home.”

Faith narrowed her eyes and said playfully, “And just what does that mean, Mister?”

“You know what it means.”

Michael cleared his throat. “Hey guys. Sorry to be the third wheel, but I do have to try to keep down dinner later, so save the gory details for late-night texts.”

David grinned. “Oh, like you haven’t heard it all before.”

“Okay,” Faith said, clapping her hands. “What a lovely and incredibly awkward conversation this has become. David, we have to reschedule the rest of Turk’s checkup for another time.”

“I figured. I was just doing the physical fitness test, and we both know he’s going to ace that one.” He shifted his feet a little. “Hey, before you go, Faith, I need to talk to you about something.”

Faith frowned. “Sure. What is it?”

David glanced at Michael. Michael cleared his throat and said, “Um, I’m gonna take Turk to the car and look for a good hotel in Council Bluffs.”

“Get one in Omaha,” David advised. “It’s a bigger city, so the hotels are nicer.”

Michael tilted his head. “Didn’t realize that’s how it usually worked, but I’ll take your advice. Come on, Turk.”

Turk hesitated a moment when Faith didn't follow. "Go on, boy. I'll be right there."

Turk dipped his head and followed Michael out of the hospital. When the door closed behind them, Faith turned to David and asked, "Okay, what is it?"

David shifted his feet again. "Something came up on one of Turk's tests."

A chill ran down Faith's spine. "Something came up?"

"Yes. On the sensory test. Specifically, his sense of smell."

Faith's heart was beating faster now. Sensory degradation was often a sign of age-related problems in dogs. It wasn't usually the first sign, though. That was typically arthritis or other joint problems followed by digestive issues. Why would Turk have issues with his sense of smell?

"What kind of something came up?"

"Well... he didn't do so well."

"Can you expand on that?"

David sighed. "I can pull up the results on my computer."

"Or you can just tell me now and stop tiptoeing around the issue."

David sighed again. "He missed three of five identification tests and was unable to locate an object hidden among other odors after being given the scent."

Faith folded her arms across her chest. Her training told her it was an instinctual defensive action. It really bothered her that she knew that. "Okay. So what does that

mean?"

"It might not mean anything. It could just be a fluke. It could be that we didn't contain or reveal the scents properly. But... it could also mean that his sense of smell is compromised."

"What do you mean compromised?"

"Basically what I said. "His sense of smell might not be up to snuff anymore."

Faith looked away, her lips pushed out nearly in a pout.

"Like I said, it might not be serious. Protocol in this case is that we wait three weeks and conduct the test again with different odors for both tests. If he passes that retest, then he passes the sensory test, and everything's hunky dory. And if not, well... we knew this day was coming."

Faith whirled on him. "Excuse me?"

David realized his mistake too late. He blinked and took a step back. "I... I didn't mean it like that. I only meant that—"

"That I should consider my dog's eventual death inevitable and not be concerned with health problems he has?"

"No," he said firmly. "Close to the opposite in fact. I meant that you should be prepared to pull him from the field if he fails. I don't need to tell you how serious it is if a K9's sense of smell is compromised."

"No, you don't, and... Damn it, David!"

“There’s no way you can possibly blame me for this.”

She scoffed. “Way to make it about you.”

“You’re making it about me because it’s easier to be angry at me than to deal with your fear over the circumstances. That’s why I didn’t want Michael here with you.”

Anger lanced through Faith’s mind, but she controlled herself. David was right. She had just finished convincing the FBI brass to let Turk keep working with her, and now, a month later, his very first test past the mandatory retirement date popped up negative for smell.

She sighed. “Okay, well... Fine. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m not mad at you. I just wanted you to have a chance to work through the initial outburst without Michael and Turk seeing it.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry too much about it. It’s just one test. I pass dogs on their retests all the time. Let’s not make this a disaster until it is, okay?”

She managed a smile. “Okay.”

“I love you, Faith.”

She felt a pang of guilt as she said it, but she said it anyway. “I love you, David.”

She joined Michael and Turk in the car. Turk greeted her exuberantly, and she ruffled his fur.



“Everything okay?” Michael asked.

“Yeah. It was just something about the paperwork he needed me to fix.”

“Gotta love paperwork. Heaven help you if you dot a T and cross an I.”

He put the car in gear, and they headed for the airport. Faith ruffled Turk’s fur again and took a deep breath. It was okay. It was just one test. There were any number of reasons it might have gone wrong. Turk was fine.

She told herself this, but the ache in her stomach refused to leave.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Their flight landed too late for them to look over the crime scene, so they drove to the Council Bluffs Animal Rescue Sanctuary first thing in the morning. The entire combined statistical area of Omaha and Council Bluffs had about half the population of Philadelphia, so traffic was light, and they reached the Sanctuary nine minutes after leaving their hotel.

Turk's nose was on the ground immediately when they stepped out of the car. Faith felt a touch of encouragement at that. Clearly he could still smell. She wondered what had happened with the test. Maybe someone had a bag of potato chips or lemon cookies in the hospital, and he was distracted by those. He loved lemon cookies.

"This is close to the smallest zoo I've ever seen," Michael said.

The sanctuary was indeed small. Its website claimed it was five hundred thirty-three acres, but a lot of that space was taken up by the parking lot and a three-story animal hospital and rehabilitation center, so the actual space reserved for animal exhibits was probably a third that size.

The sanctuary was still closed, so the parking lot was nearly empty when they arrived. A security guard let them through the gate and informed them that Saul was the manager today and would meet them in his office in the admin building.

"Should we go there first or the crime scene first?" Michael asked.

"Saul first. We need someone who can answer questions."

"You got it."

Saul was a rotund, balding man in his early forties with a baby face and small, wire-rimmed sunglasses. He greeted the two agents mechanically. He looked almost as though he was in shock. Maybe he was.

“Can you take us to the crime scene, Saul?” Faith asked.

Saul swallowed. “Um... sure. Yeah, sure.”

“If you’re not comfortable, we can just go there after we finish talking to you,” Michael offered.

“No, that’s fine. It’s all right. I...” He swallowed again. “It’s just crazy. Nothing like this has ever happened here.”

He led the agents out of the building toward the zoo. “It happened in front of the gift shop.”

“Did the cameras catch anything?”

“No. It...” he reddened. “We have cameras in the buildings and the enclosures, but we don’t have any cameras for the exterior. I’m guessing we’ll get some installed soon, but for right now... well, no, the cameras didn’t catch anything.”

They reached the gift shop a moment later. Yellow tape still cordoned off the portion of the walkway that was covered in Marcus’s blood.

“Go check it out, Turk,” Faith said.

Turk approached the blood stained and sniffed around for a moment, then lifted his head and looked deeper into the zoo. He looked confused. An ache formed in Faith’s stomach again.

“So the panther attacks him here,” Michael says. “He tries to fight it off, but it drags him to the ground... here. Then it leaves him there.”

“That’s just it,” Saul explained. “It can’t be one of our cats.”

“Why not?” Faith asked.

“Because that’s not how cats behave. Cats wouldn’t leave a kill where it dropped, they would either eat it right there, or they’d take it to their den.”

“So because Marcus wasn’t eaten, it couldn’t have been a cat?”

“I know that seems farfetched, but it’s a lot more farfetched to suggest that a cat just left him there. If it was a different kind of predator, maybe a bear or a wolfpack, then it’s possible they would have just killed him as a territorial act, but that’s just not how cats work. If they kill something, they eat it. Even when they kill each other.”

“So that’s why you had PD call us in.”

“That’s why we requested you, yes.”

“Is the owner of the sanctuary available?” Faith asked.

“That would be Lisa. She’s out of town today, but she’ll be back tonight, and you can talk to her then.”

Faith noted that and frowned as Turk trotted a few yards ahead, then shook his head.

“The animal scents are probably confusing him,” Saul suggested. “We get that sometimes with dogs. There’s so much going on that it overwhelms them, and they don’t know what to do with themselves.”

Faith's frown deepened. "Tell me about Marcus. Was he well-liked here?"

"Well, he was the night watchman. He was barely seen here. People got along with him well enough, I guess. No one hated him. He was quiet, kept to himself, did his job well, made sure problems were dealt with quickly."

"What kind of problems?"

"Usually kids sneaking in after hours to do drugs or hook up."

Faith grimaced. "Seriously?"

Saul grinned sheepishly. "They know we won't prosecute. We just kick 'em out or sometimes lecture them, depending on whoever the night watchman is. Lisa has a soft spot for kids. She doesn't want to send someone to jail for making out with their boyfriend."

"Trespassing isn't a good enough reason?"

Saul shrugged. "You'll understand when you meet her."

"I look forward to that."

"So what happened with the cat the next morning?" Michael asked.

"Ah, yes. Well, the jaguar trotted right up to me and started licking my fingers. That's a sign that she's hungry. And another sign that she didn't kill him. Hell, the dead body was there all night, and she never once approached it to try to eat it. Anyway, I led her back to her enclosure and fed her. She licked my face to say thank you, then ate her food."

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Jaguar or panther?"

"Jaguar. People call the black ones panthers. It's not incorrect, but we also have a black leopard. We call him a panther and her a black jaguar. Just helps us tell 'em apart in conversation."

"Do you always buddy up to big cats like that? Michael asked.

"Oh yeah. I love cats. I grew up in San Diego, and my mom worked with the big cats at the zoo there. I was around them my whole childhood. They never once attacked me. I know they're wild animals, and they can do something at any minute, but it's not like they're out there just waiting to tear someone's throat out."

"I get the sense you're worried for your cat."

Saul shook his head. "Not really. Lisa agrees with me that she couldn't have had anything to do with this. We're both worried for Marcus. Or rather that the killer who did this will get away with it."

Faith looked over at Turk. He was still trotting back and forth, shaking his head in confusion. She crossed her arms and bit her lip softly.

It's just the animals. Like Saul said. There's just a lot going on right now. Hell, even I can smell them.

"That's not the only reason we're sure it was a person."

Faith realized that Saul was still talking. She turned to him and said, "What's the other reason?"

"The wounds in Marcus's neck weren't caused by teeth."

“I thought his throat was ripped out.”

Saul shivered. “It was, but not by teeth.”

“And you’re sure of this because?”

"Because teeth cut differently than other things. Different teeth cut differently than other teeth. That's how we perform bite analyses. Like with sharks. When people get bit by a shark, they take pictures of the bite and examine the wound so they can figure out what kind of teeth made the bite. Conical, triangular, serrated, smooth, barbed... Then, they match the bite to the shark to determine what species. We can do the same thing with cats. We can also check bite size to determine the size of the jaw, the dentition pattern, the distance between teeth, and so forth."

“Kind of hard to determine all of that when half of a man’s neck is missing,” Michael suggested.

Saul sighed. “That’s what the police department said. I’ll tell you the same thing we told them. Teeth tear the skin differently than other things. Look.” He pulled his upper lip back and pointed at his front teeth. “Incisors are flat. They’re good at chopping through things. A bite from an incisor is going to look sort of like a stab wound from a knife. A blunt one, but you get the picture. Back here, we have molars, which are for crushing, and that’s what a molar bite is going to look like. The skin will look crushed.”

He pointed at the pointy teeth in between his incisors and molars. “These are canine teeth. They’re used for ripping and tearing food. Cats have huge canine teeth. If a cat bit into Marcus’s flesh, it would look like the skin was ripped off.”

“Or like his throat was torn out.”

“No! It’s...” Saul took a deep breath. “I know it’s hard to explain. I’m sorry for being frustrated.”

“You’re doing great,” Faith said. “Are you saying it looks like his throat was cut out instead of torn out?”

“Yes! Kind of.”

Michael dropped his chin to his chest and sighed.

“I mean, the throat was torn out,” Saul said, “but it looked like it was torn out by incisors, not by canines. The tears were all wrong. They were too broad, and they were squarish when they should have been round. I’m telling you, agents, Marcus was killed by a human being with some kind of weapon, not by a cat.”

“Any idea what kind of weapon that might be?” Faith asked.

Saul's shoulders slumped. "That's the issue. We don't know. PD wanted to make this an open-and-shut animal attack, but that's just not right. Aside from the fact that it would be immoral to euthanize the jaguar for something she didn't do, it would be immoral and dangerous to let this killer—whoever he is—keep wandering out there."

“I agree,” Faith said. “Do you have any idea who might want to hurt Marcus?”

Saul shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. Like I said, we didn’t talk much. He seemed fine, and I never heard complaints about him.”

Faith nodded. “Got anything, boy?”

Turk snorted in frustration and trotted back to her side. She kept her tone cheerful when she said, “That’s all right, Turk. We’ll find something.” She gave Saul a card.



“Call us when Mrs. Hartley gets back. We’ll want to talk to her right away.”

“I will. She wants to talk to you too. She takes this really personal, you know. This was one of her employees.”

“Yes, I imagine. Thank you for your time.”

The three agents walked back toward their car. “I want to talk to the coroner,” Faith said. “I want to see if I can get some more details on whatever weapon killed Marcus Reeves.”

Michael didn’t answer. Faith frowned and turned to him to see him on the phone.

“Yes, Detective. We’ll meet you there.” He hung up and gave Faith a grim look. “That was Detective Cuthbert. He apologizes for not meeting us at the airport. He was busy investigating a murder. He thinks it might be related to this one.”

Faith’s heart dropped like a stone. Their first morning on the job, and already their killer had struck again.

“Well,” Michael offered with a thin smile. “At least we know for sure it’s not an animal.”

That wasn’t a comfort to Faith. She’d spent a lot of time around animals and a lot of time around people. She could say with absolute certainty that people were far more dangerous.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

This crime scene had the typical sense of controlled chaos Faith was used to at such scenes. There were six cruisers and three animal control vans on the scene, and eight officers were busy keeping the small crowd of neighbors and passersby from sneaking a peak inside. Michael parked across the street, and the three of them trotted up to the barrier. The harried sergeant waved them past. “Cuthbert’s inside.” He turned to one of the pushier onlookers and warned, “Seriously, ma’am, back off. I’m not asking.”

The three agents walked inside. The smell hit Faith like a bowling ball. Clearly this home had housed a lot of animals. Turk put his nose to the ground and began sniffing, and Faith felt a rush of relief when he kept his nose to the ground and followed the scent to the living room.

That room was the scene of even more chaos. There were six animal control officers carrying out crates filled with reptiles. Lizards ranging from tiny anoles to a six-foot monitor lizard, snakes, turtles and even a four-foot alligator-like thing.

“Is that a caiman?” Michael asked.

“Yep,” the animal control officer replied. “What would you say if I told you that this wasn’t even in the top ten most dangerous animals in this house?”

Michael shivered. “I’d say fuck reptiles and people who own them.”

Faith frowned at him, and he sighed. “Sorry. I just hate reptiles. Especially snakes.”

She looked at Turk, and her frown deepened. Once again, he appeared overwhelmed.

He was shaking his head from side to side and staring intently at each animal as it was removed.

“You must be the FBI agents.”

Faith turned toward the voice to see a well-dressed man of around fifty stepping gingerly over something in the living room. He extended his hand and said, “Detective Jim Cuthbert. Sorry for not calling. Bit of a shitshow here. We’ve got it under control now, though.”

He gestured at the floor, and Faith realized that the something he had stepped over was the body of a woman in her early thirties with jet black hair and soft brown eyes behind a pair of thick glasses.

"Alison Chen, thirty-two. A neighbor heard a scream and called the police. By the time we got here, she was dead. And if not for the swift reflexes of my partner, Detective Royce"—a tall, lanky man with a somber face lifted his hand from the other side of the room—"I would also be dead, because there was a black mamba in this living room."

“A what?” Michael asked.

“A black mamba. Big damned snake. Poisonous. Supposedly the deadliest snake in Africa and number... I don’t know. Top ten worldwide. Royce here saw it and pushed me out of the way just before it struck. So we had to wait for animal control to get here. Then they go downstairs to the basement, and it’s a literal zoo down there. I’m talking about sixty animals: lizards, snakes, turtles, a fucking caiman... Those are only the ones still alive. You think it smells bad in here, wait until you go down there.” He shook his head and shivered.

“So she was bitten by a black mamba?”

“No. That’s why we called you. We think the killer wanted to make it look like that, but he picked the wrong snake. Here.”

He pointed at the body. Chen had an ugly welt on her neck, swollen purple and leaking blood and pus. Even Faith's ironclad stomach twisted a little at that. "Looks like a snakebite to me."

“And had the killer released one of the several species of rattlesnake or maybe Chen’s puff adder into the room, then I would have thought the same thing. But not a mamba.”

“Why not a mamba?”

Cuthbert pointed at the fang marks. They were spaced about three inches apart and as thick around as a roofing nail.

“Now these have swollen a little bit, so they weren’t that big to begin with,” Cuthbert said, “but they were far too big and spread apart to have come from a mamba.”

“You a snake expert?” Michael asked.

“I am not. But I watch Animal Planet. And Animal Planet taught me that mambas are elapids. Means they’re related to cobras. Cobras have very thin, narrow fangs, like needles. They’re also not spread very far apart. If this was a mamba bite, we’d be looking at much smaller marks. Now vipers like adders and rattlesnakes, they have big fangs spaced more widely apart. Those would absolutely make the kind of marks we see here.”

“You’re sure a rattlesnake didn’t just escape on its own?” Michael asked.

“The mamba was the only uncaged animal we found here,” Cuthbert said, “Now if I

were being pedantic, I would say that it's possible that a snake escaped earlier, then escaped the house after doing in Chen. But considering the death of Marcus Reeves two nights ago, I'm thinking it's not very likely."

Faith and Michael shared a look.

"So you think that we have a killer who's killing people in disguise as different animals and trying to pass the blame to said animals?" Faith summarized.

Cuthbert nodded slowly. "Yes. I'm afraid I do."

Turk sniffed around Chen's body while Faith and Michael processed that information. The small part of Faith that wondered if Saul was only defending his precious cats was convinced now. This was the work of a human hand.

"You get anything, boy?"

Turk whined mournfully and stepped away from the body.

"I feel you, boy," Cuthbert sympathized. "It's horrible."

"Did you see the other crime scene?" Michael asked.

"Yeah, I'm the detective assigned to the case." He shook his head. "I didn't believe it until now, though. I kind of wish I'd called you guys sooner."

"It probably wouldn't have made a difference," Michael said. "We work fast, but..."

He left the sentence unfinished, but the words echoed in Faith's mind. Killers like this work faster.

“The manager of the zoo said that he thinks the killer used some sort of tool to mimic a cat’s bite. He said the bite marks on the throat looked like it had been torn out by something with several flat blades like incisors.

Cuthbert took a deep breath. He seemed to be steadying himself to confront the image in his mind. "Yeah. That's... well, it was hard for me to tell, but he told me the same thing. We're waiting for the autopsy report. But..." He lifted his hands and let them drop against his pant legs. "This one, I know for sure. The killer used something to mimic a snakebite. I would say a barbecue fork, but the tips are too far apart. The point is, I'm on Saul's side now. That means I'm on your side."

A hissing noise behind them pulled their eyes away from the body. Two animal control officers carried a cage with a large black-and-white lizard. The lizard glared at the officers and whipped its tail at the bars of its crate.

One of the officers noticed the stares. “Tegu. Real pretty lizards. Not this aggressive if you take care of them.” He pointed at Chen. “She didn’t take care of them.”

The three officers and their K9 watched in silence as animal control took the tegu outside. When the door closed behind them, Cuthbert said. “So that leads us to a question I’m sure you were going to ask at some point: who would want to kill Alison Chen? Well, we don’t have a name yet, but Chen here had a history of animal abuse.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“That is so. She was indicted ten years ago for owning nine German Shepherds in a studio apartment in Omaha. Animal control over there said when they arrived, the dogs were in appalling condition. They had to put five of them down that day and a sixth one a week later.”

Turk gave Chen’s body a fishy look and stepped away. Faith couldn’t blame him, but

she still felt a pang of guilt. Good person or not, she was a person, and someone had murdered her. It was their job to find out who.

“So she switched from dogs to reptiles.”

“Birds before that. Six years ago, she was living in another apartment in Omaha, and neighbors complained of a smell. Turns out the smell was a thick veneer of bird shit all over her apartment.

Michael groaned. “Ugh.”

“Oh yeah. Almost makes you thankful for the reptile shit we’re smelling now. Anyway, last year there were fish tanks with a bunch of rotting goldfish and now it’s reptiles.”

“Jesus. Who kept selling her animals?”

"I keep saying there should be a background check for pet owners," Cuthbert says, "and animal cruelty should be a felony every time. You're in law enforcement, so you know. Serial killers start with animals and move on to people. We'd catch a lot more of them before that point if there was proper policing of animal rights violations." He looked at Chen. "Although I guess she was on the wrong end of that equation."

Michael shook his head. “How does someone end up like that? I mean... how do you live in a house with a bunch of animals that you’re treating poorly and not...” He shook his head. “I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

“I knew a lady when I was a kid,” Cuthbert said. “Real nice lady. Used to give us full-size candy bars at Halloween. Her name was Mrs. Lester. Mrs. Lester had a lot of cats. A lot of cats. Her place always smelled like piss. Being a kid, I didn't think anything of it. She just loved cats. And she did. Whenever I saw her, she was petting

a cat, feeding a cat, holding a cat. And the cats looked fine, too. Healthy, good fur, content, calm... nothing out of the ordinary. That was until one year when I went to her house for a candy bar and caught sight of her carefully flaying a cat that she had staked to a wooden pole in her backyard."

"Christ," Michael swore.

"Probably the other guy," Cuthbert replied. "The point is, you never know the kind of darkness people hide inside them. Mrs. Lester loved her cats. I know she did. I have an eye for emotion, and she really loved her cats. But she also felt a need to sacrifice them to Satan every now and then. I don't know how those two things exist in the same person, but sometimes people can be good in most ways but just have one big bad flaw that poisons the rest of them." He grimaced. "Bad choice of words."

Faith's phone buzzed. "Lisa's back," she told Michael. She looked at Detective Cuthbert and said, "Talk to Chen's neighbors. Friends and family, too, with priority on people who live in the area and saw her frequently. I want a list of people who might have wanted to hurt her. We're going to go talk to the owner of the animal sanctuary and ask the same questions about Marcus Reeves."

Cuthbert nodded. "Works for me. I'll keep you posted."

As the agents left the house, Faith wondered what Chen was like. How would an interaction with her somewhere outside of her house be? Would she seem generally nice and normal but maybe a little awkward? Would she be so confident and outgoing that no one could tell there was anything wrong at all?

And what about their killer? Would he also seem like just a regular person as West had? Or would she sense the killer in him right away like she had with Jethro Trammell, the original Donkey Killer?



Not knowing the answer to that question worried Faith the most. Whoever this killer was, he was doing a poor job of masquerading as an animal.

But if he was an expert at masquerading as a normal person, it wouldn't matter how convincing he was as an animal.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Lisa Hartley was a tired-looking woman in her fifties who greeted the agents with a weary smile. To be fair, it might not be typical of her to look so exhausted. It wasn't every day that one of her employees was viciously murdered after all.

"Can I offer you guys some coffee?" she asked when they took their seats in her office. "Maybe some vitamin water for the big guy?"

Turk wagged his tail eagerly, and Lisa smiled—a little less wearily—and filled a water bowl with a jug of purple liquid. As she filled his bowl, she said, "the coffee's good stuff. I get it delivered from a nonprofit place that only serves Rainforest Alliance certified Fair Trade organic coffees."

Faith wasn't sure what any of that had to do with the flavor of the coffee, but she had a feeling they would be working on this case well into the night, so she said, "I'll take some, thank you."

Lisa started the coffee, and Faith took a moment to look around the office. The room was fairly sparse but at the same time very full. The only furniture was a desk made of rough carved wood with three chairs of the same wood, one behind the desk and two in front. There was a little bamboo table which contained the jug of vitamin water and the coffeemaker. There were two floor lamps on either corner of the wall behind them and a single desk lamp. All three were switched off right now, the light provided by the wall-length polarized glass window behind the desk.

What made the room feel full were the plants. There were two potted trees with thin, gnarled trunks and broad, flat leaves placed midway down the side walls, and two plants with similar trunks but long, thin bladed leaves on either corner of the window.

The bamboo table had a brilliant violet orchid and vines curled around the legs of the desks fed by pots on either side. Another plant Faith didn't recognize sat on the desk. It had twisted folds of fuzzy pink flowers that looked like an exotic species of coral

Or brain matter.

Faith looked away from the flowers with a grimace. Turk had finished drinking and was now sitting next to her, staring affectionately up at Lisa. Lisa set steaming mugs of coffee in front of the agents and returned to the desk with her own mug.

Faith lifted her mug. It showed a cartoon drawing of the globe above the phrase ONE WORLD, ONE VOICE. The coffee was very good, rich and dark and smooth. Evidently, the certifications meant something after all. "Mrs. Hartley,"

"Lisa, please. No offense to my ex-husband—we split amicably—but I don't like being a Mrs."

"Lisa. First, let me extend my condolences. I can imagine this is incredibly difficult for you."

Lisa scoffed and sipped her own coffee. Her mug read WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF THE EARTH. "It's not the best day I've ever had, that's for sure."

"Can you tell us in your own words what happened?"

Lisa sighed. "Well, I was at a conference in Omaha speaking to the executives of a bunch of different zoos around the country and urging them to consider supporting the Four R initiative, and I got a call from Sean just before my keynote speech."

"The Four R initiative?"

“Rescue, Rehabilitate, Return, Respect. We want to be responsible stewards with our wildlife by rescuing animals impacted by humans in a negative way and rescuing their natural ranges from encroachment, rehabilitating both animal and land and returning them to their natural environments. Then we want to respect that we share this world with them and find ways to coexist without destroying the ecosystem.”

“You’re very passionate about animal rights, aren’t you?”

“It’s not about animal rights, really. It’s about stewardship. People benefit from rich, healthy ecosystems, not just animals. The Four R Initiative is designed to convince people that respecting the natural world will improve our quality of life. There’s an abundance of evidence that healthy flora and fauna in healthy environments coexisting with people leads to healthier people. I could talk for hours about it, but I have a feeling that’s not what you’re here for.”

“No,” Faith admitted. She didn’t say it aloud, but she also wanted a sense for just how protective Lisa was of animals. Their killer could be seeking revenge on behalf of animals, and while Lisa would likely have an ironclad alibi, it was worth figuring out how far someone with similar values might go to address animal cruelty.

Lisa sighed. “So I got a call from Sean, and I can tell something’s wrong right away. He’s shrieking and blubbering into the phone, and I go from zero to panicked pretty quickly. But I control myself and snap him out of it. ‘Sean! Take a breath and tell me what’s happening.’ So he does, and...” she lifted the hand not holding the mug and dropped it on the desk. “And... well, he told me.”

“May I ask why you didn’t return to the sanctuary upon hearing about the death of your employer?”

She deflated slightly and lowered her eyes. Faith could sense that she felt very guilty about what she was about to say. “I did return that night to speak with the police,

but... if I had left the conference and word had gotten out about what happened, then it could have seriously negatively impacted the Four R Initiative. In hindsight, there was no avoiding it. Of course, it got into the news. I was an idiot for thinking I could keep a lid on it."

She met Faith's eyes and said almost pleadingly, "You have to understand, this initiative... It's not just for the animals. We have a real chance to actually change the world for the better. People are finally willing to listen to people who promote responsible environmental stewardship. I know I sound like a crackpot, but I really believe that the future of our planet and our species is at a turning point. We can still reverse or at least slow some of the damage we've done, but we have to make changes. I..." her lower lip trembled. "I just really wanted to do that. We were so close."

Faith pondered her behavior for a moment. She was clearly passionate about her philosophy, but she hadn't yet mentioned Marcus. Faith decided to wait a little longer and see if Lisa continued to avoid the subject. "Where were you earlier today?"

"Back at the conference. They called a press interview for what happened to Marcus, and I didn't want that interview to take place at the sanctuary."

"Hmm..." Faith thought about her next question. "What was your first thought when Sean told you what happened to Marcus?"

Lisa chuckled bitterly. "Oh no. God damn it."

"Can you expand?"

She lifted her hand and let it drop again. "Oh no, poor Marcus. God damn it, this will ruin everything."

“Including Marcus’s life,” Michael pointed out.

“Yes,” Lisa said curtly.

Faith noticed her shoulders were stiff, and her lips were trembling a little. Maybe she was still traumatized by what happened, and that was why she wasn’t talking about it. “And that’s what led you to call the FBI.”

“The police wanted to blame the panther,” Lisa explained, “and...” Tears welled in her eyes. “And Marcus was doing better. He was really trying. I know he made mistakes, but he was trying hard .”

She squeezed her eyes shut and took several deep breaths. Faith wasn’t entirely convinced that Lisa was being honest with her emotions until she swallowed the rest of her still-steaming coffee without reacting to the heat. There was no doubt about it. This woman was in shock. “The police were acting like it wasn’t a big deal. Like Marcus deserved to get... eaten. ” She hissed the last word.

“And you didn’t believe it was the panther?” Michael asked.

“I can prove it wasn’t the panther,” Lisa said. “And more specifically, I should say black jaguar. We have a black leopard here too. We call him the panther.”

“Yes, Sean mentioned that. He also pointed out that the wounds didn’t match a cat bite.”

“Not even close. If you filled a cat’s mouth with chisels instead of teeth, maybe.”

"Are you concerned that the cat may be put down?"

“They’ll have to put me down before they put that cat down,” Lisa said venomously.

“But no, not really. I’m concerned that some fuckwad is going to get away with killing a poor man who was only trying to turn another leaf and be a good person. Damn it, he was trying so hard.” She wiped more tears from her eyes. “Sorry. Pardon my language.”

“No need to apologize,” Faith said. “So you’ve mentioned twice now that Marcus was trying to atone for something in his past?”

“He ran a zoo for sixteen years. It was called the Wild World Animal Adventure Park. Did you ever hear of it?”

“We’re not from the area,” Michael replied.

“Right. Well, it was shut down a few years ago for repeated severe animal rights violations. Marcus’s name got dragged through the mud, and deservedly so, don’t get me wrong. He put those animals in... well, I won’t go into detail. I’ll be honest, I hated him too. But when he came to me looking for a job here, he seemed so earnest. He really understood what he did, and he really wanted a chance to be a different kind of man. I gave him a chance. And he didn’t let me down.”

“He was your night watchman, correct?”

“Yes. I wasn’t going to risk putting him in charge of caring for the animals after his history, no matter how sincere he seemed. But I figured if he could be trusted to lock up and keep the riffraff out, then maybe over time, I could try to show him how rewarding it could be to treat animals well. Then...”

She shook her head. "I just don't understand why. What good does it do to kill him now? The animals he abused are all free or in the care of properly run facilities. He paid his reparations and restitution and made a public statement condemning his actions and promising never to do anything like that again. It's just... If I can forgive

someone like that, then other people can. He deserves justice. Not some chuckling and ‘ Huh, I guess that’s karma. ’”

She took a deep breath and released it in a shaky sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m just... it’s still a lot.”

“I understand. Do you have any idea who might have wanted to kill Marcus?”

She shook her head. “My best guess is that it’s some animal rights activist who thinks that violence is the answer to the world’s woes. There are still people like that out there, I’m afraid. I don’t know who, though. I don’t associate with people like that, and I don’t follow any kind of news that talks about them. That’s the wrong way to get people on our side.”

Faith nodded. “I agree.” She stood. “If you think of anything else, please call us. I promise you we won’t stop until we find the person responsible for Marcus’s murder and bring them to justice.”

Lisa smiled. “Thank you. I’m so glad to have you helping us.”

“One last question,” Michael said. “Did Marcus ever talk about a woman named Alison Chen?”

Lisa’s brow furrowed. “No. No, I don’t think so. Not to me, at least. I can ask around if you’d like.”

“Please do. Let us know if you hear anything.”

“I will.”

The three agents started from the room. Lisa smiled at Turk as he trotted out. “Go



find that bad guy for me, okay, boy?”

Turk barked a firm promise. Faith smiled at him and assured Lisa, “That’s what he does best.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Lillian Martin hated men like Grant Monroe. She hated most men in general, and she didn't have a much higher opinion of women for that matter, but she especially hated men like Grant Monroe. He reminded Lillian of her father. Always scowling, wearing a stupid crew cut that only made him look insecure, angry at everyone for no reason and acting like everyone had to march and salute and grovel like the damned military.

She was going to have a lot of fun killing him.

But it wouldn't be easy. Grant Monroe was old—fifty-eight, according to her research—but he was in good shape. Lillian was also in excellent shape, but he was a man, and as much as she hated it, men were much stronger than women on average, and they remained that way well into old age. Lillian would need to get the jump on him and use a weapon like she did on the clerk at the electronics store.

Grant got into his car—an old Toyota T100 pickup truck—and pulled out of the parking lot of the Philadelphia Field Office. That was an odd choice for someone so “All-American.” She would have expected an old Chevy K-body or a Ford Highboy.

Well, whatever. He could drive a Smart car for all she cared.

This was the tricky part. If she wasn't careful, he would know he was being followed. So instead of taking her car, Lillian was going to take the bus.

She stepped on the bus and watched through the windshield as the truck drove ahead. She would ride this bus until the truck turned, then figure out the next bus line she should take and what time the bus arrived at what pickup bench. Then tomorrow night, she would take that bus and follow it until the truck turned again. Little by

little, she would map out the route from the Field Office to Grant Monroe's home until she found out where he lived. He would notice her in a car. He was far less likely to notice who boarded the bus.

It was going to be tedious. It had taken her a whole month just to figure out who to stalk. She originally considered tailing Faith's partner, Michael Prince, but Prince was married to Franklin West's ex-wife, and that woman was likely to be too sharp for Lillian to approach safely.

She allowed herself a momentary fantasy of beating Ellie to death. Why the hell Frank would have wasted his time with that cutesy, smarmy, little housewife bitch was beyond Lillian. Why did West obsess over these whores who didn't deserve him?

She heaved an exasperated sigh and let the fantasy die. If she dwelled on it too much, she might act on it, and she had bigger fish to fry than her jealousy right now.

The next potential target was the other woman working at the Field Office, the Latina girl. She was taller and prettier than Faith, and Lillian thought it would be fun to make her look ugly. But it was clear that she wasn't close with Faith, so Lillian dropped that idea.

After that, she spent a week considering the boyfriend, but she wanted to save him for later. She needed that one to hurt, and it would hurt more if she was vulnerable from the other deaths Lillian would plague her with.

But she had finally settled on her target: the man who had saved Faith's career and protected her from the consequences of her persecution of Frank.

And it would be so sweet to kill him.

The truck turned right onto the freeway, and Lillian cursed. She'd forgotten about the

fucking freeway.

She pulled the handle, and the bus came to a stop. She jumped off, and the bus driver offered a snarky, “You’re welcome.”

Lillian flashed him a perky smile and extended both her middle fingers. “Stick it down your throat and choke, asshole.”

The driver muttered something under his breath and drove on. Lillian sighed and shook her head. “Damn it, Lily. Stop being an idiot. He might be the driver next time.”

Oh well. She’d just give him an apology card and make up a story about her grandmother dying or something. Sob stories always smoothed things over.

Still, she needed to control her anger. People remembered loud, angry people. She needed to be unmemorable.

She frowned. She was just so angry! Of course, he would take the fucking freeway.

She walked toward the bus stop on the cross street. She would go home tonight, but tomorrow, instead of taking the bus, she would take a rideshare. She would wait for the truck to exit and then get off the freeway three exits ahead and pretend she was taking the rideshare to a bar or something. Then she would wait at the bus stop wherever Monroe exited.

God, this was going to suck. Patience wasn’t Lillian’s strong suit.

But the reward would be worth it. If she was willing to wait, she would have the chance to show Bold that she wasn’t some run-of-the-mill attention-seeking dipshit. She was a force to be reckoned with.

And then Faith Bold would try to reckon with her. And when she did, Lillian Martin would break her. Then she would take the proof of Faith's end to West, and finally, the man she loved would see her and know he had found his soulmate.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

“What’s your take on Lisa?” Michael asked as the two of them drove away from the sanctuary.

“Her emotions seem genuine to me,” Faith replied.

“So you don’t think she’s a suspect?”

Faith shook her head. “No. She had opportunity, and I suppose she could have motive considering Marcus’s past, but she was truly upset by the murder. Not just the fact that Reeves was murdered, but the way he was murdered.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, I got that impression too. It offended her that someone tried to frame the jaguar.”

“Exactly. If she was going to kill him, that’s not how she would have done it.

“Right.”

“Okay, so what about the animal rights activist angle?”

“I like that,” Faith said. “I think we should follow up on that. Lisa’s right. Militant activists tend to have a warped sense of justice. It wouldn’t be beyond them to think that killing people with tools made to resemble animal attacks would be a sort of poetic revenge.”

“I agree. Call Cuthbert. While you’re at it, see if he found anything on Chen.”

Faith dialed the number and glanced at Turk. He was sniffing the air and shaking his head, an odd expression on his face. Her smile faded. He looked confused again. What was going on?

He noticed her and gave her the toothy grin that she had fallen in love with nearly three years ago. Then he tilted his head and sniffed some more. Finally, he barked exuberantly and buried his nose in Michael's jacket pocket. A moment later, he surfaced with his snout buried in a bag of beef jerky.

Faith sighed with relief. He wasn't confused. He just smelled food.

"Hello? Bold, are you there?"

"Yes! Yes, sorry. Um... Did you learn anything from Chen's friends and family?"

"Well, sort of. Nothing helpful. She had no friends, and her family didn't talk to her."

"Bad blood?"

"Not that they knew of. She just stopped talking to people. Probably didn't want them to know that she had a weird hoarding obsession with animals."

"I can understand that. Well, we have another angle for you to look into."

"Good, because I'm at square zero, and I hate square zero."

"Me too. Lisa Hartley at the animal sanctuary shared some interesting news with us."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. It turns out that Marcus Reeves used to run a zoo that was shut down for severe

animal husbandry violations.”

“That so? So we think this is a white knight avenging the deaths of animals.”

“Yes. Specifically, a militant animal rights activist. Someone who advocates violence to punish those cruel to animals.”

“And you want me to find out if Marcus Reeves and Alison Chen ever had a run-in with such a person or persons.”

“You read my mind.”

“I’m told I’m good at reading women’s minds.”

Faith smiled slightly. It seemed Cuthbert had taken a liking to her.

“Actually, I have some information for you,” Cuthbert said. “Not from the Chen connections but related to the case. The autopsy reports came in. Doesn’t tell us anything we don’t know, but I thought you might want to talk to the coroner yourself.”

“I would love to,” Faith replied. “Text me the address.”

“On its way to you. Hey, while I’m reading minds, I’m reading that you might want to grab dinner sometime.”

Her smile widened a little. “Sorry. I’m afraid I’m taken.”

“Ah. I was afraid of that. I saw the way you were looking at your partner.”

Faith glanced quickly at Michael and silently thanked herself for not putting the



phone on speaker. She didn't correct Cuthbert, though. That might give away the subject of their conversation. She only said, "Find me the info I need to solve this case, and I'll give you a kiss on the cheek."

"You torture me, Special Agent Bold. But I accept."

He hung up, and Faith sighed with relief. Damn it. She didn't feel that way about Michael anymore. She'd been through this already. It was just cold feet over David and the fact that Michael could talk to her about their job. So why were other people noticing that she was...

Her phone buzzed, and she shook her head. She could deal with all of that later. She had a job to do now. "Coroner's report is in," she said. "Cuthbert just sent me the address."

"The coroner's address or his address?" Michael teased.

"The coroner's address," Faith said with a glare. "You know I would never cheat on David."

Michael tensed slightly, and heat climbed Faith's cheeks. Only a few weeks ago, she had all but confessed that she was still in love with him. She wasn't, and he'd helped her realize that, but maybe this wasn't the time to be focused on her relationship. At least not around Michael.

"I'm sorry," Michael said. "I shouldn't have teased you. That was my bad."

"It was your bad," Faith said, a little relieved that it was, in fact, Michael who had pushed the awkwardness this time. Also a little guilty that she felt relieved.

"So the address, please?"

“Oh, right.” She gave it to him and said, “He’s going to look for our activists.”

“Do we think that’s what it was?”

“We just talked about the fact that we like that angle.”

“Yeah. I know.”

She frowned at him. “Do you not like that angle?”

He sighed. “I don’t have a good reason not to like it. It just seems too obvious, and I’m always leery of things that are too good to be true.”

“Sometimes they’re true.”

“I know. Like I said, I don’t have a good reason not to like it. It’s not even a hunch. Just... forget it. It’s just me being unsure. We’ll follow up on the lead because it’s the logical thing to do, and we’re detectives, not clairvoyants.”

“God, it would be nice if we were clairvoyants.”

“It would be nice if Salma Hayek would be waiting for me at the hotel room, but we don’t always get what we want.”

Faith gasped and slapped Michael on the shoulder. “Michael! And after accusing me of impure thoughts!”

“Hey, Ellie won’t shut up about Chris Hemsworth, so I get to fantasize about Salma Hayek.”

“Okay, well, leave that in your marriage, okay? I don’t need another reason to be

awkward around your wife.”

Michael chuckled. “Fair enough.”

They pulled into the parking lot of the coroner’s office a few minutes later. Faith was always a little put off by how small the offices of such functionaries were in places like Council Bluffs. It really wasn’t surprising considering you could fit the entire populations of Council Bluffs into a large neighborhood in Philadelphia, but it was strange to walk into a building that was barely larger than a laundromat and know that this was where they managed murders. It made her think wistfully about her old idea of retiring to the Midwest.

Turk started acting strange again when they entered the coroner’s office. He whined and shook his head from side to side, pawing at his nose.

“What’s up with him?” Michael asked.

“I’m not sure,” Faith said.

And that wasn’t a lie. He wasn’t acting like he couldn’t smell right now. He was acting like something he was smelling was too intense. She sniffed the air but couldn’t pick up anything that might have that effect on him.

Finally, Turk’s breath hitched. He tossed his head back, then whipped it forward and sneezed violently. He sighed and trotted forward.

Michael covered his mouth and laughed. Faith shrugged, trying to hide her relief behind nonchalance. “Problem solved.”

The coroner greeted them with a smile as weary as Lisa Hartley’s. She was about ten years younger than Lisa, which made her about ten years older than Faith, dark-

haired with candy-blue eyes and supermodel features.

“Good afternoon, agents,” she said. “I’m Dr. Yun. Welcome to my humble abode.”

Her voice was chipper in spite of her weary expression. Faith guessed that was due to years of practice pushing through the tragedy of a job that involved looking at the bodies of murdered people.

“I’ll cut right to the chase,” she said. “You guys already know that the killer was a person and not a panther or a snake.”

“Jaguar,” Michael said.

She lifted an eyebrow, and he shook his head. “Sorry. Go ahead.”

She looked him up and down and smiled slightly. It looked like Michael had an admirer out here too now. “No. Not a jaguar either. What we have is a very, very sick human.”

"Do you know what the murder weapons were?" Faith asked.

“I have a pretty good idea. Weapon one was a bunch of box cutter blades glued to something with superglue.”

“Box cutters?”

“Yes. You know the trapezoidal blades with razor-sharp edges that are really thin?”

“Yes, I know what you’re talking about. Just... Interesting.”

Dr. Yun shuddered. “If you say so. “Anyway, our guy here used ten of these blades to

tear Marcus Reeves' throat out. The skin itself was pierced by a point, sliced cleanly on one side and torn on the other side. That's how I can tell it was a box cutter blade. The blunt edge was still thin enough to slice through, just not as cleanly."

"How much force would it take to do something like that."

"A lot. Think beartrap kind of force. It's not so much the need to tear through the skin and flesh as it is that the blades are weak. Box cutters are sharp, but their blades are fragile since they're supposed to cut through tape and cardboard, not people. In order for this to work, the closing force would have to be so great that the skin was sliced before the surface tension had a chance to bend the blades. Otherwise, there would be chips of metal in Marcus Reeve's neck."

"So a very powerful spring-loaded mechanism tore his throat out with a bunch of box cutters," Faith summarized.

"Exactly so."

Faith furrowed her brow. "What kind of tool would be able to do something like that?"

"Well, this was almost certainly fabricated, but if I had to hazard a guess, I would guess he used a coil spring from a mountain bike suspension for the jaws."

"A mountain bike suspension?"

"Yes. The more serious bikes have coil spring suspension in the rear to take the shocks of hard landings. The springs themselves are powerful and compact. You could fit one to a hinge mechanism and attach that to a trigger on a pole. Squeeze the trigger, and boom."

“That wouldn’t shatter the blades on impact?”

“Not if you rig it so the jaws don’t close completely. I hate to talk admiringly of a murderer, but this weapon was more sophisticated than it sounds. If only he’d used something that was a little more like jaguar teeth, he might have actually gotten away with it.”

Faith and Michael shared a sober look. “What about the other weapon?” she asked Dr. Yun.

“I just got Alison Chen’s body, so I need to dig a little more into her before I can answer that.” She winced. “Ouch. I did not intend that pun.”

“No offense taken,” Faith said. “Any guesses?”

“On record, it would be irresponsible of me to guess. Off the record, a hot dog stick.”

Faith blinked. “A hot dog stick?”

“Yes, a hot dog stick. They sell them at sporting goods stores. It’s a stick with two long prongs on the end of it, kind of like a barbecue fork but bigger. You put the hot dogs on the prongs and spin them over the fire. Or, in our killer’s case, you dip it in snake venom and plunge it into someone’s neck.”

Faith shook her head. “Wow. Clever.”

“Yes. Your killer, whoever he is, isn’t just a person disguised as an animal. He’s a brilliant person disguised as an idiot.”

Faith sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

“I don’t envy you your job,” Yun said, “and I wish you two luck. Considering what I’ve seen so far, we’re all going to need it.”

Faith pondered Yun’s words as they left the building. A brilliant person disguised as an idiot. That might actually be helpful to know eventually. Faith had suspected him of being disguised as a well-adjusted person, but his disguise would be even more believable if they didn’t suspect him of being smart enough to carry out the crime.

Now it was up to Faith to outsmart the killer before he left them with the remains of another hunt.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Faith's phone buzzed just as she stepped into the car. She put it on speaker and said, "Go ahead, Cuthbert."

"Knights of Nature," Cuthbert said. "Little group from the University of Nebraska in Omaha. Led by a senior named Alex Forrester. They got into the news last year for wearing uncured animal pelts to a demonstration to show people how development was harming animals."

Faith grimaced. "How attractive."

"Oh yes, very much so. They've got a blog too. I've been reading it, and this kid Alex is very out there. Advocates things like slaughtering ranchers the way they slaughter their animals, penning up women who eat dairy and gorging them on hormones to harvest human milk or giving them steroids and harvesting their breast meat."

"Christ," Michael whispered. "Like seriously?"

"I don't think so. But the killing people for hurting animals thing? He seems really serious about that. Wrote an essay about a woman who was mauled to death by her pit bulls. Said the dogs should be hailed as heroes."

"Okay, you've got me interested," Faith said. "Send me an address and a picture."

"I'll give you the address to his house. That's where the group meets. Oh, and if you need another reason to hate him, it really is his house. He's a trust fund baby."

"Weirdly enough, most of them don't turn into psychopathic killers," Faith said.



“They do turn into snobby, ignorant assholes.” He chuckled. “Don’t mind me. Ex had a trust fund. It was really fun until she decided that being rich meant she could sleep with whoever she wanted.”

“The address, Cuthbert.”

“Right. On its way.”

He hung up, and Faith took a deep breath. “Thank God. We finally have a suspect.”

Michael looked out the window. “You think he’ll be home? We’ve got two or three hours of daylight left.”

She frowned. “Probably. Kids go out at night on weekdays, not daytime.” Her frown deepened. “I’ll call Cuthbert anyway and have him head to the University, just in case.”

“Good idea.”

She made the call, and when she finished, Michael remarked. “I was never home in college.”

“Yeah? Too many girls to visit?”

“You want me to answer that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, cowboy.”

He chuckled. “No, not many girls actually. Just three.”

“Only three? You poor boy.”

“Not at the same time.”

“Thank you for clarifying.”

"I mean, we didn't date at the same time. I'm a one woman at a time kind of guy."

“Why are we talking about this?”

“Because I don’t want you to think I’m an asshole.”

“I’ve known you for eleven years. Almost twelve. I know you’re an asshole.”

“Good point.” Traffic was starting to thicken, so he switched the lights on. “But I’m just saying, I was always out and about. I would go to the beach or to the zoo.”

“The zoo? Really?”

“One of the girls was an intern there.”

“Ah.”

“But I would go out drinking or to the movies or to a friend’s house. I was never alone.”

“This might come as a shock, Michael, but introverts exist.”

“They don’t lead protests covered in animal skins.”

“Sometimes they do. In fact, introverts aren’t always afraid of people or uncomfortable around others. They’re also usually less concerned with the opinions of others, so they won’t mind doing something socially unacceptable.”

“Okay, so Alex might be home. How does this help us? I mean, knowing that he might be an introvert?”

“I’ve been thinking about our profile,” Faith said. “The killer’s violent and vindictive, but I think he’s also antisocial.”

Michael switched on the siren and weaved through stalled traffic until they were past the choke point. “What makes you say that?”

“The animal mimicry. I get the point of killing someone as though you’re taking revenge for an animal, but that kind of message could be sent by clipping mugshots and news stories to them or even leaving a note to say why he killed them. But the animal mimicry suggests that he might identify more with animals than people.”

Michael shook his head. “That’s thin, Faith. I see where you’re going with that, but it’s really thin. First of all, this guy is doing a shitty job mimicking animals.”

“That just means he’s ignorant. Or he’s trying to be clever and make himself look ignorant.”

“That’s an even bigger stretch, but second of all, if he identifies so much with the animals, why isn’t he freeing all of them? Why is he only freeing the one he needs to make it look like the deaths were accidental?”

Faith bit her lip. “Okay, you got me there. It might be a delusion, though.”

“No, because he had the presence of mind to free that one animal, and the presence of mind to escape before he was killed himself. Let’s say Saul’s right and the jaguar’s a sweetheart. I doubt like hell the black mamba was. I looked it up. They’re supposed to be one of the most aggressive snake species on Earth. You walk within striking distance of one of them and they bite.”

Faith sighed. "You're right. About the presence of mind. Still... I guess call it a hunch."

Michael shrugged. "Fair enough. Well, we have this lead now, so let's focus on Alex and deal with our hunches later."

She nodded. "Sounds good."

They reached the address eight minutes later. There were several cars parked in the driveway and on the street in front of the house. Faith noticed with a dry smile that they were all expensive sports cars.

"Not too concerned about the environment, I guess," Michael said.

"Doesn't look that way," Faith agreed.

They approached the house slowly, weapons drawn. Hopefully that was overkill, but they were clearly going to be outnumbered.

They made it to the driveway when the door burst open. People poured out of the door, vaulting over cars, shrieking and crying, "Run! The cops!"

The agents looked through the group for Alex Forrester. No one Faith saw matched the description. Maybe he was still in the house.

"Faith!"

Faith turned to Michael to see him pointing at the fence separating this house from its neighbor. A lanky young man straddled the fence and looked back at the agents with shocked wide eyes staring through wire-rimmed glasses.

“Get him, Turk!”

Alex swore and vaulted the fence. Faith and Michael followed. Behind them, they heard the chorus of high-revving engines roar to life as Alex’s friends made their escape.

Faith leapt over the fence while Michael stayed on the other side with Turk. Alex was trying to hide underneath a low table in the backyard. He swore when he saw Faith chasing him and stood, throwing the table behind his back.

Faith nearly caught him on the other side of the fence, but he shook her off and vaulted into the next backyard. Faith followed and dropped to the ground, narrowly avoiding a lawn ornament that Alex hurled at her. It shattered behind her, and her eyes narrowed.

“That’s assault on an officer!” she shouted after Alex. “All you’re doing is racking up charges, Alex!”

“Suck my dick!” he called back.

All right, then.

Faith followed him through two more backyards. In the last one, they surprised a family. Alex leapt over a child sitting on a trike in the middle of the yard while Faith dodged the toddler’s older sister. The mom shrieked obscenities at them, and Alex, thankfully, chose to leave the backyards behind.

He landed straight in front of Turk and Michael.

“Shit!” he cried out, “Damn it!”

Turk ran in front of him and brought him to a halt, teeth bared, ears flattened. Michael grabbed him and tried to push him to the ground, but Alex twisted his hips and tossed Michael to the ground. He nearly landed on Turk, and the dog's momentary confusion allowed Alex to leap another fence into a drainage ditch. Faith followed, and called back to Michael, "Find a gate and send Turk through! And call Cuthbert! We need units!"

"You need this unit!" Alex called behind him.

Real original, kid , Faith thought drily.

She sprinted after him, keeping pace with the taller, younger student but not catching up. She ran for several miles every day and was confident her stamina would hold, but it would be really nice not to be five miles from her car when this was over.

Outside of the fence, Turk rushed forward until he was even with Alex. He barked at the fleeing suspect, a warning that he was still there, still saw Alex, and was coming for him.

Faith looked behind to make sure that Michael was keeping up. She sighed in relief when she saw him behind, still running and apparently unharmed from the throw.

"Alex!" she called. "We have police coming! You will not get out of this. You know it! We know where you live and where you go to school! Your friends all have records, and their addresses are on file! Stop fleeing now!"

"Bite me!"

She probably should stop trying to reason with him.

She looked ahead and found an opportunity in forty yards. The drainage ditch ended

at a road bridge, and the tunnel where the water drained was too small for people to crawl through. She called to Turk, “Go on ahead! Cut him off up there!”

Turk followed her point and put on a burst of speed. It always amazed Faith how fast he was. And they thought he was too old to chase suspects anymore!

Better hope this one doesn’t get away, or Turk might not find him again.

Faith hated that little cynical voice of doubt in her head. His sense of smell was fine. It was one damned test.

In any case, this suspect didn’t get away. Turk was waiting for him at the top of the bridge. Alex skidded to a halt and turned around, eyes huge.

He gritted his teeth and rushed Faith, but once more, Turk outran him, leaping into the ditch and jumping in between Faith and Alex. Alex skidded to a halt and stamped his foot. The movement was so absurd and immature that Faith had to laugh.

“Hands above your head!” she shouted. “Obey my commands, or I will have my K9 make you obey!”

“Oh, go to Hell,” Alex said miserably.

He complied, though, and Faith was able to handcuff him without any trouble.

“You’re in so much trouble,” Alex told her. “My lawyer will sue you until you have to beg for work at an ice cream shop.”

“Can’t wait to meet him.”

“It’s a girl, dipshit.”

“My bad,” she said drily.

She hauled Alex to his feet and led him back to the bridge. Michael waited there, having arrived while she handcuffed Alex.

“My partner’s going to help you up,” she told him. “You’re going to behave, or Turk will take you to the ground. Please understand that the only reason he hasn’t bit you yet is that I haven’t ordered him to.”

Alex sniffed. “Whatever.”

She rolled her eyes and passed him to Michael. Alex was tall but thin, and the six-foot-two, two-hundred-ten-pound Michael had no trouble hauling him up to the road. Turk hopped up and watched Alex while Michael helped Faith to the top.

“All right,” Michael said, panting. “Let’s see what the trust-fund terror has to say for himself.”

Alex rolled his eyes at Michael and muttered something under his breath.

“Same to you, buddy.”

They pulled Alex to his feet, and Faith called Cuthbert. "Suspect in custody."

“On my way. Good work, agents.”

“Thank you, Detective.”

She hung up and turned to Alex. “Okay, kid. Let’s take a ride.”

Alex didn’t say anything as they drove to the station, but the mounting fear on his



face gave Faith hope that they could put a swift end to this mystery.

And to any doubt that Turk was as effective now as he ever was.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Alex lost a lot of his bravado by the time they shackled him to a table and sat across from him. Faith got the impression that he wasn't used to being in a police station. Despite his history of extreme behavior, this was the first time he had actually been arrested.

He sat in a pose that looked like a cross between a slump and a sprawl, with his legs splayed out in front of him, his back arched and his shoulders slumped forward. His eyes stared moodily ahead above a petulant frown, and his right index finger tapped restlessly on the table. Turk growled at him, and he stopped tapping, giving the dog an injured look.

Faith and Michael watched him for a moment. He refused to meet their eyes.

"Why'd you run, Alex?" Faith asked, breaking the silence.

Alex shrugged.

"Yeah, that's not gonna work for us," Michael said. "We ask you a question, and you answer us. Why did you run?"

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"Yes, you do," Faith said. "You don't want to tell us, but you have a reason."

He shrugged again.

Faith sighed and leaned forward. "You need to start talking to us, Alex. We have

evidence that you may have murdered two innocent people.”

Alex flinched. He stared at the two agents in shock. “What? You’re kidding me.”

The agents’ stony faces told him that they were not, in fact, kidding.

He leaned back and whined. “Oh my God. What are you talking about? I’ve been home all day.”

“What about last night? Or three nights ago?”

“Home! I... Oh my God. This is crazy.”

The door opened, and a stoic police sergeant handed Faith a piece of paper. It was a report from Cuthbert. Faith skimmed the document, and her eyebrows lifted. “Okay,” she said, setting the paper face up on the table. She spun it around with her thumb and forefinger and pushed it toward Alex. “Now we’re serious.”

Alex glanced at the paper, and his face went white. “Oh my God. Those are the victims?”

The report was a transcript of a few texts and emails between Alex and the two victims. Alex warned Marcus Reeves that he would tear his throat out and told Alison Chen that he hoped she choked to death on her own vomit.

There were some other flowery threats in there, but those were the two that stuck out in Faith’s mind because of how similar they were to the actual deaths.

“You want to tell me what happened?” she asked.

“Nothing!”

“Definitely not nothing,” Michael said.

“Well... I don’t know.”

His lower lip was trembling, and tears were leaking from his cheeks. Faith resisted the urge to curl her lip in disgust. "Let's start with the alibis. Can anyone confirm that you were home?"

He sniffled. “I mean, not at night.” He chuckled bitterly. “Figures those are the only nights I don’t have a girl over.”

“Life’s a bitch, ain’t it?” Michael quipped.

“Okay,” Faith continued. “So you see our problem here. We have two dead bodies, and we have you threatening to kill them in exactly the manner in which they were killed.”

Alex’s eyes popped open. “They tore the guy’s throat out?”

“Yes.”

Forrester looked sick. “It wasn’t me. You gotta believe me.”

“No, we don’t. We have to determine the truth. Right now, it’s not looking very good for you.”

They fell silent and watched Alex for a moment. The kid’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates, and he breathed heavily. He was clearly afraid, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a killer. It didn’t take a lot of bravery to murder someone one on one with a weapon.

However, it did take some bravery to let a deadly wild animal out of its enclosure. Faith could see Alex opening the snake cage, not realizing how aggressive black mambas were, but pretty much everyone understood that a jaguar could effortlessly kill you if it felt so inclined.

Alex hadn't wanted to mess with Turk, but then again, Turk was very clearly being aggressive, and he was wearing a K9 vest and under the command of the FBI agent ordering him to surrender. And he didn't seem prostrate with fear, just aware that he wasn't going to beat Turk in a fight.

She needed to probe further.

"Why did you send those messages?"

"Because they were assholes. They treated animals like shit and got away with it. That's not cool."

There was no anger in Alex's voice. He was just stating a fact. Actually, he sounded pretty miserable now that it was dawning on him that there was a solid chance he would end up spending time in jail. Quite a lot of time.

"And you think that justifies killing them?"

Alex sighed. He rolled his eyes and said, "Look, I didn't kill them. But... if you're asking me honestly, yes. I think they deserved to die for what they did." He wasn't afraid anymore, or at least that fear was masked behind his passion for animal rights. "Think about it: why do we get treated differently just because we're, what? Smarter than animals? I mean, that's cool, and it's how we became the dominant species on the planet, but we have to be good stewards. I'm not even saying we shouldn't eat meat, just that we should be... you know, not assholes."

“I’m beginning to wonder if you know what you mean,” Michael said.

Alex sighed again. “What if someone hurt your dog? Turk, you said, right?”

“That’s right,” Faith confirmed.

“Well, what if someone hurt him? What if someone beat your dog or kicked him or threatened to kill him or starved him to death? What would you do?”

An image of West’s manic grin as he held Turk up by his neck crossed Faith’s mind. She heard the sound of Turk’s yelp as his boot slammed into his ribs.

“Honestly? I’d kill them.”

Michael shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but Faith kept her eyes on Alex.

“Exactly,” Alex said, relieved.

“Exactly,” Faith agreed.

It took Alex a moment to realize his mistake. When he did, the color drained from his face. “Wait. No... I didn’t...” He looked up at the ceiling, then lifted his hands as far as the shackles would allow and held them open in front of him, fingers splayed. “I didn’t kill them! They deserved to die, but I didn’t kill them!”

“Why not?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Why didn’t you kill them? They deserved to die. You tell your sycophants in the Knights of Nature to stand up violently to animal abusers. Why didn’t you kill

them?”

“I don’t... When did I... Are you talking about the essays? That was satire!”

“You just told me that Marcus Reeves and Alison Chen deserved to die.”

“They did! But I don’t tell my people to kill them! Read more of my work. I wrote those essays for a fiction project in literature class. It got published after the demonstration where we wore animal skins because the news likes to make everyone look violent.”

“Telling me that people deserve to die sounds pretty violent.”

Alex dropped his head. A moment later, he started speaking again, going slowly as though trying to make the two of them understand a simple concept that they should have no trouble getting through their heads. “Some people deserve to die. Killing them, unfortunately, only creates more people who deserve to die.”

“Interesting philosophy,” Michael said. “Can you expand on that?”

“Do you support our cause?”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “The Knights of Nature, you mean? No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you advocate violence.”

“Exactly my point. We don’t advocate violence, but the media has successfully made it look like we do. So you don’t support our cause because you associate it with violence. I didn’t kill Alison Chen and Marcus Reeves because... well, frankly

because I didn't think I'd get away with it, but also because I knew it would just make more people who don't give a shit about animals and think we should protect people who treat them like shit."

"Beautiful speech," Faith said. "But there's one little catch. The media didn't do shit. You did. You threatened them. That's what makes it look like you're violent."

Alex sighed. "Please do more research. I will admit that I harassed them. I'll even go to jail for that if I have to. It's like, what? Six months?"

"Depends. Not very long."

"Okay, so fine. If I have to do that, I will. I'd prefer not to, but I will. But please look deeper into those essays and into what the Knights of Nature actually stand for. Yes, we say shocking things, but we do that to get people to think. Just like my example of someone beating Turk to death. It got you to think about the animals instead of just yourself. If you check us out, really check us out, you'll find that we've never been violent, ever. We've performed peaceful demonstrations. We've never even resisted arrest."

"You resisted today."

"I evaded arrest. I didn't resist. I didn't fight you."

"You were going to," Faith said. "You charged me. What were you going to do if Turk wasn't there to protect me?"

He lowered his head again. "Just please look into us more deeply. I'm not a murderer."

"Tell me why you ran," Faith insisted, "and I'll look into your club more."



He slumped. "I... I knew that I had said some stuff that was inflammatory. I thought the cops would come talk to me, but when I saw the FBI uniforms, I freaked out. I thought... I don't know. I've heard stories about people who come with you guys and disappear for good."

"Don't believe everything you read," Michael replied.

"Same to you," Alex fired back.

Michael smiled slightly. "Fair enough. Sit tight, kid."

The three agents left the room. When they were on the other side of the two-way mirror, Cuthbert was scowling. "He's lying. Kid's lying through his teeth."

"You're sure?" Faith asked. Uncertainty flickered across Cuthbert's face, and that was enough for her. "Dig a little deeper into his claims. And look at the real history of the Knights of Nature. Let's see if there's any substance to what he's saying."

Cuthbert reddened further, but he controlled himself. "All right. I suppose we should be sure before we throw the book at him." He glared through the mirror. "Christ, I wish we could just arrest the prick on principle." Before Faith could say anything, he said, "I know, I know. Work with your brain, not your emotions. We'll do a more thorough investigation. In the meantime, though, I suggest letting him sweat. Worst-case scenario, that'll teach him not to be such a dick when he's released."

"I'm in favor of that," Michael seconded.

"Fine with me," Faith agreed.

Cuthbert left to get that started. When the door closed behind him, Michael turned to Faith. "I'm twisting your arm. Is he the killer, yes or no?"

She sighed. “No. I don’t think so.”

“I figured you would say that. Do you believe him?”

“I believe that he didn’t murder Alison Chen and Marcus Reeves. I also believe that he didn’t actually perpetrate any violence or get his group to perpetrate violence.”

“And your reason for that is?”

“He’s a coward.”

“Cowards kill people all the time.”

“Yes, but he’s specifically afraid of arrest.”

“He specifically said he would go to jail for six months,” Michael reminded her.

“Only to avoid jail for two life terms.”

“You’re nitpicking, Faith.”

“The Devil is in the details, Michael. Look, I don’t have conclusive evidence that he’s not our killer. That’s why we’re looking deeper. If it turns out the Knights or Alex himself do have a history of violence, then he’s back to being suspect number one for me. If not, then I’m thinking this is a case of a kid whose bark is far worse than his bite.”

Michael sighed. “Are we sure that everyone in the group is the same?”

“No. And if we clear Alex, the next step for the police will be to look into every other member and associate of the Knights of Nature. But like you said, we’re going to

follow this lead to the end.” She shook her head. “I just don’t think he’s our guy.”

Michael nodded. “Well, that’s a valid opinion. We’ll wait and see. Coffee?”

“Sure. Thank you.”

Michael headed to the breakroom for coffee. Faith leaned in her chair and steeped her fingers in front of her. She looked at Alex but saw the victims, murdered for past crimes by someone far more serious about protecting animals than Alex was. Alex might be passionate about the philosophy, but he cared far more about his own skin than animal skins.

Still, a part of her hoped she was wrong. If the nervous college kid she was staring at wasn’t their killer, then their killer was still out there somewhere planning his next kill. And catching him would be far more difficult with no lead to guide them.

And who knew what fate he had in store for his next victim?

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Doctor Elena Vasquez drained the last of her glass and sighed in satisfaction. Her lawyer had advised against drinking any further on the job but let him work sixty-hour weeks trying to figure out why Bison weren't crapping enough.

She had made the horrible mistake of taking a job at the Henry Doorly Zoo's wildlife rehabilitation center fifteen years ago. It offered incredible benefits and a salary far greater than anything she thought she would be able to make working an ordinary practice.

She was right about that. Unfortunately, it meant her time was not her own. Like ever. Rather than staff their hospital properly, they hired a few doctors and worked them to the very edge of what the rulebook allowed, then kept them on call so they could work them past that edge without getting in trouble.

That's the way she saw it, at least. No wonder she had to take a nip or two to get through the day sometimes. How the hell else was she going to survive this?

Well, that caught up to her when she got caught by a stupid janitor who decided his minimum-wage job obligated him to have a conscience. Gone was the Henry Doorly job, and then came nine years of working her ass off to try to make it work as a private vet, a vet for pets.

And holy hell, that was so much worse. Every single pet owner on Earth was a Karen. Literally every single one. Of course, it was a tragedy that Frou Frou had the common cold. How dare she act like it wasn't a big deal? How dare she send them home and tell them to feed her broth. Broth! Didn't they know Frou Frou was a show Dachshund?

So here she was again, this time at the Big Wilderness Zoo in Council Bluffs. Why were there so many damned zoos here anyway?

This job paid a little better than private practice but not as much as Henry Doorly. However, nine weeks out of ten, she could work forty hours and have a normal life. This was the one week out of ten. Because it really did matter that the bison's stool was ten percent looser than normal.

She sighed and filled her glass again. At least Big Wilderness didn't have working security cameras. If they ever did catch her drinking on the job, she could hold that over their heads.

An alarm went off, jarring her from her thoughts. She stared at the computer monitor, shocked sober. The alarms never went off. That wasn't a thing that happened.

The alarms were motion sensors. There were no security cameras, but the zoo did have motion sensors on each enclosure gate that would alert zoo staff if a gate was opened after hours.

She wasn't sure if she wished they had working cameras or that they didn't have motion sensors.

The alarm came from the wolverine enclosure. The zoo had a big male wolverine named Gus who was known for being possibly the only wolverine on Earth who didn't try to eat your face each time you approached him.

But what was out there? Why did the gate open?

"It's not my problem," she whispered. "It's not my—"

The door to her office opened. She shrieked and leaped to her feet as Gus trundled in.

He growled at her. He always growled, so it was hard to tell if he was angry or just saying hi.

She got to her feet and backed away anyway. Gus was a big wolverine, forty pounds or so. She knew that a wolverine that size could kill her.

“Did you let yourself out?” she asked, her voice thready. “How did you open that lock?”

Wolverines were fairly dexterous, so the lock was a combination that required holding two different pins together and twisting counterclockwise. It was meant to be too difficult for them to figure out, but it wasn’t impossible for them to perform the movement.

Gus trundled toward her, lazily at first, then much faster. She cried out and stepped back.

Something bit her leg. She hopped up and spun around, and the movement tore skin from the back of her calf. She stared in shock at the little instrument that jutted from the wall. It looked like a spring with a pair of those chattering teeth at the end, only instead of teeth, it was filled with nails. A bloody piece of flesh was caught in between those nails.

“Took you long enough,” a voice cried out.

She shrieked and spun around again. Someone wearing a fur suit stood in front of her, holding another spring trap in his hand. Or her hand. Or its hand.

I’m dreaming. I must be dreaming.

Then she heard the motion alarm going off in her office. She saw the red light

flashing above the door and felt the pain searing through her calf.

Oh God. This is real, this is real, this is—

The figure rushed her. She threw her hands in the air and screamed.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Faith could see by Cuthbert's expression when he walked into the room that she was right. The detective gave her a wan smile. "Well, you were right," he admitted. "Knights of Nature have never committed any violent act. Besides the animal skins thing, they've tied themselves to a couple of trees and poured water dyed with food coloring to represent blood on themselves to protest some land development in Bellevue. But no violence.

"As far as Alex Forrester, he's... well, like you said. So far, all bark and no bite. He's been questioned a couple of times, and each time, he's really meek and cooperative. He seems to be really passionate about his animal rights beliefs, but... yeah, those things about advocating all the garish slaughter of people and stuff did, in fact, come from an essay he wrote in college. He did send those threatening notes to Chen and Reeves, though. I don't have enough to hold him right now, but he's going to be watched, and we are going to keep looking at him. The no alibi thing still makes me wonder if maybe he's getting braver. But... as of now, I'm inclined to agree with you."

Faith sighed. "Can't say I'm overjoyed but thank you for finding out for sure. Keep looking at him and look at the others in his group. Maybe someone else is braver."

"Will do."

He headed out, and Faith gave Michael a similarly wan smile. "Well, so much for that."

"Yeah. Damn it."



Faith shrugged. "At least we followed up."

"Yeah, but we wasted time following up. We could have been out there looking for the real killer."

"Well, let's not give up on this yet. I'm only ninety-five percent sure Alex isn't the killer."

Michael glared at her. "That makes me feel much better."

She tried to chuckle but only managed a half-smile. "Let's get some rest. Cuthbert's team will be looking into the other Knights of Nature kids through the night. We should recharge."

"We can go back to the hotel and get some dinner and more coffee," Michael said, "but I don't think either of us are getting much sleep tonight."

"No," she agreed. "Probably not."

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It was nearly midnight when they arrived at their room. Turk yawned and trotted in between the beds, turning in a circle before falling instantly asleep.

Unfortunately for the human agents, Michael was right. They were exhausted, but Faith couldn't shut her brain down, and it looked like Michael had the same problem.

The other problem was that there wasn't much to do about the case right now. Their one lead had evaporated almost completely. They were chasing the smoke, hoping to find another burning ember, but as it stood, the killer of Alison Chen and Marcus Reeves was still at large.

They ordered room service and ate in silence, then showered in equal silence, Faith first, then Michael. After they were clean, Michael made more coffee.

And finally, they ran out of things to occupy themselves and only sat there, unable to sleep.

Michael broke the silence. “How’s David handling the Allentown thing?”

Faith shrugged. “He’s handling it. He’s not happy, but he’s just as gung-ho about living with me as ever. This will all be over soon, and we’ll get to move in finally. He says it’s worth the wait.”

“At the risk of getting slapped, how are you handling the Allentown thing?”

“Why would I slap you for that?”

“I don’t know. You just get irritated anytime I ask you something you’re uncomfortable answering.”

“So do you.”

“Yes, but I’m a teddy bear.”

She chuckled softly. “You are a teddy bear,” she agreed. “I’m fine with Allentown. I don’t like the commute, but it is what it is. The killer hasn’t found me yet, or at least hasn’t killed anyone to get my attention since I moved. David sees me every Tuesday and Sunday, and I don’t mind that we’re not always around each other.”

He frowned a little. She gave him a warning glance. “Now you’re at the risk of getting slapped.”

“I know. But you’re my friend, and I need to say this. Please don’t string David along if you don’t want to live with him. It will only hurt you.”

She sighed. “Do we have to talk about this again?”

“No. I’m done. I said my piece.”

She sighed and rubbed her temples. “It’s just not that simple, Michael. I do love him. I just... Look, I’m not going to bring up old feelings again, but it matters to me that you’re the only person I can talk to about my job. I can’t go home to David feeling like... like this, knowing that all I’ll get from him is sympathy. I mean, doesn’t it bother you that you and Ellie can’t talk about work?”

“No. I prefer to keep my work life and my personal life separate. If I’m stressed, she’ll massage me and make me a nice dinner or something, but we don’t talk about it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You were the wrong person to ask.”

“I was. But look, just tell him how you feel.”

“I don’t want to lose him, though. It’s... After we talked in Alaska, I was going to break up with him, but when I saw him and spent the night with him and talked to him, I realized that I don’t want to lose him. I still love him, and I want to spend my life with him. I just need my space. I don’t always need to be around someone else. David, though, he needs to be around me. Maybe not needs, but the whole moving in thing...”

“Has nothing to do with David being needy and everything to do with you being afraid to adjust your life to another person.”

She glared at him. “Gee, thanks, Dad.”

“Insult me all you want. But it’s true. And it’s valid. If you don’t want to do that, you don’t have to do that. You’re a grown adult, and if you’re happier not living with someone else, you have every right to live alone. Plenty of people do it and live very happy lives.”

“But David won’t.”

“And you need to decide if you’re going to let him go or if you’re going to keep him. There’s no such thing as a perfect life, Faith. If you are happier with David than without him, talk to him. Who knows? Maybe you’re wrong. Maybe David will understand and be happy keeping things at arms’ length.”

She bit her lip. “Do you really think so?”

“Honestly? No. I think he needs someone he can marry one day. But I don’t know him that well. We’ve only seen each other a few times. I could be wrong. And so could you. I know it almost never happens to the Great and Glorious Faith the Bold, but almost isn’t always.”

She chuckled softly. “Yeah. You’re right.” She sighed. “But what if he breaks up with me?”

“You can lure me out into the wilderness and beat me up for making you do this.”

She giggled at that. Turk stirred and opened one eye, and she suppressed her laughter and said, “Sorry, boy.”

Turk snorted and closed his eye again. Faith grinned at Michael. “I really will.” Her smile faded. “I just don’t want to lose the best relationship I’ve had. I just wish that

we could both be happy with what we have now and never need anything more—why are you smiling?”

“Because you said that David is the best relationship you’ve had. Which means you’re not mooning over me anymore.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, good for you. Now you don’t have to worry about me fighting Ellie to the death for your hand in marriage.”

Michael grimaced. “And we will now change the subject. I’ve been thinking about the case. I’m thinking we might be looking at the wrong angle for our killer.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, we’re looking at the victims’ behavior when I think we should be looking at their connections: friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, and so forth.”

“We already looked into Alison Chen’s friends and family.”

“But we didn’t do the same for Marcus Reeves,” he pointed out. “We jumped right on the train of animal rights abuse and vengeance because it fit with her.”

“It fit with Marcus too. He ran a zoo that got shut down for poor care of their animals.”

“That’s true, and we’ve pulled that thread, as we should have. It hasn’t panned out yet, but we have the cops looking through the rest of that thread. If they find something, we’ll keep following it, but right now, we need to think of where to go next, and I’m thinking the where we go next should be Marcus Reeves’ personal life.”

Faith nodded. "I suppose you're right."

"That was mighty enthusiastic of you, Faith," Michael said drily. "So clearly, you see things differently. Let's practice having uncomfortable conversations. You can tell me what you think I don't want to hear, and when I don't immediately end our friendship, you'll know you can have uncomfortable conversations with him."

She glared at him. "One, my relationship with David is very different from my relationship with you. Two, I don't mind pissing you off. Three, we're talking about the case, not our personal lives."

"Yes, but now you're mad at me, so you won't mind letting me know that you disagree with me."

She rolled her eyes. "Very clever of you, Special Agent Prince. You have helped me see the error of my ways."

"Happy to help. So what's the hangup? Why do you not want to look into his personal life?"

"I do. It's standard procedure. I just feel like we're missing something glaringly obvious."

"You feel that way every case."

"And it's true every case."

"It's also true that we figure out what that glaringly obvious thing is by continuing to put work in. We chase leads, they don't work out, we chase new leads... how many times have we had this conversation?"

She glared at him again. “Okay, I get it. You don’t need to be a jerk about it.”

"I wasn't. It just hit me. This is part of our process, too. One of us gets pessimistic or unsure, and the other person talks them down. Huh. We really do work well together."

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe, but you’re still annoying as hell.”

“Fair enough. So let’s start looking at Marcus Reeves, and if the glaringly obvious thing reveals itself, let me—”

Faith’s phone rang. Cuthbert. She lifted an eyebrow. “Maybe this is the glaringly obvious thing.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Michael said. “So often that they might not actually be that strange.”

Faith answered and put the phone on speaker. “Do you have something for us, Detective?”

Cuthbert’s reply brought to mind another common thread in all of their cases. The killer moving a step faster than the two of them moved. “We have another body. A vet at the Big Wilderness Zoo. She was killed an hour ago.”

Faith’s smile faded. “Is Alex Forrester still with you?”

“We released him three minutes ago. The Big Wilderness Zoo is sixteen minutes away if you hit every green light. It’s not him.”

Michael leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes in frustration. Their good mood from a moment ago was gone. “I understand,” Faith said. “We’re on our way.”

She hung up and sighed heavily. “Shit.”

“Yep. At least we know you were right about Alex.”

She looked out the window at the night beyond. “Sometimes, I really wish I was wrong more often.”



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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

The Big Wilderness Zoo was larger than the Council Bluffs Animal Rescue Sanctuary but still fairly small compared to the zoos Faith was used to.

“News article says it was intended to compete with the Henry Doorly Zoo but offer a more immersive experience,” Michael said. “Didn’t get as big as they wanted, but they made enough money to keep operating.”

Faith was driving this time, so Michael was getting background information on the zoo from his phone. “Is it important to know that?” she asked.

“No. I was just trying to see if this zoo had a history of ethics violations too.”

“Anything on that front?”

“Nope. Clean as a whistle.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean our victim is.”

She parked the cruiser in between two other police vehicles. Cuthbert met them at the entrance to the gate. The normally impeccably dressed detective looked disheveled and glum. Faith was pretty sure she looked the same.

“We’ve detained the night watchman. I don’t think he’s the killer, but we have to go through the motions.”

“What makes you think he’s not the killer?” Faith asked.

“You’ll see when you meet him, but he’s not the type. More importantly, we’ve been dusting for prints, and his only show up on the door handle to enter the office.”

“Got it. Who’s the victim?”

“Dr. Elena Vasquez, fifty-five. She was... well, you’d better come see.”

He led the agents to the zoo’s attached animal hospital and rehabilitation center. There were red lights flashing over the entrance to the building and again over an office at the far end of the hall on the first floor.

"Some sort of silent alarm system," Cuthbert explained. "Nightwatchman doesn't know how to turn it off. Says it's never come on before."

Cuthbert led them into the office. A uniform stood next to a corner where a heavysset man in a security guard's uniform sat with his head in his hands. His shoulders shook, and Faith saw tears leaking out underneath his hands. That didn't necessarily prove innocence, but he was definitely shaken by what had happened. Then again, if his prints were nowhere in the room, but there was no evidence of cleaning, that was a pretty good sign.

Turk put his nose to the ground and began sniffing. As at the other two crime scenes, he growled irritably and shook his head, wandering from spot to spot without seeming to notice anything. Michael frowned and glanced at Faith. He pointed at Turk and lifted an eyebrow.

She ignored him and approached the body. “Turk.”

He looked at her, and she pointed at the body of the short, gray-haired woman who lay on the floor in front of a filing cabinet on the opposite wall. He snorted and approached the body but still seemed to have trouble picking up a scent.

She pressed her lips together and crossed her arms. Come on, Turk.

“That one looks painful.”

Michael’s words pulled her out of her funk. She paid closer attention to the body and saw what Michael meant. Dr. Vasquez lay in a pool of her own blood. Small, concave wounds dotted her body as though chunks of flesh had been gouged out by an ice cream scoop.

Bite-sized wounds.

Faith shuddered and said, “So this wasn’t an instant kill like the previous two.”

“Well, to be fair, Alison Chen probably took ten minutes to die,” Cuthbert replied. “But yes, we think Dr. Vasquez was alive for at least thirty minutes. Not that you want to confirm this, but the body’s still warm.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Faith agreed. “The blood pooled here, though, so she wasn’t conscious for long.”

“No. First attack was here.” Cuthbert pointed at a filing cabinet in the corner of the room, about ten feet from the body. Faith saw a spray of blood on the cabinet and a smaller pool on the ground below. “The victim then tried to run, but as you can see from the blood spray on the floor, she had been bitten several times before she overcame her shock and tried to get away. She fell down, and it looks like she tried to defend herself before finally succumbing.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. If she had managed to scratch the killer or even slap him, then there might be DNA on her that they could use. “Defensive wounds?”

Cuthbert reached across the body with one gloved hand and gingerly lifted Dr.

Vasquez's left arm. Faith's face fell when she saw the three missing fingers. "Got it."

"Were any animals blamed this time?" Michael asked.

The security guard lifted his head from the corner of the room to answer that. "Gus."

The agents turned their attention to him. "Who's Gus?" Faith asked.

"He's a wolverine. They're normally very aggressive, but Gus has been handfed his whole life. He's about as mellow as wolverines get."

"How mellow do they get?"

He sighed. "He's cranky, but he's never done anything more than nip a couple of times. Never anything like that."

"What's your name?" Faith asked.

"Trevor."

"You're the night watchman?"

Trevor's lower lip trembled. He lowered his eyes and nodded.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

He took a shaky breath, then squeezed tears from his eyes. "No. I was asleep."

He dropped his head into his hands again and began crying softly.

Faith and Michael shared a look. Faith squatted down to eye level with the morose

guard and said, “Trevor, I understand that this is hard, but I need you to talk to me. Even if you didn’t see anything, you might have information that is critical to helping us solve this case.”

Trevor took another shaky breath and lifted his head. “Okay.”

“So you were sleeping,” Michael said. “When did you wake up?”

He sniffed. “About... I don’t know how long ago. Maybe five minutes before I called the cops.”

Faith looked at Cuthbert, who was standing a few yards behind them, hands folded across his chest. “That would put it about forty minutes ago. So roughly an hour after she was murdered.”

Faith nodded. “What woke you up?”

“Gus. I was at the front desk. He wandered in and nuzzled me to wake me up. I... I usually have beef jerky and potato chips with me. He likes the jerky. Sometimes when I’m here by myself, I’ll sneak to his enclosure and feed him some. Just a little, not enough to irritate his stomach.”

“So you were at the front desk, and you didn’t hear someone walk in?” Michael asked.

Trevor’s lips trembled. He shook his head and released another shaky sob.

“The killer appears to have come in through a rear entrance,” Cuthbert offered. “It doesn’t look like he ever passed the front desk.”

Faith turned back to Trevor. “What did you do after you woke up?”

“Well, I knew something was wrong because I saw the alarms. I got up and checked the office, and...” He glanced at Dr. Vasquez’s body. “Oh man. I’m such an asshole. Oh man.”

“Focus, Trevor,” Faith said. “Beating yourself up over things helps no one. Did you see anyone else? Anyone at all?”

“No. Just her. And Gus.”

“Where is Gus now?”

“I took him back to his enclosure. I should have called the cops first, but I was in shock. I didn’t even think that someone might still have been here, I was just... God, this is crazy.”

“I have to ask,” Michael said. “Is there any chance Gus might have done this?”

Trevor stared at the agents in shock. It seemed he hadn’t thought of that possibility. He cocked his head and replied, “I guess... No. No, because there was no blood on his muzzle. No blood on him anywhere.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, we figured it wasn’t him. Just had to ask.”

“But who would do this?” Trevor asked. “I mean... you have to really hate someone to do something like this, don’t you?”

Actually, killers who committed these kinds of ritualistic murders rarely hated their victims. They rarely saw their targets as human, only as pieces to whatever macabre puzzle they were trying to solve. It wasn’t important to share that with Trevor, though.

“We’re looking into the motive for all of this,” Faith said.

Cuthbert cleared his throat uncomfortably, and Trevor snapped his eyes to Faith.

“Wait? All of this? There’s been more?”

Faith kicked herself for revealing that, but by now, the murders would surely be on the news. Trevor must be one of those people who didn’t follow the news. There was no good reason for Cuthbert to hide the information. If he was upset, she could deal with it later.

“Yes. Two previous victims. That’s all I can share right now.”

Trevor gasped. “God.” His brow furrowed. “But... why not me?”

“Why would someone want to kill you?” Faith asked.

“Well, I don’t know, but I don’t know why someone would want to kill Dr. Vasquez either. She was always nice to me. We only saw each other every now and then when she was working late, but she would always smile and ask how my day was going. Most people don’t do that. I’m just a piece of the furniture to them.”

Faith nodded. “Our killer seems to be focusing on certain aspects of his victims’ past when he chooses them.” She hesitated a moment, then decided to be more specific. “He appears to target victims with allegations of animal rights abuse in the past. Do you know of any such allegations about Dr. Vasquez?”

“Dr. Vasquez?” The thought seemed nearly inconceivable to Trevor. “No. Never. I mean... we didn’t know each other that well, but... no, that seems crazy. She was so nice.”

So are a great many bad people, Faith thought. A touch of guilt followed that thought.

She didn't have any right to judge Dr. Vasquez, and it wasn't helping her case to assume the worst right now.

"What's with the cameras?" Michael asked. "Are they not working or something?"

Trevor sighed. "They're working. They're just not cameras."

Michael stared at him a moment, then pointed to the very-obvious camera hanging above the door. "That's not a camera?"

"I mean... it is, but not really. The camera part doesn't work, just the motion sensor. It's attached to the lights, but... no sound either. It's just that nothing happens here."

"Well, something did," Faith said.

Trevor slumped forward. "I know. And it's my fault."

Strictly speaking, Trevor was definitely to blame for falling asleep on the job, but it wasn't right to blame him for the murder. "It's not your fault that someone killed Dr. Vasquez," Faith said. "But you can help us find that person."

Trevor lifted his head again. "Yes. Anything."

"I need you to make me a list of all of the staff at the zoo. Put the names of the other vets and nurses here on top. Someone might know something about Dr. Vasquez that will help us understand who might want to kill her."

Trevor brightened. "I'll do that. I'll do that right away."

He jumped up and rushed from the room. The uniform glanced at Detective Cuthbert. Cuthbert shook his head. "He's not guilty of anything but laziness." He sighed and



shook his head. “Sad thing is the zoo will probably use him as a scapegoat to deflect from the fact that their damned cameras don’t work.”

Faith looked at Turk, who was now carefully sniffing a trash can in the corner of the room. She walked over to the can and frowned when she saw that it was empty. Nothing there but a fresh plastic liner.

“Come on, boy,” she said curtly. “Let’s go get some rest.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “You don’t want to look around a little more?”

“Cuthbert, send us the CSI report and the coroner’s autopsy report when you get it. If you find anything else you think we need to know, send that too.”

“Sure. Will do.”

Faith stormed out of the room and nearly bowled Trevor over on her way out. He pressed a sheaf of papers into her hand. “What’s this?” she asked.

His brow furrowed. “The list. Of zoo staff?”

Heat climbed her cheeks. “Right. Of course. Thank you, Trevor. The police might have a few more questions for you. Go ahead and return to the office.”

She brushed past him and headed for the door. Turk stared up at her with concern, but she couldn’t look at him right now.

“Is everything okay?” Michael asked.

“Fine,” she snapped. She took a breath and added in a softer voice. “I just need some rest, I think. We’ll start on this list bright and early.”

Michael nodded, but his face told Faith that he wasn't happy with her deflection. He didn't challenge her on it, though. "Right. Sounds good."

They headed back to the hotel. Faith tried to pull her mind away from Turk's smell issue, but she kept coming back to the trash can. There was nothing there at all. And where something might be, he'd smelled nothing.

She hated to admit it, but it was beginning to look like David was right. Maybe Turk's age was finally beginning to catch up to him.

Turk nudged her, and she looked down into his wide, affectionate brown eyes. The gray on his muzzle stood out sharply next to that brown. She forced a smile and scratched him under his chin. "It's okay, boy. Mommy's just tired." She looked back out of the windshield, and her smile faded. "Everything's going to be all right."

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Faith didn't think she would actually be able to sleep that night, but the next thing she remembered was Michael shaking her awake. She blinked and groaned, "What time is it?"

"Nine."

That brought her right to alertness. "Nine? Why did you wake me up so late?"

"Because you needed sleep. You kind of melted down a little last night. Turk's clearly got something going on with his nose, and it threw you off."

She flinched. "What do you mean, he has something going on with his nose?"

Michael sighed. "David kicked me out of the hospital to tell you something in private. Since then, you've been worried. Turk's clearly not on his A-game, and last night, he excitedly pointed out an empty trash can."

"There could have been something in that trash can."

"But there wasn't, which is why you didn't tell Cuthbert to have CSI look at it."

Faith frowned and looked away.

"I'm not going to argue with you about Turk," Michael said. "I know it's tough to deal with him getting older, and I know you'll get through it."

Faith pressed her lips together and nodded. "We don't know if it's anything to be

concerned about yet. He's going to retest in a couple of weeks, and then we'll know."

"Okay. That's fine with me. I trust you. In the meantime, you needed rest, yes?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes."

Michael grinned. "Poor Faith. I'm so sorry you have to accept that you're human."

She threw her pillow at him, and he laughed and ducked out of the way. "There's coffee and breakfast on the table. It's to go because while you got your beauty rest, I started calling people on the list. Made it to name nine and learned something pretty damned interesting."

Faith's irritation vanished. "Yeah?"

"Yep. Get changed. We're going to the corporate offices of Global Wildlife Experiences."

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In the car, Michael explained what he'd learned. "So I talked to Dr. William Orville. He's the avian expert at Big Wilderness. Turns out he knows—knew—Dr. Vasquez. They worked together at the Henry Doorly Zoo ten years ago. Evidently, Dr. Vasquez was fired when she botched several operations in a row. The internal investigation revealed that Dr. Vasquez had a habit of drinking on the job."

"So her negligence led to animals being hurt."

"Killed."

"Well, there's our motive and more evidence that our killer is attacking people who

abuse animals.”

“Yep. I did some research, and it turns out that the Henry Doorly Zoo was owned by Global Wildlife Experiences at the time they both worked there. The incident with Dr. Vasquez and a couple of unrelated financial irregularities led to the business selling the zoo and restructuring. I called the CEO of Global Wildlife, and he’s agreed to speak to us if we promise to keep his name out of the media.”

Faith frowned. “We can’t guarantee that.”

“No, and I told him that. But I did guarantee that his name would be the first one out of my lips if he didn’t cooperate with our investigation.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “I’m impressed. Normally I have to be the bad cop.”

“Well, you were sleeping.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s what I get for trying to thank you.”

“What? You were sleeping.”

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They reached the Global Wildlife building fifteen minutes later. Downtown Omaha was far from what Faith would consider bustling, but it was a much livelier place than Council Bluffs. That, combined with the sleep, the coffee and the prospect of another lead had Faith feeling focused and energetic when they walked inside.

The receptionist blanched when she saw the FBI uniforms. She picked up a phone and said something into it. Faith guessed she was warning the boss. When the agents approached, she plastered a smile on her face and said, “Good morning! How may I

help you?”

“We’re here to speak with Mr. Thurman,” Faith replied.

“Of course! Let me see if he’s available.”

“He’s available,” Michael interjected. “Because he told me he was. And I made it very clear what would happen if he wasn’t available.”

The receptionist maintained her Barbie doll smile but swallowed nervously. “Of course. I’ll let him know that you’re on your way up.”

“Thank you. And where will we find Mr. Thurman?”

“His office is the second one to the right on the ninth floor. Um...” She looked around nervously, then leaned forward and asked. “Is everything okay? Are we in trouble?”

“You aren’t,” Faith replied. “We’ll see if Mr. Thurman is.”

They left the receptionist white as a sheet at her desk. When they were in the elevator, Faith asked, “You think we’ll catch him shredding documents?”

“I think all the shredding’s been done before we arrived,” Michael replied. “The key will be to convince him that talking to us is the best way to keep himself out of trouble.”

“Do we think there’s a reason he would be in trouble?”

“It depends on what he’s covered up and how much. Probably not, but it wouldn’t surprise me too much if he has a good idea who the killer is.”

“Well, let’s not get too ahead of ourselves,” she warned. “Right now, we’re just asking about Dr. Vasquez.”

The three of them reached Mr. Thurman’s office to find him standing behind his desk with his hands behind his back. He looked sick with worry, but when he saw the agents, that expression vanished behind a smile far more natural-looking than the one the receptionist gave them on the ground floor. “Good morning, agents! Thank you for coming to see me.”

“Thank you for having us,” Faith replied. “Did my partner tell you why we’re here?”

“Yes. You needed to confirm dates of employment for Dr. Elena Vasquez. I am a little confused why you’re here in person. Normally, that conversation is a phone call.”

“The confusion might stem from the fact that I didn’t say we were here to confirm dates of employment,” Michael replied. “Although that is one of the questions we’d like answered.”

Mr. Thurman offered an apologetic look. “Well, unfortunately, in order to respect the privacy of our employees, I’m unable to provide any information other than dates of employment.”

“That would be true if we were headhunters recruiting for an employer,” Faith corrected. “But we’re FBI agents investigating three murders, at least one of whom was a former employee of yours.”

Mr. Thurman’s brow furrowed. “At least?”

“Yes. Can you confirm if Marcus Reeves and Alison Chen ever worked for Global Wildlife Experiences?”

Thurman's shoulders stiffened. "The names don't sound familiar."

"But you can confirm dates of employment, right?" Michael pressed.

Mr. Thurman's eye twitched when he realized the trap he had stepped into. "I can put in a request for that information, sure. It will take some time to find it. We've employed a lot of people at our various zoos and aquariums."

Faith was done being patient. "Mr. Thurman, Marcus Reeves had his throat torn out. Alison Chen was poisoned with snake venom. Dr. Vasquez bled out after tennis-ball-sized chunks of her flesh were gouged out of a half-dozen different places on her body. I really don't care about the risk this line of questioning poses to your corporation."

Mr. Thurman's smile faded. "I understand that, agent," he said calmly, "but I do. I have to. It's not just my livelihood at risk. Global Wildlife Experiences employs over forty-five hundred people at fourteen different locations across North America. Bad press doesn't only affect the guilty."

"Refusing to cooperate with an FBI multiple-murder investigation is pretty bad press, Mr. Thurman."

The CEO sighed. "As your partner pointed out, I am legally required to respond to requests confirming employment within a reasonable timeframe. I have agreed to do that. I'm sorry for being rude, but I don't see why we need to continue speaking at the moment."

"Because one of your former employees is dead, Mr. Thurman," Faith replied. "Judging by your reaction, I believe three of your former employees are dead. How many more will die while you're too busy covering your ass?"



Thurman swallowed but maintained his stance. “I’m sorry, Special Agent. My condolences to the families of the victims, but I have my job.”

“And we have ours,” Michael retorted. “And I will use mine to drag your name through the mud in every single news publication who’s willing to spend five minutes talking to me.”

“You’ll ruin the lives of nearly five thousand people to throw a tantrum because I won’t exceed the mandate of the law? Frankly, Special Agent, that’s a fight I’m willing to take to court.”

Michael held his gaze for a moment. Then he shrugged. “All right. I’ll let the Bureau know. By the way, how do you spell your first name? Ah, never mind. I’ll look it up.”

The three agents started toward the door. Faith put her hand on the handle and started to turn when Thurman called, “Wait.”

The three of them turned their heads toward the beleaguered CEO. Turk growled softly. Thurman sat behind his desk and rubbed his eyes. “All right. I’ll cooperate. Just... Look, I’m not kidding. If we get bad press, a lot of people will suffer. Our reputation is already shaky at best. We can’t risk things getting any worse.”

“If you give us what we need to know, we’ll do our best to keep your name out of the media. If it ends up in the media, we’ll make sure people know you cooperated fully.”

Thurman nodded and stared bleakly past them into the empty office on the opposite side of the hallway. “You two want coffee?” he said mechanically.

“We’re all right,” Faith replied.

Michael shook his head, and Thurman stood. “Well, I’m going to make some. If you

change your mind, let me know.”

He stepped outside, and Faith turned to Michael with a slight smile. "Nice work."

Michael shrugged. “Don’t thank me yet. The ball’s in Thurman’s court now.”

“Think he’ll talk?”

“Oh, he’ll talk,” Michael replied. “The question is whether anything he says will be the truth.”

Or whether we’ll be able to see through a lie , Faith thought soberly.

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Thurman returned a moment later. With his decision made, he was no longer tense. Instead, he appeared exhausted. Faith wondered if agreeing to tell the truth was a relief to him in any way or if it only left him feeling as empty as he looked.

He took a sip of his coffee, then began. “The three individuals you named were associated with us years in the past. Dr. Vasquez was a veterinarian at the Henry Doorly Zoo for... I believe fifteen years. Global Wildlife owned the zoo for the last five of those years. She was let go when it was reported that she was performing surgeries in a state of impairment.”

“She was drinking on the job,” Faith summarized.

“Yes. During the investigation into her misconduct, an employee of the zoo’s reptile house was caught stealing reptiles. Further investigation proved it wasn’t the first time.”

“What was that employee’s name?”

Thurman sighed. “Alison Chen.”

“What a surprise,” Michael said drily.

Thurman sipped more of his coffee. He looked miserable. “A lot of this was in the news, but essentially what happened is we fired Dr. Vasquez and Alison Chen and issued the usual statements affirming our commitment to caring for our animals yadda yadda, we don’t approve of any of this, and so forth. It wasn’t enough. The Henry Doorly Zoo board of trustees voted to purchase the property from us and

threatened to force the issue in court if we didn't accept their offer of two-thirds of the market value. We weren't in a position to say no, so we took the money. The damage to our reputation caused revenue to plummet by sixty percent. We had to sell a third of our properties and cut costs at the rest of them. We lost a quarter of the rest to bankruptcy. Basically, we were nearly ruined."

He met Michael's eyes and said sourly, "You see why I'm concerned about the company's reputation? If we take another hit, I can't pull us out of it."

"I sympathize," Michael replied, "but like I said earlier, we have a job to do."

Thurman sighed. "Right." He finished his coffee and said, "The last one, Marcus Reeves, he never actually worked for us. He leased staff from us for his zoo. Not animal care experts. I want that to be clear. No employee of Global Wildlife Experiences was responsible for the mistreatment those animals endured."

"I believe you," Faith replied, "but you were associated with him."

"Yes." He shook his head. "Worst advice I ever took, leasing employees to other zoos."

"You mentioned that it was reported that Dr. Vasquez was drinking on the job," Faith said. "Reported by whom?"

"Another former employee of ours. An animal trainer."

"Does this trainer have a name?" Michael asked.

"James... I'll have to look up the last name. James, something or other. He called our HR department and said he'd talked to the zoo, and they weren't doing anything about it. His next phone call was going to be to the police, he said, so we took it seriously

and sent people to investigate. And it turned out he was telling the truth."

"And what about Chen? Who reported her?"

"No one. A member of the HR team caught her stealing a red-tailed boa from an enclosure and when he confronted her about it, she started spouting some crazy shit about how she was meant to care for these animals, how their spirits were aligned or some crap."

"And Marcus Reeves?"

Thurman's eye twitched. He tapped his finger on the desk and sighed. "That was also James. Hawkins. I remember now, his name was Hawkins. Our CFO at the time called him Hawkins the Hawk for spotting every little damned thing that went wrong."

"Not really a little thing," Michael corrected.

"I know. That's just what Katie called him."

"Katie?"

"The CFO. We... well, look, hate us for this if you want, but we weren't really big fans of James Hawkins after his whistleblowing left us gasping for air."

"Would it have been better if he kept his mouth shut?" Faith asked.

"For the animals, no. For the eleven hundred people who lost their jobs and never got paid unemployment because we filed Chapter Eleven, yes. Again, hate me if you want, but the people matter more to me."

“What a noble man you are,” Michael scoffed.

Faith laid a hand on her partner’s arm. “What happened to James Hawkins? Does he still work with you?”

“No. He was let go for unrelated issues.”

“What issues?”

“Performance issues. The animals he trained didn’t perform the way we wanted them to.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Not really. It was years ago.”

Michael scoffed again. “Hmm. Are you sure you didn’t just make up a reason to fire him because he blew the whistle and put your company in trouble?”

Rather than answer the question directly, Thurman returned to his tried-and-true standard. “The company isn’t a few executives, Special Agent. It’s thousands of people. A lot of those people couldn’t feed their families or pay rent anymore after the crap that happened when James decided to play hero. To directly answer your question, it’s true that he wasn’t effective as an animal trainer, and it’s true that we fired him for that reason. And that response I can and will back up in court.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Faith said. “In the meantime, we need the most recent contact information you have for James Hawkins.”

Thurman sighed and opened his computer. “Sure. The information is years outdated, but sure, knock yourself out.” He shook his head. “We’re doing our best here, agents.

We're just trying to keep our heads above water."

"I sympathize with that," Faith said. "But someone's trying to hold other people's heads underwater, and we need to find him before he drowns anyone else."

Thurman didn't respond until he had the address. He wrote it down and handed it to Faith. "Something to think about, Special Agent. These victims weren't good people. Maybe ask yourself if the world isn't better off without them in it."

It was Faith's turn not to respond. The three agents left the bitter CEO in his office and headed outside. The receptionist paled again when she saw them and pretended to be busy with paperwork when they left the building.

Once in the car, Michael chuckled. "People are so good at finding ways to justify their actions. Even when those actions get people killed."

"They have to find some way to live with themselves," Faith opined. "Otherwise... well, they don't live with themselves."

"Yeah. Well, I'm glad I'm not him."

"Me too," Faith agreed.

Still, Thurman's words remained in Faith's head as they headed toward James Hawkins's house.

Ask yourself if the world isn't better off without them in it.

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James Hawkins lived on five acres of land abutting the Hackberry Nature Preserve a

few miles east of Council Bluffs. As soon as the property came into view, Faith could see a collection of exotic animals in enclosures throughout the property. There were bears, antelopes, big cats and a few different species of eagle that Faith could see just from the driveway. It looked like James had kept up his animal training business.

They parked the car, and as soon as they left the vehicle, Turk became agitated. He put his nose to the ground and growled, staring at the animals and baring his teeth.

“What is it, boy?” Faith asked. “What do you smell?”

“Probably the wolves,” Michael replied, gesturing to a large enclosure where five huge gray wolves could be seen prowling among a few trees planted to simulate their natural forested environment.

“Maybe.”

Turk only grew more agitated as they left the animals behind and approached the house, however. By the time they stood on James Hawkins’s front porch and knocked on the door, Turk had his ears pricked up and his tail flat out behind him, a sign of extreme alertness.

It wasn’t the animals.

The door opened, and a tall, muscular man of about forty poked his head out. His eyes widened when he saw the FBI uniforms. “Can I help you?”

“James Hawkins?” Faith asked.

“That’s me. Is everything all right? What’s going on?”

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold,” Faith replied. “This is my partner, Special Agent



Michael Prince, and our K9 unit, Turk. Can we talk to you for a few minutes?"

"May I ask what this is about?"

"We have questions about your former employment with Global Wildlife Experiences."

James's demeanor changed immediately. His eyes narrowed, and his lips curled into a frown. "I don't have anything more to say about them."

"This is important, Mr. Hawkins," Faith insisted.

"I made an official statement to Global's HR department when I left. I still have a copy of it. Give me an email address, and I'll send it to you."

Turk growled low in his throat. James's frown deepened. "Am I in some kind of trouble?"

"That's what we're trying to determine."

James's face changed again, this time registering shock. "What? Why?"

"May we come inside?"

"I'd really prefer to have some answers before I let you into my house or answer any of your questions."

He kept his voice calm but firm, and when Turk growled at him again, he didn't show any concern. Not all that surprising from a man who trained wolves for a living.

Faith decided to be upfront with him. "We're investigating the murders of Dr. Elena

Vasquez, Alison Chen and Marcus Reeves. We believe you may have some information for us."

James stared blankly at her for a moment. He blinked and said, "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

James took a breath and released it slowly. "I haven't spoken to any of those people in years. I've been trying hard not to think about them."

"Well, someone thought about them," Faith said. "Someone tore Marcus Reeves' throat out, poisoned Alison Chen and chopped holes into Dr. Vasquez."

James took another breath. His eyes flicked between the agents. "I'm sorry, but I don't have anything that can help you."

Turk took a step toward James, and this time, he did react, stepping through his doorway and trying to pull it closed. Faith stopped it with her foot. "James, we will come back with a warrant if we need to."

"I'm sorry to hear that," James replied, still calm. "That's what you'll have to do."

"And if things go that way," Michael added. "We'll report to the press that we've made an arrest in this case, and a lot of people are going to learn that you had history with our victims."

James stiffened. "You know about my history?"

"We talked to Mr. Thurman at Global Wildlife Headquarters," Faith said.

James sighed. "Of course you did. So what? I'm a suspect now?"

“At the moment, you’re a person of interest,” Faith clarified. “This conversation will hopefully tell us whether you should be considered a suspect or should be removed as a person of interest.”

James sighed again. “Do either of you work with animals? Besides your dog?”

“No.”

“Okay, well, I have a lot of animals here, and they all need food. I don’t have anyone to ask to care for them. Point being is that I need to make sure they’re fed, watered and enclosed securely before I come with you.”

“We can always start the conversation here,” Faith offered.

James shook his head. “Just... give me a moment, all right?”

"I don't think we can do that, James," Michael replied.

“Am I under arrest?” James asked.

Michael frowned and reluctantly admitted, “No.”

“Then you’ll have to wait for me to take care of my animals. You can come with me if you’re afraid I’ll try to run.”

Faith and Michael shared a look. Then Faith turned back to James and said, “You go ahead. Just pretend we’re not even here.”

Turk growled again, and James gave the dog a mistrustful look. He led the three agents into the house. Faith followed, one hand on her service weapon. It was too early to tell if James was guilty or not, but Turk's behavior suggested that they might

have finally found their killer. It wasn't nearly enough evidence to hold up in court, but Turk had found more than one killer with his nose before. Maybe he'd come through for them again. Faith could always hope.

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The inside of James's house was sparse. His money clearly went to maintaining his animals. He led them through the nearly bare interior to a backyard where several chest freezers sat, their cables snaking underground.

There was a slab near one of the chests where several thick cuts of beef sat. "This is for the tigers and bears," he explained.

Michael put a hand on his shoulder. "I think this is where we stop," he told the suspect. "I'm not looking for a fight with a five-hundred-pound cat."

"I don't enter the enclosures with food," James replied. "There are pullout drawers in each enclosure. I put the food in there and push it through for the animals." When Michael was still wary, James said, "You can do it yourself if you don't believe me."

Turk barked, and James frowned and looked at Faith. "Is he going to attack me?"

"If you behave yourself, then he'll behave himself," Faith said. "Although I'll be honest, I do find it interesting that he's reacting this way around you. He typically only does that when he recognizes a smell he's picked up at a crime scene before."

"Well, I'm working with a lot of animals," James replied. "Considering the careers your victims chose, I imagine your dog is smelling something similar on me."

Faith frowned. That was actually a logical explanation. It still didn't absolve James of suspicion.

The animal trainer was pushing a pallet jack underneath a pallet piled high with sides

of beef. He lifted the pallet and pushed the meat toward the enclosures. Faith heard growling as the animals rushed to their feeding troughs anticipating the meal.

“Can you explain to us your association with the victims?” Faith asked as they walked.

“Sure,” James said, pointedly ignoring the still-growling Turk. “I reported Dr. Vasquez and Marcus Reeves for animal abuse. I don’t know who Alison Chen is.”

“She worked at the Reptile House in Henry Doorly when you reported Dr. Vasquez.”

“I see. Well, I deal with large carnivores and occasionally large herbivores, not reptiles.”

“So you didn’t report her for stealing exotic animals from the zoo?”

“I didn’t. Did someone say I did?”

“No,” Faith admitted.

“Then why are you asking me about it?”

“Because she was murdered two days ago. Someone jabbed a two-pronged roasting needle into her neck but dipped it in snake venom first. A couple nights before that, someone tore Marcus Reeves’ throat out. And last night, someone gouged pieces of Dr. Vasquez’s flesh from her body until she bled to death.”

James grimaced. "Sounds brutal." He pulled to a stop in front of an enclosure housing two beautiful Bengal tigers and unloaded some of the meat into a large metal trough that extended outward from the enclosure. The tigers growled and clawed at the cage, waiting for their meal.

“All right, all right, calm down,” James said. “You know you’re going to get the meat in a second.”

He pushed the trough closed, and the tigers fell on the meat savagely. Faith was grateful to be separated from the animals by thick steel bars.

James pushed the forklift ahead and said, “Okay, so I’m clearly a suspect. Am I correct in assuming that?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?”

“I think you know,” Michael replied.

James chuckled and pulled to a stop in front of an enclosure housing two enormous brown bears. The bears were more well-behaved than the tigers, but the heavy, open-mouthed breathing of the carnivores was somehow more disconcerting to Faith than the growling of the cats. James unloaded most of the rest of the meat onto the pullout trough and pushed it through. The bears remained calmer than the tigers, but there was something frightening about how easily they tore the beef apart. One of the animals fixed its gaze on Turk and gave the dog an expression that looked a little like amused contempt. Faith was glad when they moved on.

“Last stop is the wolves,” James informed them. “Make sure your dog doesn’t freak out. Dogs have problems with wolves sometimes. To answer your question... Prince, right?”

“That’s right.”

“To answer your question, Special Agent Prince, if you think I decided to murder

three people years later for actions other people took, then I would respectfully suggest that the two of you need to reconsider your approach to this case.”

“Can you expand on that?” Faith asked.

“Sure. I’m bitter about losing my job at Global Wildlife Experiences. I was a good trainer. They told me all the time how much they liked my work and appreciated my expertise.”

“They?”

“The executives. I was held in high regard. Then the whistleblowing happens, and all of a sudden, I’m a disease. They fired me for ‘not upholding the standards expected by Global Wildlife Experiences.’ What really happened is they changed their expectations several times until they found demands I couldn’t or wouldn’t meet. Then, they used that as an excuse to retaliate for the fact that I reported severe ethical violations that endangered the lives of animals and people. And yeah, I was pissed off about it.”

They reached the wolf enclosure. Turk stopped growling. His ears perked up, and he tensed and looked warily at the wolves.

If the bears and tigers were frightening, the wolves were like something out of a nightmare. They were beautiful animals, sleek and powerful and glistening in the sun.

They were also silent. That was what really unnerved Faith. The tigers had growled and the bears had huffed, but the wolves didn’t make a sound as they padded over to wait patiently for their meat. They held the eyes of the three visitors and stared without fear—without identifiable emotion of any kind—as James loaded the trough and pushed it closed. Even with the meat in front of them, they held the strangers’ gaze until Faith and Michael looked away.



Only then did she hear the soft sound of their teeth tearing into flesh. She shivered and looked at James. “Why don’t we continue this conversation inside?”

James gave her a half-smile. “Wolves got you feeling the heebie-jeebies, huh?”

She narrowed her eyes. “The wolves, yes. You? Not so much.”

James chuckled. “Loud and clear. Sorry if I’m not the most personable guy right now. I wasn’t expecting to be accused of murder today.”

“As long as we keep this conversation friendly, you have nothing to worry about from us,” Michael said.

Turk’s growl seemed to belie that statement, but James didn’t seem worried. “All right. Let’s go back inside.”

The sound of the wolves’ meal followed Faith as they headed for the house. She wasn’t sure why it disturbed her so much. Dogs came from wolves. Turk looked a lot like a smaller, darker-furred version of a wolf.

But wolves weren’t dogs. That was what really disturbed her. When Turk was ready to eat, he would get visibly excited, whining, barking and wagging his tail. The wolves seemed devoid of emotion, only possessing the cold stare of a predator.

They looked like dogs, but they weren’t. They were far more dangerous. Just like killers. They looked like people, but they operated on a far more brutal set of instincts.

Once they were inside, Michael resumed the questioning. “All right, so you hate the executives of Global Wildlife. They’re alive, so clearly you didn’t kill them. Let’s talk about the people who are dead. What are your thoughts on them?”

James raised an eyebrow. "My thoughts?"

"Yes."

"They were pieces of shit. Again, I don't know about this Alison Chen girl, but Dr. Vasquez was a snobby, arrogant bitch who thought she deserved some sort of pampered, spoiled life and Marcus Reeves was a greedy little coin-counter who treated animals like furniture."

"And yet you were made a pariah when you reported them," Faith said.

"Yes. But that wasn't their fault. That was Global's fault."

"Still," Michael pressed. "Kind of sucks that Vasquez and Reeves never faced justice. Vasquez kept her license, and Reeves avoided jail time. All of those dead animals, and they got the equivalent of a slap on the wrist."

"Yeah, it's pretty shitty," James agreed.

"It almost makes you think that someone ought to take justice into their own hands," Michael suggested.

James laughed. "Boy, you really like me for this. Look, I'm not crazy. I believe that animals should have rights, but I'm not one of those kooks who thinks if you hit a deer with your car it should be treated like manslaughter. It's possible to use animals to meet our needs in a responsible way. I train animals for film sets and stage shows. You won't find wild bears balancing beach balls on their noses.

"I say this to point out that I don't see anything morally wrong with training animals to do what we want them to do. But drinking while working with large predators is dangerous for a lot of reasons, in addition to the animal cruelty problem. Running a

zoo full of starving lions stuffed into cages that couldn't hold a sufficiently dedicated bobcat is a problem for reasons beyond the fact that the lions are starving and going crazy."

"Are you saying that you reported their violations because they endangered people?" Faith asked.

"Both people and animals. They were disasters waiting to happen. What I did was the equivalent of warning someone that they were driving on a flat tire, and I was treated like the guy tossing nails onto the road. But I didn't kill anyone. That wouldn't accomplish anything."

"Take the wheels off of a car, and it's not going to blow a tire out on the freeway," Michael pointed out.

"Fair enough. Can't say I'm all that upset that they're dead. But I wasn't the one who took the wheels off."

"Can you prove that?"

James sighed. "You said Reeves was killed when? Four days ago?"

"That's right."

"Okay, I have an alibi for that one. I was giving a presentation in Hollywood for the Animal Trainers Guild."

"Can you confirm that?"

"Sure can. Pictures, blog articles, and if you call my representative at the guild, she'll confirm my attendance. I was one of the speakers for day four."

Faith looked at Michael. Michael nodded and asked James, “Do you have a phone number I can call?”

“Sure. There’s a business card in the small drawer to the left of the refrigerator in the kitchen. It’ll say ATG on the front of it and have a number for Valerie Collier.”

Michael stood and headed to the kitchen.

“While he’s following up on your alibi,” Faith said, “Tell me honestly. Do you think the world is a better place without Marcus Reeves, Elena Vasquez and Alison Chen?”

“Honestly? I think the world is a better place without a lot of people.”

Faith didn’t know how to respond to that. From the kitchen, she heard Michael talking to Valerie Collier. “I see. Thank you for confirming that, ma’am.”

He hung up and returned to the living room. “All right, Mr. Hawkins. Your alibi has been confirmed. It looks like you were out of town not only for Marcus Reeves’ murder but for Alison Chen’s. We’re certain that Dr. Vasquez was killed by the same murderer, so you’re off the hook.”

James nodded. With the threat of arrest no longer looming, he relaxed a little, and his tone was gentler when he said, “For what it’s worth, I do hope you find this guy. At the end of the day, humans are animals too. When we give into our lowest instincts, we quickly reach a point where it becomes impossible to stop. Eventually, this guy will stop worrying whether the people he targets are guilty or not. That’s when this will become a problem.”

Faith stood. “I guess that’s the difference between you and me, James. From where I’m standing, this is already a problem.”

The three of them left James and began the drive back to their hotel in Council Bluffs. They remained silent for the journey, both of them irritated and discouraged by their lack of progress.

And James was right about one thing. Killers like this one couldn't stop. Like the wolves, they were wired differently than others. The only way to stop them was to lock them away where they couldn't hurt anyone else.

At the moment, their wolf still roamed free, silently prowling through the darkness looking for his next kill.

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The two human agents continued to be silent while they ate their lunch—sandwiches and fruit ordered from room service. Turk tried to engage with both of them, but when it became clear that his humans weren't going to be cheered up, he retreated between the beds and sat, resting his head on his hands with a glum look.

Michael finally broke the silence when he finished his lunch. "We need to look into our victims' backgrounds."

"We have been," Faith protested. "That's all we've been doing."

"Okay, good point. Let me clarify. We're approaching this case like it's an animal rights case, like our killer is getting revenge on behalf of the animals."

"Well, yeah. The evidence for that is overwhelming."

"And yet all of our leads evaporate," Michael countered. "Forrester was all bark and no bite and Hawkins was more irritated about being fired than that the victims got away with their crimes."

"That's only two leads, Michael."

"Well, that's another thing. We're not finding much. We've been narrowing our search to one specific thread and hoping that it will lead us to the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Have you heard anything from Cuthbert about the other Knights of Nature?"

She shook her head. "That doesn't mean he won't find anything, though."

“There were only a dozen people in that group, Faith. All college kids. That’s not a lot of life for a team of investigators to dig through. If there was something to find, he would have found it already.”

Faith frowned. She hated to admit it, but Michael was right about that. The Knights of Nature were a dead end. “What about Global Wildlife, though? It could be one of their colleagues from there.”

“Maybe, but if it is, I don’t think the animal rights thing is the angle we should be looking at.”

“What else could it be? What other possible reason could someone have to fabricate tools to look like animal bites?”

“The answer to the first question is that they didn’t like the victims. The answer to the second question is the part that really bugs me. James Hawkins was an animal trainer. If he was going to fabricate a tool to look like an animal bite, it would be a good tool. It would look like a real panther bite, not box cutters. A real mamba bite, not a hot dog fork. And he would have at least rubbed some blood on the wolverine’s muzzle. We should have thought about all of that before we even went to talk to him, but we didn’t. We just decided that we knew it was him.”

“We didn’t decide that we knew it was him,” Faith said. “He had a connection with all three victims, and he had a motive.”

“He had a connection with two victims and happened to be in the vicinity of the third victim.”

Faith pressed her lips together. She was getting frustrated. “Okay, so the lead didn’t work out. The lead to Forrester was stronger, but that didn’t work out either. Why are you suddenly getting pissy? I mean, yeah, it sucks, we haven’t caught the guy. But

you tell me all the time that's just how cases are."

"Yes, but I'm telling you now that we wasted time because this was a thread that should never have been pulled. We're smarter than that."

Faith narrowed her eyes. "It was my deduction that this was related to animal cruelty. Are you saying I was foolish?"

Michael sighed and rubbed his temples. "No. Sorry. That came out wrong. I do think you were wrong, though. I don't think the animals are the central issue in this case, I think the people are. I think our killer's trying to make it look like it's about the animals, but frankly, he's doing too poor a job for me to believe it."

"But what else is connecting our three victims?"

"I don't know, but we need to find out. The animal thing was the killer's way of distracting us, and we've fallen for it."

Faith crossed her arms and thought a moment. Michael had a point, but there was more to consider here than the killer's moments of incompetence. She shook her head. "I don't believe that. It's too much of a coincidence that all three of them happened to have a history of abusing animals either through greed, negligence or some sort of mental illness. It just makes more sense for them to be targeted because of that. And they have the workplace association too."

"If it'll make you happy, then have the police scour Global Wildlife's employee records, but I'm telling you, Faith, this is a dead end. We need to find another reason why someone wanted these people dead, because it's too much of a coincidence that the killer sucks at making these look like animal attacks each time and each lead we find on that end turns out to be a dead end."



“That’s putting us back to square one, Michael.”

“I hate to break it to you, Faith, but we’re at square one. This is square flipping one right now. No suspects, no leads, no idea what the motive is.”

“The motive is taking revenge on them for animal cruelty,” Faith insisted. “I will take that to court.”

“And you’ll get the case dismissed because we have nothing solid to back that up.”

“We have nothing solid to back up the idea that there’s another reason,” she countered.

“Because we haven’t looked at any other reason!” Michael thundered. “If we looked, we’d find one!”

“So you think.”

“Yeah! So I very much think. I’m sorry, does my opinion not matter? Should I bow down to the almighty intelligence of Faith Bold and stop trying to offer an alternative to all of the ideas you have that aren’t working?”

She glared at him and resisted the urge to fire back. From in between the beds, Turk moaned forlornly.

“Why don’t we take ten minutes to cool off,” she said thinly, “before we say anything else we might regret?”

They didn’t get their ten minutes. Faith’s phone buzzed before Michael could respond. It was the Boss.

She took a deep breath and put the phone on speaker. "Hello, Boss."

"Bold, we have a problem."

"What is it?"

"We had reporters here this morning asking for you. They wouldn't take no for an answer. I forced them to take no for an answer and had security pull them out of the building, but they ran into Chavez, and Chavez spilled the beans about you being assigned cases away from Philadelphia to keep your name out of the news. Now the news is coming up with a bunch of wild theories about why you might be hiding from them."

Faith sighed and pressed her palms to her forehead. "Shit. Why was Chavez talking to them?"

"I don't know. The kid's... Well, she's still a kid. Half the time, she's shrewd and sharp and half the time she does stuff that's so stupid it boggles the mind. This is one of the latter. Either way, the news media has your face all over tvs talking about how you're dodging questions about the West case that could suggest West might be innocent or might have come to justice through illegal means."

Michael swore softly. Faith paled. "And if people out here recognize me, they might tip the media off."

"Yes. We're pulling you out of the field for a while. Sorry, Faith. I know you didn't want things to get this far, but we've got no choice. I need you on the next flight to Philadelphia. Prince, are you there?"

Michael cleared his throat. "Here, sir."

“Prince, I’m sending Ralston out to finish this case with you.”

Faith flinched. “What?”

"You heard me, Bold. You're coming home, Ralston's flying out. His K9 will join him, so you're not down a team member, Prince."

“That’s bullshit, sir! You can’t take me off of an active case!”

“I can. I have to. I did. I’m sorry, Faith. We tried.”

“That’s...” she pursed her lips. “Sir, I’m sorry. I think there’s a connection issue. I’ll call you back when I have an update on the case.”

“Bold, don’t be a child. I’m no happier about this than you are, but I’ve got my hands tied behind my back.”

“I’ll talk to you later, sir.”

“Bold, don’t you dare hang up! Prince, did you understand my instructions?”

Michael looked at Faith. He hesitated for a moment, then sighed. “Sorry, sir. You’re breaking up.”

“Bold! Prince! God damn it, I—”

Faith ended the call and looked at Michael. Her partner met her eyes and said, “If you get me fired for this, I will move into your place in Allentown and be the loudest, most annoying, most obnoxious roommate you’ve ever had.”

She smiled softly. “Thank you, Michael.”

“Fuck you. Sincerely.” He sighed. “All right. So what’s it gonna be? Are we looking into their personal lives, or—”

Faith’s phone buzzed again. Cuthbert this time. She lifted an eyebrow and answered. “Hello, Detective.”

“Got something for you. Not sure how much yet, but it’s the only angle from this Knights of Nature thing that might turn into something.”

“Give it to me.”

“One of the kids we talked to tipped us to a man they had a run-in with last year. I guess he thought they were kicking their dog. The kid managed to stop the fight before anything happened by showing him the ball, but he said the rage in the man’s face scared the hell out of him.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “Did the kid give you a name?”

“Yes. A former Animal Control officer named Nathan Reed. He shows up in our records as being fired for assaulting a dog owner when he got a call to her residence and found the animals in a severely malnourished state. Guess who the dog owner was?”

Faith’s eyes widened. “Alison Chen.”

“Yep. Split her lip and gave her a black eye. Better yet, security cameras at a convenience store a mile away from the Big Wilderness Zoo picked him up ten minutes after Dr. Vasquez was murdered. There are visible stains on his coat that could be blood. He lives across town from Big Wilderness Zoo.”

“Well, that’s interesting.”

“It gets better. Marcus Reeves trespassed him from the Wild World Adventure Park years ago because he was being, quote, ‘abusive to the zookeepers.’”

Faith grabbed a notebook and pen. “We’re on our way. What’s the address?”

Cuthbert provided it, and Faith said. “Thank you, Detective. We’ll keep you posted.”

“Should I send units?”

“Have a couple in the area, but don’t send them to the house until our call.”

“You got it.”

He hung up, and Faith grinned at Michael. “Oh, would you look at that? A thread.”

“It’s a damned thin one,” Michael said softly.

“But it’s there. And it’s tangible. So we’ll follow it.”

He sighed. “Okay. Let’s go check it out.”

The three of them cleared up their lunch and headed to their car. They drove in silence again, each brooding over their own private demons. Faith was excited at the latest development in the case, but she was on borrowed time now. Hanging up on the Boss wouldn’t delay anything.

This lead needed to pan out. They needed an answer now, or Faith would be shipped back home in a box and kept in a storage closet until the West case calmed down again.

On the other side of that coin, the longer she was out here, the more likely her name

and face would show up on everyone's television set. That would raise a whole host of issues Faith wasn't prepared to deal with.

So focus on the one you are prepared to deal with. Find this killer.

Faith took a deep breath and looked through the windshield. She thought of the wolves at the Hawkins place, silently padding closer, their eyes boring into Faith's soul.

Faith was coming for a wolf now, but that was all right. She'd encountered many dangerous creatures during her career and survived all of them. Besides, wolves were most dangerous in packs. This killer was a lone wolf, but Faith had her pack to help her, and despite her argument with Michael, he was clearly still on her side.

So let the wolf fight. Faith was ready for him.

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They reached Nathan Reed's home a half hour later. Reed lived in a lower-income area of Omaha in a dilapidated house surrounded by a chain link fence. Not surprisingly, Reed also had guard dogs. The agents only got within ten yards before two massive Rottweilers rushed to the fence, barking and snarling.

Turk bared his teeth and returned the sentiment, but Faith ruffled his fur and said, "Relax, boy. Let's take this nice and easy."

"How do you want to do this?" Michael asked. "There's no way in but through the gate."

"We'll call Reed," Faith said. "Go back to the car and put the lights on. Run the siren for a little bit too. We'll see if we can draw him out."

Michael sighed. "All right. I'm going to call those units in too. Even if we keep them waiting outside, I want backup ready in case he runs."

"Go ahead."

Faith waited with Turk while Michael left to do that. She could see movement from inside the house, and as soon as Michael switched on the lights and hit the siren, the curtain of one of the windows lifted, revealing a man's face with a liberal coating of stubble.

A moment later, the door opened, and Nathan Reed stormed out. He was big, six-foot-two like Michael, but thirty pounds heavier with massive hands. He was a little pudgy around the middle, and his gray hair suggested he was a few years past his

prime, but none of the victims were imposing physical specimens, so that didn't necessarily mean he wasn't capable of violence.

The furrow in his brow and the snarl in his voice suggested he was more than capable of hurting someone. “What the hell do you want? Turn that god damned siren off!”

“Nathan Reed?” Faith called.

“I don’t answer questions!” Nathan shouted back. “What are you doing here?”

Turk growled at him, and Nathan’s face changed. Faith was surprised to see it soften and hear something that sounded almost like affection. “Hey, boy. What’s going on with your mommy? Why’s she coming after me?”

“May we talk?” Faith called.

Nathan’s brow furrowed again, but he kept his eyes on Turk, and his tone was a little less surly when he said, “About what?”

“About why I’m here.”

Michael stepped next to Faith and said, “The police are on their way. They’ll stay in their cruisers unless they see Reed run or hear us call for help.”

Reed lifted his eyes from Turk, and his scowl deepened. “Tell me why you’re here, and I’ll tell you if we can talk.”

Faith considered a moment before she replied. She didn’t want to spook Reed before their backup arrived. She tried a half-answer. “It’s related to an ongoing Bureau investigation. We believe you might have information that can help us.”



“What’s the case about?”

She hesitated again. “I’d prefer to have this conversation inside where your neighbors can’t hear us.”

“They won’t be able to hear a damned thing over that racket coming from your police cruiser. If you’re not going to be honest with me, I’m not going to talk to you. How’s that?” He looked at Turk. “Boy, tell ‘em to be square with me. That’s only fair, right?”

To Faith’s utter astonishment, Turk looked at her and barked reprovably. She looked at Michael to find him similarly shocked. Then she turned back to Reed. “We’re investigating the murders of Marcus Reeves, Alison Chen and Dr. Elena Vasquez.”

Reed's eyes popped open. There was no more anger in his voice, only surprise. "Well, shit. All right. I guess you better come in. Cookie, Brownie, that's all right."

The Rottweilers instantly calmed. They remained close to the fence, and when Reed opened the gate, they flew out and rushed to Turk, sniffing and panting excitedly.

"They don't get a lot of visitors, unfortunately," Reed said to the once-more-stunned agents. "They're happy to see another dog." He frowned. "It's too bad that so many dogs are attached to people."

He turned around and headed for the door. All three dogs followed him, tails wagging. Faith and Michael shared a look, then took up the rear. Out of the corners of her eyes, Faith could see the police cruisers pulling to the curb on either side of the house. She wondered what they would make of what they saw. Hell, she didn’t know what to make of it herself.

When they stepped inside, Reed said, “Close the door if you don’t mind. Cookie and

Brownie are harmless, but the assholes next door get antsy if they see them outside without them being on a leash.”

Faith closed the door while Michael regarded the dogs, who were excitedly showing Turk around their home. “Well, they look harmless now.”

“They’re harmless always,” Reed snapped. “Unless you’re an asshole trying to hurt me. You an asshole trying to hurt me?”

“I very much hope not.”

“Then they won’t hurt you.”

Nathan Reed’s word on its own wouldn’t mean much to Faith, but when Turk trotted up right next to the Rottweilers to accept the treats the gruff old Animal Control officer provided, she started to feel they might have the wrong man.

“Always loved Shepherds,” Reed said, “but when I saw Cookie and Brownie at the shelter, I just had to take them home.”

He smiled tenderly at his dogs, but his smile vanished when he looked up at the agents. “All right. Say your piece.”

“Marcus Reeves was murdered at the Council Bluffs Animal Sanctuary four days ago. Two days later, Alison Chen was killed in her apartment, and last night, Dr. Elena Vasquez was murdered in her office at the Big Wilderness Zoo.”

“Good. Good riddance to them. They were assholes who hurt animals.”

“Did you get rid of them?” Michael asked.

“No.”

“I’d like to believe you, Nathan,” Faith said, “but we have evidence that places you near the scene of Elena Vasquez’s murder shortly after she was murdered. Security footage at a convenience store near her office showed you wearing bloody clothes.”

“Yes. I was clearing roadkill. I volunteer my time to do that. The least respect we can show these animals is getting their bodies off the road.”

“Do you have the clothing for us to look at?”

“I do, but they’ve been cleaned.

“We’ll take it anyway.”

He headed to his bedroom, muttering something. Turk followed him, and he reached down and scratched the German Shepherd behind his ear.

“Well, Turk likes him,” Michael said.

“He trusts him,” Faith added.

“Nathan Reed is clearly a fan of animals and clearly not a fan of people,” Michael said. “Especially people who hurt animals.”

Faith shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m having second thoughts.”

Michael frowned. “Because of Turk?”

She nodded. Before Michael could reply, Reed returned with an armful of clothing. He tossed them at the agents, and Michael caught them. “It’s all there,” Reed said.

“Go ahead and look for whatever you want.”

“We’re going to check the footage to make sure this outfit matches,” Michael warned.

“Check whatever you want. I told you I didn’t kill anyone.”

“When were you fired from Animal Control?” Faith asked.

“Ten years ago.”

“May I ask why?”

Reed’s eyes narrowed. “Something tells me you already know.”

“In your own words,” Faith insisted.

Reed took a deep breath. Faith noticed that his hands were shaking a little. "I got a call from a concerned neighbor about a house with a lot of dogs in poor condition. Showed up, and there's this skinny little bitch arguing with my partner that he can't take her dogs from her. You should've seen these dogs. Couldn't have weighed more than forty pounds. Shepherds should weigh close to twice that much when they're full grown, but these dogs were so malnourished. They were missing fur, covered in mange..." He looked at Turk, and tears welled in his eyes. "I don't get it. Why do people hurt innocent animals?"

Turk trotted over to him and pressed his head against Reed’s legs. Reed dropped to the floor and hugged Turk. Faith was all but convinced now that Reed wasn’t their man. Turk’s instincts were good. He wasn’t always right about who was a murderer and who wasn’t, but he had never treated a murderer this well. This kind of behavior was usually only reserved for families of victims or close friends of Faith herself.

Reed took a breath and said, “Well, the bitch was yapping on about how their spirits were fed and that mattered more than earthly food. I grabbed her by her hair, yanked her down and made her look at the dog. I asked her if he looked happy and healthy to her. She said, ‘Of course. Can’t you tell?’ So I slapped her around a little.”

“You split her lip and gave her a black eye, Nathan,” Michael corrected.

Reed frowned. “Yeah. I beat her up. She deserved it.”

“And was it before or after that you were trespassed from Marcus Reeves’ zoo?” Faith asked.

‘After. That was four years ago. Again, if you’d seen the conditions these animals were in, you would have understood. I can tell you care about your dog. He’s in great shape, happy, healthy and strong. You would understand if you saw what the asshole was doing to his animals.”

“Understand what, exactly?”

“I told him that if he and his zookeepers didn’t get their shit together, I’d throw them all in the cages with their animals.”

“But there was no physical confrontation?”

“Nah. Security dragged me out.”

“Can you confirm your whereabouts for the night of the murders?” Michael asked.

“Four nights ago, two nights ago and last night?”

“Well, you said you saw me at a convenience store last night.”

“Within a mile and ten minutes of our latest murder, yes.”

Reed scowled. “No. I live alone, and Cookie and Brownie don’t speak English. I can tell you I was home four nights ago, out on a walk through the park with my dogs two nights ago and clearing roadkill last night. But I’m guessing it’s not enough for you guys.”

“I believe you,” Faith said.

Michael snapped his eyes toward her. Turk barked approvingly. Faith smiled and said, “Turk can tell you’re a good man at heart. But listen, keep your nose out of trouble, okay?”

“Excuse me, Special Agent Bold,” Michael said curtly. He turned to Reed. “You said you’re glad these three are dead. You’ve had run-ins with two of them in the past, and in both cases, you were punished, not them. We have you near the murder scene of the third victim.” He glared at Faith. “How are we supposed to believe you didn’t kill them?”

“I couldn’t risk losing my dogs,” Reed replied. “I couldn’t leave them alone or have them placed in a shelter. People don’t like adopting Rottweilers because everyone thinks they’re vicious. I can’t lose them. They need me.”

“I understand that,” Faith sympathized.

“That being said,” Michael interjected, “we will be talking to you again. There’s a lot of hard evidence not based on emotion or conjecture that suggests you had the opportunity and motive to kill all three of our victims. We’re going to have the police keep an eye on you. Don’t leave town.”

Reed scoffed. “I’ll stay in town, agent. But that killer, whoever he is? He’s a hero.”

This time, it was Michael's turn to scoff. He spun on his heel and stormed from the house. Faith sighed and called Turk to follow her. He nuzzled Reed once more, then followed Faith outside.

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Michael was on the phone when Faith reached him. He frowned at her and continued to talk to whoever was on the other end. "If he leaves his house, I want him tailed." A brief pause. "No, for some reason, Faith thinks he's innocent." He sighed. "I don't know for sure, but I like him more than the others so far. His face got ugly when he talked about people who abuse animals, and he made it very clear that he thinks the victims deserve to die and the killer's a hero." A final pause, then, "All right. Thank you, detective."

He hung up and walked to the car. Faith kept quiet until they were on the road, then said, "I know you're upset with me, Michael, but I really don't think Reed is our man."

"Why?"

"Because Turk doesn't behave that way around killers."

"Turk almost bit Ellie because he thought she was a killer. You're telling me the reverse is impossible?"

Faith's shoulders tensed. "That was over a year ago. And yes, I'm telling you, the reverse doesn't happen."

"You mean it hasn't happened. Not it won't happen."

"So you don't trust Turk?"

Michael's fingers tightened around the steering wheel. "That's not the question you



should be asking.”

“I’m more concerned with why you’re not answering.”

“Yeah, and that’s a problem,” Michael snapped. “You’re sensitive about Turk’s age when you should be focused on solving the damned case.”

“Turk’s age? We dealt with that question. The FBI cleared him to continue working.”

“And then he failed the sensory test.”

“That test isn’t over. He’s going to retake it in a couple weeks.”

“Because he failed the first time.”

“No, he didn’t! There has to be some other reason why he didn’t score well.”

“No, Faith, there doesn’t. You want there to be another reason. You believe there’s another reason. But there doesn’t have to be another reason. It’s perfectly possible that Turk failed his sensory test because his senses aren’t effective anymore.”

Faith’s blood boiled, but she knew Michael was right.

But he wasn’t right. Damn it, she didn’t have an objective reason, but she didn’t need one. She just knew. Why couldn’t Michael just support her on this?

Deep down, though, she knew it was fear that motivated her reaction. She didn’t want to confront the possibility that Turk might finally be getting too old to do his job.

That didn’t matter in this case, though. It wasn’t Turk’s smell that affected his behavior around Reed.

“Turk’s sense of smell has nothing to do with his behavior around Reed today. He was like that with him because he trusts him. His intuition is that Nathan Reed is a good person.”

“And the evidence is that Nathan Reed likes dogs and is willing to beat a mentally ill woman for mistreating them.”

“We don’t know that Alison Chen was mentally ill.”

“We don’t know that Nathan Reed is innocent, either, but if you can trust the way Turk’s tail wags, I can trust the mountain of evidence that suggests that Nathan Reed is quite fine brutally murdering people who mistreat animals. Including his repeated, proud admission that he is.”

“But he wouldn’t leave his dogs. You believe that, surely.”

“I believe that he’s the sort of person who will see something, get pissed off, and act without thinking.”

“Well, it takes thought to build the weapons our killer built. These are planned killings, not heat-of-the-moment killings.”

Michael was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his tone was quieter, but he was still irritated. “We have him in a convenience store minutes after Dr. Vasquez’s murder wearing bloody clothing. Come on, Faith. Look at the evidence. We have a connection with all three victims, bad blood with two of them, violence against one of them, and Reed in a bloody outfit a mile away from the third one ten minutes after she was killed. All of that versus, ‘Well, my dog likes him, so he must be innocent.’ Think. Use your head.”

Faith took a deep breath to control her anger. They’d been through this so many times

before. Michael would be convinced that the evidence was ironclad and immovable and would only point to one conclusion. Faith would get a hunch that suggested a different conclusion. Invariably, Faith was right. Well, not invariably, but far more often than not. But he still didn't trust her.

And the worst part was that, in this case, he had a valid point. She really didn't have anything other than Turk's behavior to justify her position.

"Okay," she said. "Fine. We have the police watching Reed now, so they'll let us know if they get anything. In the meantime, we should explore other possibilities. We have a chance to look into Reeves' personal life now, like you wanted to earlier. When we get to the hotel, we can—"

"We're not going to the hotel."

Faith frowned. "We aren't?"

"No. I'll send your stuff home after you."

Faith stiffened. "Send it home?"

"We're going to the airport," Michael said. "I'm putting you on a flight home, and I'm waiting for Ralston."

Faith was too shocked to react at first. She just stared at Michael in disbelief.

Then the hurt settled on her. "You're sending me home?"

"Yes. That's what the Boss ordered us to do."

"But... you backed me up. When I was talking to the Boss, you backed me up."

Michael sighed. "I know. I'm sorry. That was a mistake."

"A mistake ? And the answer is to replace me with Ralston ?"

"The Boss is replacing you with Ralston because your presence here could be a liability to the Bureau."

"Don't you dare hide behind them," Faith hissed. "You agree with him now."

"I never disagreed with him. I was just willing to overlook things because I valued your input, but... Look, you have some things to come to terms with regarding Turk, and right now, it's affecting your ability to do your job objectively."

An angry lump formed in Faith's throat. "So you're sending me home."

Michael lifted his hand and let it drop. "It's the right thing to do. Turk's sense of smell is unreliable, and your mental state is unreliable. You two need some time to process."

Faith sat ramrod straight in her seat. At the moment, the only thing she could process was that her partner was sending her away from the case they were working on because she trusted her K9s opinion and disagreed with his assessment of a suspect. It was a kind of betrayal she never would have expected from Michael.

"What's wrong, Michael?" she asked softly. "We've disagreed before. You've never done anything like this."

Michael sighed again. "I told you from the beginning that I understood the Bureau's position when it came to you and Turk. In the past, keeping you in the field has proven to be the correct thing to do. But it's dangerous for you to decide that a suspect is innocent based on Turk's reaction to him. That concerns me, Faith.

Honestly, it does. When I heard they were pulling you out of the field, I thought it would be a good chance for you to decompress. You've never taken a vacation before. You've never shut down the crime-solving part of your brain. You've suffered immense stress along with actual psychological and physical torture in the meantime. You're in the middle of a confusing time in your personal life, and you're struggling with Turk's mortality. And you have this new killer chasing you. It's a lot to handle. I think you need some time to handle it."

"I can still do my job."

"It's affecting you," Michael insisted. "During our last case, you were so convinced that you'd never be able to talk to anyone else your whole life that you confessed to still having feelings for me because I was the only person who understood you. And now... Look, if it wasn't directly affecting the case right now, I'd just deal with it, but it is, and I can't."

Faith's head hurt. She was rarely shocked so deeply but hearing her best friend and partner saying all of these things had thrown her for a loop. Michael didn't trust her anymore? The only time he'd ever questioned her like this was when she was trying to learn the Copycat Killer's identity while balancing her job. That time, she'd nearly gotten herself fired, and she had made mistakes.

But she'd never screwed up a case. Not once. Not even when she was at her worst.

"I think this is affecting you," Faith said. "I think you were shocked by the conversation about my feelings, and that's perfectly understandable. But you can't tell me that you honestly think I'm not capable of doing my job right now. Can you?"

Michael didn't answer right away. When he did, he sounded tired. "The one thing I've worried about since West was caught was how you would handle Turk's retirement. It's the last area in your work life where you can't be objective. The rest

doesn't matter, I'll admit that. I'm sorry for bringing it up. I do think that the new killer and the West trial and moving in with David and everything is affecting you, but I don't think it's affecting you to the point where you can't do your job. But you can't be objective about Turk. His sense of smell is compromised. It's clear that it is. But you can't even face the possibility that he might be too old to work with you, so you shut down anytime it's brought up that he might be near the end of his working life."

Faith swallowed the lump in her throat. "I told you. He's going to be retested in a couple of weeks. If that test comes back bad, then I'll retire him. It will hurt like a fucking bitch, but I'll do it. What really hurts like a fucking bitch right now is that my best friend has already assumed that the worst is true and is now deciding that he would rather be rid of me than give me the benefit of the doubt, even after over eleven years of working together."

Faith's phone rang before Michael could reply. "It's Cuthbert. I'll put it on speaker. Go ahead, Detective."

"Well, Bold," Cuthbert said, sounding just as tired as Michael. "You were right. Reed isn't our man."

Michael flinched. "What? How do you know?"

"Because he's still in his house. Watching Old Yeller, according to Officer Chandragupta. That means he's not the person who less than an hour ago killed Dr. Sarah Clement in her own home."

Faith's heart sank. A part of her wanted to feel some sort of triumph at this validation, but she wished it could have come any other way than by hearing that while they were chasing their tails, their wolf had taken yet another victim.

“Understood,” Michael said. “Send us the address. We’ll meet you there.”

Faith hung up, and Michael sighed. “Damn it. This sucks.”

“You can say that again.”

“I sure could. But I’m pretty damned sick of saying it at all.”

“We’ll get this guy,” Faith said. “This is just another setback. We’ll find our killer. He’s on borrowed time, and he knows it.”

“Yes, but how many other victims are on borrowed time because of him?”

Faith’s lips thinned. That was a question she didn’t want to answer, but one she feared would be answered for her whether she liked it or not.

Meanwhile, their killer was somewhere out there, blood dripping from his fangs, full from another meal taken at the expense of an innocent.

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Dr. Clement had lived in a spacious property dominated by an upscale mansion with a large yard covered with domed netting. Faith wondered at its purpose until she saw several birds of different species—some of them not native to America.

“An aviary,” she said aloud.

“That’s our connection to animals, I guess,” Michael said.

The two of them hadn’t spoken for the fifteen minutes it took them to drive here. The shock and disappointment of this latest murder left them too overwhelmed to address the argument they’d had. Anger and hurt floated around the back of Faith’s mind along with the beginnings of validation that after all of Michael’s rhetoric, she and Turk had been right.

But she didn’t focus on that right now. She had a job to do, and she would do it regardless of whether Michael thought she could or not.

Michael parked the car behind the police cruisers, just like he had before. There were four cruisers this time and no fewer than fourteen animal control vehicles. Apparently, the situation here was even more involved than at Alison Chen's house.

They met Detective Cuthbert in the living room of the property. The detective appeared to be somewhat more well-rested than the last time Faith saw him, but the blank look on his face told her that he was just as upset by this as she was. He greeted the agents with a nod.

“The body’s in the aviary. We’ll go look at it in a second, but Animal Control doesn’t



want us there until they clear the larger birds. Some of the birds are dangerous.”

“That’s fine,” Faith replied. “Can I send Turk to sniff around?”

“They won’t let him in the aviary, but he can look around the house.”

Faith nodded. “Okay, go ahead Turk.”

Turk put his nose to the ground and began investigating. Faith noted with some satisfaction that he didn’t appear confused this time.

“What can you tell us?” she asked Detective Cuthbert.

“The victim is Dr. Sarah Clement. She’s a well-respected wildlife researcher. Or she was. Recently, she’s faced controversy for her advocacy of some rather... interesting philosophies.”

“Such as?”

“Behavior modification techniques but carried to a bit of an extreme. I’ve only glanced at the surface, but it’s kind of like those old mental hospitals that used electroshock therapy to cure violent patients. Actually, electroshock therapy is one of the tools she uses. Used, I should say.”

Michael chuckled humorlessly. “So it would be safe to say that she abused animals.”

“That’s how the majority of the scientific community saw it. She was fired from Florida State University and lost her fellowship at the Ecological Society of America. She moved here, built her own aviary, and has her own research lab in the basement. CSI’s looking through it now, but it looks like the killer was only present in the aviary. There’s a gate outside that leads directly to the aviary. It doesn’t look like he

was even in the house. You can check the basement out if you want. It's... well, let's just say I can understand why people didn't agree with her methods. It looks like a damned psych ward down there."

"We'll take your word for it," Faith said. "But if your officers find anything down there, we want to know about it."

"Yeah, of course." He patted his vest and frowned. "Of all the years to quit smoking."

"How was Dr. Clement murdered?" Michael asked.

"Best guess right now is fishhooks. Big ones. We think the killer was trying to simulate raptor talons. It's a gruesome scene. The killer gouged her eyes out, tore open her throat and abdomen and ripped her scalp almost completely off."

"God," Faith whispered.

"Yeah. That's why I wish I had a damned cigarette. Oh, shit, I completely forgot. Her research assistant is here. She's the one who discovered the body and called it in."

Faith perked up. "Where is she now?"

"She's helping animal control with some of the more unruly birds. I'll see if they can spare her yet."

As he said that, they heard loud screeching. A moment later, a massive eagle with a golden-brown head flew through the living room. Turk barked and leaped at it, but the bird evaded him easily and headed straight for the front door. Faith and Michael hit the deck, and the eagle tucked its wings and soared through the door, then climbed rapidly into the sky, screeching its joy at escape as it rose into the air.

“Well, that one’s free, at least,” Michael said.

“No!” a voice cried.

Faith turned to see a woman in her late twenties crying out in anguish. She was short and plump with freckled cheeks and curly red hair cut so it fell above her shoulders.

She was red-eyed, and her cheeks were puffy. Clearly she’d been crying. Faith stood and approached her. “You must be Dr. Clement’s assistant.”

“I was. Until some asshole killed her. Now Darla’s escaped, and we can’t finish.” Her lower lip trembled, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. “She won’t survive out there. She hasn’t been acclimated to the wild. She was supposed to be Dr. Clement’s personal bird.”

“And what exactly was Dr. Clement’s plan with her?”

The woman wiped tears from her eyes. “Darla was injured as a chick. She never learned how to hunt properly. She won’t even eat live food. Dr. Clement was going to keep her as a pet and take care of her.”

“She didn’t want to modify Darla’s behavior to hunt for live prey?” Michael asked.

The assistant frowned and didn’t answer.

“What’s your name?” Faith asked.

“Grace.”

“Grace. I’m Faith. That’s my partner Michael. We’re here to find out who killed your boss, but we need your help. You need to answer all of our questions honestly. We

believe that the person who killed Dr. Clement did so because of her work.”

Grace shook her head, pouting. “They’re all stupid. They don’t get what she was trying to do.”

“What was she trying to do?”

“She was trying to train endangered raptors to live around humans.”

“She wanted to turn them into pets?” Michael asked.

"No! Darla was a special case. She wanted to teach endangered birds of prey how to adapt to life in population centers so they could survive and not go extinct. You know that pigeons and crows are actually more successful in urban environments than they are in rural environments? They've adapted perfectly to the presence of humans, and their populations are stable. But most birds of prey don't do so well. Some do okay in less densely populated places, but a lot of eagles need space to thrive. Golden eagles need dozens of square miles of territory, and they won't establish themselves in places where large human populations get in the way.

“Dr. Clement wanted to teach the raptors that have large home ranges how to adapt to crowded places. She was going to teach them not to attack dogs or cats or children so that people didn’t try to drive them away. She was going to teach them to recognize buildings and cars and to nest in skyscrapers and office buildings. They could fly to the wilderness for food, or maybe one day cities would build feeders for them where people could put meat they didn’t want.” She sniffled. “She just wanted to help, but everyone acted like she was evil.”

“Was there anyone in particular who seemed like they wanted to hurt her?”

Grace shook her head. “Dr. Clement didn’t talk to me much about that. She always

said that we had to focus on the positive and not worry about the negative.” Her eyes widened. “The birds! Oh my God! What’s animal control going to do with the birds?”

“I don’t know,” Faith said. “But… Grace!”

The assistant had sprinted out the front door and was now shouting at one of the animal control officers. She jumped in front of him and his vehicle, arms spread to block him. Faith and Michael jogged closer to hear her demanding to know what they planned to do with the animals.

“Most of them are going to be put back in the wild,” the officer was saying, trying to remain patient.

“They can’t go back to the wild! They’re not ready yet!”

“They’re birds, kid,” the officer replied. “They don’t need training.”

Grace turned beet red. “No! It’s not that simple!”

The officer sighed, now out of patience. “Look, kid, I have a job to do.”

“I’m not a kid! I’m twenty-nine years old, and I have a doctorate, asshole!”

To the officer’s credit, he seemed appropriately chagrined. “Okay. I’m sorry. You’re right, Miss—Doctor. I’ll tell you what. If you give me your contact information, I’ll promise that we won’t do anything with these birds until we talk to you. I can’t guarantee that you’ll get to decide what happens, but we’ll get your input, and I’ll pass your information to my superiors. Will that work for now?”

Grace lowered her arms. “You’d better keep that promise.”

“I will. We just can’t have them attacking the police officers while they’re investigating the crime scene.”

Grace nodded. “Okay.”

Once Grace was finished with the officer, Faith asked, “Did Dr. Clement work closely with any other researchers?”

Grace shook her head. “Not anymore. She used to work with a lot of people, but when she was kicked out of the Ecological Society, no one wanted to talk to her. She lost all of her friends. I’m the only person she talked to. I don’t even think her family talked to her.”

“Damn,” Michael said. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Me too. She was a good person.” Grace’s mouth trembled. “I just hate that people won’t remember her like that.”

"Guys?" Detective Cuthbert called from the door. "The crime scene's open if you want to go see the body..." He glanced at Grace. "See Dr. Clement."

“We’ll be right there,” Faith called. To Grace, she said, “Can you think of anything else that might help us determine who murdered Dr. Clement?”

Grace shook her head. “No. I knew people hated her, but I never thought anyone would do anything like this. It’s just so vicious. ” She looked up at Faith, her eyes swimming with tears and narrowed in anger. “You know, people are just as vicious as animals are, but they have an excuse. They’re just following nature. We’re the ones who are supposed to be better than that.” She shook her head again. “But we aren’t. We’re just like chimpanzees biting each other’s throats out and tearing each other’s faces off.”

The unintentional parallel to Reeves' murder caused Faith to shiver. She squeezed Grace's shoulder and handed her a card. "If you think of anything, call me. I promise you"—she met Michael's eyes—"I'm not going anywhere until I bring this killer to justice."

Michael looked away and frowned. Faith looked away too, because staring at him right now would make her angry, and she needed to deal with that anger later.

The two human agents returned to the house. "Turk's already looking around the body," Cuthbert told them. "Hey, it's none of my business, but he kinda seems confused. I've never worked with a K9 before, so I could be wrong, but he seems a little out of his depth with this one. You think maybe all of the animals could be throwing him off?"

Faith glanced at Michael. He had his lips pressed together and refused to look at her. She took a breath and said, "I'm quite confident that Turk can do his job, Detective."

"Right. Of course. I didn't mean to offend."

When Faith walked into the aviary and saw Turk staring intently at a light fixture on the floor, though, her heart dropped.

"What do you see, Turk?"

Turk looked back at her. He looked so confused. Her heart sank even further. Come on, boy. Please don't fall apart on me.

She sighed and called him to her.

Turk lowered his eyes, and for the first time since she'd known him, he looked ashamed. When he reached her, she ruffled his fur. "It's okay, Turk. You'll find

him.”

And for the first time since she’d known him, she wasn’t sure she believed that.



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The scene was every bit as gruesome as Detective Cuthbert described. Maybe it wasn't as gruesome as Marcus Reeves' torn throat, but Faith didn't have to see that face to face. She was staring at an exploded eyeball dripping down Dr. Clement's left cheek right now, and that was among the worst things she had ever seen at a crime scene.

"How long would it take to do something like this?" Faith asked.

"There aren't any hooks here," Cuthbert replied, "so that means he carried them out with him. That means that he probably held a few in each hand and twisted them to look like bird talons squeezing. Didn't do a very good job, but that's par for the course. He's the most incompetent murderer I've ever seen, who is somehow also freaking impossible to find."

"We need to figure out if any other researchers were caught up in the backlash when Dr. Clement went off the rails," Michael said. "Then see if any of them knew our other victims."

"That doesn't seem likely," Cuthbert said. "I mean, I'll look into it, but the difference between Dr. Clement and Alison Chen is the same as the difference between me and a mental patient who thinks they're Sherlock Holmes." He looked back at the body. "Although I guess Dr. Clement was flirting with insanity herself."

A thought occurred to Faith. "I agree with Michael. We should look into other wildlife researchers, particularly animal behaviorists."

Michael's eyes widened in surprise. He clearly didn't expect Faith to agree with him.

Cuthbert seemed surprised as well. He raised an eyebrow and said, “You guys are the serial killer experts. Tell me what I’m missing here.”

“I think our killer might be trying to modify human behavior the way Dr. Clement was trying to modify animal behavior. He’s killing his victims using the tools of the animals they worked closely with to send a message to others that abusing animals will only hurt us in the end.”

Clement still wasn’t convinced. “I mean... I see where you’re going with that, but you can’t really modify someone’s behavior when you’ve killed them. And these are not accidents. He has very much killed all four of these people.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed, “and I don’t think you can modify eagle behavior by shocking them until they learn to avoid pooping on cars and eating people’s pet cats. But if Dr. Clement was loopy enough to think she could, then maybe our killer is loopy enough to think that he’ll make a difference in the world by killing people who don’t behave the way he thinks they should.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve met a killer who thought that way,” Michael added.

Cuthbert shrugged. “Well, like I said, you guys are the serial killer experts. Council Bluffs isn’t exactly the murder capital of America, so I’ll admit I’m a little bit a lot out of my depth. I’ll go read some news articles.”

He turned to leave, pausing when he saw Turk sniffing carefully up and down the gate that led to the yard outside. He wisely kept whatever thoughts the sight gave him to himself.

When he was gone, Michael cleared his throat. “Listen, Faith. I’m sorry about—”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Faith said curtly, “and sorry won’t even be close to good enough.”

Michael lowered his head and didn’t reply. Faith looked down at her body and said, “See if you can figure out how this went down: how the killer entered, how he approached Dr. Clement, if she fought back, and so forth. Maybe we’ll gain some insight into the killer’s MO.”

“Sure. You got it.”

Faith left him and walked to Turk. “Hey, buddy.”

Turk looked at her and shook his head, groaning in frustration. Faith squatted beside him and stroked his fur. “It’s okay, buddy,” she said, fighting another lump forming in her throat. “You’re doing your best. You’re a good boy.”

Turk looked back at the fence and cautiously resumed his inspection. “Did you find something, boy?” she asked, hoping against hope that there might be some sort of logical explanation for his behavior.

Turk looked at her, then back at the fence. Finally, he snorted and dipped his head, then moved deeper into the aviary. Faith stayed where she was and watched him walk away. She lowered her eyes and stared at his pawprint in the dirt in between a couple of shrubs.

She had fought so hard to get his retirement postponed. She had gone to bat for him against three members of the Bureau so high-ranking that even the Boss was intimidated by them. All of that, and barely a month later, Turk was already nearing the end. She thought she would get at least a few more years with him. At least two.

You’re going to have to let him go someday, Faith.

The voice in her conscience was that of Supervisory Special Agent Gordon Clark, an old friend and mentor of hers who was one of Franklin West's last victims before Faith discovered his identity as the Copycat Killer and drove him out of Philadelphia. Faith hadn't thought about him in a while. Maybe it was because West had killed him to get her attention, and now the Messenger was out there killing people to get her attention.

"I know," she said softly. "But..."

She let her voice trail off. Clark's voice said, I know it's hard. That's the price we pay to have creatures as awesome as dogs. They don't live very long. The fact is that Turk probably won't see you turn forty and definitely won't see you turn forty-five. It sucks. It's hard. It's terrible. It's unavoidable."

She lowered her head and wiped tears from her eyes. "I know. I know, I just hate it."

Look, don't give up yet. There's a reason the Bureau allows retests. Humans make mistakes, and even good vets like David screw up sometimes. Let's wait to see how Turk does with the retest. As for the smells here? Well, open your own nose. These scenes aren't exactly the freshest.

She chuckled and wiped tears from her face again. "Yeah, I know. You're right. Damn, I wish you were actually here right now. You understood me even better than Michael does."

"Faith?"

She shot to her feet when she heard Michael's voice. Her partner lifted his hands placatingly. "I think I know what happened."

She took a deep breath and ran her hand over her hair. "Yes. Sorry. Talk to me."

“Well, I think we’re on the right track that this was someone Dr. Clement knew. There’s no sign of forced entry here or in the house.”

“So he was let inside?”

“Yes. I believe he was let in through the aviary gate because there are actually working security cameras in the house.”

Faith’s spirits lifted when she heard that. That could explain why Turk was interested in the gate. Maybe his confusion came because the killer was masking his scent, and Turk couldn’t quite get a full whiff.

“And Grace didn’t see him?” she asked.

“No. And before you ask, no, she wasn’t the killer. The driveway cams capture her car pulling in about four minutes before the police were called. About twenty minutes before that, they show Dr. Clement reacting to a noise from the aviary and going to check it out.”

“That’s when the killer arrived.”

“Yes.”

“And there are no cameras in the aviary?”

“None here and none in the basement. I’m guessing Dr. Clement didn’t want a record of her research.”

Faith nodded. “So the killer was known to Dr. Clement. I wonder if he was known to the other victims?”

“Maybe. I don’t think so because there were signs of a struggle with Dr. Vasquez, but that could only be because she remained conscious longer. That’s the other big news. The first hook to Dr. Clement pierced her brainstem.”

Faith winced. “So she was dead before all the rest of the mutilation.”

“Yes. She didn’t suffer. That’s the silver lining, I guess.”

“Yeah. I guess lights out is better than a slow, cold descent. Good work, Michael.”

He gave her a half-smile, but she could see the pain in his eyes. Well, he deserved it. He’d said some really hurtful stuff, and it killed her that he would just decide to drive her to the airport without even a conversation first.

But she would deal with that later. They had a case to solve first.

Faith called to Turk, and the three agents walked into the house. Faith looked around for Detective Cuthbert, and Michael said, “He’s in the basement. I ran into him when I was looking at the cameras.”

They headed downstairs to find the detective looking through a sheaf of papers and taking notes. Faith glanced at the basement and had to agree with Detective Cuthbert. She didn’t know what all of the odd tables, cages, machines and other equipment did, but it looked an awful lot like a sanitarium from a horror movie. She wondered if Grace knew about all of this and genuinely believed the ends were worth the means or if this place was off limits to the assistant. That made her wonder if Dr. Clement’s motives were as noble as she claimed or if the doctor simply enjoyed the power she had over defenseless creatures.

Something to think about, Special Agent. Ask yourself if the world isn’t better off without them in it.

Detective Cuthbert looked up and said, “Good. I was just about to call you. I think we found our guy.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Dr. Victor Lawson. Also an animal behaviorist. Extremely well-regarded but suffered from the aftershock of Dr. Clement’s fall from grace.”

“They worked together?”

“Yes. It looks like Dr. Lawson was a mentor to Dr. Clement. Taught her a lot of his methods for interpreting animal behavior. When she started quoting his research in her defense of her behavior modification efforts, he cut off ties with her and denounced her methods as immoral. There was a brief back and forth between the two of them in a couple of publications before people finally stopped wanting to listen to Dr. Clement at all. It looks like Dr. Lawson is still getting good work consulting with zoos and wildlife sanctuaries, but the scientific community has pulled back. They haven’t abandoned him, per se. He still publishes, but it’s all his own research. He’s not working with any of the major universities or think tanks anymore.”

“Any sign that he blames Dr. Clement for his fall from grace?”

“Nothing explicit, but Alison Chen was his intern for a summer, and he was hired by Marcus Reeves when James Hawkins refused to train animals for him anymore. That didn’t work out either since Dr. Lawson was likewise appalled at the condition of the animals.”

“Let me guess,” Michael said. “He was involved with Dr. Vasquez too.”

“Yes. Personally involved.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Ah."

"Yep. Left her when her drinking on the job became publicly known. That damaged his reputation for a little while, too."

"So why now?" Michael asked. "Some of these events occurred years ago."

"Yes, but it wasn't until last year when Dr. Clement burned him that he suffered any serious damage. People pretty quickly started to pity him for Dr. Vasquez drinking, and zoos forgave him for his actions when it became clear that Reeves was unethical. I don't think anyone held firing Alison Chen against him."

"So this was the straw that may have broken the camel's back," Faith summarized.

"Looks that way." Cuthbert checked his watch. "We have a couple of hours of daylight left. You guys want to take a ride to Dr. Lawson's property?"

Faith nodded and looked at Turk. "How about it, boy? Ready to catch a bad guy?"

Turk barked exuberantly.

"The leader has spoken," Cuthbert said. "Let's go."

Faith cautioned herself not to get her hopes up too much. Their other leads hadn't worked out. But she felt good about this one. She was sure they had the real killer in their sights.

She could only hope that this time, her intuition was telling her the truth.



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Dr. Lawson lived in Mineola, a small community a half-hour's drive southeast of Council Bluffs. His property, like Dr. Clement's, consisted of a house with an attached animal habitat. His house was somewhat smaller than Dr. Clement's, but the habitat was larger, closer in size to James Hawkins' place. Like Hawkins' property, the habitat was actually several enclosures, each housing a different type of animal. The largest enclosure contained a family of mountain lions. The lions crowded against the fence and watched the police cruiser as it passed by.

"I never realized how many people own big animals out here," Detective Cuthbert remarked.

"That's probably something people don't notice unless those animals escape," Michael replied.

"Or until someone starts murdering people," Faith added.

"Well, let's see if we can't get them to stop murdering people," Cuthbert said.

The four of them left the vehicle and approached the house. Almost immediately, Turk's ears pricked up. He held his head high and sniffed the air, eyes wide and alert.

Faith and Michael shared a look. Faith almost wanted Michael to say something to challenge Turk's reaction, but that little bout of anger faded quickly. Unless Turk was greatly mistaken, they were about to apprehend their killer.

Cuthbert, at least, seemed to take Turk's reaction seriously. He drew his weapon and positioned himself in front of the door, ready to act immediately if Lawson presented

any kind of threat.

Faith knocked on the door. Michael drew his own weapon and stood on Faith's other side. Turk crouched, his body coiled like a spring.

The door opened. A short, balding man with a sharp goatee and half-moon glasses frowned at the arrivals and asked, "What's going on?"

Before any of the humans could respond, Turk shot through the door like a bullet, barking madly. He nearly bowled over the balding man, who cried out and threw his hands against the door to steady himself.

"Turk!" Faith called. "Heel!"

Turk obeyed the command but growled at Faith in frustration. He turned back toward the interior of the house and barked urgently.

"What is the meaning of this?" the balding man asked.

"Dr. Victor Lawson?" Faith asked.

"Yes, and you do not have permission to be on my property."

"I'm Special Agent Faith Bold," Faith replied, watching Turk. The K9 was turning in a circle in a spacious living room, snorting, sniffing and barking, impatient for permission to look further. "The dog is my K9 unit, Turk. This is my partner, Special Agent Michael Prince and Detective Jim Cuthbert of the Council Bluffs Police Department. We need to talk to you."

"About what?"

“The murders of Marcus Reeves, Alison Chen, Dr. Elena Vasquez and Dr. Sarah Clement.”

At the last name, Dr. Lawson’s jaw went slack. “Sarah’s dead?”

“Sure is,” Faith said. “Her face was torn to pieces.”

Dr. Lawson exhaled sharply, deflating like a balloon as he did. “Oh God. Did the birds get her?”

“It was made to look that way,” Faith replied. “Turns out, it was actually fishhooks.”

“Fishhooks?”

“You a big catfish guy, Victor?” Michael asked.

Faith followed his eyes to see a picture of Dr. Lawson on the wall. In the picture, the doctor was in fishing gear, holding up a large river catfish in his left hand and a pole in his right.

Dr. Lawson blinked. “Wait. Are you telling me that you believe I am the killer?”

“Can we come in?” Faith asked.

Before Dr. Lawson could reply, Turk barked loudly. His teeth were bared, and his ears were flat to his head.

“Easy boy,” Faith called.

Turk dipped his head in frustration and turned back to Faith, barking earnestly.

“This is ridiculous,” Dr. Lawson said. “You can talk to me at your station rather than invade my house.”

“I’m afraid we’re past that point,” Faith said. “Turk is a trained K9 who has picked up the same scent at each crime scene. His reaction constitutes probable cause, and as of right now, he will search your property. Go ahead, Turk!”

Turk shot off, moving from place to place throughout the living room. Every so often, Dr. Lawson would start to protest again and earn a growl from the K9.

“He won’t hurt you unless you try to hurt one of us,” Faith assured him.

Dr. Lawson was bright red with anger, but when he spoke, his voice was controlled. “I will be confirming with my lawyer that you have probable cause to be here.”

“That’s fine,” Michael said, stepping inside and holstering his weapon. Faith and Detective Cuthbert followed suit.

“Would you like to answer our questions, Dr. Lawson?” Faith asked.

“For the moment, yes, but I reserve the right to stop speaking at any time.”

“Of course,” Cuthbert said, offering the scientist a sharklike grin. “Your rights are very important to us.”

Turk trotted to the back door leading to the animal sanctuary, but when Dr. Lawson tried to stand in front of him, Turk bared his teeth and barked. Dr. Lawson backed away and stared at Turk in terror.

“Easy boy,” Faith called. “He’s not going to hurt anyone.”

Turk narrowed his eyes but left the man alone and returned to the back door.

“Please don’t let him into the animal enclosures,” Dr. Lawson pleaded. “These animals are all suffering from severe emotional trauma. The sight of an aggressive dog could set their treatment back years.”

“Sorry about that, doctor,” Faith said. “But this is a murder investigation.”

"I'll take you back there," Dr. Lawson offered. "But please, not your dog. Please, I've been working with some of these animals for months. They've made a lot of progress, but that can all be reversed if they're frightened badly."

“Four dead people, Doctor,” Michael said. “Turk gets to go wherever he wants.”

Dr. Lawson put his hands on top of his head and stared at the back door in anguish. Faith wasn’t sure if this was due to genuine concern for the animals or if he was afraid of what Turk would find. But like Michael said, they had four dead people to think of. She walked to the back door and opened it.

Dr. Lawson sighed with relief when Turk trotted quietly through the door. Maybe he knew that his presence could be a stressor to the animals, or maybe he had an easier time focusing on what he was looking for by staying calm, but his barking stopped, and his ears returned to their ordinary position pointing straight up.

“God...” Dr. Lawson whispered. “Oh God.”

“Can you confirm your whereabouts earlier today, doctor?”

“Earlier today? I was here, working with my cougars.”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

Dr. Lawson's frown deepened. "My assistant, Jason, can confirm that I adjusted my typical schedule today."

"And where is he?"

"Still at the University, I believe. We typically work in my office at the University of Nebraska during the mornings and the residence in the afternoons. I left early today to get a head start on the rehabilitation plan we have for these mountain lions."

"So you weren't at Dr. Clement's house in the early afternoon?"

"No. I came straight here."

"But no one can confirm that."

"I told you, my assistant can."

"Did he come here with you?"

"Well... no."

"And you've already admitted that your behavior was unusual."

Dr. Lawson's frown deepened.

"What about last night? Did you pay Dr. Elena Vasquez a visit?"

"I haven't spoken to Elena in eight years," Dr. Lawson replied. "If I were going to kill my ex-girlfriend, why would I do it now, years after I've moved on? And why would I kill her to begin with?"

“I imagine that it’s frustrating to see your reputation repeatedly damaged due to no fault of your own,” Faith said. “First you hire a disturbed animal abuser as an intern, then you accept a job training animals for a zoo owner renowned for mistreating his animals, then your girlfriend gets caught drinking on the job and to top it all off, your protégé goes off the deep end and starts running a horror movie psych ward for birds. You’ve tried to walk the straight and narrow, but you’ve picked bad friends.”

“I’m not sure where you’re getting your information,” Dr. Lawson replied, “but my reputation is fine.”

They were near the mountain lion enclosure now. The cats were now standing in front of them, staring at Turk with interest. Faith noted that they were just as silent as the wolves at Hawkins’ place.

“Can anyone confirm your whereabouts last night?”

Dr. Lawson sighed in frustration. “No. I live alone, and Jason leaves work at seven o’clock every night. If the other murders occurred at night, then I won’t have an alibi for them. But I also don’t have a motive. What could I possibly gain from killing these people?”

“Revenge.”

“Again,” Lawson said through thin lips, “my reputation is fine. There were minor hiccups after Elena’s exposure and Sarah’s... decline... but the academic world understands that I can’t be blamed for their behavior. I am not at risk of losing anything. If you paid attention, you would notice that I am helping many different animals at the moment, and I have a teaching position at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. I am not so petty that I would kill people over the inconvenience their existence means for me.”

“The inconvenience their existence means for me,” Michael repeated. “That was beautiful. Poetic.”

Dr. Lawson rolled his eyes. “Nor am I so stupid that I would risk the utter destruction of my own life over such pettiness. Do you hunt your own exes to kill them? Do you plot the murder of your own irritating colleagues?”

“Me? No. But I’ve arrested quite a few people who have. A lot of them give me the same excuse you just did.”

“It’s not an excuse, it’s a reason.”

"Potato, potato."

Turk returned to the doctor and sniffed him. He bared his teeth and growled softly.

Faith looked at Turk, then at the doctor. “The problem is that my dog is matching your scent to the crime scene. You have no alibi, and whatever you might be telling me now, you do have motive. You’re connected to all of these victims, and you’ve had opportunity.”

“You can’t possibly believe you have enough to arrest me.”

“I have enough to detain you,” Faith countered, “and I’m going to do that.”

Dr. Lawson reddened, but his voice returned to calm again. “Are you taking me in for questioning?”

"We are," Cuthbert replied. "I called a cruiser when I saw the K9 react the way he did. They'll be here in a few minutes. If you play nice, then that'll be a nice, cordial conversation."



“I’m afraid there will be no conversation without my lawyer present,” Dr. Lawson said. “I won’t resist detainment, but I will not talk until my lawyer is in the interrogation room with me.”

He spun on his heel and returned to his house, head held high. The others followed him, Turk just ahead and to the side so he could take the doctor down if he tried to flee.

He didn’t try to flee, but he did call someone on his cell phone. “Jason, please call Britney and tell her to meet me at the headquarters of the Council Bluffs Police Department. Inform her that I’m being detained on suspicion of multiple murders and that law enforcement is justifying this action due to the reaction of their dog. Then I’ll need you to come to the house and monitor the animals while I’m away.”

“Their highly trained, licensed and certified K9,” Faith corrected.

He hung up and gave Faith a cold look, but when Turk growled at him, he paled and looked away. True to his word, Dr. Lawson offered no resistance as Detective Cuthbert handcuffed him and led him outside.

The police cruiser pulled up next to Cuthbert's, and the detective led him toward it. Turk stopped on the porch and looked back into the house. He sniffed and growled, cocking his head and staring hard into the residence.

“Come on, Turk,” Faith said. “We got him.”

Turk hesitated another moment, then followed her to their own cruiser. Two minutes later, they were on their way back to Council Bluffs. Turk turned around and watched the house retreat as they pulled away.

She ruffled Turk’s fur. “Good job, boy.”

## Page 23

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There were times when fate interceded to prove the rightness of Lillian's actions. She wondered briefly why fate hadn't interceded on behalf of West when he needed it, but it occurred to her that had fate done so, there would be no reason for Lillian to torture Faith Bold and no reason for Franklin West to ever notice Lillian.

He would notice her soon. Faith would notice her now. Fate had intervened in the best possible way.

Lillian was at the grocery store shopping and who should happen to walk in but Special-Agent-in-Charge Grant Monroe of the FBI's Philadelphia Field Office. Lillian was so shocked to see him that she almost gasped.

Fortunately, she controlled herself. She bought her groceries and waited at the bus stop, waiting to see which way Monroe's truck would turn when it pulled out of the parking lot.

And fate intervened in her favor once more. The truck turned right just as her bus arrived. The bus followed the truck for two miles before the truck pulled into a residential neighborhood.

And parked in the first house on the left. In ten minutes, fate had spared Lillian weeks of work.

She spent the rest of the day in a haze, unable to believe her good fortune and afraid that if she did, it would jinx everything somehow. It couldn't be that easy. This was something she was supposed to have to work for.

But slowly, she realized that there must be a reason for it. West had always been right. People were weak. They were foolish. They were parasites. They relied on the help of other weak, foolish parasites to protect them, and they deserved to die until the species weeded out the weaklings and left the fittest to survive. This was evolution's way of blessing Lillian's part in the quest to return the world to the way it should be.

With the haze cleared, she was simply excited. She had the biggest grin on her face when she left her house, her tools in her backpack. She boarded the bus and returned to the stop where she had seen the truck park.

And fate intervened again. The truck was there. Monroe was home. Lillian was going to kill him tonight.

She giggled and reminded herself that if this was going to work, she needed to be stealthy. Grant Monroe had been a SAC for close to twenty years, but he might still have some instincts left from his time in the field. Lillian had to be careful, or this could all blow up in her face.

But she was confident she would succeed. Fate willed it.

She walked down the street behind Grant Monroe's house and sneaked into the backyard. For a moment, she was terrified that he might have a dog. That would ruin everything.

But fate intervened yet again. The yard contained no living things save for a small koi pond.

A koi pond and an old Toyota pickup. What a study in contradictions Monroe was.

She pulled her first tool from her backpack. This one was a five-pound chunk of

diorite, an intrusive igneous rock formed by slow underground cooling of magma. In other words, a stone.

She threw the stone through the back window. The glass shattered and Lillian quickly grabbed her second tool and hid in the shadows at the side of the back door.

Now, fate would need to intervene a final time. The prudent thing for Monroe to do would be to call the police and report the noise. That way, he wouldn't risk his own life investigating the sound.

But if Lillian was right about him, he would be brave. He would investigate the noise himself. He would want to find out who was invading his home and deal with the threat himself.

Lillian was right. Fate intervened. The back door opened, and Grant Monroe stepped outside, a handgun in his right hand, a forbidding frown on his face. His shoulders were square, his head held high, his eyes full of courage.

And Lillian lifted the crowbar high and slammed it down onto the back of his skull.

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“This is a waste of time. My client was under no obligation to answer any questions, and had I been there, I would have advised him not to. You’re rewarding him for his generosity by accusing him of murders based on what? Your dog’s nose?”

Faith understood that it was Britney’s job to defend her client, but she still had to keep her hands folded in her lap to resist the urge to strangle the smarmy bitch. She kept her tone calm when she replied, “We have motive and opportunity as well.”

Britney scoffed. “You have the minor irritation he suffered, and you have the fact that he lives alone and doesn’t have security cameras at his property. I live alone, Special Agent. I can’t prove my whereabouts for last night. Are you sure I didn’t kill Dr. Vasquez?”

“Cut the attitude,” Michael snapped. “We don’t have to like each other, but we’re going to have a civil conversation with each other.”

“No, we aren’t. We’re not going to have a conversation at all. Your probable cause is the fact that a dog reacted negatively to the presence of large predators.”

“He’s been around large predators several times during the course of our investigation,” Faith countered. “That was the only time he reacted that way.”

“So now it’s he said, the dog said? Come on, Special Agent. Be reasonable.”

“We’re just trying to establish the recent nature of Dr. Lawson’s relationship with Dr. Clement,” Faith said. “We haven’t even gotten past the first question.”

“His relationship with Dr. Clement was nonexistent,” Britney replied. “They had a falling out, and he cut ties with her. The way most adults would.”

“Well, one adult tore Dr. Clement’s scalp off and gouged her eyes out with fishhooks,” Michael replied, “so I suggest you find a better defense for your client than ‘Most adults wouldn’t do this, so clearly he wouldn’t.’”

“I suggest you find better evidence than, ‘My dog growled at him, so clearly he’s the killer.’”

“Try to look at this from our perspective,” Faith began.

“No! I’m looking at this from my client’s perspective and from my perspective as his counsel. You’re desperate to find a killer, which I understand, but you’ve leaped at the tiniest thread that might connect my client to these crimes, and you’re trying to use that thread to pull an entire case to the surface.”

“I like how you said you were looking at this from your perspective than proceeded to speak from our perspective,” Michael said, his voice dripping with contempt.

Britney stuck to her guns. “It is my perspective that you are desperate and you’re trying to make the square peg of my client fit into the round hole of your case. Detective Cuthbert, have you succeeded in obtaining a warrant to search my client’s property?”

Cuthbert, who had been silent up until now, frowned. “We’re still working on it.”

Britney scoffed. “Yeah, that means no. Which means the judge hasn’t issued one. I’m going to guess it’s because you don’t have enough to justify that warrant. You had your probable cause, you looked around, you found nothing, and you detained my client based on the fact that your dog doesn’t like him.”

Turk growled at the lawyer. Britney smiled sweetly. “Hmm, he doesn’t like me either. Maybe I am the killer.”

Faith glared at Britney and said, “I have records that prove Turk’s success identifying serial killers in several past cases. He’s not just another K9. He’s one of the most successful agents in the FBI’s history.”

Britney gave Faith a triumphant look. Faith was confused by that look until Britney said, “And how old is Turk? It’s my understanding that the FBI has a mandatory retirement age of nine years old for their K9 units.”

Faith’s frown deepened. “It’s a testament to Turk’s effectiveness that he was allowed to remain in the field past that retirement age.”

“Or it’s a testament to the FBI’s willingness to bend the rules for their darling Agent Bold. Tell me, did you face any repercussions for your assault on Jared Greenwood? What about when you harassed the family of one of the Copycat Killer’s victims while under explicit instructions from your superior to refrain from involving yourself in the case? I wonder, Special Agent, were you ever cleared by a licensed psychologist to return to active duty after your first psychologist turned out to be one of the most prolific serial killers in U.S. history?”

“The FBI cleared me for active service. I’d be happy to provide you with those records.”

“They sure did. Just like they settled Jared Greenwood’s lawsuit out of court and made him sign an NDA. Just like they continued to keep you in the field despite repeated instances of overstepping your authority, bullying suspects, assaulting suspects, harassing innocent people and repeatedly involving yourself in an investigation that you were told—repeatedly—to stay away from.”

Michael chuckled. “Wow. You are completely off the deep end.”

“We’re talking about perspective, Special Agent,” Britney replied. “So here’s a perspective: an FBI agent with a long history of mental health struggles stemming from an incident with a notorious serial killer and compounded by numerous incidents with an even more notorious serial killer has somehow been allowed to break almost every rule the FBI has while suffering no discernible consequences to her career. Her K9 unit even received a special dispensation to continue working with her past the mandatory retirement age. This same agent is now trying to insist that my client is a serial killer based on nothing but the fact that he lives alone and has no one to confirm that he didn’t leave his house and the fact that this elderly K9 didn’t like him. There is no evidence that my client was present at any of your crime scenes, no evidence that he’s had any contact with any of your victims within the past six months—several years for everyone who isn’t Dr. Clement—and on top of that, he cooperated with a search of his home predicated once again on the fact that the elderly K9 didn’t like him. This at great risk to the animals entrusted to his care and over my client’s reasonable objections to the search and request that the animals be spared a potentially hazardous interaction with the dog.

“So here’s my perspective, Special Agent. This case will be thrown out before it ever sees a jury. This goes beyond you being wrong about my client. This is a clumsy, ham-fisted and embarrassing attempt to force a case where none exists, and it’s a sign that the FBI’s unhinged golden child has gone so deep into her delusions that she’s forgotten not only due process but good detective work.

“Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you’re convinced that a judge and jury will see it differently. Maybe they’ll decide that Turk is a mind reader, and my client must be the killer just because the great Faith Bold says so. But unless you’re absolutely confident that’s what will happen, I suggest you start doing some real detective work and stop harassing my client.”



The room fell silent. Britney held Faith's gaze, and the smug smile she wore made Faith grateful that her hands were hidden underneath the table or Britney would see her fingers flexing as she imagined wrapping them around the lawyer's throat.

"Let's take five," Cuthbert suggested. "We've somehow leapfrogged from having a conversation to discussing the dynamics of a trial that isn't even on the table right now. When we return, let's see if we can't just clear up a few things and end the night amicably."

"Of course, detective," Britney said cheerfully. "I'm all for ending things on an amicable note."

Faith hated that cheer. Britney knew she was winning. That's why she was being so smug. She was winning, and she knew that Faith needed this confession, or she didn't have a case. That's why Faith hated lawyers. It wasn't about justice for them. It wasn't about defending the innocent. It was just a game to them. A contest. Instead of encouraging her client to clear his name by talking to them, she was encouraging him to hide any potential guilt so Britney could prevent the FBI from having a case regardless of whether Dr. Lawson was a murderer or not.

Again, Faith understood that Britney was doing her job, but it was an evil job. Like being an insurance adjuster looking for reasons not to approve a claim. Faith liked to believe that she had faith in the justice system, but sometimes, she thought they could do away with one side of the justice system and be just fine.

The agents left the room and returned to the other side of the two-way mirror. Through the mirror, they could see Dr. Lawson and his lawyer conversing in low tones. After a few seconds, Britney shook her head in disbelief and laughed. Her upper lip was curled in contempt.

Screw you too, bitch , Faith thought.

“Well, this is a pickle,” Cuthbert said, “And I don’t see a point in sugarcoating our situation. The lawyer’s right. We don’t have enough to charge him, and we don’t have enough to hold him. We need him to slip up talking to us, or we need to find something at his house that incriminates him.”

“What’s the holdup on the warrant?” Faith asked. “We have probable cause.”

Cuthbert sighed. “There’s a big difference between probable cause for a quick look-see and probable cause for a warrant. Judge Kelly doesn’t think we have enough to justify a full search. He thinks that if Turk smelled something at the house, he should have found something. But he didn’t.”

"He did," Faith insisted. "He found the whole house, and he found Dr. Lawson. Of course, Dr. Lawson's scent would be on everything in that house."

“Even his research assistant?”

“Possibly. They might be more than colleagues.”

Michael and Cuthbert looked at each other. Faith hated that look. It communicated their belief that Faith was indeed grabbing at straws, along with their distrust of Turk's conclusion. It revealed as well their desire to let Faith down easy so she wouldn't fly off the handle when they disagreed with her.

That made Cuthbert’s words a particularly bitter pill to swallow. “Faith, I don’t mean to be an asshole, but we can’t use that as justification for a warrant. That really is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.”

“Dr. Lawson was your lead!” Faith snapped. “ You were the one who suggested him as a suspect.”

“I know. I wanted to talk to him. I didn’t anticipate Turk would freak out.”

“He didn’t freak out , Cuthbert. He found evidence.”

“What evidence?” Cuthbert replied, his own voice now betraying his frustration. “What did he find? He spent the whole time sniffing and growling, but what did he find? He’s done this at every scene, and so far all he’s found is an empty trash can.” He sighed. “Look, I was wrong. I thought it was Dr. Lawson, and maybe it is, but we need a lot more than what we have.”

Faith didn't reply. Now, Cuthbert was insulting Turk. No one but Faith believed that Turk was capable of doing his job. It hurt all the more because of the doubts Faith herself had.

But this was different. This really was. Turk wasn’t confused at Dr. Lawson’s house, he was certain. He was sure that the killer was there. He was—

And the answer came to Faith, so clearly that she wondered how she could possibly have missed it before. With a sickening lurch, she realized Britney was right. She had just decided to focus on Dr. Lawson without considering other possibilities.

This possibility was staring her right in the face.

“Jason.”

The other two looked blankly at her.

“Turk wasn’t reacting to Dr. Lawson. He was reacting to the house. And who is at the house frequently besides Doctor Lawson?”

“Oh, shit,” Michael breathed. “Turk was right the whole time. We’re the ones who

missed the mark.”

“We were so focused on Dr. Lawson’s history with the victims that we didn’t think about anyone else at the residence,” Cuthbert said.

“We’re going back,” Faith replied, “Jason is supposed to be there watching the animals. We’re going to go have a chat with him.”

“I’ll stay with Dr. Lawson and try to keep him talking a while longer,” Cuthbert replied. “Get what you need and call me as soon as you do.”

“We will,” Faith promised on her way out of the door.

Excitement wrestled with guilt in their mind. They had been so focused on their suspect that they had blinded themselves to what was right in front of them. Now, they could only hope they weren't too late.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Dr. Lisa Hartley pulled to a stop in front of the property and steadied herself with a deep breath. She had debated calling ahead rather than arriving in person, but cell phone records were too easily obtained these days and too many eyes were on her and the Council Bluffs Animal Rescue Sanctuary. She needed to handle this problem quickly and quietly.

She sighed and slapped the steering wheel. Damn Marcus for dying when he had. A week later, and this wouldn't have been an issue. Well, it was always an issue when someone died in your animal sanctuary, but it was an even bigger issue when it happened in the middle of the biggest damned conference in Lisa's career.

The Four-R Initiative was brilliant. It was going to make her a celebrity. It was going to cement her legacy and take her from small-time zoo owner to big-time animal expert. Lisa was already thinking about broadcast rights, excursions to exotic locations, magazine interviews. Of course, she would write a book. Everything she had ever wanted in life, everything she had worked decades to achieve, was right there in front of her, and it was taken away because of some vindictive moron who wanted to take revenge years later.

And then Sean. Fucking Sean. Sean had to go and suggest that they call the FBI. The police were going to sweep everything under the rug. It might have cost them a jaguar, but so what? They could have played that to their advantage. It could have improved her chances, not hurt them. But Sean had to suggest the FB-fucking-I, and Lisa didn't really have a choice but to accept because how could she convince people that she cared about animals when she was going to let an innocent jaguar take the heat for a revenge killing.

So what could have been a minor incident instead had people asking questions. If Lisa was the woman she claimed to be, why was the FBI investigating a murder at her zoo? Why was there only one night watchman on duty? Where else was she cutting corners? Were her animals really as well-cared for as she claimed?

That was a problem, or it would be if she didn't do something about it. The Four-R Initiative actually would help animals. That was the ironic thing. Lisa's bid for fame would do some real good for the world. But she'd cut some corners to get there. Not all of her food was high quality. Not all of the animals received top-quality—and expensive—medical care. Nothing was terrible, but when all eyes were on you, everything that wasn't perfect would be picked at and exposed and denounced. People would throw out words like deplorable, appalling, inexcusable. And there would go Lisa's reputation.

It wasn't fair. She'd tried things the right way, but getting to the top the right way was impossible. The people at the top got there because they were willing to cut corners, make sacrifices, and sometimes hurt people to move forward. That was just nature. The strong thrive, and the weak die. She'd been the weak for a long time. She finally had a chance to be strong and to profit off of that strength, and some dipshit had targeted her security guard of all people and thrown her entire life end over end.

But she had a plan. She would hire Dr. Lawson to visit her zoo and offer suggestions that could improve the lives of their big cats. She would spin the improvements as an exciting new opportunity to even better care for her animals. That way, she would get ahead of any of the bullshit that might come from any of the prying eyes heading her way.

Was it a good plan? Hell no. Was it the only one she had? Just as hell, yes.

And it would be okay. Things would be delayed for a few years, and she would have to spend some money she didn't have yet, but she had good credit, and she could cut

labor costs a little bit. Her employees loved heartfelt speeches. She'd give one about how the animals needed their help, and she had to cut some things like employee benefits or overtime. Those were easy ones to get away with. No one under the age of forty thought about health benefits, and she could make sure that they didn't ask for more than a few hours a week of overtime from people. Sean could handle all of that.

She took a breath and got out of the car. She plastered a smile on her face and as she walked to the door, it occurred to her that she totally could have just called Dr. Lawson. That was what she got for jumping at shadows and overthinking things.

Well, whatever. She'd just claim that she was so overwhelmed she had to appeal to him in person. That was good press. People liked seeing emotion for a good cause.

She knocked on the door, and it opened to reveal not Dr. Lawson but some man she didn't recognize. She blinked. "Oh... I'm sorry. Is, uh, Dr. Lawson here?"

The man smiled. "He's out right now, but he should be back shortly. You're Dr. Hartley, right? Dr. Lisa Hartley?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Wonderful! Dr. Lawson will be excited to meet you. He talks about you a lot."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. He really respects the work you're doing at the Council Bluffs Animal Rescue Sanctuary. He tells me all the time that you're going to be the next face of American conservation."

Lisa felt a flush climb her cheeks. "That's high praise."

“He means it, too. He’s a big supporter of the Four-R Initiative.”

Her anxiety and irritation vanished at that. “Oh! I’m glad to hear it. Maybe he can mention something like that to the Ecological Association. Any endorsement helps.”

“I’m sure he’d be delighted. In the meantime, if you’d like to come in and have some coffee, I’ll call him and let him know you’re waiting for him. It shouldn’t be long at all. He’s rarely out long after dark.”

Lisa smiled. “Thank you. That’s very kind, Mr...”

“Merrick,” he replied. “Jason Merrick.”

He held the door open for her, and Lisa walked inside, her hope for the future restored.



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Faith frowned when she saw the other car parked in front of Dr. Lawson's house. "There's someone else here."

"Yeah, I see it," Michael said, checking the load on his weapon. "Do you want to wait for backup?"

"Cuthbert texted me that he's sending units," Faith replied. "They'll be here in ten minutes, but I don't want to wait for them. We'll go in with Turk. We should be able to handle a few people, and that's if this new arrival is even violent."

"I'm going to tell dispatch about the situation anyway," Michael said. "I know we're pretty sure we're chasing one guy, but if we run into multiple killers in there, I at least want the police aware." He frowned at her. "On record, I would like to point out that I think we should wait for backup, but I know that you won't listen to me."

"Nope."

The three of them left the car. Turk padded silently in front of the two human agents. It reminded Faith of the wolves at Hawkins' place. She was glad this wolf was on their side.

They heard a commotion as they approached the house. Faith heard squawking, screeching, growling and grunting along with the sound of glass and ceramic shattering and wood splintering.

She looked at Michael and asked, "Did you call animal control too? I have a feeling we'll need them."

Michael sighed and dialed the number. “Another reason to wait for backup.”

“Another reason to hurry,” Faith countered. “Someone could be in danger in there.”

Michael’s expression turned grim. “You think Jason brought someone back here?”

"Maybe. Or someone showed up to talk to Dr. Lawson, who was on his list."

“You think he’s hunting Lawson’s connections?”

“I think Lawson is unwittingly giving him access to the identities of potential victims,” Faith replied.

Michael alerted animal control to the situation, and Faith checked her weapon one more time. She looked down at Turk and gave him a half-smile. "Okay, boy. Let's do this."

Michael put his cell phone back in his pocket and took a deep breath. “All right. Do we knock or do we just go in?”

“We knock,” Faith said. “Then we go from there.”

Faith knocked loudly. “Jason? This is the FBI! Open up!”

No response other than the cacophony of animal sounds inside. Faith tried one more time, and when there was still no answer, she said, “Okay, before we go in, I want you to check the exterior of the habitats and tell me if there’s an entrance from the outside that Jason might escape through. While you’re at it, see if your flashlight will reveal anything inside. If you don’t find an exit, come back here. If you do, then you stay there while Turk and I go in through the front.”

“Got it.”

Michael split off, and Faith listened intently. She had no idea what she would find on the other side of the door. When Michael returned, he told her, "There's an exit, but it's padlocked from the outside. He'd have to come through here to get out."

She nodded. “Okay then. We’re going in.”

Faith stepped back. Michael took a deep breath and said, “Cover me. I don’t want to get shot after I kick in the door.”

He lifted his leg and kicked hard. The door splintered inward, and the two agents rushed into the house and straight into chaos.

A moose charged Michael. He cursed and lifted his handgun, but Turk jumped in front of him and backed the big animal down, barking savagely. The moose bellowed and stepped away, backing into a corner.

A small, furry animal bounded past Faith, nearly knocking her off of her feet. The animal turned back to her and lifted its long ears for a moment before resuming its journey. A jackrabbit.

Michael swore again when a falcon landed on top of his head. He swiped it off, and the bird shrieked in indignation before huffily perching on the rail of the staircase.

More birds flew and squirrels, rabbits and rats flitted along the ground. A raccoon clambered across a countertop. Apparently, Jason had released the animals from their cages. Hopefully, he hadn't released any of the predators. Considering the boldness the prey animals were showing, she doubted it, but that would be a bad surprise to suffer.

“It’s like Dr. Doolittle’s house party,” Michael muttered.

The only animal to threaten them was the moose, though, and it didn’t want any part of Turk. Faith nodded for the back door and said, “We’re going outside. When we get to the door, I’ll call Turk through. Then we’ll close the door behind us so the moose doesn’t get out.”

“We need to clear the second floor first,” Michael said. “Jason could be up there.”

Faith frowned. “You’re right. Okay, you go upstairs. I’ll stay here and watch the door.”

“Got it.”

He headed upstairs, and Faith turned to the moose. The animal continued to bellow and shake its head at Turk, but Turk remained undaunted, dancing out of the way of the animal’s mock charges and nipping at its ankles to keep it in the corner. The raccoon approached Faith and cocked its head curiously. Faith fixed a stern look on it and shook her head, and the creature decided it wasn’t worth the risk and trotted to the refrigerator.

“Damn it!” Michael called.

Faith rushed to the staircase, gun leveled. “Michael! What is it?”

He nearly bowled her over on his way down. "A snake! Damn it, it was a snake! In the bathroom! No, Jason, but there's a damned big snake! Some kind of python or boa. Crap!"

She heard a hiss and looked up to see a snake lifting its head and staring at them. The snake flattened its neck and glared at them through slitted yellow eyes.

Faith backed down, pulling Michael with her. “That’s not a python, Michael. It’s a cobra.”

Michael snapped his head around and blanched. “Oh crap.”

“Call animal control,” she said. “The moose and the cobra are the most dangerous animals here. They need to know about them.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Mind if we do it away from the ten-foot-long killer snake?”

“Right behind you.”

The snake watched them until they were at the foot of the stairs. Then, satisfied that it had chased the intruders away, it retreated into the darkness of the bedroom.

Michael shivered. “Christ. The thing struck at me. I was an inch away from dying.”

Faith squeezed his shoulder, then motioned to the back door with her head. “Come on. Let’s go check the enclosure. Turk!”

Turk snapped at the moose once more, then followed his humans outside and into more chaos. Elk, bison and an odd-looking species of deer walked around, browsing on the various bushes planted in between the enclosures. One of the deer saw Turk and leaped ten feet into the air before bounding away. Two more deer followed it into the enclosure, and they bounded toward the opposite side, then turned to watch the intruding dog carefully.

“Pronghorn,” Michael said. “Neat.”

“Pronghorn?”

“It’s a type of antelope,” he explained. “Did you know he had this many animals here?”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t really paying attention the last time we were here.”

“Well, it’s a lot. This place is either bigger than it looks, or he’s got them crowded in.”

“We’ll save that question for later,” Faith said. “We need to find… Jason!”

She pointed at the far end of the enclosure. At her cry, the man in question looked up, startled. He wasn’t alone. Wrapped in his arms was the unconscious form of a woman with her wrists and ankles tied and her mouth taped. Faith took a closer look at the captive, and her eyes widened. It was Lisa Hartley!

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The agents advanced on Jason, guns drawn. Jason cursed and held Lisa in front of him, a knife placed against her throat. Turk rushed forward, trying to flank Jason, but Jason reached a corner of the wall next to an animal enclosure and kept Lisa in between himself and the K9, forcing Turk to stay away.

Faith caught movement out of the corner of her eye and flinched when she realized what enclosure Jason was next to. The mountain lions slammed into the fence, nearly knocking Jason over. They clawed at the two humans next to their cage, snarling when the thick steel mesh prevented them from reaching their prey.

Jason recovered and returned to the corner, just far enough away that the lions couldn't hit him. When they realized they couldn't get to Jason or Lisa, the lions calmed down and sat, staring at the two humans. One of them looked Faith's and Michael's way but evidently decided they were too far away to worry about and returned its attention to the tantalizing meal close by.

Faith and Michael spread out to block Jason's path of escape. "Jason," Faith called. "Put Lisa down and come toward me with your hands in the air. I'll make sure Turk doesn't hurt you."

"Can we talk first, please?" Jason asked. "I think if you talk to me, you'll understand."

Faith heard a soft wail over the cacophony of animal noises behind her. Backup was arriving. "We can talk, Jason, but before we do, you should know that the police are here. There's nowhere for you to run, and we're going to have more guns here in minutes."

“There’s a King Cobra loose in the house,” Jason warned. “Its venom can kill people in minutes. You should warn your officers.”

“We did,” Michael assured him. “They won’t come into the house until animal control gets here, but they’re armed too. You’ll have us, armed animal control officers and armed police officers to get through if you want to escape. Which means you won’t escape.”

“I’m not trying to escape. I just want to talk.”

“We can talk after you release Lisa Hartley.”

“I can’t do that,” Jason replied. “Please. Let me just explain myself.”

Faith and Michael shared a look. Faith was more concerned with Lisa being released safely than with hearing a serial killer explain himself, but right now, Merrill had them at a disadvantage. Turk couldn’t reach them, and neither of them had a shot. When the other officers made it inside, that would change. They could set up different shots and press the issue, but right now, keeping Jason talking might be the best chance they had.

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“My name is Jason Merrick,” Jason began. “If you look up that last name, you’ll find a criminal record. I used to operate a dogfighting ring in Des Moines.”

Faith saw Michael’s grip on his handgun tighten. He had infiltrated a dogfighting ring in Atlanta on one of their cases and seen dogs torn apart in the cage.

Jason noticed his reaction. “Yes, it was horrible. Despicable. I was a piece of shit, but I didn’t realize it until one of my trainers brought a Scottish Terrier puppy in to warm



up the dogs. I stubbed my toe inspecting it, and... and..." His voice trembled, and Faith saw tears shining in his eyes. "And the puppy nuzzled me to make me feel better. I was going to feed it to a bunch of Dobermans, and it was trying to comfort me."

Turk had stopped barking. He watched Jason warily, but he must have sensed that there wasn't any immediate danger.

He sniffed. "I took the puppy and left the ring. I had that puppy for nine years until it got sick with cancer a year ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Faith said. "I understand how much you must have loved your dog."

"I don't deserve that love, though. I never did. I have so much blood on my hands."

"So you kill people instead?" Michael challenged. "Where's the logic in that?"

Faith snapped a hard gaze over to him. He pressed his lips together but fell silent.

"I kill people who hurt animals," Jason said. "It's my penance. There's more than just me. I've learned that. There are a lot of people who hurt innocent creatures. I'm atoning for two crimes, my own and the fact that I let the other people working with me get away. I never reported them." He sniffed. "I was afraid they'd hurt Charlie."

"Charlie was your dog?" Faith asked.

"Yes. But I don't know how many other dogs died. I just hate thinking about how many animals got hurt because of me. They didn't deserve it. I deserve it." He shook Lisa. "They deserve it."

He took a deep breath, and when he spoke again, the tears were gone. “I killed them the way they deserved to be killed. All of them. I tore Marcus Reeves’ throat out the way the lions and tigers he abused should have. I poisoned Alison Chen with King Cobra venom out of respect to the reptiles she trapped. I tore Elena Vasquez apart like the poor wolverine forced to get his checkups from her drunken hands. I ripped into Sarah Clement the way her birds should have ripped into her. Now I’m going to feed Lisa Hartley to these mountain lions. It’s a better meal than she ever gave her own cats.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Faith insisted. “There’s a better way to make up for what you’ve done.”

“How? Go to prison where no one will care?”

“You can write a book. You can tell your story. People will sympathize with you. Animal rights is a huge cause. People will understand why you did what you did. Even if they don’t agree with your actions, you’ll raise attention to this issue. People will take action to stop dogfighting rings poorly run zoos, and people who abuse their pets. You can make a difference. What you’re doing now won’t make a difference.”

“What I’m doing now makes all the difference.”

The back door opened, and police officers poured into the enclosure. Faith turned around and saw they were all animal control. “Get the animals back into their enclosures for now,” she called. “We have a situation here, and we need uniforms ASAP.”

“Will do,” the lead animal control officer called. “But that will still take about fifteen minutes.”

“Faster would be better,” Faith said.

“Take your time,” Jason countered. “It won’t change anything.”

“Jason, we’re trying to be understanding,” Michael said, “but you will not hurt Lisa Hartley.”

“You’d defend her? After what she did?”

“What did she do?” Faith interjected. “Tell us.”

“She lied. She claims to care about animals, but it’s all a lie. She feeds her animals crap. They’re sick all the time. She’s not rehabilitating them. They’re sick because of her. She just wants her name in the news. She thinks she can get famous by exploiting animals. It’s bullshit. I’m going to punish her for it. It’ll be my last atonement.”

"You won't survive this," Michael said. "You hurt Lisa, and you die. If you want to live, if you want a chance to tell your story to the world, then let her go and surrender. You have my word we won't hurt you. You'll get a chance to share your side. But we can't let you hurt her."

Jason nodded. "You're right. I was too late. I let the animals loose, thinking that I was doing something kind to them, but I just wasted my time. I can see you putting them back in cages. I could have finished my atonement if I'd remained focused. I made a mistake."

“It’s a good thing,” Faith told him. “You gave us a chance to help you. This isn’t atonement, Jason. It’s just murder. I know it feels like you’re taking revenge for the animals by killing these people, but you aren’t. You’re just doing more harm.”

Jason sighed. His shoulders slumped, and he nodded again. “You’re right about that too.” He chuckled. “I guess I wanted to believe there’s another way, but you’re right. There’s only one thing I can do to make this right.” He turned to Turk and smiled.

“I’m so sorry. For everything I did. I’m sorry. I hope that what happens now will make up for it in some small way.”

Before Faith could react, he drew the knife across Lisa Hartley’s throat. She watched in horror as he shoved her to the ground, blood spurting from her neck.

Jason leaped onto the mountain lion fence and scrambled to the top. Faith’s eyes widened when she realized what he was about to do. The lions grew instantly alert, anticipating the meal they were about to receive.

Gunfire split the night. Jason jerked several times as he was hit. Faith glanced behind her to see that the uniforms had made their way to the habitat. She heard a desperate cry and turned around to see Jason dragging his bleeding body to the top of the fence. Another volley of gunfire hit him at the top. He wavered at the top for a moment, then with a final gasp, grabbed the fence and toppled himself into the cage.

The mountain lions fell on him before he hit the ground. Faith turned away, but she could still hear the sound of the animals tearing his flesh from his bones.

Jason Merrick had atoned for his sins.

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Faith, Michael, and Turk sat in Detective Cuthbert's office. Their coffee mugs had cooled long ago but remained untouched. No one had spoken since arriving back at the precinct early that morning.

Cuthbert broke the silence. "Lisa Hartley should be all right. Well, she should live, at least. Paramedics stopped the bleeding and gave her four units of blood on the way to the hospital. Last I heard, she's still unconscious but expected to pull through."

"That's good," Michael said.

Turk whined mournfully, and Faith reached down and stroked his fur. There was another minute of silence. Cuthbert broke it again by saying, "I apologize for not having faith in your K9. Turns out he actually has the best sense of smell in the world."

"That so?" Faith asked.

"Oh, you didn't hear? Yeah. Turns out that Jason Merrick had Type One Diabetes. Some dogs are trained to smell for high blood sugar or low blood sugar, so diabetics know when to take their medicine before they suffer symptoms. Turk here actually managed to smell the residue of that scent underneath all of the other scents competing for his attention. The scent was very faint at the crime scenes, I'm guessing, but once he was in the vicinity of the killer, he recognized it right away. Surreal."

Faith smiled a little and scratched Turk behind his ears. "Yeah. He's a good dog."

Michael slumped forward a little more in his chair. Faith was pretty sure she knew why. They'd talk about that later. They'd all had a tough past few days.

Cuthbert sighed. "Well... Thank you guys. This was definitely the most unusual case I've ever worked. I'm pretty sure I couldn't have worked it without you two."

"Happy to help," Michael offered. "Maybe not happy, but you get the point."

"Sure do. Not to rush you guys out of here, but the media's going to descend on us like flies on poop in a few minutes. I don't know how much of what Lawson's lawyer said is true, but you might not want to be here for the flashing lights, Faith."

"No," Faith agreed. "I don't." She stood and extended her hand. "Thank you, Detective. I wish you luck."

"Oh, don't worry about me," he said, taking her hand. "I'm small-time. No one cares if I tell the rats to piss off and go chase celebrities."

Faith chuckled. "Well, good luck anyway."

"Thank you."

The three agents left for the airport without further ceremony. Turk promptly fell asleep when Michael started driving, exhausted from the night's efforts.

Michael cleared his throat. "So I owe you an apology. I should have trusted you. I should have trusted Turk. I let the stress of the case get to me, and I took it out in the worst possible way. I shouldn't have threatened to ship you back to Philly. That was wrong."

Faith tried to be angry at Michael, but to her surprise, she couldn't. There was

something else bothering her much more than Michael's mistake. And she had to admit that he wasn't entirely wrong.

"It's all right," she replied. "I wasn't objective about Turk's smell. I'm still not. Obviously, it's been proven that he's just as sharp as ever. There must have been something wrong with David's test. Still, if he failed the test, I would have probably refused to believe it. It's tough to admit, but the reality is that I won't be objective when Turk finally needs to retire, so I'm glad to have you here to help me. I can't promise I won't be extremely irritating and probably hurtful when it happens, but I'll come around. When I overcome my emotions, I'll come around."

Michael offered her a half-smile. "I've been your punching bag for eleven years. I can handle hurtful words."

She chuckled and punched his shoulder playfully.

"See? Totally fine with that."

She rolled her eyes. Then her brow furrowed. "Where is Ralston, anyway?"

"He never came. I called the Boss outside of Nathan Reed's house and told him that I wasn't going to work with anyone else on this case. Lucky for both of us, I didn't call him back after the visit and tell him I changed my mind."

"You might get in trouble for that."

He shrugged. "We're always on the verge of getting in trouble. It won't happen unless we fail."

She smiled and stroked Turk's fur softly. "That won't happen as long as we've got Turk on our side."

“He came through again,” Michael admitted. “Smelling diabetes. That’s just crazy.”

“Crazy is good sometimes,” Faith said.

They fell silent for a while. Faith's smile faded, and she stared pensively out of her window.

“What is it?” Michael asked.

She pressed her lips together. “The victims were bad guys. In all of our past cases, the victims were good guys. They were innocent. The victims here weren’t innocent. They all hurt animals. I’m not saying that what Jason Merrick did was right, but this is the first time we’ve been fighting for justice for people who... well, don’t deserve it.”

“I think you’re misremembering some of our past cases,” Michael said. “A lot of our victims have been killed because of things they did that were wrong. That doesn’t mean they don’t deserve justice. Besides, the victims here weren’t all that guilty. Maybe Dr. Vasquez and Dr. Hartley were the closest. Vasquez was unrepentant and Hartley was exploiting animals for her own gain. But Clement was genuinely trying to help. She was just a little kooky. From what little I know about Alison Chen, she was born with something missing in her brain and never received the help she needed. And Marcus Reeves may or may not have been truly trying to turn a new leaf, but he wasn’t hurting any animals anymore.”

Faith nodded. "Yes. You're right. I think just because this is an animal abuse case, it hits closer to home for me."

“Of course it does. You’ve seen Turk suffer. It’s personal to you. I’m only saying that we brought justice to people who did deserve it, not people who didn’t. Even Vasquez and Hartley didn’t deserve the deaths Jason gave them. Or tried to give them



in Hartley's case."

His eyes narrowed. "And I don't buy that atonement bullshit for a second. If he cared about the animals, why did he try to frame them for his crimes? Why didn't he release all of them? Maybe he couldn't get the zoo cages open, but he could have let Chen's animals out. He could have opened the aviary gate and let Dr. Clement's birds escape. But he didn't. The only time he did anything for the animals was when he climbed that fence at Dr. Lawson's place and fed himself to the cougars, and he only did that when he knew there was no way out."

He shook his head. "No, Jason was just violent. He was a killer. He didn't want to kill animals anymore, so he made up a reason to kill humans so he wouldn't have to feel guilty about it. He's no different from anyone else we've caught who claims to have a good reason for murdering people. Don't feel bad for him. He got what he deserved. And what he wanted, I guess."

Faith bit her lip softly. "I don't feel bad for him. I just... I guess I saw a different side of people. Or just realized a different side. I just wish there wasn't so much evil in the world."

"For every evil in the world, there's an annoying FBI agent and his irritable, straightlaced partner. For the biggest evils, they also have a dog with superpowers."

Faith chuckled and stroked Turk's fur again. The K9 stirred in his sleep and sighed in satisfaction when Faith found his favorite spot behind his ear. "When you put it that way, it's not so bad."

"Nope," Michael agreed. "Not bad at all."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:51 pm*

Faith closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was going to be hard.

In the living room of her one-bedroom apartment in Allentown, David was watching tv with Turk. It was a cartoon about a dog who delivered a shipment of medicine to kids dying of a bad fever in Alaska. One of Turk's favorites.

David had surprised her when she arrived home. After the stress of the case, his presence was more than welcome, and she had spent the first night wrapped in his arms.

But not every night would be like this, and Faith didn't always want to come home to another person she had to think about when her job involved the kind of risks and stresses it did. And she had to break that news to him tonight. She should have broken it to him months ago.

She was afraid. She didn't want to lose him. In an ideal world, their relationship would never change from what it was right now. They would see each other frequently, enjoy the passion they shared and the companionship they needed, but Faith would have her space when she needed it too. She would be able to take a breath every now and then and recharge her emotional batteries so she could be the girlfriend she needed to be and not resent him for being around her constantly.

But the world was rarely ideal. David wanted a wife, not a girlfriend. That's really what this all boiled down to. She wanted a boyfriend, not a husband. If David could be okay with a lifelong girlfriend, then everything would be fine and dandy. If he wanted a wife, then he would need to look elsewhere. Faith couldn't give him that.

She really, really hoped he would be okay with a lifelong girlfriend. She loved him, she just—

The bathroom door opened, and she jumped in surprise. David stood in the doorway, but his face was wrong. His skin was ashen, and his eyes were as big as saucers. Faith felt a pit in her stomach. “What’s wrong? Did something happen to Turk?”

David shook his head. “Not Turk. He’s eating dinner. I, uh, I answered your phone. Sorry, you had it on silent, and I didn’t know how long you were going to be in here, but it was Michael, and he called back-to-back when you didn’t answer, so I figured it was important.”

“What is it?” Faith asked again. “What did he say?”

Instead of answering, David handed her the phone. Faith’s heart pounded as she put it to her ear.

“What is it, Michael? What happened?”

Michael’s voice sounded thick and strained, almost as though he had been crying. “Faith, you need to get to Philadelphia as soon as possible.”

“What happened, Michael? Is Ellie okay?”

“Ellie’s fine. But someone murdered the Boss.”

Faith’s heart fell like a stone. As shocking as this news was, she had a feeling that wasn’t the worst of it.

“Someone?”

Michael’s pause told her all she needed to know before his response confirmed it.

“No. Not just someone. The Messenger.”