



So Wicked (Faith Bold #20)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

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

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

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

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Dr. Rachel Summers loved her life. She had to be just about the happiest cat lady who'd ever lived. She was forty-three years old, unmarried and never planned to be married, and lived alone with Sherbert, Sprinkles and Sugarpie. Yes, those were silly names, but so what? They were silly cats.

And she had her own veterinary practice. Ever since she was three years old, she'd wanted to be a veterinarian, and by golly, she had done it. Life was good.

Tonight, however, it was hard to remember that. She hated putting animals down. All vets did, but Rachel took it harder than most. Her cats were her family, and losing them would feel absolutely like losing children.

What she hated most of all was the fact that so many owners abandoned their pets right at the moment they needed them most. She couldn't understand it. Why would you raise an animal from infancy, care for it generously its entire life, spoil it, love it, and then at the end, dump it at the vet and claim that it was too hard for you to be there when it was euthanized?

Most of the time, Rachel was able to work around that by giving the animal medicine that helped it sleep before she put it down. She would ask the owners to at least stay until their pet was unconscious so it could slip away on a dream, with its last waking memory being of its best friend beside it.

Sometimes, that didn't work. Like today. Tommy was a Dachsund who at fifteen years old was finally succumbing to multiple health issues that made his life painful and joyless. Georgia, his owner, was finally ready to let him pass in peace and spare him further pain.

But she refused to see it. She refused to even see the anesthetic enter his body.

“I can’t. I can’t watch his eyes close. I want my last memory to be of him awake and alive so I can hold his spirit in my memory forever.”

No amount of coaxing or gentle scolding would cause Georgia to budge. She just couldn't handle it.

Well, it was a good thing for her that she didn't see what poor Tommy did as soon as Georgia left the room. There was nothing more heartbreaking than watching a fifteen-year-old dog panic and struggle, too weak even to call out for its owner, desperate for one last moment of comfort, one last moment of love. Watching the life fade from an animal at peace in the arms of its best friend was hard enough. Watching it try to figure out why its best friend had abandoned it at the end was unbearable.

“It’s a shame,” a voice said.

Not Rachel’s voice.

She lifted her head. A vague alarm told her that no one else should be here at this time of night, but she was too caught up mourning Tommy to heed that warning. The last thing she saw before the syringe plunged into her neck was an open locket with a picture of a dog swinging from the neck of the figure holding the syringe.

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“We now commit into your arms the soul of our brother, Grant Monroe. Lay him on your bosom and carry him to the highest Heaven. Permit him to drink of the river of life and rest at the throne of grace for all of eternity. As he served you in life, so now reward him in death, that in his new life, he may glorify God.”

“Faith?”

Special Agent Faith Bold stirred. “Yes. Sorry. Um... can you repeat the question?”

Dr. Perth smiled sympathetically. She always smiled sympathetically, just as she spoke sympathetically, walked sympathetically, tapped her chin sympathetically and laughed sympathetically. Faith wondered sometimes how much of her sympathy was real and how much had been practiced in front of a mirror so she could pass her Board of Psychology exam.

“I was asking if you’ve thought about taking some time off to grieve.”

Faith resisted the urge to laugh. Why did so many people react to grief by stopping? When Faith scraped her knee as a girl, her parents would always tell her to walk it off. This was no different. “No, I’m not going to take time off. I’m going to find the person who did this and bring them to justice.”

Dr. Perth shifted in her seat. That meant she was about to disagree with Faith. In a completely sympathetic way, of course.

"Faith, you, of all people, know how damaging grief is. This isn't just a scraped knee you can walk off."

That was another greatly irritating trait of Dr. Perth. She seemed to be able to read Faith almost as easily as Faith read killers. Easier, even. Faith really didn't like that. The last time someone was able to see through her so easily, he'd used that knowledge to psychologically torture Faith for years, not to mention beat her boyfriend nearly to death and kill her mentor and an old friend from the Marine Corps.

Not that she suspected Perth of the same intention. She'd vetted Perth so thoroughly that she could recite the woman's internet history for the past eight years if she needed to.

It just bothered her.

"Faith?"

She sighed in exasperation. "Yes, I understand that. I'm not saying that I want to ignore my grief and pretend that it doesn't exist, but I also don't want to wallow in it. That fucker's still out there, and I'd very much like to make him not out there."

"And do you feel you're in the right state of mind to accomplish that?"

"Do you feel I'm not in the right state of mind?"

Dr. Perth reminded Faith of yet another frustrating trait by looking over her glasses at her in the matronly way an old teacher might. Faith rolled her eyes and said, "I'm angry, yes, and I'm grieving his loss. But I have accomplished quite a lot while angry and grieving."

Dr. Perth shifted in her chair again. Come on. You're going to disagree with that?

"We've agreed in our previous sessions that your insistence on returning to work

after the Trammell incident and again after West's abuse of you was detrimental to your performance and wellbeing. Do you disagree with that conclusion now?"

Faith sighed. "No. But this is different."

Dr. Perth did a passable job of hiding the expression that said she'd heard that many times from many patients and each of them had been wrong. If Faith hadn't been a twelve-year veteran of the FBI, she might not have seen through Dr. Perth's sympathetic smile.

But she was a twelve-year veteran, and she had brought dozens of killers to justice. Even when suffering from grief and anger.

"Maybe it's not different," she backtracked, "But I've shown that I'm capable of functioning even when I'm not at a hundred percent."

"Do you trust your fellow agents?"

Faith lifted her hands and let them drop. "Yes, I trust my fellow agents. Yes, I think they will catch this killer eventually. Yes, I understand that the 'right' thing to do is to stay out of it. I'm too close to the case. I'm still suffering psychologically from Trammell's attempted murder of me and West's mental and emotional torment. The Boss—SAC Monroe—was my friend and a mentor and not just my superior, and I'm mourning his loss. All of that is true, but you know what else is true? I'm the best agent in the Field Office at hunting these kinds of killers."

"I say this gently, but—"

"You don't have to be gentle."

Dr. Perth nodded. "All right. That was a very arrogant statement you just made."

“That doesn't make it untrue. Killers manifest in different ways. Most serial killers don't try to advertise their murders; they try to conceal them. Most of them target people in their extended social circle—not friends or neighbors, but residents of the same community or members of the same social group: church, school, business, et cetera. Some of them have a type and arrange to be near the people they target. Some of them are drifters who kill opportunistically. There are agents who specialize in hunting those killers. Desrouleaux, the lead agent on the Messenger case, is excellent at hunting the type who arrange to be near their preferred targets. Think Bundy, Gacy and Dahmer. He's probably better than I am at those cases.”

“And you don't feel the Messenger has arranged to be near his preferred targets?”

“Yes, but he doesn't operate the same way other killers do. He's not burying his bodies or dumping them somewhere people could see him. No weird smells are going to emanate from his house. He's not going to hang out with people and then suddenly those people disappear from his life.”

“So he's not going to leave the same clues.”

“Yes! Exactly. He's highly ritualistic, which isn't exactly unusual among serial killers, but what is unusual is the way he displays his kills. He's a show-off. He wants people to see his victims, know why he killed them, and be afraid that more people will die if the goal he's created in his mind isn't achieved.”

“So he's more like West.”

Faith sighed. “No. Well, yes. Sort of. West is a show off, but he doesn't— didn't—have a point beyond wanting people to view him as a god. There's no moral there.”

“Is that why it was so difficult for you to find him?”

Faith stiffened. Her lips thinned, and she looked away from Mr. Perth.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Perth said. Somehow, she managed to make her damned apology sympathetic too. “But I have to point out that your reaction to that question supports my point that you’re not in the right emotional state to hunt this new killer. I’m not an FBI agent, and I won’t pretend that I understand firsthand the stress you endure, but I am endorsed by the FBI to determine if their agents are fit for duty.”

“And I’m not fit for duty.”

“No. Not right now. I’m sorry, Faith.”

Faith nodded. Then she stood abruptly. “Okay. Thank you. I’ll see you next week.”

“We still have fifteen minutes left.”

Use them to go screw yourself. She was able to stifle those words and instead said, “I’m not in the mood to talk right now.”

“We will have to talk through this, Faith, if I’m to ever give you a clean bill of health.”

Faith stifled another insult. “Well. Not today.”

Dr. Perth lowered her gaze and pursed her lips. That was a sign of extreme disapproval. One day, someone would have to compare the training of psychologists and librarians and determine at what point, if any, they diverged from each other.

Faith gave Dr. Perth a perfunctory goodbye, then stalked out of the clinic. The receptionist gave her a wary look and clearly very much hoped that Faith didn’t need

anything from her. Faith didn't, so she gave her a perfunctory nod and stepped out onto the street.

The sun was high in the sky, but the day was cold. Faith's feet crunched in the snow as she stalked to her car, an old Crown Victoria that now sported winter tires but was otherwise the same as it had been when it rolled off the lot nearly twenty years ago. She started the engine and pulled smoothly out onto the road, irritated that the snow on the ground meant she had to drive slowly and carefully. Not that she was a speed demon, but...

"Damn it!" She smacked her steering wheel, not too hard, but enough that the impact stung the palm of her hand. "Damn it."

She tried to hold onto that anger, but it faded quickly. She knew going into the session that it was going to end with Dr. Perth recommending her suspension. She also knew that trying to protest that decision to the ASAC from New York, who was babysitting the office until a permanent replacement for the Boss could be found, would be futile. The ASAC would be by the book, and by the book, you followed psych recommendations religiously.

So she was once more about to be removed from the field, left with nothing to do but sit at home and stew about the fact that the Boss was dead, his killer was still out there, and she wasn't allowed to stop him.

Well, she'd have David. They could finally get some quality time together, and maybe Faith could finally have the conversation she'd been meaning to have for months but hadn't gotten around to.

At least Perth didn't rake me over the coals for that. Not this session, anyway.

Faith and David were on the verge of moving in together, something David was very

excited about and Faith was very terrified about. She loved him, she just...

“Ugh. I can’t do this. It’s too damned much. I can’t be upset about David and upset about Grant and upset about my career and therapy and—”

She jumped when the vehicle behind her blasted its horn. The light had turned green. Faith resisted the urge to give the aggressive driver the middle finger and sped forward.

Maybe Dr. Perth was right. Maybe she should take some time off. Her instinct was to hate that, but her knowledge told her that she really wasn't in the right place to continue working. She could take a few weeks to let some of the emotion cool down. Then, she'd be ready to jump back into the job.

“But not the right job.”

And therein, as the Bard once said, lay the rub. She could take a few weeks off and go back to work, but the FBI would never let her work on the Messenger case. They would decide that she was too close to the case—or rather would continue to believe that she was too close—and assign her somewhere else a dozen states away. Just as with West, they would never let her officially work the case. The problem was that West was only caught because he couldn’t stay away from her. If the Messenger was in control enough to keep his distance and only contact her through his murders, then the FBI would actually need to hunt him to find him, and as good as Desrouleaux was, this just wasn’t his wheelhouse.

And the killer was escalating. First, it was a man Faith didn’t even know. Then it was one of her neighbors. Now it was her boss. He was working his way closer to her. Who would he come for next? David? Michael? Turk?

It didn’t matter that she was suffering. She was the right agent for this job. She

needed to be on this case, or more people would die.

Her phone buzzed. It was the new ASAC, Tabitha Gardner. She answered. “Bold.”

“Special Agent Bold, this is ASAC Gardner.”

Faith rolled her eyes. “Yes, ASAC. What can I do for you?”

“I need you to bring your K9 unit to headquarters. You and I need to talk.”

Did Dr. Perth call them already? “Of course. I’m on my way.”

“Thank you.”

When Tabitha hung up, Faith called David. “Hey, baby. I hate to do this to you once again, but we have to reschedule dinner. The new b—ASAC Gardner needs to meet with me and Turk.”

“Ah. No worries. Do what you have to do. How are you feeling, by the way?”

In no mood to talk about it. “I’m all right. This sucks, but I’ll get through it.”

“All right. Well, I’m here if you need to talk.”

“Yeah. I know. Thank you.”

She hung up and sighed heavily. Somewhere out there, a psychopath was plotting his next murder. And Faith was about to get boxed out and forced to sit on the sidelines while he did it.

That could only happen for so long before she was pushed too far and decided to take

the case whether she was allowed to or not.

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The Philadelphia Field Office was in a state of shock. Grant Monroe—the Boss as he was affectionately known by his subordinates—had run the office for over fifteen years and mentored nearly all of the agents who worked for him. He was a pillar to that office, a fixture, and knowing that he would never again bark orders or deliver scoldings was inconceivable. Knowing that he would never arrive with an inspiring word, never deliver his pointed but helpful advice, never bless them with his acerbic wit...

Faith's breath hitched, and she realized that tears were forming in her eyes. She swore softly and diverted to the breakroom for some napkins to dab her eyes. Fortunately, she rarely wore makeup, so she didn't have to worry about anything running.

Turk nudged her, and she looked down at his big brown eyes. They were sympathetic, too, but she didn't mind his sympathy. There was no judgment in his sympathy, no calculation. He only wanted her to feel better.

She reached down and ruffled his fur. "Hey boy. I love you, you know that?"

"Hey, Faith."

Desrouleaux's voice startled her. He grimaced and stepped backwards. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, that's fine," Faith said, forcing a smile. "I was just grabbing some coffee on my way to meet Gardner."

Desrouleaux smiled sympathetically. Faith wasn't proud of the irritation she felt at

that look, but she didn't have the energy to handle any more sympathy right now. Not human sympathy, anyway. "It's tough to be here without the Boss, huh? I've been crying too."

When he mentioned that, Faith saw his eyes were puffy and red-rimmed. Her irritation faded. Desrouleaux had known the Boss longer than anyone at the office. The two of them were partners briefly when Desrouleaux was just starting as a field agent, and he'd been a loyal agent for Monroe during all seventeen years of Monroe's tenure as SAC of the Philadelphia office.

Faith smiled and squeezed his shoulder. "We'll get this fucker. Don't worry."

"Damned straight," Desrouleaux agreed.

There was no force behind his agreement, though. It could be just his grief, but Faith worried that he didn't feel up to the task of hunting the Messenger. He wasn't a fool. He knew he was the wrong agent for this type of killer. But he, like so many otherwise good agents, was by the book, and the book said, you don't allow agents to work cases when they're as close to them as Faith was to the Messenger.

But that wasn't Desrouleaux's fault. If he refused the case, they'd just give it to someone else just as wrong.

Faith clapped him on the shoulder again, then headed to the office. She was halfway there when she realized she'd forgotten the coffee. And the napkins. Oh well. Too late to go back now.

Walking into the Boss's office without seeing the Boss was another gut punch. It wasn't Tabitha's fault that she was sitting in the Boss's chair, but Faith still felt a surge of anger seeing someone else occupy the seat her mentor had occupied.

On Tabitha's right was Deputy Director Smythe, a one-time rival, sometimes friend, and for many years superior of the Boss. Smythe was decent enough as far as the brass went, but he was the architect of all of Faith's current frustration with her job, and she wasn't happy to see him here.

Her partner was there too, Special Agent Michael Prince. She lifted her eyebrow at him, but he avoided her eyes. Did that mean he was being suspended, too? That would make sense. Other than Desrouleaux, he'd known the Boss the longest amount of time. Monroe was the only SAC Michael had ever worked for.

Or did it mean they were being assigned to a case? She knew it was a foolish hope, but she allowed herself to cling to it. Please let me work. Even if it's not the Messenger case. Just please don't tell me to sit still.

Turk trotted up to Michael, tail wagging. Michael managed a smile and ruffled Turk's fur. "Hey, boy."

"Hey, other boy," Faith said, a little curtly. Michael hadn't greeted her, and that made it very hard for her to cling to her foolish hope.

Michael nodded professionally. "Hello, Faith."

Uh oh. There goes my foolish hope.

"Have a seat, Special Agent Bold," Tabitha said.

She was a plain, well-dressed woman of around forty with curly brown hair and green eyes that were remarkably striking, especially considering how unremarkable the rest of her features were. Faith had only interacted with her twice before now, so she didn't know if the quiet, businesslike air she had was typical or if she was still getting her feet wet.

Either way, Faith sat. Turk took his place in between her and Michael and nodded to let Tabitha know he was ready for her. Faith wondered if he realized that the Boss wasn't coming back yet. Would he be upset when he understood, or would he only be upset for Faith's sake?

"Dr. Perth has recommended that you be placed on administrative leave pending a psychological evaluation," Tabitha began. "Are you aware of this recommendation?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Faith studied Smythe's face. The Deputy Director remained impassive. Tabitha cleared her throat, a sign of anxiety. Maybe Smythe was evaluating Tabitha to see how she handled a tough conversation.

"Do you wish to make a formal statement or lodge a complaint at this time?"

"No complaint, but I would like to formally state that I believe I am fit to continue in my capacity as a field agent and would like to expedite scheduling of my psych eval."

Tabitha pursed her lips. Then she folded her hands on the desk. Not a good sign. "Special Agent, there is also the question of the serial killer responsible for SAC Monroe's death. I have spoken with Special Agent Desrouleaux who is the lead agent on this case, and he believes strongly that this killer has an obsession with you. I understand that is similar to the dynamic between you and Franklin West."

Faith's lips thinned. "I don't agree with the word dynamic, ASAC Gardner, but it's true that Franklin West and the new killer appear to be fixated on me."

"Right." Tabitha unfolded and folded her hands. "In any case, since this killer has escalated to murdering federal agents and since this killer is fixated on you, the Bureau believes that you would be safer in a Bureau safehouse outside of

Pennsylvania.”

Faith stared at Tabitha for a moment. A safe house? Outside of Pennsylvania? She expected to be suspended, but moved? It was one thing to be assigned a case out of state, but now they wanted her to move out of state.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but... a safe house?"

“Yes, Special Agent. We’ve chosen a location in Midland, Texas. This will be a temporary move until the killer responsible for SAC Monroe’s death is brought to justice, but in the meantime, we feel it’s best if you’re out of harm’s way.”

“No.” Faith shook her head. “No, this is a bad idea.”

Tabitha bristled slightly. “It’s not an idea, Special Agent. Those are my instructions.”

“Well, un-instruct them,” Faith snapped. “ASAC Gardner, this killer is trying to draw me out. The messages he’s left at each crime scene make that clear.”

Tabitha frowned. “I wasn’t aware of a message at SAC Monroe’s crime scene. What was that?”

Faith shivered slightly. She hated that Smythe caught that shiver and hated the way he lifted his eyebrow.

“The message was YOU NEED TO LOOK AT ME, BOLD. Written in the Boss—in SAC Monroe’s blood and...” She swallowed. “And brain matter.”

Tabitha’s frown deepened. “I see. I’ll have to speak with Special Agent Desrouleaux. I wasn’t made aware of that. Still, it only supports my decision. You’ll be safer somewhere far away.”

“And a whole lot of other people will be un safe! He could come for my partner next. Or my boyfriend. Or my partner’s wife.” Michael shifted uncomfortably at that. “Look, ASAC Gardner, the killer’s escalating. He’s trying to get my attention, and each time I don’t give it to him, he kills someone closer to me. He’ll keep doing that until I pay attention to him. Until I look at him.”

“I understand your concern,” Tabitha replied. “However, my decision remains final. You will be placed on administrative leave and housed in a Bureau safehouse in Midland until further notice.”

“Damn it, Gardner, forget about the book for a second!” Faith snapped.

Tabitha frowned and looked nervously at Smythe. “Special Agent, that is not an appropriate way to speak—”

“If I may, ASAC,” Smythe interrupted.

Tabitha’s face flamed. She lowered her eyes and nodded.

Smythe turned to Faith. “Faith, giving a serial killer what they want is very rarely a good idea.”

Oh, because you’ve caught so many killers, you damned bureaucrat? “Pretending to give a killer what he wants to flush him out is often a good idea, sir. No disrespect to Desrouleaux and Chavez, but they have nothing right now. If we let it be known that I’m working this case, the killer might try to contact me personally. That could be our chance to stop him. We can set up surveillance and have a team on call—”

“If we let it be known that you’re working this case, then the general public will start asking why yet another murderer is fixated on our most famous agent. The Bureau is not prepared to answer those questions, especially because—being frank, Special

Agent—we're not sure we want to know the answer ourselves.”

So that was it. They were worried about more press. Faith swallowed and fought to keep emotion from her voice. “Sir, I understand that the FBI is concerned about the exposure we suffered in the aftermath of West’s capture and trial—”

“The ongoing exposure, Special Agent.”

“Yes. I understand that it wasn’t ideal for the Agency, but—”

“Not for the agency, for you, your partner, or for Grant.”

Faith bristled, but she kept her mouth shut. There was no point in arguing further. The decision had been made. They weren’t interested in what she had to say. The one person who might have been interested had been beaten to death eight days ago.

She couldn’t stay in Philadelphia, but maybe she could at least buy herself a little freedom to keep an eye on the case. “May I stay with a friend instead, sir?”

Smythe blinked. “A friend?”

“Yes, sir. A former colleague of mine in the Marine Corps. He lives in Indiana, so he would still far away from Philadelphia, but it would require fewer Bureau resources, and frankly... I would rather be with a friend than be alone.”

Michael frowned at her. She would apologize for the slight later.

Smythe leaned back and crossed his arms. “And you guarantee that you will refrain from sharing FBI case information with your friend?”

“Yes. You have my word.”

Smythe looked at ASAC Gardner. Tabitha's lips were thinned almost to the point of nonexistence, and her face was beet red. It was bad news for her that Smythe had to step in. She recovered well enough to say, "Very well. I will need this friend's name, address and contact information as well as confirmation that he's agreed to shelter you. I need that ASAP, Special Agent. I expect you to be out of Philadelphia by tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

Faith looked at Michael. Michael avoided her eyes, and she narrowed her own. "And what about my partner?"

"He will be assigned to administrative duties pending your return."

"Here?"

"Yes. We do not believe there is a danger to Special Agent Prince at this time."

"He's my friend. That means he's in danger."

Tabitha sighed in exasperation. "Be that as it may, Special Agent, Prince is needed here."

"But I'm not?"

Tabitha sighed again. "It's done, Special Agent. If you have any further objections, you can lodge a formal complaint." She stood. "Please contact me as soon as your arrangements are finalized."

“But—”

“It’s done , Special Agent.”

Faith frowned. “Yes, ASAC Gardner.”

“Thank you. That will be all for now.”

Faith got to her feet and nodded at the two high-ranking Bureau officials. Without another word, she pivoted and left the office. She heard Michael’s footsteps behind her, and her hands curled into fists. Someone had some serious explaining to do.

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Faith managed to keep her cool until they reached the parking lot. As soon as the door to the field office closed behind them, she whirled on Michael.

“Did you know about this?”

Michael sighed. “You want to talk about this over lunch, or would you rather scream at me in full view of the security cameras Gardner reviews every day?”

Faith took a deep breath. “Okay. Lunch it is.”

Turk’s ears perked up, and in spite of her anger, Faith felt the ghost of a smile come to her lips. “Yes, Turk, Michael is going to buy us lunch.”

Turk wagged his tail happily and nuzzled Michael. “Yes, Turk,” Michael said drily. “I guess I’m going to buy you lunch.”

“It’s the least you can do,” Faith said.

“Hey, you’re the one who went no contact after we found the Boss.”

“I didn’t... Ugh. Lunch, Michael. Not in front of the cameras.”

“Sounds good.”

Michael led them to his car—a much newer and much larger Jeep SUV. As they pulled out into traffic, Faith realized she would have to return to the office to get her car before she left for her friend’s place, a fact she hadn’t considered when Michael

asked her to lunch. “What time does Gardner leave?”

Michael chuckled. “She’s an ASAC with three years of experience who just got assigned to the most celebrated field office in the Bureau. She had it hidden while Smythe was there, but she has a cot in her office.”

Faith pressed her lips together. “Lovely. You don’t think she’ll try to give me a pep talk, do you?”

He shook her head. “I think she’ll be very grateful to interact with you as little as possible until they find someone to take her place.”

“So you don’t think she’ll stay?”

“No. She’s at least two years from being considered for SAC, and when she is, they’ll start her at a nice easy office. San Angelo or Lebanon.”

“Lebanon?”

“Missouri.”

“Ah. I have no idea where either of those places are.”

“Exactly. From what I’ve read about Gardner, she’s competent, by the book and doesn’t make waves.”

Faith scoffed. “No wonder Smythe wants her here.”

Michael accelerated onto the freeway. “Yep. This office just experienced the worst loss in its history. Putting someone here who would try to run the office like their own little fiefdom is the opposite of what we need.”

Faith glanced sideways at him. “You like her, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “She’s a band-aid. I don’t feel about her one way or the other.”

She frowned. “Still, I feel like they could have promoted from within. Maybe Desrouleaux or maybe you.”

“They won’t pull Desrouleaux off of the Messenger case. And they want me with you because we’re the winningest team in Bureau history. Besides, neither of us have been ASACs, and I’ve been a supervisory agent in nothing more than name.”

Faith’s frown deepened. “Right. When the Wall needed someone with authority to babysit me.”

“If you’d listen, you wouldn’t need a babysitter.”

Faith took another deep breath. "So, was this your idea?"

"The suspension? No, but I agree with it. And deep down, I think you do too, or you would have fought it a lot harder. Ditto the safe house."

She whirled on him. “I do not agree to being moved a thousand miles away.”

“It was supposed to be two thousand until you appealed to Smythe’s desire to make you not the Bureau’s problem.”

“So that’s what this is? Step one to my dismissal?”

“That depends on you, Faith. Try to step outside of yourself for a second. You just lost a friend and mentor who—let’s be honest—shielded you from a lot of the consequences every agent not named Bold would have suffered had they taken the

actions you've taken. And before you get pissy with me, I'm just as broken up about the Boss's death as you are. That's why I'm not arguing my administrative assignment. I am in no shape to go into the field right now. Neither are you. So let's both accept that."

"Yeah, but you're not being sent away."

"You know why they're sending you away."

"Yeah, but..." she took another deep breath. "Yes. I understand the Bureau's reasoning, and I understand that in most cases, this would absolutely be the right decision. But this isn't most cases. You know that this killer will keep escalating until he sees me pay attention to him. How many more people die before the Bureau figures it out? You? David? Ellie?"

"I am very well aware of the risks," Michael assured her. "And I even agree with you that at some point, we need to change our approach to the Messenger. But in order to do that effectively, you need to be at one hundred percent."

"I'm never going to be at a hundred percent! That's what this killer is counting on!"

"And if you make a mistake with him like you made with West, you might end up looking like the Boss."

An image of the Boss's body flashed across Faith's mind. She shivered and looked out the passenger window just in time to see Michael exit the freeway. She recognized the exit. "That donut place?"

"They also sell croissanwiches," he said. "You want me to buy, we eat where I want to eat."

“No, that’s fine. I could actually go for a donut right now.”

“Try the maple bacon. I swear it’s to die for.”

She glared at him. “Lovely choice of words.”

His smile faded. “Yeah. I’ve never been one for thinking before I speak.”

Faith shook her head. “I just hate that he’s winning. We’re not giving him what he wants, but he can keep hurting us until we give him what he wants. We’re running out of time to lure him out. Pretty soon we’ll just be appeasing him.”

“I know.”

“Then why? Why send me away? Am I worth that much?”

“Yes.”

“Bullshit.”

“Go to Hell,” Michael countered with a lot more force than Faith expected. “People care about you, Faith. I care about you. I don’t want you to die. If I thought you were in a place to fight this guy, I’d hide you in my basement and have Ellie dye your hair black so you can go fight him. But you aren’t. You’ll make mistakes, and the Messenger will capitalize on them. And then you’ll end up dead, and that’s not something I will allow. Be mad at me if you want, but I’m not going to let you die.”

Faith looked at Michael’s eyes as he pulled the SUV into the parking lot of Night Owl Donuts. There was real fear in them, and real affection. The affection reminded her of the way he used to look at her when they were dating.

It had been years since their relationship ended, but there were times when Faith felt a glimmer of the feelings she once had. This was one of those times.

She had learned the hard way that there was no going back. Michael was happily married, and even if Faith wasn't looking to marry David, she still loved being his girlfriend. She and Michael were best friends, and that was all they could ever be.

But every once in a while, those feelings came back, and she allowed herself to wonder.

"It was your idea," she said softly. No anger, no accusation, just fact.

He sighed deeply and nodded. "Yes. I brought up the threat the Messenger poses to you and suggested that for the time being, you be sent somewhere out of his reach. Not for the duration of the case, but I can talk them out of that once the fallout from the Boss's murder fades away."

Faith nodded. "Okay."

He raised an eyebrow. "Okay?"

"Okay. If you think this is the right decision for me, then I trust you. I'll go away for a while and wait until I'm ready to come back."

He stared at her incredulously. "I don't know who the hell you are, but you better find the real Faith Bold ASAP or we're gonna have a problem."

She rolled her eyes and shoved him playfully. "Come on. Get out of the car. I'm hungry."

Turk barked support for her admonition, and the three of them made their way inside

the donut shop. Michael ordered a biscuit sandwich and his ungodly combination of maple, bacon, and donut, and Faith ordered a croissanwich, a coffee, and a normal chocolate ring donut with no meat or salt to ruin a perfectly good sweet treat.

Turk got a plain ring donut and a ham and cheese sandwich. He wolfed both of them down eagerly, then whined plaintively for more.

“No,” Faith said. “The last time I gave you food like this, you stunk the whole apartment up.”

Michael grinned. “Just keep the windows down while you drive. I assume you’re not leaving your car here.”

“You assume right. The drive will be my catharsis.”

“Not your friend?”

“No, that will be reminiscing about the good old days.”

“Ah, so a Marine buddy.”

She nodded. “First Sergeant Delroy.”

“Ooh, a sexy older Marine buddy.”

“Should I tell David you said that?” Faith said drily. “Besides, you don’t know that it’s a he.”

“It’s a he.”

“How do you know?”

“You get along better with guys than girls.”

She chuckled. “How enlightened of you.”

“I’m a detective, not a social worker. You like guys because most guys are intimidated by your stern, take-no-prisoners attitude, so they leave you alone.”

“Before you make a horribly broad generalization about most girls, I should point out that Delroy isn’t intimidated by anything.”

He grinned. “I’ll bet he isn’t.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure what dirty joke you were trying to make, but I’m visiting First Sergeant because I haven’t seen him in a while, he’s retired now, and if anyone comes trying to kill me in his presence, he’ll rip them into strips.”

“Wow. Well, if you catch him dismembering any unfortunate murderers, take video and send it to me.”

“Will do.”

Her smile faded slightly. Michael reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

“Hey. It’s gonna be okay. We’ve dealt with worse.”

She sighed. “I’m getting sick of telling myself that.”

He looked over her shoulder at the fading dusk. “Yeah. Me too.”

They finished their meals, then Michael dropped her off at the station. She picked up her car and texted David goodbye. She had a go bag in the car with changes of clothing, toiletries, and cash, so she didn’t need to stop by her apartment. She felt a

little guilty about leaving without seeing David in person, but if she stopped, she'd spend the night, and if she did that, she might wake up in the morning determined not to leave at all.

So, she pulled onto the freeway and headed east, away from her home, away from her friends, and hopefully away from the grasp of a crazed killer who sent messages to her using the blood of his victims.

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Lillian Martin smiled apologetically at the irate guest in front of her and wondered what her fat lips would look like stretched inside out over her skull. “I’m so sorry, ma’am, but I’m afraid that without a receipt, there’s nothing I can do.”

The woman planted her hands on her hips and said, “Yes, there is.”

Lillian’s smile widened. “No, there isn’t.”

“Yes, there is.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Yes, there...” the woman sighed. “I’d like to speak to your manager.”

Lillian continued to smile sweetly at her.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re excused.”

The woman—Glenda? Glinda? Glimmer? Something like that—stiffened as though she’d been slapped. “Get me your manager right now!”

“No.”

“Ex cuse me !?”

“You asked for my manager,” Lillian said sweetly. “I refused to get him.”

“You can’t... Hello? Hello!?”

Gayle leaned over the counter and shouted for help. Lillian let her scream for several minutes, earning disgusted looks from the other customers at PriceLo. The other employees were more than happy to ignore the banshee while she endeavored to make the universe aware of the horrific travesty she was enduring at the hands of this brat who didn’t realize that the entire universe revolved around Garnetta.

“Hell...”

Ginger stopped and stared at Lillian with something akin to horror. She’d finally realized that Lillian was the only person there who would pay attention to her. And above Lillian’s sweet smile were hard eyes that gave Georgina a real reason to fear her, though it was certain she had no idea what that reason was.

Lillian decided now was the time to twist the knife. “Ma’am. Unless you have a receipt, I will not refund your items. Period. You can leave them here if you don’t want them, but you’ll receive zero dollars and zero cents for them.”

“That’s—”

“I don’t give a shit what it is.”

Geraldina flinched again. “You can’t talk to me like that!” The plaintive wail of a woman-child.

“Yes, I can. I did. And you can Google our customer service number if you want to tell someone else who doesn’t give a shit all about it. But you will not receive a refund without a receipt.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Lillian was sure that Gigi would harass her for the next forty-five minutes just out of spite. But there were those hard eyes that Genevieve didn't quite realize were the eyes of a killer.

So, instead, Genetta turned around slowly and waddled out of the store. Lillian caught sight of her amazed face in the security camera screen above the exit. No doubt, she couldn't believe that her feet were carrying her out of the store.

And she'd left her cart.

Lillian took a deep breath, and when she saw the time, she released it in a little squeak of joy. Her shift was over.

She clocked out and carefully replaced her uniform, changing into the baggy sweatpants and oversized hoodie that would ensure no one who saw her would be able to describe her well. She really should kill Gloria for being such a bitch, but she couldn't let herself lose control like that. That's what had gotten her into trouble the first time. She called her supervisor over. "Hey, Larry, the Gilda I was just talking to left her cart behind."

Larry, a heavyset balding man of around forty, frowned. "The what?"

"The customer. Gepetto, or whatever."

Mike blinked. "Oh. You mean the Karen?"

"Huh. Could have sworn her name started with a G."

"It might, but the term for a woman being bitchy to businesses is Karen. Unless it's a guy. Then it's Darren."

Lillian didn't really care and had completely lost interest in this conversation, but she needed this job, and being cordial with your boss was pretty necessary if you wanted to keep your job. At least Mike wasn't handsy with her.

"Well, she was a bitch, whatever her name was. She's lucky I didn't ram a pistol up her ass and pull the trigger."

Mike laughed, and Lillian joined her. He would never know that she meant that comment seriously. "Well, you're lucky. You get to go home and forget about this crap for the next nine hours."

She rolled her eyes. "Fun."

He laughed again, then clapped a hand on her shoulder. "See you tomorrow."

Okay, well, he wasn't sexually handsy. Just one of those annoying people who thought he was friends with everyone.

But she needed this job, so she smiled and said, "See you tomorrow, Mike."

She drove home, smiling pleasantly just in case anyone looked into her windows. Two people cut her off, and she entertained herself by imagining them bleeding out slowly while begging her for mercy. It really was a shame that society expected her to put up with assholes.

Overall, despite Karen and the traffic, Lillian was in a good attitude. Frank was going to be on TV again today. That always made it a good day.

Lillian switched on the tv as soon as she reached the house. She squealed and clapped her hands when she saw Frank. God, he was so handsome! Why hadn't Faith begged for the chance to do whatever he wanted? I mean, who wouldn't want to give that

man everything he ever wanted?

The news story was about the new trial set to begin tomorrow. Frank's first trial had ended with a mistrial when some jurors maintained that the FBI mishandled evidence in the case and denied Franklin West due process. His new jury had been selected, and now once more, the jury would determine whether or not Frank could be held legally accountable for the thirty-two murders he was alleged to have committed.

The scene changed to show the crowded courtroom, full of civilians eager to watch the trial of the century. How lucky they were to be in Frank's presence. Lillian wished she could be among them, watching that god of a man make his accusers look like fools.

But she couldn't. She couldn't let the world know that she adored him, or her own mission would be endangered. And she couldn't allow that. She had to get Faith Bold. She had to destroy her and then show Frank that she was worthy of his love. Then she could break him out of prison, and they could be together. Yes, they could be together.

She sighed and crooned as the image switched back to Frank. "I'm going to win your heart, baby," she whispered. "Did you get my letters? Did you know they were from me?"

There was no way he could know they were from her, of course, but that was all right. He would fall in love with the words, and then, when he saw the woman who had written them, he would fall in love with her too.

But all in good time. It was enough that she had found the courage to talk to him. Everything else would come later.

Maybe she'd write him another letter. Maybe she'd ask him who she should kill next.

She could set up an anonymous P.O. box and...

No. Too risky. The FBI could track the owner of that P.O. Box, and then the jig was up.

She sighed. "One day, we'll be together. In the meantime, I should start thinking about my next call for Faith's attention."

Faith Bold was difficult, but she wasn't impossible. She would crack with the right pressure. Lillian just needed to know exactly where to put that pressure.

Then, she'd leave a message for the entire world to read.

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Ten Days Later

Faith took a deep breath, lowered her head and sprinted up the hill. Turk followed, not sprinting, but loping gently to match Faith's pace. Faith kept her breathing controlled as she ascended the slope. Her side ached, and her lungs burned, but she kept the pace until she reached the crest of the hill a half mile from the base. The hill sloped downward at a much gentler rate after the crest. She continued at a fast jog—barely a trot for Turk—and reached the house a few minutes later.

She headed upstairs to the shower, Turk at her heels. She glared at the dog, who looked just as energetic as he had at the beginning of the run. “Yeah, yeah. In my defense, I only have two legs.”

Turk cocked his head, confused. Faith chuckled and said, “Go on to the yard, boy. I’ll make dinner when I’m done in the shower.”

Turk shot off like a bolt of lightning. Well, he loves it here, Faith thought.

Retired First Sergeant Jacob Delroy lived in a spacious house in Carmel, Indiana, a suburb a few miles north of Indianapolis. Jacob's particular neighborhood was just far enough from the city to be quiet while remaining close enough to be convenient.

And he had a big backyard, which made him instantly a great friend to Turk, who now spent almost all of his waking moments running around, splashing in the pool and chasing squirrels. Faith loved watching him play. He'd spent his entire adult life as a K9, first for the Marine Corps, and then the FBI. This was probably the first time he'd had a chance to act like a puppy since he was a puppy.

As for Faith...

Well, she appreciated the quiet. She no longer lived near downtown Philly, and the place she rented with David was a lot quieter than her old apartment, but it was far and away louder than this neighborhood was. She liked that the neighbors kept to themselves but were polite to each other when they did interact. She liked Jacob's cooking, which was every bit as amazing as she remembered it in the Corps, except he had much better ingredients to work with. She liked talking to Jacob too. It was nice to reminisce about the Corps with someone who really understood what fighting in a war was like.

But she was going stir crazy. Her daily runs weren't enough to shake the restlessness and overwhelming boredom that she felt. A few short months ago, she had seriously considered retiring and moving somewhere just like this. She was very glad that she had elected to stay with the FBI instead. She was definitely not ready to stop.

Yet here she was, stopped. Doing nothing. Waiting for news from back home to let her know if she could expect to return anytime soon or if she was going to be forcibly retired.

She hated that.

"Should've just ignored everyone and stayed in town," she muttered. "Disguised myself and looked for the Messenger."

That was a bad idea for many reasons, but anything would be better than just... existing.

She finished showering and dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, then headed downstairs. Jacob was grilling steaks. He looked up at Faith and smiled. "Now I've seen everything. Staff Sergeant Faith Bold in oversized sweatpants and a baggy t-

shirt.”

She chuckled. “I’m a lot less by-the-book these days, First Sergeant.”

“So I hear. Word on the street is you’re a maverick.”

“I’ve always been a maverick. You know that.”

He laughed. “If you say so.”

He flipped the steaks, then asked, “So do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?”

He laughed again. “That’s a no. All right, we don’t have to talk. You want your steak rare or burnt into an ungodly unamerican charcoal briquette that I wouldn’t feed to my enemy’s dog?”

She chuckled. “Rare is fine, First Sergeant.”

“Rare is goddamned beautiful and the only proper way to eat steak,” Jacob corrected.

He pulled the steaks off of the griddle and set two of them on plates. The third he left on a cool griddle to rest. For Turk, Faith guessed.

“Here anything from Michael?” he asked as he ladled mashed potatoes next to each steak.

She sighed. “No, nothing. Well, yes, but nothing about the case. Just small talk.”

“Got it. What about your new ASAC? Have you talked to her?”

“Not since I left, no.”

“You should. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”

She sat across from him at the table. “Yeah, the FBI works very differently.”

He grimaced. “Sounds horrible.”

“You get used to it. They don’t like when people make waves, but they also let people make their own tactical decisions. To a point, anyway.”

“Well, in that case, it sounds beautiful.”

“It has its moments.”

The two fell quiet and focused on dinner. Turk came in halfway through and immediately devoured the steak Jacob had made for him.

“Damn,” Jacob said, watching the dog eat with an impressed look on his face. “Kid can put it away.”

“Yes, he definitely likes eating.”

“As do I, Staff Sergeant. As do I.” He finished his steak, belched loudly, and capped the statement off with, “God bless America.”

Faith grimaced. “It’s a wonder you’ve never married, First Sergeant.”

“I am happily single, Bold. The last thing I want to do after sacrificing the best years of my life in service to my country is deal with some woman nagging me all day long.”

“Well, thank you for enduring the pain of having a woman live with you for a little while.”

“You’re not a woman. You’re a Marine.”

Faith laughed. “You know, if you told that to anyone who wasn’t a Marine, they’d think you were a misogynistic son of a bitch.”

“And they’d be half right. But in any case, you’re not here for good, and while I am easily the prettiest son of a bitch you’ll ever see, I doubt you’re looking to marry me anytime soon.”

She chuckled. “No, sadly I am not.”

“Good. Then I don’t have to have an awkward talk about how I love you like a friend only.”

Turk trotted to Jacob and laid his head on Jacob’s lap. Jacob looked at the dog with almost fatherly affection. “Maybe I’ll get a dog.”

“You should. You’d be the best puppy parent ever.”

Jacob grimaced. “Puppy parent? God damn, Bold. You’ve been living among the savages for too long.”

“Wait until I tell you about my favorite socially and environmentally sustainable coffee shop.”

“Keep it up, and I’ll have you run laps around the neighborhood in full gear.”

“I might actually do that tomorrow. I ran clean today, but I don’t feel exercised.”

“See? Aren’t you glad you came over here? You can finally learn how to be a Marine again.”

Faith smiled, but her eyes shifted away from Jacob. He watched her for a moment, then stood and cleared their empty plates. “Okay. Spill it. It makes me sick watching grown adults mope, so tell me what’s bothering you before I make you do burpees until I get tired.”

She chuckled, but there was less mirth in her laughter this time. “I just hate feeling like I have no control.”

She waited for him to crack another joke, but he nodded seriously as he retrieved two beers from the fridge. He handed one to Faith and said, “I’m going to the living room. You can follow me, or you can shout at me from the dining room, but if you do that, you have to stand at attention and address me as First Sergeant.”

“I’ve been calling you First Sergeant the first time. I don’t think I’ve used your name once since arriving here.”

“At attention, Marine.”

Faith rolled her eyes and followed Jacob to the living room. She sat on the couch while he sprawled on his easy chair and flipped the tv on to the local news. He kept the volume low and said, “I’m not an FBI agent, Faith, but I understand how frustrating it is when the brass makes decisions for the good of the policymakers and not the good of the boots in the field. Major Yeltsin used to tell me that the reason I was a good First Sergeant was that I could call the brass sons of bitches and articulate why, then still hold my Marines accountable to their decisions.”

“I feel like there’s a lesson there, First Sergeant, but I’m not sure what it is. Will you have mercy on a poor crayon-eater and explain it to me?”

He smiled. “The lesson is a very simple and very brutal truth. Sometimes we don’t get our way.”

“Well, sometimes people die when we don’t get our way.”

“Yes. That’s the brutal part.”

She looked away, and they sat in silence for several minutes. Jacob finished his beer and headed to the kitchen. He returned with Turk, a bag of dog treats and two more beers. He handed one beer to Faith and said, “Just so you know, Staff Sergeant, I’m going to let Specialist Turk eat as much of these treats as he likes.”

Faith smiled. “Go ahead, First Sergeant.”

He handed a very happy Turk the first treat, then said. “The thing is that sometimes people die when we do get our way. The job of the brass is to figure out how to maximize our success, minimize our losses, and keep the bean counters happy. That’s a very, very hard job, and one I’m grateful I’ve never had to do. I don’t know if your bosses are making the right decision. I do know that you made an oath to follow lawful orders as an FBI agent. At least, I’m assuming you did.”

“Something like that.”

“Then you have to trust that they’re making the best decision possible with the information they have.”

“But what if they aren’t? What if I know they aren’t?”

Jacob sipped his beer. “Then you need to make a fully informed decision and be ready to suffer the consequences. All of the consequences.”

Faith lowered her eyes. Jacob's meaning was clear. If she felt strongly enough about the Messenger case to break the rules she was bound by, then she needed to be ready to lose her career over it if it came to that. So, was she absolutely certain she was right? Or did she just want to be right because she didn't want to accept that the Messenger might actually be able to keep killing and get away with it?

“God damn it.”

She frowned. “What is it?”

Jacob turned the volume on the tv up. “Listen.”

“...was found in Carmel Valley of Peace Pet Cemetery late last night. The cemetery is only a block from Dr. Summers's veterinary practice at Carmel-Westfield Animal Medical Center. Police have released few details of the crime scene so far, but they have suggested the crime was unusually disturbing. At the moment, it is unclear what the motive might have been.”

The screen showed an image of a woman in her early forties, attractive with a bright smile and playful gray eyes.

“And she was pretty. Don't hate me, Staff Sergeant, but it hurts more when it's a pretty woman who dies.”

“And you're still not married,” Faith quipped.

Her words came on instinct, the typical and nearly constant banter between Marines who served in the same unit. The active portion of her mind was instantly analyzing the information from the news report and trying to determine what sort of killer would murder a vet and then bury her in a pet cemetery.

“Fuck it. I’m putting the basketball game on.”

Jacob switched the channel. Faith got up to watch the news story on the tv in her room. She stopped herself, however, and instead headed to the kitchen for more beers.

First Sergeant was right. She wasn’t ready to face the consequences of defying her superiors. She had to trust that they were right, and she needed to spend this time resting. Watching a news story about a possible exhibitionist serial killer like the ones she’d made a name for herself hunting would inspire her to take risks she didn’t want to take.

Not yet, anyway.

So, she watched the Indiana Pacers drub the Los Angeles Lakers and allowed Dr. Rachel Summers and her violent and untimely death to retreat to the back of her mind.

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Dr. Lisa Patel wiped sweat from her eyes and sighed in exasperation. There was nothing to remind you that you weren't young anymore, like an eighteen-hour shift.

Her shift was only supposed to be ten hours, but the surgery had gone badly, and she'd spent six more hours fighting—and this time succeeding—in keeping her patient alive. Then she'd gone to her office, locked the door, and spent two hours weeping bitterly.

It wasn't her fault. It couldn't be her fault. She did everything right. She prescribed the correct medicines at the correct doses based on the patient's medical history, age, weight, and sex. She'd made the incision beautifully and removed the tumor just as beautifully. So beautifully that she was confident that the cancer wouldn't return.

Then the patient had coughed. He wasn't supposed to do that. He was supposed to lie still on the bed until the anesthesia wore off, but instead, he had coughed, and when he had coughed, Lisa's scalpel had nicked the posterior vena cava.

What followed were the second-most harrowing six hours of her life. She'd closed the wound, bound it, transfused three units of blood into an animal that could only hold four. Then she'd restarted his heart, six times.

And finally, the heart stayed strong. The patient stabilized, and Dr. Patel closed him up, calmly issued aftercare instructions, and then went to her office to prepare a report that she'd have to share with the owner.

At least Feisty had made it. Shooter hadn't been so lucky.

She opened her car door, collapsed into her car seat and burst into tears again. Shooter was a service dog, a beautiful Golden Retriever who belonged to a patient of hers who suffered from PTSD after his long years of service in the military. That dog was his entire life, and he'd died on the table during a routine operation to remove a cyst from his gallbladder.

That time, it had been Lisa's mistake. She hadn't been careful with her scalpel, and she'd sliced his liver open too deeply to close.

She wept, thinking only of the dog and not the fact that her car door—which she locked religiously whenever she parked it—was unlocked when she opened it. She begged Shooter for forgiveness and didn't see the figure sitting up in the back seat. She wiped tears from her eyes, and when she lowered her hand again, she didn't register the sting the syringe made as it injected fifteen cc's of pentobarbital into her neck.

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Faith didn't end up donning a rucksack and quickmarching around the neighborhood, but she did take Turk for a walk first thing in the morning. The night had brought the usual slew of nightmares. Lately, those nightmares featured the leering images of Jethro Trammell—the Donkey Killer who had nearly killed Faith—and Dr. West—the Copycat Killer who had made her life a living hell for years—but they were no longer the central characters. Instead, they sat and watched while Faith battled silhouettes and ghosts, sometimes of killers she'd brought to justice and sometimes of innocents she'd lost.

And she lost those battles every time. The ghosts always overpowered her. Last night's ghost was that of the Boss. His head was misshapen, with the crown shattered and one eye hanging out of its twisted socket. He leered at her through bloodied teeth and demanded to know why she'd let the Messenger kill him like that.

Dr. Perth would say that her dreams were her mind's way of grieving since Faith refused to allow for the natural process of grief. Dr. Perth would be wrong. She wasn't often wrong, but she was way out in left field on that one. Faith had wept almost constantly for twenty-four hours after the Boss's death, and when she was awake, she thought of him as he was in life: fierce, strong and proud.

No, these nightmares weren't her way of grieving. They were a warning. Avenge me or carry this guilt for the rest of your life.

Turk barked a pleasant greeting at a nearby squirrel. The squirrel replied by freaking completely out and shooting to the top of an elm tree that rose eighty feet above the neighborhood. Turk cocked his head and tried to understand the meaning of the squirrel's indignant shouts but couldn't quite place it.

“Let’s go to the lake, Turk,” Faith said. “Maybe you’ll have more luck with the ducks.”

She turned right down a gently curving and sloping street that would lead from this subdivision to the next one over. The “lake” was only a few hundred square feet bigger than the “pond”—a similar body of water in the center of the loop that formed Jacob’s neighborhood—but it was stocked with fish and more popular with birds as a result.

The air was cool and crisp here, and as Faith’s boots crunched in the thin layer of snow that carpeted the sidewalk, her thoughts drifted to the veterinarian who had died two nights before. She wondered what her last moments were like. Had she seen the killer coming? Had death been slow and painful or swift and merciful?

Merciful? She scoffed. Death wasn’t merciful. Not even when it was swift. Death was the end. Death was nothing. Faith didn’t have a problem with religion, but she couldn’t bring herself to believe in an afterlife. She’d seen death countless times and nothing about the mangled bodies of the innocents she avenged or the tortured expressions of the killers who’d opted for justice on their own terms suggested that they were on their way to an eternity of joy and happiness or even an eternity of pain and suffering.

They were just gone.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and googled Rachel Summers. Turk gave her a fishy look, and she said, “I’m just satisfying my curiosity, Turk. I’m not going to do anything about it.”

Turk’s half-closed lids and dry expression suggested that he saw right through Faith’s ruse.

But it wasn't a ruse. She had decided to play nice and follow her superiors' instructions. She was just bored and trying to keep her mind active as well as her body.

Dr. Rachel Summers was forty-three and a graduate of Purdue University. She worked for ten years at the Central Indianapolis Animal Hospital before opening her own practice in Carmel. She was unmarried and lived alone with her three tabby cats. That made her an ideal victim. Single women living alone were statistically the most likely to fall victim to a violent crime.

But she wasn't killed at home. She was killed... well, the police didn't know yet or hadn't said yet. She had stayed late the night of her murder and been found dead in the pet cemetery the following morning. Police still hadn't released details of her murder, but they'd used the words disturbing, terrifying, and macabre.

She noted that they hadn't said brutal or vicious or any other descriptor that suggested a gruesome death. That was interesting. It was possible, of course, that the murder was disturbing, terrifying and macabre because it was gruesome, but usually when a crime scene was gory, it was described as such.

But it was also possible that the murder wasn't gory at all but was disturbing, terrifying and macabre for different reasons. In one of Faith's recent cases, a terminally ill man had killed three women in an attempt to perform an alchemical ritual called the Magnum Opus which would allegedly give him eternal life. The women were killed violently, but not gruesomely. They weren't eviscerated or cut to pieces.

Still, the scenes were absolutely disturbing, terrifying, and macabre. Each woman was posed naked in a position that represented a different alchemical signal and then sprinkled with a different color of talcum powder. Those scenes were as horrific as any of the far more gruesome scenes Faith had investigated.

So, what had this killer left behind that affected the officers so much?

Turk barked, pulling her from her thoughts. She lifted her head to see they had reached the lake. A few other people ambled around, enjoying the cool air and the pristine water of the lake. Ice had formed at the edges of the lake, but it was several weeks still before that ice would form a crust over the entire surface.

“No ducks, though,” she said aloud. “Guess they’ve all flown south. Sorry, boy.”

Turk seemed perfectly okay with the absence of ducks because he had robins to play with. The birds didn’t seem particularly happy to have an enormous carnivore chasing them around, but they tolerated Turk’s attention and hopped just out of reach of his playfully swiping paws. One of them cast Faith a longsuffering look, and she shrugged. “What am I gonna do? He’s got too much energy for me.”

While Turk played with the birds, Faith walked along the edge of the lake. Some fish still moved in the icy water below, their movements sluggish from the cold. A large channel catfish, about three feet long, looked expectantly at Faith. She showed him her empty hands, and the fish lost interest.

It was crazy how well some animals had adapted to human presence while others had suffered mightily. Some of that was by human design. Mammoths had been hunted for food and gone extinct meanwhile cows had been bred so that they were far more successful and widespread than they ever were in the wild.

It wasn’t all human design, though. Many animals had died out for no other reason than that humans had moved in and changed the land so much that they didn’t know how to live on it anymore. Meanwhile, other animals thrived in human environments. Rats, for example, would probably lose eighty percent of their global population if cities ceased to exist.

Or maybe they wouldn't. Maybe they'd just adapt to whatever came after people. What was it that allowed some creatures to survive no matter what hardship they faced while other creatures faded away?

Turk barked loudly. A different kind of bark. Faith's thoughts disappeared as she turned to her dog. He stood with his head high and his ears alert.

Faith reached for her gun, concealed in a holster inside of her coat. She put her hand on the barrel but didn't draw the weapon. "What is it, boy? What do you see?"

He looked at Faith briefly, then turned the way he was facing before. He sniffed the air and barked again. Then he shot off like a rocket.

Faith sprinted after him, sending snow flying with each stride. Turk bounded easily up a hill, and Faith struggled to follow. When she reached the other side, Turk was already fifty yards ahead of her, and the distance was expanding quickly.

"Turk! Hold on, boy!"

Turk looked around and slowed when he saw Faith. She caught up to him, and he sped up again, matching Faith's pace but only if she maintained a dead sprint.

And they said he was too old to be a K9.

They ran up another hill and when they came to the other side, Turk vaulted an eleven-foot fence, bounding lightly up the red brick base and over the wrought iron spikes, then landing just as easily on the other side.

Faith sighed and pulled herself over the fence as fast as she could. She sincerely hoped Turk wasn't causing her to trespass on someone's private property because he smelled bacon.

Deep down, though, she knew it wasn't bacon Faith was chasing. She'd worked with him long enough to know the way he acted when he found something interesting versus when he found evidence of a crime.

Dr. Summers's face flashed across her mind. Was she about to find something disturbing, terrifying and macabre?

Turk slowed to a trot on the other side of the fence. He sniffed the air as he walked through small marble slabs. Faith realized quickly that they were in a graveyard.

But what kind of graveyard? The slabs were placed very close together. Was this some sort of infant graveyard? Did they have those?

Then she saw an etching of a poodle and realized that they were in a pet cemetery. Her eyes widened. Had someone else been murdered?

She felt a slight chill, but the thrill of excitement that followed it was much stronger. That brought guilt as well, but Faith couldn't help it. She was going stir crazy out here with nothing to do, and she was tired of being treated like damaged goods. She would stay away from the Messenger case. Fine. But that didn't mean she couldn't help other innocents. It didn't mean she couldn't catch other killers.

Turk stopped behind a large, spreading oak tree surrounded by marble slabs in a ring around the trunk. The slabs here were of somewhat higher quality than the others, and some were inlaid with gold filigree. Evidently, the oak tree was a desirable location.

Turk looked at Faith, and the sober expression in his eyes told Faith that they had stumbled onto something big. When she walked around the tree and saw the woman lying in the middle of a ring of rocks with a sheaf of hickory branches in her hand, sunflowers over her eyes and a jar of honey and a bottle of red wine on either side of her head, she knew exactly what the police meant by disturbing.

The woman's skin was flaccid and gray. Faith knew that if she turned the body over, she would find that side deeply ruddy and full from the blood that had pooled to the bottom of the body. A small bruise on her neck with a red dot in the middle told Faith the cause of death.

This woman had been poisoned, then laid to rest in a pet cemetery with vaguely Celtic motifs. A nametag over her left breast identified her as Dr. Lisa Patel, DVM.

Faith shared a sober look with Turk. They had come to Indiana to escape a mystery. Now, another mystery had found them.

"Okay, boy," Faith said. "Looks like we're going to have to catch another bad guy."

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Faith sat on a stone bench twenty feet from the oak. A dozen people crowded underneath the tree, four uniformed police officers, a plainclothes detective, five CSIs, and a coroner and her assistant. One hundred feet past faith, police officers were pushing the last reluctant looky-loos out of the pet cemetery.

Turk sat in front of Faith, looking at her from time to time with a curious expression on his face. He probably wondered why she wasn't ordering him to examine the crime scene.

She would get to that in a little bit, but she had to decide exactly how to go about that first. If her superiors found out that she was investigating a murder, she would probably be suspended without pay and put on notice, meaning that any further violation would result in the end of her career. On the other hand, if Carmel Police caught her snooping around a crime scene or investigating a murder without their knowledge, it would mean a minor scandal with the FBI and a guarantee that she would be forcibly retired as a field agent. But if she could get away with it, then she would suffer none of those consequences.

Could she get away with it, though? She often relied on local police forces to do the busywork that she couldn't do herself. Without that manpower, could she be of help here?

The detective approached, shaking his head and swinging his arms as he walked. Faith would wait until she talked to him to make a decision on how to proceed.

"Afternoon, ma'am," the detective said when he was within five yards. "I'm Detective Chester Slade."

Slade was about Faith's age, of average height and build. He had a handsome but somewhat soft-featured face with big blue eyes that no doubt made a certain type of girl swoon fiercely.

Romance was nowhere near Faith's mind right now, though, and wouldn't have been even if she was single. By the expression on Slade's face, romance was nowhere near his mind either.

"Faith Bold," Faith replied.

Slade frowned. "That sounds familiar. FBI agent Faith Bold?"

She tensed a little. "Yes."

If Slade had an opinion on Faith's reputation, he didn't share it. He nodded and said, "Well, it's nice to meet you in person, Special Agent Bold. Sorry, this is your introduction to our town."

He gestured to the body, which was being carefully lifted onto a gurney for the coroner to take. "Second vet in two days found like this."

Faith raised an eyebrow. "Exactly like this?"

"Well, we'll have to wait for the coroner's report to know for sure, but yeah. Almost certainly."

"Damn."

"You can say that again." He took his hat off and fanned his face, odd considering that it was only thirty degrees outside. "We expect this kind of thing in Indianapolis, but not here. Not that Indianapolis is a particularly dangerous city, but it's a big city,

and that's usually where you get crap like this."

Actually, almost the opposite was true. In the city, you had a lot of murder motivated by economic stress, but this kind of ritualistic display was far more common in rural areas and suburbs. She didn't tell Slade that, though.

"I noticed a needle mark on the victim's skin," she said. "They were both poisoned?"

"Dr. Summers definitely was. I assume Dr. Patel as well."

"May I ask what the poison was?"

"Pentobarbital."

"Ah. I'm not familiar with that."

"It's the drug most commonly used for pet euthanasia."

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place for Faith. "So two vets killed with the drug used to put pets to sleep and then laid to rest in a ritualistic fashion in pet cemeteries."

"Pretty much. Fun, right?"

"Do you have any leads yet?"

Slade released a tense laugh. "We're less than forty-eight hours into the case. I thought we were moving fast. Now I'm looking at another body."

Faith nodded. "That's the trend nowadays."

"Trend?"

"Yes. Since the Donkey Killer was exposed roughly three years ago, we've seen an increase in the number of ritualistic serial killers like this one who move exceptionally fast. Most of them fit the criterion of a spree killer in terms of their speed, but in every other way, they fit the criteria of a serial killer. Victims are chosen on purpose, not randomly, the killings themselves are hyper-ritualistic, and there's always some sort of warped moral or message to the deaths."

"So basically like normal serial killers except they kill a slew of victims in days instead of years."

"Essentially, yes."

Slade put his hat on his head and took a seat next to Faith on the bench. The two of them watched as CSI gathered their materials and prepared to release the crime scene.

"Any idea why that's going on?" Slade asked. "The rise in quick-moving serial killer freaks?"

Faith shook her head. "The prevailing opinion right now is that Jethro Trammell inspired a lot of otherwise closeted psychopaths to come into the light."

"Trammell is the Donkey Killer, I'm guessing?"

"Was. He was killed by my partner when he rescued me."

Slade's eyes widened. "Oh, that's right. I remember reading about that now. He was the crazy farmer who captured people and tortured them in his barn."

Faith's shoulders stiffened slightly. "Yes, that was him."

"Damn. Well, good for you for getting out of that and not being a complete basket

case.”

Faith didn't like the direction this conversation was heading, so she returned the subject back to Slade's original question. “I don't agree with the FBI's analysis, though. These kinds of killers don't act because they're inspired by others. Their motivations are always internal. Frankly, they could care less that the Donkey Killer ever existed, and they would have done what they did anyway.”

“What about the other guy? West? You don't think he was inspired by Trammell?”

“In a way, yes, but he was the exception.”

Actually, if West's claims to Faith were to be believed, West had been killing people since long before Trammell ever showed up. Faith didn't want to get into that with Slade, though, and in any case, Trammell did inspire West to change his MO.

“Got it. So why do you think there are more of them now?”

Faith smiled grimly. “I don't think there are. I think killers like this have always existed. I think we're just paying more attention now.”

The two of them fell silent again. Turk whined softly as the uniformed cops gathered the yellow tape and cleared the scene. Where a moment ago, a dead woman had lain posed to the world as a message that Faith hadn't deciphered was now only a plot of grass. It was as though the murder had never happened.

“Are we taking the witness with us?” one of the uniforms asked Slade.

“No,” Slade said. “She's not a person of interest anymore.” He cocked his head. “Actually. Miss Bold, I know this is a lot to ask. I'm sure you're probably here for personal reasons, but this sort of thing... Well, like I said, it's like nothing we've ever

seen before. If you're able to offer any kind of help or insights, we'd love to have them."

Faith felt a rush of excitement followed immediately by disappointment. "I... I wish I could. I'm afraid that the FBI has... They have me on another assignment right now."

Slade's eyes widened. "There's another killer out here?"

"No. Nothing like that. I'm just... I'm supposed to focus on my current assignment."

Slade's eyebrows furrowed slightly, and Faith could tell that the detective knew she was hiding something. He didn't probe any further, though. "Ah. Bummer." He stood and extended his hand. "Well, it was nice to meet you, Special Agent Bold. For what it's worth, I think you're doing a damned good job."

Now it was Faith's turn to wonder what Slade wasn't saying. Had he seen through her deflection and guessed that she was suspended and not on another assignment?

That mystery would have to remain unsolved. She stood and took his hand. "Good luck, Detective."

He nodded, then left with his uniforms. Faith watched them leave, and only left the cemetery when they were gone.

They walked slowly back to Jacob's house. Turk could sense that she was troubled and tried to engage her in play a few times while they walked. When she didn't reciprocate, he whined softly and nuzzled her leg.

She reached down to scratch behind his ears for a moment. "Mommy's okay, Turk. She just has a lot on her mind."

Faith wasn't superstitious, and she didn't believe in spiritual signs that would show her what path to take in life. Still, it felt a little more than coincidental that she would happen to be in Carmel right when another of the killers she specialized in reared his ugly head and began to murder innocents. The cold, analytical portion of her mind told her that a coincidence was exactly what it was. After all, she had said to Slade that the "increase" in serial killers wasn't an increase at all but a function of more awareness on the part of law enforcement.

But she was here. Innocent people had died. And the local detective assigned to the case had stated explicitly that he was in over his head and needed help.

She cursed softly. "I should have told him to call the Indianapolis office and get their help. They probably have an agent who can shed some light on this."

Once more, the cold analyst in her mind refused to let her explain away her actions as simple forgetfulness. She could have recommended the Indianapolis office, but she didn't. Why not?

"Because..."

She looked at Turk. He met her eyes, and since she was being extra superstitious today, she might as well just accept that it looked like his expression encouraged her to be honest.

"Because I want to help. I'm the most qualified agent in the Bureau to handle this kind of crime. And I can't sit still and wait for someone to tell me it's okay to do my job again. I'm here, and I can make a difference now."

Turk barked, and Faith smiled. Now that her decision was made, her uncertainty disappeared. Doing this would be a huge risk. If her superiors caught wind of the fact that she was assisting in a multiple murder investigation when she was supposed to be

laying low on administrative leave, she risked losing not only her field agent status but her employment.

Not my life, though. Not like Dr. Summers and Dr. Patel.

She jogged the rest of the way back to Jacob's house and caught him just returning from work. He lifted his eyebrow when he saw her.

"You look excited. Is the FBI giving you your job back?"

"No. But I'm going to work anyway."

She explained about the dead body Turk had found and Detective Slade's request for help. Jacob sighed at the end and shook his head.

"As your friend, I should tell you that this is a very bad idea and one you need to dismiss out of hand and never reconsider. As your First Sergeant, I am well aware of the fact that you will never follow an order you disagree with and aren't particularly interested in hearing the rationale for that order. As a Marine, I'm going to tell you that I'm proud of you and wish you good luck."

Faith smiled at him. "Thank you, First Sergeant."

"Go get 'em, Bold."

She wrapped him in a bear hug, then jogged to her car. The drive to the Carmel Police Department took twenty minutes. She found Detective Slade in the lobby preparing to leave. His eyes widened when he saw her. "Special Agent Bold. What are you doing here?"

"It looks like I'll have some free time after all," she said. "I wanted to see if you still

needed help.”

Slade grinned from ear to ear. “I’d be happy to have you.”

Faith returned Slade’s grin. Eventually, the other shoe would drop, and she would suffer consequences for her actions here, but she could worry about that later.

I’m back, baby!

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The three of them drove into downtown Carmel. Traffic was steady but not particularly heavy this early in the afternoon.

“The clinic Dr. Patel worked at is on the other side of downtown,” Slade informed them. “She was close friends with another doctor there, Emma Rodriguez. I was just on my way to question her when you showed up and saved my life.” He glanced at Faith. “What changed your mind?”

“I didn’t feel good about leaving you guys out to dry. Especially with a crazy like this on the loose.”

“Well, we’re glad to have you. Honestly, the pace at which these killings are happening concerns me. I’m afraid we’re going to have another body show up before too long if we don’t put a stop to this.”

"Me too," Faith admitted. "Hopefully, Dr. Rodriguez can give us something we can use."

“Your mouth to God’s ears.”

They reached the Indianapolis Animal Hospital Emergency Medical Clinic—Carmel Branch six minutes later. When Turk saw the sign, he began to wag his tail and bark eagerly.

“Never seen a dog excited to see the vet before,” Slade remarked.

“My boyfriend is a vet,” Faith explained. “He’s also Turk’s doctor. They get along

really well.”

“That’s good. That’ll make moving in together easier.” Faith’s reaction must have showed on her face because he quickly said, “Ouch. Sorry about that. I’m not very good at minding my own business, I’m afraid. That’s why I became a detective.”

“It’s fine,” Faith said. “And I am glad that they like each other.”

The emergency clinic was a lot busier than Faith would have expected from a city this small. Dozens of pets and their owners sat in the waiting room or stood in line to sign in for an appointment. Nurses flitted in and out, moving the patients through with brisk efficiency. It reminded Faith a lot more of an actual human hospital than David’s clinic. Although she supposed the Philadelphia Animal Hospital was just about as busy.

“Are they always this packed on a Wednesday?”

“This is the first time I’ve been here, but Carmel’s a big dog town. Lots of upper-middle-class people with their purse dogs and families with their big dogs. And this is the only branch of the animal hospital for Carmel and Westfield.”

“Got it. Here’s hoping Dr. Rodriguez has time to see us.”

“She’ll have to make time.”

“Fair enough.”

As it turned out, Dr. Rodriguez was more than happy to make time. The three agents only had to wait a few minutes before Dr. Rodriguez herself stepped into the waiting room and called them back.

Behind the counter, the clinic was just as busy. Barks, meows, snarls, hisses, squawks, and various other sounds greeted the detectives as Dr. Rodriguez led them to her office. Turk shot Faith a concerned look when they passed one door to find a terrified puppy struggling to escape a nurse who was giving it probably its first vaccination shots.

Once in the office, Dr. Rodriguez sighed and gave Turk a slight smile. "Hey, boy. Sorry, I couldn't introduce myself properly outside. I'm Dr. Emma."

She extended a hand, and Turk shook it. She stooped in front of him and gave him a quick visual inspection, no doubt a habit for a vet with many years of experience. Turk behaved well for the inspection, used to this kind of treatment his entire life. K9s were subject to a robust battery of exams at least once a year and usually more often than that, on top of the typical routine medical exams.

"Strong teeth," she commented. "Good muscle tone. Clear eyes. Joints seem fine. He's in good shape for a dog who's been a K9 for... I'm guessing six years now?"

"Closer to seven. He recently turned nine."

Emma nodded appreciatively. "He looks good. You take good care of him."

"Thank you." Faith smiled at Turk and ruffled his fur.

Slade interjected. "I understand that you were close with Dr. Lisa Patel?"

Emma's smile faded. "Yes. We were good friends."

"I'm very sorry for your loss."

Emma nodded. "Thank you."

“We’ll try to keep this brief,” Faith said. “I’m sure you have a full plate today, and I don’t want to pull you away from your patients.”

"Not so full a plate for me, actually. I'm mostly clearing up some paperwork, then I'm going home. It's going to be a little while before I see patients again, I'm afraid." Her eyes squeezed shut, and tears welled in them. "I just saw her yesterday. Like... I just saw her."

Faith’s heart went out to the grieving vet. The first difficulty most people experienced when confronted with the death of a loved one was trouble wrapping their heads around the fact that someone could be smiling, laughing and talking with them one moment, and then seemingly the next moment, they were dead. Emma had probably only just been notified of Lisa’s death.

“Really wish we didn’t have to be the bearers of bad news,” Slade said.

Emma sniffled. “Not your fault.” She took a deep breath and wiped the tears from her eyes. “So, I assume you need to ask me about the last time I saw her, if I saw anyone suspicious and stuff like that?”

“Sure. We’ll start with that.”

She chuckled bitterly. “Well, the last time I saw her was yesterday at the clinic. We didn’t really say much, just a quick greeting over coffee. I had a lot of patients, and she was scheduled for a surgery that ended up taking hours longer than it should have.”

“Why’s that?” Faith asked.

“There was an incident with the patient. The patient coughed during surgery, and the spasm caused Lisa’s scalpel to come into contact with a major blood vessel. I don’t

know all of the details. I was actually going to talk to her about it today, but she never came.” She fought tears for another moment, then said, “I do know that the patient survived, and they expect no further complications.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Faith said.

“Yeah,” Emma replied. “Me too.”

“Did Lisa seem different at all to you?” Slade asked. “Any recent changes in mood or behavior?”

“Um...” Emma sighed. “She was a little more stressed lately.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Well... that incident with the patient wasn’t the first time that...” She caught herself and said, “You know, I don’t think I should say anything. I don’t want her or anyone else here to get in trouble.”

“No one here is going to get in trouble with us unless we have reason to believe they were involved in Dr. Patel’s murder,” Slade assured her. “But we need to know the answers to our questions. They’re critical in helping us find the person who did this to Lisa and bringing them to justice. That means you might have to say some things about your colleague that you’d rather not say.”

Emma took a deep breath. “I understand. I hate it, but I understand.”

“I don’t blame you for hating it,” Faith said. “You were about to tell us that the incident with the surgery last night wasn’t the first time there’s been a mistake during one of Lisa’s surgeries?”

“Last night wasn’t a mistake,” Emma insisted. “The patient coughed at the exact wrong time. There was no way to avoid what happened, and frankly, a lesser doctor would have been unable to save the patient’s life the way Emma did.”

“But the other times?” Faith pressed.

Emma sighed. “Just one other time. There was a patient a few months ago, a therapy dog. He was in surgery to have a cyst removed from his gallbladder, and he died during the operation.”

“And it was Dr. Patel’s mistake that caused that to happen?”

Emma looked at the door and bit her lip. “If... Can I say something and not have it repeated in court?”

“I can’t make that promise,” Faith replied.

“But,” Slade interjected, “I will remind you that we’re here to solve Lisa’s murder, not rake her memory over the coals for her mistakes as a surgeon.”

Emma looked down at her desk. “Officially, the death was ruled an accident. Unofficially... Lisa told me that she wasn’t paying attention and accidentally sliced open the patient’s liver. I wasn’t in the room, so I can’t tell if it was her fault for sure or if it was only the guilt talking, but as far as she was concerned, she was responsible for the patient’s death.”

“How did the owner feel?” Faith asked.

“Very much the same way.”

Faith didn’t show her excitement, but she felt it. Now we’re getting somewhere.

“What’s the owner’s name?”

“Jack Thompson. He’s an Iraq war veteran who was prescribed a therapy dog to help with his PTSD. That’s what he told us, at least. We don’t have access to his medical records obviously.”

“How did he react when he learned his dog died?” Slade asked.

“Badly. Security had to escort him out of the building. The next morning, he came back and became belligerent and aggressive. When security tried to remove him again, he became violent. They were able to subdue him and hold him until the police arrived. We trespassed him from the property, but he came back again, and when he was arrested again, he shouted... I don’t remember the exact words, but he threatened to kill Lisa.”

Now they were really getting somewhere. “When’s the last time you saw him?” Faith asked.

“The last time I saw him was one month ago. That was the last time he trespassed. I assumed he had been put in jail for violating the trespass order.”

Slade shook his head. “No, they would have processed him and given him a court date. Typical sentencing in that sort of case is a token jail sentence—usually time served—and probation. It actually takes a lot to put someone away for trespassing. A restraining order, however, is a different thing. Did Lisa ever get one?”

Emma scoffed. “No. I told her to, but she didn’t listen. I think she felt guilty, maybe. I don’t know. She just didn’t want to go to court over anything.”

“What about a lawsuit?” Faith asked. “Did Mr. Thompson attempt to sue the clinic for wrongful death?”

“That’s what I heard. Doctors here are technically independent contractors, but from what I’ve overheard, Thompson couldn’t find a lawyer to take the suit. He never lodged one himself, so I assume they told him he couldn’t win.”

“I’m guessing that Lisa’s mistake wasn’t common knowledge,” Faith said.

Emma shook her head. “No. The clinic went with the official story.”

“And she’s had no contact with Mr. Thompson outside of this clinic?” Slade asked.

“Not that I’m aware of. We all thought he was gone. I can’t believe they released him. I thought that his threats would be enough to keep him in jail.”

“Sometimes I wish it was that easy,” Slade opined. “What about Dr. Rachel Summers? Ever hear of her?”

Emma frowned. “Who?”

“She’s the first victim,” Faith said. “She was murdered two nights before Lisa.”

“Ah. I see. No, I’m sorry, I don’t know her.”

“Lisa never mentioned her?”

“No. Not to me, at least.”

The two detectives shared a sober look. That could mean nothing, or it could mean everything. Faith would have to look a little deeper before she could know for sure.

“I don’t suppose you have contact information for this Jack Thompson?”

“The front desk might,” Emma said.

“We’ll ask them. Thank you.”

“Lisa wasn’t a bad doctor,” Emma said. “She was a good one. She just had a bad day.”

“Everyone does,” Slade agreed.

The three agents made their way to the reception desk. While the receptionist found the information they needed, Faith recalled the times Turk had been threatened by killers over the years. She was grateful that she’d never had to kill anyone for it, but there were times when she wouldn’t have hesitated.

She had a feeling Jack Thompson understood that feeling very well.

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Jack Thompson's address was in Sheridan, a small town north of Carmel. According to Slade, he didn't actually live in the town but in a small cabin in the woods off of the Monon Greenway.

"Most of the land is public use and not zoned for residences, but there were a few old hunting lodges repurposed into homes that got an exemption. Looks like Thompson is one of them."

"We'll need to be careful going in," Faith said. "He could be armed."

"He's not licensed to own a firearm, but yes, we should be careful. He might very well have one anyway."

"I suggest we have Turk lead. He's trained to recognize gunpowder and other explosives from his time in the Corps."

"Works for me. Are you anticipating a fight?"

"If he knows we're here investigating the murder, yes," Faith replied. "He might not be the killer, but if he knows we suspect him of being the killer, he could react badly."

"Got it. Well, we'll be ready if that's what happens."

Slade turned off of the Greenway onto a rough dirt road that led east into the forest. The shadows were growing long as the afternoon progressed. They reached for the car with jagged claws, and Faith felt a shiver as the road disappeared behind them.

Turk didn't show any fear, but his eyes were wide and alert, and his tail swished back and forth. Like Faith, he anticipated a fight too.

"According to the GPS, the house should be eight hundred feet to the left just about... here."

He stopped the cruiser and pointed out of the window at a narrow footpath that led up a low hill. Faith caught a glimpse of a log cabin between the thick branches of the trees lined on either side of the path. "Okay, boy," she told Turk. "On my command."

The three of them left the vehicle and Turk trotted to the edge of the footpath, ears up, body poised. Faith and Slade checked their weapons, and when Slade nodded to Faith, she commanded, "Go."

Turk shot forward, bounding almost silently up the path. "Damn," Slade whispered. "I forget how quiet dogs can be."

"Let's see if we can be that quiet," Faith replied.

The two human investigators started up the footpath, hands on their weapons but not drawn. Faith listened closely for the barking that would tell her that Turk had found their quarry, but it never came. When they reached the cabin, they found Turk standing in front of the door, sniffing carefully.

"What does that mean?" Slade asked.

"It means Thompson might still be inside," Faith said. "Or he's not here, but Turk smells something suspicious."

Slade nodded. "I'll go to the back, you take the front?"

“Works for me.”

Slade moved around to the back of the house, this time drawing his weapon. Faith drew hers but held out hope they wouldn’t need to use them.

She knocked on the door. “FBI! Respond!”

Jack—if he was inside the cabin—didn’t.

“FBI! Jack Thomas, respond!”

He still didn’t.

Faith lifted the radio Slade had let her borrow to her lips. “Slade? You there?”

“I’m here. Back door’s locked. Are we going in?”

“Looks like it. Let me try the front door and see if it opens.”

She reached for the handle, but before she grabbed it, Turk barked urgently. The door burst open, knocking Faith off of the porch. She covered her head just before she hit the ground, but the five-foot drop still knocked the wind out of her. She gasped and fumbled around for her weapon while a tall figure covered in dirt and branches jumped off of the porch and sprinted into the forest.

Turk started after the suspect but hesitated when he saw Faith. “Go after him!” she commanded.

Turk ran after the suspect, and Faith found her weapon and got to her feet. Slade rounded the house and rushed to her. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Faith said, wincing as she rolled her shoulder. Noting Slade’s concerned expression, she said, “Seriously, I’m fine. Just bruised. Come on, Turk’s on his trail.”

The two officers jogged into the forest, following Turk’s barking. The suspect already had a significant head start, and he knew these woods much better than they did, so they would have to rely on Turk to keep up with their suspect and hopefully corner him.

“Did you see a weapon?” Slade asked.

“No, but I didn’t get a good look. He was wearing hunting camouflage, so he could have concealed something.”

“Damn it. Okay.”

Reminding her about the weapon made Faith worry for Turk. Turk was adept at handling suspects with weapons, but in the forest, he wouldn’t have as much room to maneuver. Neither would Slade, but if he knew where he was going, he could be trying to lead Turk into a trap.

She heard barking and then a cry and increased her pace. “Jack Thompson! Stop!”

A yelp followed that command, and a thrill of fear coursed through her spine. “Don’t you dare hurt my dog!”

That brought a disturbing feeling of guilt. After all, they suspected Jack of murdering someone for hurting his dog.

The chase continued deeper into the forest. Here, the tall trees thinned out, and the young trees stifled the forest floor with their branches, making it difficult for the two investigators to know where they were going.

Turk began to bark again, and Faith breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't sound hurt. Faith guessed that he had cornered the suspect and been shaken off but not injured.

“Jack! We're going to find you. Give it up now! You're only making things worse for yourself!” Another yelp followed that, and she swore. “Damn it, Jack, if you injure my K9, you'll be charged with aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer.”

“Does that really matter if he's up for multiple murder?” Slade asked.

Faith glared at him, and he looked away. “Jack! Turk!”

Turk replied by whining. She wouldn't have heard that if she wasn't close. “Turk! Come here, boy! Can you come to me?”

A second later, Turk walked through some low-hanging branches and trotted to Faith. He was shaking his head and rubbing his nose with his paws, but he didn't look like he was bleeding.

“What happened, boy?” Faith asked. “Did he spray you with something?”

“Bear spray, I'm guessing,” Slade said. “Everyone carries that out here. Poor guy. That's tough.”

Turk whined plaintively, and Faith saw his eyes were bloodshot. He sneezed and shook his head again.

Faith sighed in exasperation. Not only was she upset to see her dog hurt—even in a minor way like this—but their suspect had defeated their K9 and was now probably undetectable.

“Put an APB out,” she told Slade.

“You’re calling the chase?”

“Hell no. But I’m also being realistic.”

Slade nodded. “Good point.”

Faith pulled her water bottle from her best pocket and poured it over Turk’s face. Turk groaned with relief as the water washed away most of the bear spray. That wouldn’t help his sense of smell, though. It would be hours before that recovered.

Still, maybe they could pick up a trail. The woods thinned out up ahead. If they were lucky, maybe they would thin out enough for them to see footprints or snapped branches that might tell them where Jack Thompson had gone.

"Take us to him, boy," she told Turk. Turk gave her an injured expression, and she clarified, "Take us to where you saw him last."

Turk sneezed, then trotted off the way he had come. The two human agents followed, keeping quiet so they could hear any movements that might indicate the presence of their suspect.

Turk led them a couple hundred feet through the forest. For a moment, the trees actually grew thicker, and Faith had a sinking feeling that Jack would have lost them after all. After another hundred feet or so, however, Turk led them into a clearing. He trotted to the middle, where a rough circle of disturbed ground confirmed that he had tussled briefly with their suspect. He lowered his nose to the ground, but after a moment, he released a glum moan and sat, putting his head in between his hands.

“It’s all right, boy,” Faith said. “Come on. I see his footprints.”

Faith followed the tracks into the forest, but after another thirty yards, the trees

thickened again. The three agents had to move slowly so Faith could catch the snapped branches and disturbed leaf litter that were now her only indication of where Thompson might have gone.

“I didn’t see any blood,” Slade said. “Would’ve been nice if Turk had gotten a bite in so we could track the blood.”

“Shh,” Faith said. “Stay quiet. He might make noise.”

“You think he’s close?”

“He could be. He might be trying to hide now that he’s defeated Turk’s nose.”

Slade shrugged and fell silent. He didn’t seem to have as much hope as Faith did. To be honest, she wasn’t particularly hopeful either, but she wasn’t ready to give up yet.

Then it occurred to her that smell wasn’t the only sense Turk had that was superior to their own. “Turk,” she called softly. “Use your ears. Listen for the suspect.”

Turk cocked his head, and Faith tapped her own ears. “Listen.”

Turk concentrated for a moment, then wagged his ears. Faith nodded. “Yes. Use those.”

Turk dipped his head and trotted forward, head lifted, ears scanning like radar dishes.

“Didn’t know dogs could move their ears like that,” Slade whispered. “He looks like a cat.”

Turk looked back and gave Slade a dubious look. The police officer lifted a hand in apology, and Turk resumed his search for the suspect.

The sky was darkening fast. According to Faith's phone, they had two hours of daylight left, at least, but the thick tree cover meant that little of that light made it to the forest floor. Turk would be just fine without light in normal circumstances, but with his sense of smell compromised, he would be a lot less useful. They could continue this search for another hour or so, but then Faith would have to admit defeat and take them back to the car.

Then Turk stopped. He stood stock still, focused on something ahead and to his right. Faith held a hand up, and she and Slade stopped.

Turk crept forward, his paws making no sound as they hit the dirt. Both of his ears pointed forward, and after a few more steps, he launched forward without warning, chomping down on a pile of leaf litter.

A cry came up from the leaf litter, and a moment later, Jack Thompson got to his knees, shaking his arm and reaching for Turk. Faith and Slade drew their weapons, and Faith commanded, "Stop! Jack Thompson, do not injure my K9!"

Jack looked at Faith, his eyes wide. Turk growled and pulled him back to the ground, his jaws cinched tightly over his shoulder. Jack cried out and said, "Okay! Okay! You got me! I'm unarmed! Please don't shoot!"

Faith kept her weapon trained on him and called Turk off. Turk released Jack and trotted back to her side while Slade handcuffed their defeated suspect.

"All right, Mr. Thompson," Faith said, holstering her weapon. "We're going to get you checked out at a hospital. Then we're going to have a little chat."

"Oh God," Jack whimpered. "Am I in trouble?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

Slade pulled Jack to his feet and called for an ambulance to meet them at Jack's residence. The four of them headed back through the woods, and Faith dared to hope that she might have reached an end to this case without risking her career or the life of another innocent.

Still, the lengthening shadows seemed to taunt her as she followed Slade and Turk back to Jack's cabin. It felt like a mocking warning not to get her hopes up.

After all, in Faith's experience, things were rarely this easy.

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It was well past dusk when they finally started to interrogate Jack. Turk hadn't injured him seriously, but he had a good hold of Jack's shoulder, and the hospital had to disinfect and bandage some deep punctures. Faith worried a little about that. The FBI had once had to settle a lawsuit after Faith sicced Turk on a suspect who turned out to be innocent. It was possible that Jack wouldn't press charges, but she didn't want to bank on that.

Then again, this was what came with the job. She had chosen to involve herself in this case knowing the risks. She couldn't waste any more time worrying about herself.

Jack was morose when the three of them walked into the interrogation room. He glared at them, but there was more defeat in his eyes than anger. "You guys gonna tell me what I did yet?"

"Well, we have you for battery on a LEO for bear spraying the dog," Slade said. "So there's that for sure."

"What was I supposed to do? Let him bite me?"

"You were supposed to answer the door when we identified ourselves as law enforcement," Faith said.

"Oh yeah," Jack said. "Nothing I look forward to more than a chat with uniforms."

"As long as you tell the truth, you have nothing to worry about."

“I tell the truth when I talk, but I don’t know you. Why would I talk to you?”

“Special Agent Faith Bold,” Faith said, taking a seat in front of him. “Now you know me. That means you’ll tell me the truth now, right?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Jack insisted. “Damn it, I was just in my own home filling out an application for another service dog. I don’t want to replace Shooter, but...” He tried to run his hands through his hair, but the shackles prevented him. “I can’t do this alone. The nightmares...”

He shivered. Faith felt a touch of sympathy for him. She suffered from nightmares herself. Oddly enough, none of her nightmares were about her combat experience, but she understood how difficult it was for many warfighters. Those memories lingered.

Still, that wasn’t an excuse to murder a vet, even if she had made a grave mistake like Dr. Patel. “I’ll be honest with you, Jack. You’re going to be honest with me, so I’ll return the favor. We’re investigating you for the murders of Dr. Rachel Summers and Dr. Lisa Patel.”

Jack started. “Patel’s dead?”

“Yes. She was killed last night.”

Jack tried to pump his fist but was once more prevented by the shackles. “Yes! Fuck that bitch!”

Faith and Slade shared a look. “Real broken up about the vicious murder of an innocent person, huh,” Slade commented.

“Oh, go to Hell. She wasn’t innocent. She killed my dog.”

“Yes, we heard there was an unfortunate incident when your previous therapy dog was in surgery,” Faith said.

“His name was Shooter, and he was my best friend. My only friend.”

He looked at Turk and smiled wistfully. Turk cocked his head at the odd expression. Most people he’d bitten didn’t look at him like that. “He a good dog?” Jack asked Faith.

“He is. A great dog.”

Jack nodded. “Then you know. You know what you’d want for anyone who hurt him.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “I would. And as long as we’re being honest with each other, I’ll admit that I wouldn’t mind doing it myself if I had to.”

“I see where you’re going with that,” Jack said, “but I didn’t kill anyone.”

"We'll see about that," Slade said. "See, the thing that makes it hard for me is that you were trespassed from the business after two violent encounters with security. During those encounters, you made criminal threats to Dr. Lisa Patel. Then you came back anyway and made threatening comments to Dr. Patel again. I looked up your records. You were arrested and ordered to complete a diversion program, or you would be sentenced for those charges. Did you complete that program?"

Jack’s shoulders slumped. “No.”

"I'm so glad you answered that honestly," Slade replied. "Because I already knew you didn't. That's good because that makes me want to trust you. Trust me when I say it's a good thing if I trust you."

Jack sniffed but didn't reply otherwise.

"What exactly were the threats you made, Jack?" Faith asked.

Jack paled slightly. "Just... you know, ordinary stuff."

"Threatening to kill someone isn't ordinary," Faith replied. "Are you telling me you didn't threaten to kill her?"

He sighed. "Yes, I did, but... I didn't mean it."

"Really? If I was face to face with the person who killed my dog, I'd mean it when I said I wanted to kill them."

In fact, Faith had seen Turk hurt before. Dr. West had hurt Turk and once nearly killed him. Had Faith not already been incapacitated, she would absolutely have killed West.

"Yeah, I wanted to kill her, but I wouldn't have done it," Jack insisted.

"That's a bit of a thin excuse for us, Jack," Faith said softly.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you," he said glumly. "I didn't kill her."

"You still haven't told us exactly what you said to her," Slade pressed.

Faith turned to the detective to see a hard expression. He must have known the answer to that question too.

Jack tapped the table and stared at the detective. Anger replaced his anxiety, and his voice was steady when he said, "I told her that I would catch her alone one day, and

that I would kill her and bury her with the animals she's killed so their souls could torture hers for all of eternity. And you know what? I'm glad she's dead. I hope those animals are torturing her. I hope Shooter spends all of time biting her bitch face off."

Faith and Slade shared a look. Jack gestured at Turk and said, "Imagine if your dog died because a vet fucked up. Imagine you take him to someone you trust to take care of him, and when you arrive to pick him up, you find out that they killed him instead of taking care of him. How would you feel?"

"I understand how you feel, Jack. If that's the reason you killed them, then I get it."

"I didn't kill her." He frowned. "Wait, you said them? Oh, that's right, there was that other vet too, the uh... what was her name?"

Faith frowned. "Dr. Rachel Summers."

"Right. Yeah, I don't know her. Didn't know her. Did she work at the clinic too?"

Faith's frown deepened. She had made a career out of reading criminals, and Jack looked very sincerely unaware of who Dr. Summers was. "No, she had a practice at Carmel-Westfield Animal Medical Center."

"Huh. I don't know where that is. You think the same person killed both people?"

"We know it," Slade said.

He remained stern, but Faith could hear the uncertainty in his voice. He wasn't sure that Jack was guilty anymore either.

She folded her arms and leaned forward. "Jack, can you account for your whereabouts last night?"

His eyes shifted to the left, a common physiological tell that a person was about to lie. "I was at work."

"No, you weren't."

Jack stiffened and blinked. He watched Faith's face shrewdly, then apparently decided she was bluffing. "Yes, I was."

"Where do you work?"

He frowned. "Why does it matter?"

"So we can verify your alibi. If you can prove to us that you were at work when Dr. Patel was murdered, then you can't be our killer, and we'll release you."

His frown deepened. "You know what? Fuck it. I hated the bitch. I wanted her dead. If I could have killed her, I would have. Shooter's gone. I have nightmares every goddamned night, and they're getting worse. You want to pin this on me? Sure. I killed her."

"You work for Red Racer Auto Body?" Slade asked.

Jack blinked, genuinely surprised. "How'd you figure that out?"

"You listed it as your place of employment when you brought Shooter to the emergency clinic. They gave it to us as part of your contact information. I'm going to call them Jack. If they tell me you weren't at work last night, then it's going to look very bad for you."

"Go ahead. I already told you you can pin it on me."

Faith leaned back in her chair and pursed her lips. Jack was a good lead if Patel was the only victim, but he didn't seem to know anything about Rachel Summers at all. He could be lying about that, but...

"Jack, if you're the killer, then we'd appreciate a clear confession so we know to stop looking. If you're not the killer, then I have something for you to consider. Dr. Rachel Summers, who you claimed not to know, had zero record of malpractice and not one complaint lodged against her in twelve years as a veterinary doctor. Not one. I understand being happy about Dr. Patel's death after what happened with Shooter, but Dr. Summers wasn't the same sort of vet. I assume Shooter went to the vet more than just the last time."

He looked warily at Faith. "Yeah? So?"

"And I assume that other vets were able to help him? Keep him healthy, make him feel better when he was sick?"

"Yeah?"

"And those vets. Do they deserve to die? Do their patients deserve to be without good, kind doctors?"

Jack lowered his eyes. "No."

"No, they don't. Well, this killer isn't only targeting bad vets. He's killing good vets too. If that's you, then you deserve to go to prison for punishing innocent people. If that's not you, then please help us clear you so we can find the person who is killing good vets before they kill another good vet."

Jack sighed. "I was at a treatment center."

“A treatment center? What kind?”

“For PTSD. It’s... not a treatment center, I guess, just a mental health clinic that caters to people suffering from post-traumatic stress. I... I’ve been going there a few times a week. I was there last night, and I was there Sunday night. They had a birthday party for one of the other people in my group.”

Slade blinked. “Seriously? Can you verify that?”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, you can call Roger. He’s my battle buddy. We’re supposed to support our recovery together. You know, call each other if things get real bad.”

“Why the hell didn’t you just tell us that? Why make up some shit about being at work?”

Jack shifted. “I didn’t want to tell you that I was seeing a psychologist.”

Faith couldn’t help but feel a bit of sympathy. She wasn’t a big fan of psychologists either, considering that her favorite one turned out to be a serial killer.

“I get that,” she said, “but would you rather we believe you were a murderer?”

“I don’t know!” Jack cried. “I just... I was mad. And scared. And... it’s just not fair. Like... where were you guys when Shooter was killed? I kept calling and calling and asking you to find justice for him, but... I guess I just didn’t trust you. I thought you’d already decided I was a murderer, and I don’t know. I was mad, and I figured, you know what, if I have to go to jail even though I didn’t get to be the one to kill her, so be it.”

“Jesus Christ,” Slade muttered. “What’s Roger’s number?”

Before Jack could give Slade the number, the door opened, and a uniform said, “Detective? We...” He glanced at Jack. “Can I speak to you two for a moment?”

Slade frowned. “Is it important? I’m with a suspect right now.”

“Um... he might not be a suspect anymore.”

Faith’s heart sank. She had a feeling she knew what the uniform was going to say. Slade sighed heavily. “Damn it. All right, just hit us with it.”

“We found another body, sir.”

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The singer on the radio crooned softly, asking God to send him an angel. The Angel in the room floated to the corner and disposed of the used syringe in a bin marked MEDICAL WASTE. There was no risk of death from the trace amount of pentobarbital left on the needle, but bloodborne diseases were always a risk, and even a simple infection could become very dangerous if one was unlucky.

Ralphie had been unlucky. The poor boy should have had another three years or more, but that doctor took him away from the Angel too early. Now he was a real angel, his spirit happily floating around in Heaven. Because, of course, all dogs went to Heaven.

How could they not? They were such pure creatures. They existed for no other reason than to love and be loved by men.

The Angel's brow furrowed. Someone else had said that. Was that Shakespeare? It sounded like Shakespeare.

The Angel hummed a soft tune and caressed Ralphie's picture in the locket. There were many other pictures of Ralphie around the apartment, along with all of his favorite things from life. His water and food bowls still stood on the kitchen floor to the left of the refrigerator. His leash still hung on the handle of the coat closet. His favorite toy—a bone-shaped rope toy that was bright green once but now dull and faded—sat on the Angel's desk.

“Never understood that,” the Angel muttered. “Why he liked that rope toy instead of a chew toy or something.”

The answer became clear almost immediately. Chew toys were popular with dogs because they mimicked the pained squeals of prey. Ralphie wouldn't like that. Ralphie liked all creatures. He would never hurt anything.

"He was a good dog."

The Angel stared at his picture for a moment longer before opening the top drawer of the desk and pulling out a new syringe. The next one was smaller. She would need a smaller dose, maybe ten cc's. The Angel wasn't sure it mattered if there was too much pentobarbital, but it was very difficult to come by this drug without raising suspicion. The Angel had one hundred twenty cc's, and there was a strong chance that there would be no more after that. They was probably seven or eight more. Then the Angel might be done.

There were other ways to kill people, of course, but the Angel wasn't sure it was possible to get away with killing people in any other way. And anyway, it wouldn't send the same message.

The message was important. People needed to know. They needed to understand why.

The Angel had missed the chance to get Ralphie's killer. Dr. Rogers had done the job himself by hooking himself to a rock-climbing anchor without testing the anchor first. It had snapped, and the good doctor had fallen three hundred feet and shattered his skull on some rocks in the Badlands of New Mexico.

"The bad doctor," the Angel corrected. "The very bad doctor." The Angel's head tilted. "The very wrong doctor, in any case."

The Angel pressed the syringe into the bottle of pentobarbital and carefully measured 10 cc's. The syringe prepared, the Angel carefully packed it in its travel case and

recapped the drug.

“Careful, careful, careful, always have to be careful.”

The Angel muttered that word all the way to the bedroom but fell silent at the sight of the bulletin board. That board was important. It told the Angel who was still out there.

There were so many. Too many. It was impossible to get to all of them. The Angel would have to be content to get to as many as possible.

“Three down, maybe seven or eight more to go,” the Angel whispered. “And where do they go? Depends on the weight of their soul. Someone else said that too, but I don’t remember who. I’m a poet, and I know it, but I rarely show it.”

Once, simple wordplay like that would bring a smile to the Angel’s face. Once, Ralphie would be there to yip and smile and look at the Angel with such love. Such pure love.

“That’s all anyone needs is love,” the Angel whispered. “Just love, love, love, love, love. All you need is love. Love is all you need.”

The Angel continued to mutter on the way back to the living room. Sometimes talking helped. The Angel knew it looked insane, but it was better than the silence.

Poe. That was who it was. Not Shakespeare. It was a story where a man fell in love with a woman and said that she existed only to love and to be loved by him. Good story. The Angel read it once in high school.

The television was announcing the Angel’s most recent handiwork. Finally, they remembered to point out the crimes the dead ones had committed to earn themselves

their fate. That was good. People were getting the point.

The doorbell sounded. The Angel answered.

“Hi! Pepper’s Pizza!”

“Yes, Pizza time. It’s a pizza frenzy.”

The delivery driver laughed politely. “That’ll be seventeen dollars even.”

The Angel put a twenty-dollar bill in the driver’s hand. “And tip too. Seventeen plus three equals twenty. A Lobster. A redback. A double sawbuck.” The Angel saw the driver’s nametag and added, “A Jackson for Jackson.”

The driver’s face instantly adopted the plastic smile of someone who realized too late that they were dealing with a crazy person. “That’s it,” the driver chuckled nervously. “Um. Thank you.”

“Yes,” the Angel said. “Goodbye, Jackson.”

The driver took off, moving as fast as he could without feeling impolite. The Angel watched him go and muttered. “A Jackson for Jackson.”

The pizza was all right. That was as good as anything got for the Angel these days.

The latest one’s face showed up on the TV screen, and the Angel smiled. Almost anything.

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“Shit,” Faith swore.

“What?” Slade asked. Then he saw. “Oh, God damn it.” He parked the car. “Stay here.”

Faith had no intention of leaving the vehicle right now. In fact, she sank as low in the seat as she could and pulled her jacket up so it covered her face almost completely. The crime scene—the Happy Heaven Pet Cemetery in Westfield—was crawling with press. Faith desperately wanted to avoid having her face in the news right now. She was taking a risk helping Slade, but that didn’t mean she didn’t care about being discovered. And if she was going to be outed, she wanted it to be Slade’s department calling the Bureau, not a reporter recognizing the world’s most famous FBI agent and pointing a camera and a microphone at her.

“Hey!” Slade called as he stepped outside. “What the hell is this? This is an active crime scene. Get out of here!”

The nearest reporter called, “Detective! This is the third murder of this type in four days. What can you tell the city of—”

“No comment. And if you really need a comment, go screw yourself. Off my crime scene.”

“Sir, the people of—”

“The people of Carmel would like this killer caught. That’ll be a lot easier to do when I don’t have to deal with assholes trampling my crime scene. Move.”

The reporter, of course, didn't take no for an answer. "Can you tell us if you have any suspects?"

Slade didn't bother answering him. "Sergeant, get these dipshits off of my crime scene. Move them if you have to. I'll be more than happy to tell the judge exactly why I used force to prevent destruction of evidence."

There was a mild commotion as the unseen sergeant and his officers cleared the cemetery of press. Faith sunk lower in her seat and prayed silently that the passing newspeople didn't glance into the passenger window of Slade's cruiser. She looked behind at Turk and decided he was okay to be seen. Cops had K9s too.

The door opened. "All right."

"Shit!" Faith swore, flinching. "Damn it, Slade."

"Sorry. I was just saying it's safe to come out now."

"Right." She rubbed her forehead. "Yeah."

She got out of the cruiser and let Turk out. Unfortunately, the crime scene had indeed been trampled. The ground surrounding the body was full of footprints, and it was impossible to tell if any of them were the killers.

"Bunch of parasites," Slade muttered. "Damn it."

"Did they touch the body?"

"A part of me hopes so, Special Agent, because if I find a single fingerprint from one of those Neanderthals on my victim, I will make it my personal mission to ensure that they lose every single privilege that might allow them to work in news ever again."

He took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Sorry. I just hate reporters.”

“Can’t say I’m a huge fan either,” Faith said. She looked down at the body. “There are worse people, though.”

The victim wore scrubs instead of the business casual outfit Dr. Patel had worn. He also wore glasses. He also was a he, which was more evidence in favor of the hypothesis that it was the victims’ profession that mattered more than anything. Perhaps the only thing that mattered.

She stooped down and put on some rubber gloves. “Who called it in?”

“Security guard. Showed up, saw the body, noped out and called us. Sergeant told me over the phone that they talked to him already. I have his number if I think we want to call him later.”

“Works for me. I doubt it’s a guard anyway. It’s got to be someone who knows the victims personally.”

She pulled the victim’s wallet from his pocket and looked at the ID. “Dr. Mark Chen.”

“Let me see it,” Slade said. She handed him the wallet, and he said, “I’ll send the DL number to the station and have them get me a bio on this guy.” He pulled his phone from his pocket and took a picture of the ID. “So you think it’s someone who knows our victims?”

“I do. These killings were done to send a message.”

“What message, though? It’s not just bad vets. You said so yourself.”

“No, not just bad ones. I don’t know what the message is yet. It might have something to do with punishment. It might even be a way to show forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness?”

“Or absolution.” She cocked her head. “Hmm. I have a project for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. I want you to figure out what the connection between all of these victims is.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You think the victims knew each other?”

“Maybe. Maybe they just happened to be in the same place at the same time. Maybe they all just happened to have our killer in their extended social circle.”

“So they might not know each other, but the killer would have to know all of them.”

“Yes. There are dozens of veterinary doctors in the Indianapolis area, maybe hundreds. This killer targeted three specific ones in three different places around Carmel and Westfield. I would bet my career that he has a reason for picking each of them.”

Actually, she was betting her career.

“What are you going to do?” Slade asked.

“I’m going to figure out what this crime scene means.”

He blinked. “Is that not what we’re doing?”

"I mean, I'm going to figure out what these rituals all mean: the stone circle, the sunflowers, the honey, the wine. There's a reason for all of them."

"Ah. All right. So we're splitting up?"

"Yes. This killer's moving very fast, and now that the media's on the trail, there's a strong chance that it's going to be harder for us to work without being harassed and interrupted. We don't have any suspects right now, but we have multiple avenues to follow to look for a new lead. I think we're better served turning over every rock until we find that lead."

"Sounds good to me. I'll give you a ride back to the station."

She smiled drily. "Well, since I don't have my car, I kind of need you to give me a ride."

"I can do without the attitude, thank you," he quipped. "Unless you want to walk home."

She grinned. "You remind me of my partner."

"He sounds like a very handsome and intelligent man."

"He is. Sometimes."

The brief moment of levity faded by the time the three of them were in the car on their way back to the station. The killer was maintaining his breakneck pace, and with the media wolves sniffing the air, there was a danger that Faith could be discovered and forced to leave the case in the hands of Slade and his overwhelmed team at Carmel P.D.

Or the Indianapolis Field Office .

That thought brought Faith up short. The Indianapolis Field Office would probably be assigned to this case anyway. Three kills in four days definitely fit the criteria for stepping in and taking over. If one of their agents recognized Faith, then her goose was double-cooked.

All the more reason for them to work fast.

Faith sipped her coffee and scanned the article on Celtic burial rituals. Turk was napping next to her bed. Considering the hour, Faith should be sleeping too, but she couldn't sleep until she had answers.

The killer had chosen very specific items to bury his victims in. Well, not bury but lay to rest. The circle of stones, the jars of honey and wine, and the sunflowers over the eyes were all well thought out, and each element was present with each victim.

The honey and wine was the Celtic component. Several Celtic cultures used to lay their dead to rest with a jar of honey and a jar of wine. Sources seemed to differ on whether that was for the deceased soul's consumption or an offering to some angel or spirit meant to grant them a place in the afterlife.

The stones could be a Celtic ritual too, or some other culture from the British Isles. The Irish and Scottish were known to bury their dead in cairns or sometimes simple piles of stone stacked over the deceased's body. This was supposed to prevent the dead from rising and wandering the Earth.

The sunflowers were an anomaly. Many cultures were known to incorporate flowers in their funerals and burial rituals, but specifically sunflowers placed over the eyes

wasn't something that seemed to belong to any culture.

So what was the symbolism?

Faith leaned back in her chair and crossed her arm. The victims were laid to rest in the middle of a ring of stones, but they weren't covered. That could just be a time issue. The ritual was already complex enough to be time-consuming, which wasn't compatible with the idea of getting away with the murders. Or it could mean that the souls were meant to be freed rather than trapped. The honey and wine could be a traditional offering.

Or maybe it was a peace offering. An apology of sorts was made on behalf of the victims by the killer. That could explain why the victims were buried in pet cemeteries. Maybe the killer was forcing the victims to atone for their crimes and then showing the spirits of the animals that they had atoned and so their souls could be pardoned. That fit with her hypothesis that these killings were absolution.

But the sunflowers didn't make sense. Unless the killer wasn't as sophisticated as Faith thought they were and was just making up some reason for the stones, honey and wine too. They might just be using sunflowers for the shock value.

Or maybe to symbolize the victims waking into a new life. The sun was an ancient symbol of life and creation, and to many cultures, the sunrise was a symbol of rebirth. Maybe the victims were slain to leave their old life behind, then atonement was made on their behalf so they could be reborn into a new one in harmony with all living things.

Then why kill Dr. Summers? Faith had looked her up, and there really was no hint of wrongdoing that she could find.

She sighed and rubbed her eyes. She was grabbing at straws here. The "aha" she

hoped to find wasn't here. Not yet. She needed to know who knew all of these victims before she could determine the reason for Dr. Summers' death.

"So to solve the case, I need to solve the case," she said drily.

Turk lifted one ear at the sound of Faith's voice. "Sorry, boy. Go back to sleep. Mommy's just tired."

She was tired. And she wasn't going to get any more work done tonight. She sighed and got to her feet.

As she showered, she wondered what kind of killer might feel an urge to atone for a victim's crime rather than punish them for it. Maybe she was completely off base, and this was a punishment, but she had a hunch that there was a component of forgiveness to it. Of absolution.

And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

This killer had done a little more than amputate the vets' scalpel hands, but the sentiment could be the same.

"He's not trying to punish them," Faith whispered. "He's trying to save them."

She pulled that thread for a little while, but the answer continued to elude her. She'd have to call it quits and try again after she'd gotten some rest.

But she was close. She was heading in the right direction. That was a start.

She just had to hope she finished before the killer atoned for anyone else.

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“Bold? You have a gentleman caller.”

Faith stirred and checked her phone. “Shit. Okay, I’m up. I’ll be downstairs in ten minutes.”

“You’ll be downstairs in five, Marine. Jesus, six-fifty-two, and you’re still not up? You’ve gone soft, Bold.”

She rolled out of bed and rubbed sleep from her eyes. “Won’t happen again, First Sergeant.”

Outside the door, Jacob chuckled. “Relax, Bold, I’m just screwing with you. I know you were burning the midnight oil. There’s coffee on the counter. I’m heading to work, but your cop friend can stay as long as he needs to. If the killer shows up to try to get to you two, there’s heavy weaponry in my basement.”

Faith chuckled as she pulled on her pants. “I’ll keep that in mind, First Sergeant.”

She made it downstairs in four minutes, but Jacob wasn’t there to see her. Oh well. Slade would back her up.

The Detective sat at the table admiring his coffee. Turk wagged his tail and sat next to him, closing his eyes in satisfaction as Slade scratched him under his chin. "Damn. I didn't know Marines had such good coffee."

“We didn’t. That’s why we make sure to get good coffee as soon as we’re out.” She grinned and sat across from him. “I hope First Sergeant didn’t rough you up too

much.”

“I won’t lie. He intimidated the hell out of me. My old man was a Marine, and he can still kick my ass.”

“That never goes away.” She sipped her own coffee and said, “So you’re here. That means you found something, yes?”

A boyish smile lit his face. “Hell yeah, I did.”

He set his laptop on the table, opened it, then turned it to face her. She smiled slightly. “You have to unlock it first.”

He reddened slightly. “Oh. Right.”

“Nice swim trunks, though. Orcas?”

He reddened further. “Right whales. Grandpa was a fisherman in the North Atlantic. Used to see them all the time.”

“Wow. Grandpa was a fisherman, Dad was a Marine, and you’re a cop. What’s your son gonna be?”

“He wants to be a racecar driver.”

“Oh, that’s cute! Wait, you really have a son?”

“Yep. Peter. Turns seven next week.”

“And you have a shirtless picture of yourself in whale trunks instead of a picture of him as your screensaver?”

“Can we get past the damned trunks? Don’t you have a boyfriend?”

“Did I say I was admiring the picture?”

Slade rolled his eyes. “All right. Ha ha ha. Forget the screensaver.”

He turned it around and showed Faith a list of names. Faith immediately recognized Dr. Rachel Summers, Dr. Lisa Patel, and Dr. Mark Chen.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a guest list for the Great Lakes Veterinary Conference last year. All three of our victims were on the list.”

Faith grinned. “This is awesome, Slade!”

“You know what’s even more awesome?”

“What?”

He reached around the screen and tapped the tab key. The list became much smaller. It now contained only four names: the three victims and a Dr. Sarah Foster. Foster’s name was struck through with a note to the right that said DECLINED.

“Ooh,” Faith said. “What am I looking at here?”

“This is a list of members of the conference’s panel on vaccinations. You’ll notice that our three victims remained on the panel. You’ll also notice that Dr. Sarah Foster did not remain on the panel.”

“I do indeed notice that. She declined to participate?”

“That’s the official story, but when I called the conference organizers, they gave me another story.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, it took a little digging, but it turns out that Dr. Foster was caught engaging in ‘unethical behavior’ and was asked to leave the panel.”

“What sort of unethical behavior?”

“They didn’t say. They claim to not have records. I can push on that if I need to, but I let it go for the moment because they volunteered a piece of information that I think is more valuable.”

“What’s that?”

“Guess who asked Dr. Foster to resign from the panel?”

Faith’s grin widened. “Would it happen to have been our victims?”

“Just one of them. Dr. Mark Chen. I did a little digging, though, and learned that Dr. Chen was a business partner of Rachel Summers at the time.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do. Dr. Patel’s the odd woman out, but she was part of the panel, so it’s not much of a stretch to believe that Foster just had it in for everyone on the panel.”

“That is very intriguing, Detective. Do we perhaps have contact information for Dr. Foster?”

Slade frowned in mock offense. “Come on, Special Agent. This isn’t my first day on the job. I have her home address, her work address, and the address of the shelter she volunteers at. I took the liberty of calling her work and learning that she is out of the office on Thursdays. I’ll bet money she’s at the shelter today.”

"Go ahead and bet," Faith said, downing the rest of her coffee. "But send officers to her house just in case we're wrong. Good work, Detective."

Slade puffed his chest out like a kid who won a gold medal at a science fair. “Thank you, Special Agent.”

“Come on, Turk,” Faith said. “We have another lead.”

Turk barked enthusiastically and wagged his tail. Faith gave him a quick scratch behind the ears, then led him and Slade out of the house.

They hadn’t moved fast enough to save Dr. Chen, but if all went well today, they could at least deliver justice for the three victims.

The Marion County Animal Shelter was located south of the city. That meant a long, slow ride through downtown traffic. Slade led them on a roundabout path to avoid the worst of the traffic, leveraging his lifetime of experience driving through the city to determine the quickest route to the shelter, but it was still taking forever.

Faith did breathing exercises to keep herself calm, but she couldn’t stifle her irrational fear that Dr. Foster would somehow discover that the police were after her, and run before they could reach her. Turk picked up on her anxiety and laid his head on the center console of Slade’s cruiser so Faith could stroke his fur while they drove.

Slade picked up on her anxiety, too. "You want to call the shelter and let them know that we need to come in to talk to Dr. Foster?"

Faith thought a moment, then shook her head. "No. I don't know what her relationship is with the others there, but I don't want to risk someone telling her that we're on our way so she can run."

"Good point. Well, we're ten minutes out, so why don't you call anyway just to make sure she's still there? Tell them your K9 needs an emergency exam, and they're the closest place with a doctor on staff."

"Not a bad idea," Faith said. She dialed the shelter, and when the receptionist answered, she adopted a concerned tone. "Hello, this is, uh, Officer Bold with the Indianapolis Police Department. Listen, I have an emergency. My K9 cut his neck on some barbed wire. He's bleeding badly, and his breathing is starting to get labored."

"Oh my God. Umm... do you need directions to the hospital?"

"I'm only a few minutes from you guys. I know that you guys have a vet who visits on Thursdays because my cousin got a dog from you. Is she there if we come in really quickly? I just don't have the tools to stop the bleeding."

"Oh, um... Yeah, I'll let Dr. Foster know you're on your way in."

Faith pumped her fist. "Okay. Thank you."

She hung up, and Slade said, "Damn. You laid that on really thick."

"Hey, this was your idea."

"I was thinking a limp or something, not bleeding out. Damn."

“Well, it worked. Unless you want to chase another suspect through the forest.”

“I mean, the shelter’s in the city, so...”

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. Next time, you can call the shelter."

“All right, don’t get all pissy with me.”

She gave him a sideways glance. “You related to a man named Michael Prince by any chance?”

“We’ve been through this. Unrelated but an admirer. He sounds handsome and intelligent.”

She chuckled. “Come to think of it, we have been through this. He’s also very annoying.”

“You have to be nice to me. I gave us this lead.”

“All right, fair enough,” she allowed. “But if it doesn’t pan out, I’m going back to being mean.”

“Works for me.”

They reached the shelter a few minutes later. Turk’s tail wagged in anticipation of the hunt. Faith patted his shoulder. “Probably no chase this time, boy.” At least, she very much hoped so.

The shelter was beautiful from the outside. The paint looked fresh, and the building and lot looked clean. The landscaping was well-manicured, and the sign showed a beautiful Dalmatian puppy looking with big brown eyes at a smiling woman in

veterinary scrubs. Text below the sign proudly announced “Healthy, Happy and looking for a home!”

Inside, the building was just as well-maintained. The receptionist sat behind an oak-paneled desk, and the floor was nicely tiled. Not quite stone but far better than the paper laminate found in most businesses of this sort. Faith almost wished she could be here for a purpose other than arresting a suspected killer.

The receptionist’s eyes widened when she saw them walk in. “Oh, you’re the police officer with the K9.” She frowned. “But he looks fine. And you’re wearing an FBI uniform.”

“Yes,” Faith admitted. “I really do need to see Dr. Foster, though. We’re conducting an investigation.”

The receptionist blinked. “Um... I mean... do you have a warrant or anything?”

“We have a lot of probable cause,” Slade replied. “You can make things difficult for us, but that’s only going to delay our investigation, not change the outcome. And it could contribute to a very bad person getting away with very bad things.”

The receptionist bit her lip and looked between the three of them. Her eyes rested on Turk, and the K9s professional demeanor finally swayed her. “Dr. Foster is waiting in her exam room, but I can’t promise that she’ll talk to you.”

"That's fine," Faith replied. "Let us worry about her. Where's her exam room?"

“It’s at the end of the hallway, past the cages. Your dog... he’s okay with other animals, right? We have some animals who were rescued from abusive households, and they can be unpredictable sometimes.”

“He’s fine,” Faith assured her. “He’s been through worse than a few barking dogs.”

“Okay. Shit, um... Good luck, I guess?”

The three of them walked through the door and started toward the exam room. As the receptionist had warned, several dogs got to their feet and backed to the rear of their cages, barking and snarling, their tails tucked in fear. Turk gave them compassionate looks but otherwise didn’t react.

A few other workers gasped when they saw the officers. One of them dropped a tray of dog food and apologized profusely as she tried to move the food out of their way.

“That’s all right,” Faith told her. “Sorry to intrude. We should be out of your hair soon.”

The door to the exam room opened, and a petite woman with severe features and jet-black hair pulled back in a tight ponytail poked her head out. “What the hell is going...” Her eyes flew open when she saw the investigators approaching. “Oh, shit!”

She ducked back into the room and closed the door. Faith heard a click as the latch closed. She drew her weapon, and Slade followed suit while Turk rushed to the door and barked firmly.

Through the window in the door, Faith could see Foster taking pill bottles out of her purse and throwing them in desk drawers. “I can see you,” Faith told her. “Open this door now, or we’re coming in.”

Foster glanced nervously back at the door, but didn’t answer. “Dr. Sarah Foster, I see you removing evidence from your purse and attempting to hide it. We will search this room, and we will find that evidence. You’re only earning yourself more charges. Do you open this door, or do we come in?”

Foster tossed a final bottle into a drawer and called, "I'm opening the door! I'm coming quietly! Please don't hurt me!"

She rushed to the door, and when she opened it, she tried to push past the two of them. Slade caught her and quickly handcuffed her.

"Turk, go find her drugs," Faith said.

"No!" Foster shrieked.

She aimed a kick at Turk, and Slade pulled her away and pushed her against the wall. "That's assault on a law enforcement officer!" he shouted. "You want more charges?"

"Okay," Foster said. "Damn it! Fine! You got me. Can we please have this conversation somewhere else, though?"

"We will," Faith replied. "But first, we're going to gather all of the evidence."

Foster slumped in Slade's arm. Tears welled in her eyes. "Damn it," she muttered. "This isn't fair."

Faith scoffed. Some people were so selfish. Three people dead, and it was unfair that she'd been caught?

Well, she'd get what was coming to her. "Call a unit to take her to the jail," Faith told Slade. "We'll get what we need here. Then we'll see what she has to say."

Foster sniffled and pouted as Slade led her outside. Faith walked to Turk and retrieved the bottles Foster tried to hide. She saw one that said PENTOBARBITAL, and her lips thinned.

There was no more doubt about it. They had their killer.

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Dr. Foster shook like a leaf as Faith and Slade took their seats opposite her in the interrogation room. Turk sat calmly to her left, watching her closely. After Faith walked out of the exam room with the pills Foster had tried to hide, Foster had lost all of her fight and gone quietly with the officers Slade called to take her. Now she sat ready to answer for her crimes.

“Okay, Dr. Foster,” Faith said. “Let’s get straight to the point. We suspect you of the murder of Dr. Rachel—”

Foster’s eyes flew open at the word murder. “Murder? You’re kidding me!”

“No, ma’am.”

“But...” She looked at Slade. “You said it was for assault on a law enforcement officer and tampering with evidence!”

“Those charges too,” Slade agreed. “You didn’t even give us a chance to talk before committing those crimes, but we’re going to talk now.”

“But I didn’t kill anyone!”

“As I said,” Faith continued. “You’re suspected of the murder of—”

“I didn’t kill anyone !”

“You’ll get your chance to talk, Dr. Foster,” Faith replied.

“But...” Foster slumped backwards. “Shit.”

“As I said,” Faith repeated. “You’re suspected of the murders of Dr. Rachel Summers, Dr. Lisa Patel and Dr. Mark Chen.”

Foster flinched. Slade lifted an eyebrow. “You recognize those names?”

She shook her head rapidly.

“Let’s try again,” Slade said. “Only this time, pretend I already know the answer to that question, and I’m just trying to figure out how honest you’re going to be with me.”

Foster released a sound that reminded Faith of Turk whining. “This is fucking bullshit.”

“We get it,” Faith said sternly. “This is unfair. This is wrong. You’re innocent, and you’re suffering for no reason. Now answer our questions.”

“I...” Foster tapped her foot anxiously on the ground. “I know them, but I didn’t kill them.”

“How do you know them?”

Foster rolled her eyes. “We were supposed to be on a panel together last year at the Great Lakes Veterinary Conference. I ended up pulling out of the panel.”

“You pulled out, or you were asked to leave?”

“I pulled out voluntarily. You can check the official records.”

“We have,” Slade replied. “We’ve also dug a little deeper than the official records. You want to tell us about the unethical conduct you engaged in that raised concerns with the other panelists?”

Foster’s lips thinned. “I didn’t engage in any unethical conduct.”

“Really? Because according to some of the organizers, the panelists caught you behaving unethically and asked for you to be removed from the panel.”

“Well, I don’t know what they said. I know that I was asked to leave, and I did.”

Faith leaned back and crossed her arms. “So now we’ve gone from leaving voluntarily to being asked to leave.”

“Yes, I was asked to leave, and I left voluntarily.”

“And you don’t know about any unethical conduct?”

“No.”

“So you didn’t know that they accused you of stealing drugs and trying to resell them during the conference?”

Foster swallowed. “No. The event organizers just told me I could either leave, or they could make my life very hard.”

Faith and Slade shared a look. “Did it upset you at all to be accused of unethical behavior by your colleagues?” Faith asked.

Foster scoffed. “No, not at all. I loved it.”

Faith smiled slightly. “Okay, fair enough. That was a weak question.”

“Here’s a stronger one,” Slade said. “How did you feel when your colleagues requested that you be removed from the panel?”

“How is that a stronger question? I was pissed. Just like I’m pissed when some moron in a Civic who thinks he has a sports car cuts me off on the way to work. But I don’t carry a gun and shoot everyone who cuts me off.”

“But you do carry Pentobarbital,” Faith pointed out.

Foster paled. “I’m a veterinary doctor. I often carry drugs with me.”

“Then why hide the evidence?” Faith asked. “Why run into the exam room in a panic and try to throw the pills into drawers? Why not just explain to us that’s why you had the drugs?”

“Because I knew you guys were going to assume the worst. I could see that your dog was fine— nice trick, by the way, to get me to stay; super cool of you—and I saw your FBI uniform, and I knew that you were after me, so I didn’t want anything that could make you think I was a criminal.”

“Why did you know we were out to get you?”

“Because you’re always out to get me! That’s what you cops do. You go after innocent people.”

Faith leaned forward and held Foster’s gaze. The vet paled a little and lowered her eyes. “Do you really believe that?” Faith said.

Foster swallowed. “Yes.”

“Your mouth says yes,” Slade replied, “but your body language says, that you’re hiding something and trying to play stupid hoping that we buy it.”

Foster’s eyes shifted to the left. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

"Hmm. So why the pentobarbital? And the other drugs, what were they, Detective?"

“Embutramide, potassium chloride and magnesium sulfate.”

“Wow,” Faith said drily. “That’s a lot of big names. Dr. Foster, what do all those drugs do?”

Foster’s eye twitched. “They’re anti-seizure medications.”

“Ah. Anti-seizure medications. What else are they used for?”

Foster swallowed. “I use them as anti-seizure medications.”

“Yeah, we’re done with the lying,” Slade said. “Let me be very clear. I have three dead victims, all of whom were injected with lethal amounts of pentobarbital. Pentobarbital is used to euthanize pets. Fun fact: so are all the other drugs you had in copious amounts. I mean copious amounts.”

“It’s also used as an anti-seizure medication.”

“It’s also used to execute people in certain states.”

Foster’s eyes snapped open. “W—what?”

“You heard me. Pentobarbital is used by some states to execute convicts on death row. So is potassium chloride.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“You didn’t know that those drugs were lethal to humans at the right dosage?” Faith challenged.

“Oh, come on!” Foster exclaimed. “ Tylenol is lethal to humans at the right dosage. You can’t tell me that you actually suspect me of murder because I happened to have drugs that could kill people. Everyone who has a medicine cabinet has drugs that can kill people.”

“Not many people have drugs specifically designed to kill people in large quantities in their handbags,” Faith replied. “Not many people have the same drugs that killed three people who got her removed from a panel and jeopardized her career and carry them around within hours of those multiple murders.”

“I...” Foster was shaking again. “Please. I didn’t kill anyone, okay?”

Faith and Slade looked at Foster for a long moment. Faith broke the silence. “Why did you have the drugs, Dr. Foster?”

Foster took a deep breath. “I was transporting them to the animal shelter. They were running low.”

“Nope. No reason to hide them if that’s all you were doing.”

Foster whimpered again. “God... this isn’t fair.”

“Three people are dead,” Slade snapped. “That’s a little more unfair, don’t you think.”

“Jesus Christ, God spare me from fucking goody two-shoes pricks.”

The two investigators blinked in shock at the sudden outburst. Foster sighed in exasperation and said, “I took the drugs, okay? I... Do I need a lawyer?”

“Do you?” Faith asked.

“For... God damn it!” She leaned back as far as the shackled would allow and shook her head. “I took the drugs.”

“Why?”

“I sell them.”

Faith lifted an eyebrow. “You sell them?”

“Yes. Pentobarbital isn’t made in capsule form for human consumption anymore, but it’s manufactured in small dosages for pets who have seizures. People take the pills recreationally.”

“How difficult is it to extract a lethal dose from those pills?” Slade asked.

Foster frowned. “What?”

“I feel like that was a simple question.”

“Probably very easy, but who the hell would want to do that?”

“A murderer.”

Foster paled. Slade held her gaze for a moment, then asked, “And the other drugs? Are those taken recreationally?”

“Magnesium sulfate is. It’s the main ingredient in bath salts.”

Slade grimaced. “Lovely.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Foster said. “People are going to do drugs whether I profit from them or not. There are far worse people out there than me.”

Faith leaned forward. Foster paled and leaned away. “Fuck you ,” Faith said quietly. “Three people are dead. We think you killed them. You’re doing a very bad job of convincing us that you didn’t.”

“But I didn’t ,” Foster insisted, her voice barely a whisper. “I swear to God! I just took the drugs. I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Hmm. I’ll make it really easy for you to convince me. Sound good?”

Foster perked up. “Yes! Yes, what do you need me to tell you?”

“Where were you last night for starters? Then how about the night before? And just for fun, where were you two nights before that?”

Foster slumped again. “I can’t tell you that.”

“You sure?” Faith asked. “Because the next step is that we formally charge you for multiple aggravated murders. Some other charges too, but those are the big ones. When that happens, your name and face get blasted on the news.”

Foster whined once more. “The news ?”

“Yep. Then you go to trial, and reporters write stories about you and talk all about your little drug dealing problem. Now, look, if you killed the three of them, now is

the time to get a lawyer and grasp at any straw you can to keep yourself out of prison. If you didn't, then now is the time to convince us of this, because we're very convinced that you did."

Foster sighed. "Okay. I was doing community service."

If Faith were to list the top hundred answers she expected from Foster, that one wouldn't have made the cut. "What?"

"I was caught with drugs before. Two counts of misdemeanor possession. They only found the yellow jackets—that's the pentobarbital. My lawyer managed to keep me out of prison and keep me from losing my license, but I was given a year of probation instead. As part of my probation, I was given two hundred hours of community service. It's damned hard to find time to do that when I work full-time and volunteer, so I've been working nights cleaning up streets in the city. I have three weeks left to complete twelve hours, and then I'm done. You can look up my record and confirm that."

Faith's confidence began to dissipate. "Can your probation officer confirm that you were at community service?"

"Well, we're supervised by PD officers, but if my probation officer finds out I was caught with drugs again, I'll fail my probation and have to go to jail. I'll lose my license, and my life will be ruined."

"And that's why you didn't want to tell us," Slade said.

"That's why. Please—"

"Call the supervisor for those shifts and confirm that Foster was there," Faith told Slade. "You can look up the number. I don't feel like arguing with Dr. Foster

anymore.”

“No! Please!”

“Enough. Three people are dead, and you’re whining because you might get caught dealing drugs? I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

Slade dialed the number while Foster buried her face in her hands and wept. Faith took deep breaths to stay calm. She was angrier at the situation than at Foster. Foster was a piece of work, no doubt, but what really angered Faith was the likelihood that their lead had taken them to another dead end.

Slade confirmed that outcome a moment later. “Damn it. All right, thank you, Sergeant.” He hung up and looked at Faith. “Sergeant York was the supervisor. He confirmed that Dr. Foster was present for her court-ordered community service each of the past five nights.”

Faith sighed. “All right.” She stood. “Okay, Dr. Foster. That’s it for us. Indianapolis P.D. is going to come talk to you about the drug charges.”

Foster’s head snapped up. “What? You’re still charging me?”

“I’m not, but Indianapolis sure is.”

“But... I helped you! I told you the truth!”

“If I were you,” Faith replied, “I’d start preparing for a career change.”

Foster’s complaints echoed as the three investigators left the room. “Oh, damn it! This isn’t fair !”

No, Faith agreed. It's not. It's not fair at all.

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Michael hated lying. He didn't mind the occasional fib every now and then when interrogating a suspect, but he hated lying to people he cared about, and he hated lying to his superiors.

He hadn't really told an untruth, to be fair. He just hadn't shared the entire truth. He agreed that Faith needed to be kept off of the Messenger case. For the time being, at least. Eventually, she would have to take that case because there was no one as qualified as the two of them were to stop this killer. For now, though, she needed time to grieve the Boss.

What he hadn't told her was that he'd asked for a transfer to administrative duty. His superiors hadn't assigned him, they'd approved his temporary transfer. He told Faith it was because he needed time to grieve the Boss, and that was an untruth now that he thought about it. He'd told his superiors that he would be spending his time organizing the files at the office, and that was definitely an untruth. The Boss ran a tight ship, and there wasn't a sheet out of place among the hundreds of thousands of them present at the Philadelphia Field Office Records Department.

He'd told his wife that he was taking a bit of a break from casework, and that was the lie that hurt most of all. Ellie trusted him. She believed every word he said was honest, and up until now it was.

But he'd lied to her.

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. A soft hand caressed his shoulder. "Hey. Everything okay?"

He looked at his wife. She loved him so much. She was so good to him despite all of the stress he put her through. He wanted so badly to tell her the real reason for his behavior. In fact, he almost did.

Before the words came out, though, he thought of the possible consequences of bringing Ellie into this. He was already putting himself at risk. He couldn't bear the thought of putting Ellie at risk.

So, he just smiled and said, "Yeah, Ellie, it's great. I'm just a little tired, is all."

Ellie returned a smile of her own, the gently exasperated one that he had gotten used to seeing every time he came home exhausted from a case. "That's because you don't sleep. You're going to drive yourself into an early grave."

Almost certainly. "I'll turn in early tonight. I just have a few more things I need to wrap up."

"You can't wrap them up at the office tomorrow?" She leaned down and let her arms slide down his chest. "Maybe?"

She kissed him softly behind his ear, and a thrill ran down his spine. "You have no idea how much I wish I could."

She sighed and stood. His shoulders slumped a little when she pulled her hands away. "Even when your friend is killed, you can't take real time off?"

"Sorry, Ellie."

"They gave Faith time off. Why not you?"

"I'm the senior partner. I have to make sure the paperwork is in order."

“Really? It sure seems like Faith is the senior partner. She gets all of the special privileges and gets handled with kid gloves. People act like you’re just her assistant. Watson to her Holmes.”

“Hey, Watson was a lot more important than people give him credit for. Without Watson, there would be no Holmes.”

“Exactly my point,” she replied, ignoring his joke. “You let them ride roughshod all over you, and it pisses me off.”

He felt a flash of irritation but pushed it away. Now was not the time to let his ego get in the way. “They’re not riding roughshod on me, Ellie. They just expect me to be able to keep things organized. Faith and I both have our strengths. This is mine.”

“So because you’re a better agent, she gets time off?”

Michael shifted uncomfortably. Ellie tolerated Faith on a good day, but it was clear that she resented her. Michael suspected that his brief romance with Faith years ago had more to do with it than anything else, but he didn’t want to get caught up in that argument right now. “Faith took the Boss’s loss harder than I did. He was a friend to both of us, but he was a mentor to her.”

“You told me he was a mentor to you too.”

"Ellie, what do you want me to do?" he snapped. "I'm just filing paperwork, okay? I'm not out in the field fighting criminals or staring at creatively rearranged corpses. So, as far as I'm concerned, this is a vacation."

Ellie’s lips thinned, and Michael knew he’d just earned himself the silent treatment for the rest of the day. He sighed and rubbed his temples. “Look, I’m sorry. I’ll get this done really quickly, and then we can go out for dinner tonight. Sound good?”

“Sure,” she said curtly. “Whatever you want.”

She spun on her heel and stalked out of the room. Michael leaned over his desk and groaned.

God, I hate this.

He hated it, but it was necessary. Faith was right about one thing. The Messenger wasn't going to work on the FBI's time. The longer she went “ignoring” him, the more people were going to die.

She was right about another thing too. He and Ellie were no doubt high on the list of potential next victims. He wasn't just doing this for Faith. He was doing it for Ellie. One serial killer had already nearly killed Ellie. He wouldn't give another one a chance.

And that was the big lie, the one that would make both Faith and Ellie furious with him. The one that would make his new Boss furious with him and possibly endanger his FBI career.

Michael was going to work the Messenger case.

No one knew he was going to work the case, and no one would know. That was because Michael wasn't going to look through the case files Desrouleaux and Chavez had compiled and try to go from there.

No, Michael was going to talk to the one person who might possibly know something about the Messenger, the one person who could help him understand the mind of a violent psychopath obsessed with Faith Bold.

Michael was going to talk to Franklin West.

He grabbed his cell phone and stepped onto their balcony, then called the jail. After a few minutes with various receptionists and secretaries, he finally got a hold of the warden.

“Yes, hello?”

“Mr. Santana, this is Special Agent Michael Prince with the FBI’s Philadelphia Field Office.”

“Yes, Michael! Hello. What can I do for you?”

“I’m going to call in that favor.”

A few years ago, Michael had helped Santana escape a jam. Santana’s friends had looped him into a Ponzi scheme and planned to blame everything on him. With Michael’s help, they were able to prove that Santana was an unwitting accomplice. He kept his career, and the perpetrators were now in year three of a seven-year sentence for racketeering. After his acquittal, Santana had told Michael to call him anytime he needed anything.

The brief pause that followed Michael’s statement told him that Santana never expected Michael to collect. Too bad, buddy.

“Sure,” Santana said finally. “Yes! Of course. What can I do for you?”

“I need to talk to Franklin West.”

The pause that followed that announcement was far longer. After well over a minute, Michael said, “Jorge? You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here, it’s just... geez, Michael.”

“I know. It’s a big one.”

"It's a little more than a big one, dude. This is... I mean, he's on trial right now. His lawyers are watching every single move we make like a hawk. If it gets out that we're letting FBI agents talk to him, then we could destroy the prosecution's case."

“No one needs to know. The questions I need to ask him have nothing to do with his case, anyway.”

“Yes, but you have to do with his case. You’re married to his ex-wife, and your partner is the agent who exposed him.”

“I know it’s a big ask, Jorge,” Michael said, “but I really need to talk to him. I’m not kidding when I say people’s lives depend on it.”

Santana sighed. “Jesus. What... Hmm...” He paused again, then said. “Okay. I can probably get you thirty minutes with him on Saturday. He’s allowed an hour of rec time. It just so happens that there’s going to be a temporary shutdown of the security cameras for system maintenance that day too. I can shut off the cameras for those thirty minutes at the start of his hour. That’s incredibly dangerous, so I’m going to have to have guards close enough to kill him if he tries to move. If that happens, then it’s a lot of bad for both of us. I’m going to do this for you, but we are definitely even.”

“Definitely. One hundred percent. I really appreciate it, Jorge.”

“Don’t mention it. Seriously. Not to me or to anyone. Ever.”

“Mention what?”

“Yeah, exactly.” He sighed again. “One-forty-five on Saturday. Don’t be late.”

“I won’t be. Thank you.”

“Stop thanking me.”

He hung up, and Michael released a sigh he didn’t realize he’d been holding. He walked inside, tossed his phone onto the desk and collapsed onto the bed. Part of him was excited to be breaking the rules. Another part of him was certain that this was going to ruin him.

But he had to try. The people he loved were in danger, and the Bureau was mishandling things very badly. He needed to do something to get ahead of the Messenger before he came home to find Ellie’s head split open with a new message written for Faith.

The door to the bedroom opened, and Michael heard Ellie sigh. A moment later, she climbed into bed with him and help him close. “I’m sorry, honey. I’m upset that we don’t have as much time to spend together as I wanted, and I let that make me mad, but that’s not fair to you. I know you’re trying hard, and I really appreciate it. Thank you.”

Michael hated lying to Ellie, but he had no choice right now. The alternative was much worse. “It’s all right. When things settle down, we’ll take a vacation together, okay? We’ll do that Alaska cruise you wanted.”

“Sounds wonderful,” she said. She draped her leg over his thighs and nuzzled his ear. “Right now, though, all I want is you.”

He managed to appear enthusiastic, but his mind was nowhere near his wife, and when they finished making love, he found that their intimacy had only increased his guilt.

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Faith watched the Indianapolis police cruiser speed away from the Carmel Police headquarters and sighed. “There goes the best lead we’ve had so far.”

Turk pressed against her leg, but even his beautiful brown eyes weren’t enough to cheer her up right now. She sighed and walked back to the break room where Slade waited. He handed her a coffee when he entered. “Made some already. Figured you’d need it. Hell, I need it.”

“Thank you.” She sipped the rich brew and shook her head. “So what now?”

He took a deep breath. “Well, I’m having some junior detectives follow up on the other attendees to see if maybe it was someone on the outside of the panel. Foster’s refusing to divulge the names of her customers, but IPD is going to work on her and get us that information as soon as they can. In the meantime—”

The door to the break room burst open, and Faith flinched and gasped.

ASAC Tabitha Gardner glared at her, her hands clenched into fists. “Bold? What the hell are you doing here?”

Faith blinked. “I... um...”

Slade tried to come to her rescue. “Faith and I were in the same criminal justice class. I heard she was in town and invited her over for a chat.”

His efforts came to naught. Tabitha didn’t even come close to buying his excuse. “A chat with a suspect, perhaps? Several suspects of several killings? Did you,

perchance, Detective Slade, accept Special Agent Bold's offer to assist in a serial killer case?"

Slade swallowed. "Faith was kind enough to offer her perspective on a case that I—"

"Yeah, I thought so. Bold, walk with me." Turk growled low in his throat, and Tabitha stared at him in amazement. "Is your K9 unit threatening me?"

"He's not threatening you, he's just upset," Faith replied. "Turk, calm down, boy."

Turk glared at Tabitha but stayed silent.

"Walk with me," Tabitha insisted. "Detective, you stay here. Your captain wants to have some words with you."

Judging by Slade's expression, he expected that his conversation would be as painful as Faith's was. Judging by the look on the police captain's face when Faith passed him in the hallway, Slade was right to be nervous.

Tabitha led them outside. She walked stiffly, her arms jerking back and forth rather than swinging, her heels clacking against the concrete. Faith had seen the Boss upset many times before, but she knew how to handle him when he was like that. Tabitha was an unknown quantity, and the little that Faith did know suggested that she would be far less forgiving than the irascible but generally lenient Monroe.

When they reached the side of the building where they could talk without being overheard, Tabitha spun around and glared at Faith. "You start, Special Agent. Tell me why you thought this was a good idea."

"Detective Slade asked me for my assistance. The Carmel Police Department is unused to these kinds of cases, and he was afraid that they wouldn't be able to stop

this killer before he struck again.”

“And you thought that you should be the one to handle it and not the Indianapolis Field Office?”

Faith didn’t have an answer to that. Well, she did, but one she knew Tabitha wouldn’t accept.

“I’m waiting for your answer, Special Agent.”

Apparently, she’d have to give an answer anyway. “Slade asked for my help.”

“Your help specifically?”

“Yes. He knows me by reputation.”

“I’m so glad you mentioned that, Special Agent,” Tabitha said with mock cheerfulness. “We’re going to come back to that. In the meantime, I want to know why you didn’t tell him to contact the Indianapolis Field Office.”

Faith’s shoulders tensed slightly. Turk started to growl at Tabitha but remembered Faith’s command to stay calm and sat instead. “I wanted to help, ASAC Gardner.”

“That’s close to the truth,” Gardner said, “but I don’t think you wanted to help. I think any help you’re providing would just be icing on the cake. I think you wanted to work, and this was your way of getting around our instruction that you lay low. I don’t think this was about the victims at all. I think it was about you.”

Faith bristled. “That’s not true, ma’am. Turk and I discovered the second body. We were the ones who called it in. I’ve seen hundreds of bodies of people who have been used as showpieces by murderers. I have a unique skillset that makes me well-suited

to hunting this specific type of killer. I'm better at it than anyone else. I don't say that to be arrogant, ma'am. I'm only stating a fact. I am the most qualified individual to assist with this case."

"And I assume you also believe you're the most qualified individual to lead the Messenger case."

Faith's shoulders tensed a little further, but she held Tabitha's gaze. "Yes, ma'am."

Tabitha nodded. "Okay, Special Agent. Here are a few things to consider. I've also seen hundreds of bodies used as showpieces by brutal murderers. So have many, many field agents and managers and even directors in the FBI. It's personal for all of us. You do have a unique skillset, and that skillset is the only reason you still work for us. You are the only agent who could get away with your continual flagrant disregard for policy and procedure and not permanently lose your position with the Bureau. That has paid enormous dividends. It's also incurred enormous costs. Right now, Special Agent, the Indianapolis Field Office is enduring a near-assault from dozens of reporters wanting to know where you are, what you're doing, and if you're going to be transferred here to protect you from the Messenger."

Faith flinched. "I wasn't aware of that."

"Of course you weren't. You can't be bothered to think about how your actions affect the Bureau or the other field agents you work with. Your job is to catch bad guys, and nothing else is important. Never mind that a lot of other bad guys are farther from being caught because the Indianapolis Field office is now trying to run interference to protect themselves from you. Never mind that the Philadelphia Field Office is without a leader once again. That doesn't matter because you have to catch your bad guy because your few victims matter more than the many victims who will suffer because you can't follow rules."

Faith took a moment before replying. Tabitha's words hurt, but the ASAC was going too far, acting like the bureaucratic problems Faith's work created led to other killers getting away with murder. And anyway, why was the FBI so concerned with secrecy? Shouldn't the Bureau want criminals to know they were being hunted?

She didn't bring up that point, but she couldn't let Tabitha's accusation stand. "I resent your implication that my desire to hunt serial killers is leading to innocent deaths, ma'am."

"Tough shit. It's true."

"Can you prove that?" Faith snapped, finally losing her cool. "Have Indianapolis send me the files for every single person who dies because the press wants to act like dicks right now. While you're at it, why don't you tell me how many people you've saved by keeping me off of the Messenger case? I'd like to see exactly how many people are suffering because I'm not allowing you to muzzle me."

"Here's what I think, ASAC. I think you're upset because I'm a headache for you. I'm a headache for you because I don't follow the Almighty Rules. I don't always follow the letter of the Almighty Rules because the spirit of the Almighty Rules is to protect people from bad guys, and the letter of the Almighty Rules sometimes gets in the way of that."

"And you know the real reason I'm not fired? I'm right. That's why. I respected SAC Monroe more than anyone in this damned Bureau, but he would have fired me at least three times that I know of. He didn't. Not because he had a soft spot for me, but because I'm right. I protect people when no one else will. I catch bad guys when following the rules would result in them staying free. Sometimes it bothers the people who have to deal with the bureaucratic headaches it creates, but to quote a wise woman, tough shit. My job is to make sure innocent people don't die. I don't give a rat's ass if that means a few hours of overtime for you or an unpleasant conversation

with Director Smythe.”

Tabitha stared coldly at her. As Faith’s anger calmed, a touch of fear replaced it. She stood by what she’d said, but maybe it wasn’t wise of her to antagonize a brand-new SAC candidate who wanted to impress the brass by showing that she wouldn’t be intimidated by the star agent.

She couldn’t apologize, though. Doing that would invalidate all of the good points she had made, and those were points the Bureau needed to hear and understand.

When Tabitha spoke again, her tone was even. "I was warned that you would be a thorn in my side, Special Agent. I was told that you are an unparalleled detective with an unequaled passion for justice. That's absolutely true. I was also told that you stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the possibility that any point of view besides your own could have merit. Unfortunately, that is also true.

“I’m going to share my point of view anyway. It costs the FBI about one hundred thousand dollars to prosecute a murder case. It costs anywhere from one to three hundred thousand dollars to investigate a murder case. In extreme cases like the West case, that number climbs well into the seven figures. Those numbers represent thousands of man-hours, a plethora of hard and soft resources, and a whole lot of the diplomacy you hate so much. We have to make deals with local law enforcement, local, state and federal prosecutors, and sometimes politicians. We have to manage interactions with the press so we can protect the integrity of our Bureau, our investigations, and our prosecutions. That diplomacy probably costs the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of dollars more for every case.

“Actions like yours make all of that hard work even harder. Especially the diplomacy part. Making those things harder means it’s harder for our field agents to do their jobs and protect innocent people. You’ve been sheltered from that fact for a long time. That was a mistake. Sheltering you has put the Bureau in a position where we are less

capable of doing our jobs all to accommodate one agent who can't be bothered to do hers when she doesn't like what she's told. That will no longer be the case.

"Yes, it's irritating. Yes, we should just be able to waltz in like cowboys, shoot the bad guys, and then ride off into the sunset. The problem is that it only happens in movies. This is real life. We don't have to like real life, but we have to live in it. We have to operate effectively in the real world, including all of the parts of it we hate. That's part of being an adult. So when I tell you that you need to grow up, I mean it very sincerely and officially as your supervisor.

"But, since I know you won't grow up, I'm just going to tell you what will happen when I find out that you've ignored everything I've just told you. I will fire you. I will terminate your employment with the FBI. And I will sleep like a baby knowing that I've lost the best detective in the Bureau because you are every bit as poor an agent as you are great a detective."

Faith was once again stunned into silence. She'd heard similar rants before, but none as pointed or as hurtful as this one. What hurt the most was that a lot of what Tabitha said was true. Faith still didn't agree that muzzling her was the right choice, but she knew that Tabitha didn't have the luxury of "riding off into the sunset" and letting someone else handle the irritating stuff.

And Faith knew that she willfully ignored the irritating stuff because she didn't want to accept the possibility that maybe, just maybe, she was doing more harm than good.

"I have to return to Philadelphia," Tabitha said. "So I won't be here to babysit you. This is your chance to prove that you're mature enough to make the tough choices, Special Agent. But I'm not holding my breath."

She didn't wait for Faith to reply. Faith stood where she was, listening to the sound of Tabitha's heels clacking on the concrete as she walked away. She thought of Michael

and Desrouleaux and Chavez and all of the other agents who were counting on her to come back. She thought of Turk and how hard she'd fought to stave off his retirement. She thought of how hard she'd fought to prevent her own dismissal several times before. If she didn't toe the line now, Tabitha would think nothing of ending her career.

Then she thought about Dr. Rachel Summers, Dr. Lisa Patel, and Dr. Mark Chen lying in rings of stones with sunflowers covering their eyes. She thought of Dr. Emma Rodriguez weeping for the loss of her friends. She thought of the Boss lying in his backyard with his head split open, his blood used to taunt Faith, to dare her to lose hope and give up.

Her choice was clear.

"All right, Turk. Let's go talk to Slade."

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Slade met Faith in the lobby. His lips were thin, and his eyes narrowed in a scowl. He grabbed her arm when she walked inside and gently turned her around. “We need to talk away from the station,” he said quietly. “We’re very unpopular here right now.”

“We can go to Jacob’s place,” Faith suggested. “He’ll be at work for a few more hours, so he won’t interrupt us.”

“I’m not worried about Jacob interrupting us,” Slade replied. “And I have a lead.”

“You have a lead?”

“Shh. I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

When they left the lobby, he took his hand off of her arm and led them to his car. He didn’t speak again until they left the parking lot.

“So that was fun.”

“Your boss rip you a new one too?” Faith asked.

“Oh yeah. He was under the impression that I had formally requested the FBI’s help and gotten permission to work with you. He was less than pleased to learn that I had just asked you for help at a crime scene.”

“I see. Sorry about that.”

“I’m not. Between you and me, I really don’t give a shit if the brass gets their feathers

ruffled. My job is to catch killers. If they want a politician, they can hire a politician.”

Faith perked up a little. “I agree. What do they want us to do? Just let people die so the right I’s are dotted and the right t’s are crossed?”

“They want to win reelections and earn promotions,” Slade agreed. “That’s all it is. They disguise it as ‘the greater good,’ but that’s bullshit. It’s just the greater looking good.”

“Exactly,” Faith said, perking up even further. The sting of Tabitha’s rebuke was fading. “I’m not going to fold my hands and curtsy just because it makes people look better.”

“Me either. Glad we’re on the same page.”

Turk barked his own agreement.

“And he makes three,” Faith said, reaching back to scratch Turk under his chin. “And you said you had a lead?”

“I do. A customer of Dr. Foster’s. Kid named Alex Winters.”

“An actual kid or just a younger adult?”

“Everyone under thirty is a kid to me,” Slade replied. “He’s twenty-five.”

“You’re over thirty?”

Slade grinned. “I’ll be forty next week.”

“Wow. You look good.”

“Thank you, but we can flirt later. This kid Alex is a lot more attractive to me right now.”

“Tell me about him.”

“He’s one of Foster’s pentobarbital customers. Most recent sale was a week ago, for thirty days’ supply of pills. That’s enough to kill our three victims. I looked through the security footage for the sites of our murders. I didn’t place him at the exact scenes of the crimes—those aren’t covered by cameras—but I confirmed that he was at the pet cemetery where Dr. Patel was murdered on the night of her death.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. Camera caught him walking right through the graveyard wearing a black hoodie and black gloves. Thankfully no ski mask, so we have a nice look at his face.”

“Wonderful! And your department doesn’t know about this?”

“Nope. They might figure it out eventually, but I’m hoping that the delay caused by transferring the case to another detective will give us time to close it. I’m sure you know that the positive press of closing a case successfully always outweighs the negative internal press of not following rules.”

Faith wasn’t sure that was the case for her any longer, but she could deal with those consequences later. “I’m in. Let’s go get him.”

“And what a coincidence. Here we are at the pet store where he works.”

Slade parked the vehicle, and the three investigators jumped out and walked inside.

Squeaks and Giggles was a small family-owned shop, and the three of them, plus the

three shocked employees and three equally shocked customers, made for a tight fit. The birds, lizards and rodents that comprised most of the store's animals didn't take well to the presence of a large predator, and the cacophony of fearful and indignant calls added to the chaos.

One of the employees—a tall, gangly young man with a shock of messy dark hair and eyes that Faith could generously call vacuous—tried to take advantage of that chaos to run through the back door. Turk caught him at the end of the hallway, jumping up and landing onto the young man with all fours and slamming him into the back door. He sank to the ground and cowered, competing with a particularly insistent cockatiel to see who could shriek the loudest in the store.

Faith and Slade walked over to him. “Okay, Turk,” Faith said.

Turk backed away but remained ready to pounce at a moment’s notice should the suspect try to flee again.

“Alex Winters?” Slade asked.

“I’m clean, man!” Alex cried. “I swear to God!”

“The anthem of dirty people everywhere,” the detective replied drily. “Come on. Let’s go have a nice talk.”

Faith hauled Alex to his feet and opened the back door. The other people in the store were too shocked to do anything but stare as the four of them left.

“Man, you guys are trippin’” Alex complained. “I’m clean, bro, I promise.”

“Doubt it,” Faith said, “but that’s not what we’re here for.”

Alex's brow furrowed. "What? You're not shaking me down?"

"Not for drugs."

She led them to a stone retaining wall at the back of the strip mall and made Alex sit on the wall.

"Okay, Alex," Slade said. "Let's make this short and sweet. You were seen on camera at Deer Ridge Pet Cemetery on the night of Dr. Lisa Patel's murder."

"Who?"

"Dr. Lisa Patel. She was killed by a pentobarbital injection and posed in a ring of stones in the cemetery."

"What? What the hell?"

"Yeah, that's what we said," Slade agreed. "Pretty messed up stuff. You want to tell us about it?"

"I didn't see anything, man. Come on, I was just walking home."

"That's a pretty long walk from here," Faith said. "What is that, eleven miles?"

"I didn't walk from here. I walked from my night job."

"Your night job?"

"Yeah. I work at a liquor store on one-thirty-first street."

"What time did you work Tuesday night?"

“I work seven to eleven every night. It’s only a two-mile walk back home if I cut through the cemetery, so I leave my car at home to save on gas.”

“You walk for forty-five minutes in the cold every night to save two dollars in gas?” Slade challenged.

“Hey, you want to pay my bills for me?” Alex retorted. “Go ahead. Otherwise, I need to save every bit I can.”

“Yeah, those fines and restitutions must be tough,” Slade replied. “How much do you owe for your theft conviction?”

“Like four k still.”

“Ouch. Looks like crime doesn’t pay.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Yeah, thanks for the lecture, dude. Super helpful.”

“Well, I’ll bet my badge you have drugs on you now, so if getting a lecture doesn’t help, how about I search you.”

Alex blanched. “Come on, man, I wasn’t doing anything.”

“What were you doing on Tuesday night?” Faith asked.

“Walking home! I told you.”

“So you don’t know anything about the murders of Dr. Rachel Summers, Dr. Lisa Patel and Dr. Mark Chen?”

“No! You can call my Boss. I was at the liquor store until eleven, then I went straight

home."

"Was there anyone at your house who can confirm that you went straight home?" Faith asked.

Alex swallowed. "No. But you have me on camera, right? You can see what time I walked through the cemetery, right?"

"We can see what time you showed up," Slade agreed, "but not how long you stayed or when you left. You would have had more than enough time to kill Dr. Patel and stage her body."

"Okay, so I happened to be there at that cemetery. What about the other two? Were they killed in the same place?"

Slade's lips thinned slightly. "No."

"And do you have evidence of me being at the other place? Or places?"

His lips thinned even further. No, but that doesn't mean you weren't there."

"Man, when do I have time to murder people? Monday and Saturday are my only days off, and I have a diversion program I have to go to on Monday and community service on Saturday. The other days, I work twelve hours. I wake up, eat breakfast, go to the pet store, eat dinner at the taco place, go to the liquor store, go home, shower, and then sleep and wake up to do it all over again. If someone beat me up and stole my car, I wouldn't have time to flip them off."

"You poor boy," Faith said sarcastically.

She was beginning to worry, though. She was excited to hear about Slade's lead at

first, but if they verified Alex's employment history, then it would be a serious challenge for him to have committed the murders. And he didn't seem to know any of the victims at all. She had a bad feeling that the two of them had grabbed at a straw that turned out to be a coincidence.

"How did you know Dr. Rachel Summer?" Faith asked, watching his face closely.

He showed no sign of recognition. Only annoyance tinged with fear and desperation. "I didn't know the bitch! Or the other two!"

"Yeah, she's not a bitch, Alex," Slade interjected. "She's a person with loved ones who was murdered and left like a damned sculpture so some whack job could get his ego stroked. So how about a little more respect?"

"Also," Faith said. "You did know her. She sold you drugs."

Alex blinked, but he kept his bravado when he replied. "Man, you dragged me out of my job, threatened to have me eaten by a dog and accused me of killing three people just because I walk home from work. Y'all are trippin'. But seriously, I didn't know them, okay? My drug dealer called herself Candy. Maybe that was one of them. I don't know. I make it a point not to be— made it a point not to be nosy about my dealers. Call my Boss. Talk to my manager here. I'm trying to get clean, bruh. Like seriously. I just work and go home and go to my community service and my diversion program. That's it. Ain't nothing worth catching a murder charge."

"You're trying to stay clean, but you were caught making a drug purchase from Dr. Foster the week before?"

Alex stiffened and looked back at the liquor store. "I ain't never murdered anybody. That's what you're here for, right? You don't care about the drugs. I didn't kill anyone. I do drugs— did drugs sometimes—but that doesn't make me a murderer."

Faith and Slade shared a look. Slade sighed. "Okay, stay here. Give Special Agent Bold your Boss's number at the liquor store. I'll go talk to your manager inside."

He turned around, but his phone began to ring before he could take a step. He pulled it from his pocket, and Faith watched his face fall. "All right," he said after a moment. "Thank you for calling me. I'll be right there."

He hung up and sighed. "That was the chief," he told Faith. "It's going to be a day or two before Rory can take over, so he needs me to handle the scene."

"The scene?" Faith asked. "What scene?"

Then Slade lifted his eyes to hers, and she knew. She lifted her hands to her head and looked up at the afternoon sky. "Shit."

"Yeah, exactly."

Faith turned to Alex. "You're still not off the hook," she said. "Where were you last night?"

"Home, man. I told you, that's all..." His eyes popped open. "Wait. No! I was at my Boss's house last night!"

"From here or the liquor store?"

"The liquor store. Yeah, she invited me over."

"To do what?"

Alex blushed a little. "I mean... you know."

Faith rolled her eyes. “All right. You’re free to go.”

Alex slumped with relief. “Thank you, man, thank you. Hey, I’m sorry I said y’all were trippin’.”

“Quit the drugs, Alex,” Faith suggested. “They’re bad for you.”

“Yeah, for sure. I’ll try, man.”

On their way back to the car, Slade asked, “You don’t want to call the boss just to make sure?”

“I’ll call her on the way to the crime scene,” Faith replied. “But I think we both know this one was a dud.”

Slade sighed. “Yeah, I know. Damn it.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Faith said. “It happens.”

Slade didn’t look comforted by that. That was perfectly fine because Faith wasn’t comforted by it either.

They got in the car without another word and left to look at the latest dead body their killer had left behind for them.

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This scene was no different from any of the others. Faith had to hand it to their killer. He was nothing if not consistent. “Are you sure I’m okay to be here?” she asked Slade.

“For now, yes. If someone says something, I might have to send you away, but I’m firmly entrenched in the philosophy of ask for forgiveness not permission, at least as it pertains to this case.”

His words were bold, but his tone was lifeless. Faith didn't blame him. All of the work they had done, all of the risks they had taken, and yet here they were staring at another dead body. Another victim was taken regardless of every effort they'd made to prevent it.

“Victim is Dr. Jessica Lee, forty-four. She is a licensed veterinarian, but she didn’t have a clinic or general practice. She wasn’t an animal surgeon either. She ran an animal hospice in Sheridan.”

Lee was a petite, attractive woman who looked far younger than her years. Faith was grateful that this killer took his victims without mutilating them. At the very least, their families could identify them without being scarred even further.

Then again, this was pretty scarring. The more Faith looked at the stoneware jars of honey and wine and the bright yellow flowers placed carefully over the victim’s eyes, the more it seemed somehow worse than if she’d been shot or bludgeoned to death. The respect the killer showed the victim was an affront, a mockery of the respect they should have been shown.

Turk carefully sniffed around the body, picking up clues that could later be used to identify their killer. The problem was that in order for Turk's clues to work, they had to have a lead. Turk couldn't find a needle in a haystack the size of the Greater Indianapolis area. That was up to Faith and Slade.

She wished Michael was here. His perspective on things always helped Faith know which direction to look. Faith might get the credit for solving most of their cases, but without Michael to bounce ideas off of, she was adrift. She needed him. No offense to Slade who was doing a damned good job for a suburban cop who'd probably never had anything more challenging than a garden variety murder of a spouse to deal with before now, but he didn't have the instincts that Michael had.

Her stomach turned. Garden variety murder? She shook her head and looked away from the body. This job was desensitizing her too much.

"Did Dr. Lee attend the veterinary panel with the other victims last year?" she asked Slade.

He shook his head. "No. I checked the list when we got here. She wasn't invited."

"Is there a reason for that?"

"None provided, but she wasn't unique. A lot of other vets weren't invited. At first glance, it looks like the vets at the panel were primarily clinicians and surgeons. I don't know much about veterinary medicine, but maybe animal hospice care is still an outlier industry. In any case, our other three victims were at the conference, so I don't know if it tells us anything that Lee wasn't."

Turk snorted and looked mournfully at Faith. He hadn't found anything new here.

"That's okay, boy," Faith said. "Mommy's not doing a very good job either."

“I don’t get what we’re missing,” Slade said. “I feel like this should be obvious. They were all vets. Three of them were female vets in their forties, too.” His eyes widened. “Do you think that might have something to do with it? Like, maybe this guy hates female vets?”

Faith shook her head. “No. Chen was male. Serial killers don’t step outside of their boxes. There’s no such thing as a ‘one-off’ kill. If he hated female vets, Chen would still be alive.”

Slade sighed. “Yeah. I guess that should have been obvious.” He rubbed his face with both hands. “God, I just feel like I’m in so far over my head.”

“That’s normal,” Faith replied. “I wish I could tell you it gets better.”

“Hey, thanks for the encouragement,” Slade said. “Makes me feel a whole lot better.”

“I’m in the same boat you are.”

He crossed his arms and shook his head, staring intently down at Lee’s body as though looking at her long enough might tell him everything he needed to know. “I just feel like we’re so close. I feel like the answer is right there if we can only reach down and grab it.”

Faith smiled slightly. “My partner and I sometimes describe cases like this as puzzles. Each crime scene and each lead gives us a few more pieces of the puzzle but always edge pieces, parts that don’t tell us what the picture is. The more pieces we get without that final piece, the more frustrating it is not to have that whole picture.”

“The more answers you get, the more questions bother you,” Slade summarized. “Yeah, my old mentor talked about that. He said you have to learn to be patient and follow the evidence, even if that means taking the scenic route to the answer and not

the direct route.” He shook his head. “It’s just hard to do that when your killer is dropping people at a rate of more than one per night. You realize he killed two people last night?”

He sighed and rubbed his face again. “What am I saying? Of course you do. Damn, I hate this.”

“Let’s focus on Lee,” Faith said. “Did she have any complaints of malpractice? Any complaints of any kind?”

“I don’t know yet. Let me look.”

He pulled his phone out and sat on a gravestone. The stone informed Faith that Brutus was the best dog ever, and that Zoey and Mikey couldn’t wait to see him in Heaven. She looked at Turk and a powerful image came to her of laying him to rest and kneeling in front of his gravestone.

Dogs had such short lifespans. Almost all pets did. They lived for a decade or two, but they left memories that lasted a lifetime. They were all the best qualities of humanity distilled into bright, perfect stars that blazed brilliantly and never truly faded.

Many of Faith’s cases involved crimes against animals or vengeance taken against those who harmed animals. She hated that. It suggested that animals could sometimes pull the worst out of people and not just the best.

Except that wasn’t true. The bitter, brutal truth was that some people were just the worst. Some people had a warped and twisted sense of love and justice. Some people didn’t have a sense of either.

But why vets? Why people who helped animals? This was the first time Faith could

recall where people who helped animals were targeted. Dr. Patel had made a mistake and harmed an animal, but she was the only one. It made sense to kill her. Well, not really, but from the perspective of a vengeful killer, it did. But the others? Why?

“No complaints,” Slade said. “She had a clean record. Her animal hospice was ranked number fourteen in the country and number two in the state of Indiana. She was divorced once, no kids, but according to records, the divorce was amicable, and the ex-husband moved to South Korea.”

“And there’s no connection at all with the other three?”

“No. She went to school in Washington State and had a practice in Wyoming until the divorce seven years ago. Moved here and as far as I can tell so far, she wasn’t affiliated with any of the major animal hospitals or medical centers.”

“What about patients? Animals that might have been seen by all of our victims at one point or another?”

“That’s going to be a project to uncover, but I’ll get my team started on it. Not like we have anything better to do.

Faith should try to encourage him and tell him that they'd find an answer eventually, but she wasn't any more confident than he was. Or rather, she was confident that they'd find an answer eventually, but not that they'd find it in time. Indianapolis could only run interference for her for so long before her location was leaked. Then, she would be a liability to Slade and not an asset. Slade's time on the case was numbered too. The other detective would be able to take over soon, and then they'd both be on the outside.

Then, God knew how long it would take them to find answers. It could be like the West case where keeping Faith away meant years before he was caught but he would

be forced to lay low. Or it could be like so many other cases where the killer kept killing, and no one managed to stop him until he got old and tired and decided to stop.

Slade sighed and stood. "Well, that's all we can learn so far. We know that the killer hates vets. That's about it. That's true, and he's a freak who likes Celtic mythology. We know that if we don't figure out an answer soon, we're both going to be put on timeout, where we'll get to sit on the sideline and watch more people die without being able to do anything about it. We know... not enough. That's what we know. Not enough."

Faith didn't reply. She didn't have anything helpful to say. Slade was right. That's what it all boiled down to. They didn't know enough.

The three of them turned the scene over to CSI. With nothing more for them to learn unless they were handed a miracle, Slade drove Faith to Jacob's house.

The sky was nearly dark when they reached her home. Another day spent learning nothing. Two more vets dead and another night approaching. Slade dropped her off with nothing more than a simple good night, but Faith was sure that he was thinking the same thing she was.

How many more would die tonight?

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Faith didn't feel like sitting still in the house, so she waited for Slade's car to disappear around a corner, then led Turk toward the neighborhood park. The night air was chilly, not quite biting so but close. Winter was deepening.

Because of the cold and the lateness of the hour, everyone else was inside, so Turk and Faith had the park to themselves. The only sound was the crunch of their feet in the soft snow.

Faith focused on the soft glow of the moonlight on the gentle blanket of snow, the trees rising on either side of the path—close enough to feel cozy but distant enough not to crowd her—and the calm of the winter air. Her mind slowly calmed as well, and after a few minutes, she was able to think about the case without the anxiety that plagued her earlier.

The killer was the key. It always was. Faith needed to determine what the killer's motive was in order to figure out who the killer was.

The victims were all veterinary doctors, but all involved in very different specialties. Dr. Rachel Summers was a general practice vet. Dr. Lisa Patel was a surgeon. Dr. Mark Chen was primarily an administrator as far as Faith could see and rarely saw patients himself anymore. And Dr. Jessica Lee ran a hospice. Only Patel was guilty of malpractice. The others had clean records.

So why them? Faith didn't believe it was just a general vendetta against vets. The victims were spread out across the Indianapolis area, miles from each other. They were chosen for a reason, but why? Why them?

She wouldn't get an answer focusing on the victims. That much was clear.

So she focused on the killer. What did she know about the killer?

This killer preferred poison. That fit with Faith's hypothesis that these murders were intended as some sort of absolution for the victims. The killer was being almost gentle with them. He—or she; Faith didn't know if it was a man or a woman—didn't want them mutilated. He didn't want them to suffer either. Pentobarbital put people to sleep before it killed them. They had all drifted peacefully away.

Then the killer had staged them carefully and included traditional, or at least traditionally inspired offerings for the afterlife.

So this was a mercy. The killer was trying to help them.

That suggested someone deeply spiritual and someone who believed that somehow, these vets required forgiveness. That led Faith to believe that the killer considered the vets harmful to animals.

The problem was figuring out exactly what harm the killer perceived had been done. Again, it was these vets, these victims, not just any vet. So what had these victims done that made them need absolution?

She heard footsteps behind her and stilled. Turk turned around and wagged his tail. That meant it was probably someone friendly.

Jacob's voice confirmed that a moment later. "Hey, Faith. I saw you walking away instead of coming inside. Thought I'd join you."

He'd called her Faith, not Staff Sergeant. That meant he knew she was upset.

Yeah, that or the fact that you walked away instead of coming inside.

“Sounds good,” she replied.

They continued down the path. To their right, bright blue, green and red lights twinkled. It occurred to Faith that Christmas was only a few weeks away. It was hard to be in a festive spirit when she spent most of her time solving vicious murders.

“Except these murders aren’t vicious.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh.” Heat climbed Faith’s cheeks. “Sorry, Jacob. I didn’t realize I said that out loud.”

“No need to apologize. I can tell you’re upset. You want to talk about it? I’m not a detective, but I’m a lot better of a listener than you grunts ever gave me credit for.”

Faith chuckled. Then she sighed. “I’m just having trouble figuring out why.”

“Why the killer chose these victims?”

“Yes. It doesn’t make sense. I mean, it does make sense. I just have to figure out what sense it makes.”

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s atonement of some sort.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Atonement? Like he’s sacrificing them to save his sins?”

“Not his sins. Or her sins. Poison is usually a woman’s choice of weapon. Then again, this kind of ritualistic display of the body is usually a characteristic of male killers. Anyway, the killer’s not saving his or her own sins. This is redemption for the victims.”

“The victims? Why?”

“That’s what I need to figure out. They’re all found in pet cemetery’s in the middle of a ring of stones with a jar of honey and a bottle of wine next to their heads and sunflowers on their eyes.”

“Damn. Freaky.”

“Yes, but very gentle.”

He chuckled. “I’ve never heard a serial killer described as gentle before.”

“This one was, though,” Faith insisted. “He injected them with a sedative that put them to sleep before they died. He arranged them carefully at rest and then gave them an offering to provide the spirits. At least, I think that’s what the honey and wine are for. I looked it up, and those were traditional Celtic adornments. They’re meant for the deceased to enjoy in the afterlife, but the sunflowers on the eyes remind me of the Greek practice of placing coins placed on the eyes of the dead as a bribe to the ferryman who transported their souls to Hades.”

“Hmm. So the killer thinks he’s what? Rescuing them from themselves.”

“That’s my hypothesis. I just don’t know why them . Why Rachel Summers? Why Lisa Patel? Why Mark Chen, and why Jessica Lee?”

“I’m guessing you’ve gone through the obvious stuff: did they know each other, were

they screwups, did a patient see all of them...”

“That’s what we’re checking on now. Slade’s got people looking to see if there was a patient who saw all of these doctors. Normally, that’s where we’d get our big break, but... I don’t feel so confident about that this time.”

“That sucks. I’m really sorry.”

She chuckled bitterly. “Yeah, me too. But sorry doesn’t change shit.”

“I know. I’m not making excuses. I’m just saying I feel bad that you have to deal with this. This sounds like a case that’s going to be very difficult to resolve.”

“That’s what scares me. This guy’s killing people fast. Four victims in four days. Two of them last night. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was killing someone right now.” She shivered at that thought. “And I’m still on the outside. I have the basic outline of a motive, but I don’t have the details I need to really understand what his purpose is with these deaths.”

“That sucks even more. I don’t suppose it would help if I told you that you’re doing the right thing no matter what your superiors think.”

“That’s another thing,” Faith said. “My superiors know what I’m doing now.”

Jacob’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit.”

“Oh shit is right,” Faith replied. “My new ASAC flew all the way out here to tell me that I was a terrible agent who didn’t care about any of my colleagues and I’d thrown them all under the bus by helping with this case.”

“Ouch. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Me too. She also said I’m fired if she catches me freelancing again.”

Jacob pursed his lips. “Not to be an asshole, but isn’t that exactly what you’re still doing?”

“I can’t not help people, Jacob. I can’t just let people die because I might get in trouble.”

“Hmm... Have you thought about her perspective, though? She has the big picture to consider. She can’t just focus on this case.”

Faith bristled a little but reminded herself that there was no way Jacob could be expected to understand what he was saying. “I understand her perspective perfectly. I just don’t agree with it. I don’t get why we have to cater to so many interests aside from the public we’re supposed to protect. What happened to just doing our jobs and catching bad guys and letting the media think whatever it wants?”

He smiled wryly. “I think you’re confusing Hollywood with real life. In real life, letting the media think whatever it wants can be really dangerous.”

She sighed. “You sound just like her.”

"I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't play devil's advocate. It just goes back to the conversation we had when you first took this case. You're a Marine, Faith. You're a grunt. Marines don't run from fights, they run toward fights. Officers have more to consider than just kill all bad guys. I guarantee you that your Boss is just as miserable trying to figure out how to manage the media as you are trying to figure out the mind of your killer and just as terrified that the media will crucify her and the rest of the Bureau as you are that the killer will strike again."

“Well, those are bullshit priorities. I don’t care if she’s brass. We should have no

other purpose than protecting people.”

“There’s more to protection than just shooting bad guys, Faith.”

She looked sideways at him. “You know, you’re shit at making me feel better, First Sergeant.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. I know. I’m much better at reminding people that shit sucks than I am about hiding the shit. But I’ve found that when you can accept things for what they are, you have an easier time handling them. Even if what they are is... well, shit.”

Faith looked ahead. “I guess I’ve never gotten around to accepting that some things are shit.”

They were nearing the other side of the park now. The air was rapidly getting chilly enough to make Faith uncomfortable. Turk looked fine, but Turk always looked fine. Sometimes, Faith wished she could borrow a little of his ability to accept things the way they were.

“What more is there?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

"You said there's more to protecting people than just shooting bad guys. What more is there? If you remove the things that put people in danger, then they're safe, right? So what more is there to protect people than making them safe from the things that want to hurt them?"

He shrugged. “A lot of things. Sometimes there are things that hurt them by accident. Seatbelts protect people from car accidents. Cars don’t want to hurt people. Engines

don't want to blow up. They just do sometimes. Other times, you have to protect people from themselves. Like not letting your teenager drink and go out alone late at night. I'm not saying that your Boss is doing any of those things. I'm just pointing out that there's more to consider than just stopping predators."

Faith's brow furrowed. Something danced around the edges of her mind. She couldn't quite place it, but if she could just get it to coalesce in her head...

"Protecting people from themselves. I think you're onto something there."

"You think this killer is protecting the victims from themselves."

"Yes. I think so. It's not just absolution. It's protection. That's what the stones are for. It's a shield against punishment. And the honey and wine are peace offerings. And the sunflowers... that symbolizes understanding. Exiting the night and stepping into the day. It's a symbol of showing the victims why what they were doing is dangerous. Or maybe showing other people why what the victims did was dangerous."

She quickened her pace as her mind tried to work out the details. "It's not a perfect hypothesis, but I think I'm heading in the right direction. The killer is trying to save these victims from themselves while also warning the world not to make the same mistakes they made and get themselves hurt the same way."

"That makes a macabre kind of sense."

"Yeah. I need to talk to Slade. I think we need to look at people who haven't been personally wronged but have a philosophical disagreement with the victims."

"I leave it to your expertise, Staff Sergeant. Just so you know, though, I'll be taking fifteen percent of the credit. Just because."

She grinned. “I’ll allow you twenty percent of the credit, First Sergeant. Maybe twenty-one.”

He laughed. “Sounds good, Bold. Good luck.”

Faith broke into a jog back to the house, leaving Jacob behind to make his way slowly. Turk bounded along with her, looking hopefully at her as they ran. On the way, she texted Slade to meet her at a café in downtown Carmel and be ready to work. He replied a moment later that he hadn’t stopped working and would be happy to have someone else to feel miserable with him.

Faith sent a thumbs up, but she didn’t feel miserable anymore. It would be a stretch to say she felt hopeful, but she no longer felt trapped.

That was a good start.

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Faith met Slade just after eight o'clock at night. Slade was bundled up in a jacket that looked more like one of the parkas Faith had worn for her case in Alaska. Despite the pink in his cheeks, though, he looked alive and enthusiastic. "Hey, Faith. You have something?"

"I hope so."

Some of the enthusiasm faded. "You hope so?"

"Yes. Don't get down yet. I think this is good."

"Okay," Slade said warily.

"I think the killer's protecting our victims from themselves."

"How do you mean?"

"I think the killer's not just trying to absolve the victims from past crimes. I think he's trying to prevent them from committing future crimes."

"Future crimes? Like what? Patel was the only one with a history of malpractice."

"Yes, but what is something vets do all the time that might be considered criminal?"

"What?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking you."

Slade sighed. “Okay. Let’s get some coffee. I think my brain needs to work a little better before I can come up with a good answer.”

The two of them ordered their coffees—black for Faith, a cappuccino for Slade—and took a seat in a corner of the café. There were only a few other people there with them, and they were able to talk without being overheard.

“Okay, well, there’s the idea of spaying and neutering them,” Slade said. “A lot of people think that’s cruel.”

“Hmm,” Faith said. “That’s possible. I feel like that doesn’t narrow it down enough, though.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t narrow it down?”

“Every vet’s trained to spay and neuter pets. They are, right?”

“I think you need surgical training, actually.”

Faith frowned. “Well, Lee wasn’t a surgeon, and neither was Chen. Summers had surgical training, but she didn’t specialize in it. The leaves us with Patel as the only victim who makes sense.” She shook her head. “No, it’s not fixing animals.”

“Okay, um... maybe something about animals in abusive homes? Maybe these doctors didn’t do enough to report abusive owners?”

Faith shook her head. “The killer would go after the abusive owners if that was the case. And then that would be punishment, not absolution.” She steepled her fingers. “This is something vets do that they believe helps animals but that other people might see as hurting them. Spaying and neutering fits that definition, but we’ve already determined that it doesn’t fit in this case. Abuse is pretty clearly a bad thing that no

one would think is helpful to an animal."

"You're absolutely sure this killer is trying to protect the victims from themselves?"

"I'm as close to absolutely as I can be without being one hundred percent certain."

Slade leaned back in his chair and sipped his cappuccino. "I don't know. I mean, I hear a lot of people claiming that fixing animals is inhumane. The only other thing I hear a lot is eating animals and owning animals as pets at all, but those two don't make sense either."

"No," Faith agreed. "Vets don't prepare animals for consumption, and if the issue was owning pets, the targets would be breeders. And again, both of those things would earn punishment, not forgiveness."

"I don't want to be the sour grapes at the table," Slade said, "but maybe our killer really is just trying to punish people. Maybe this isn't trying to help anyone at all."

Faith sighed and sipped her own coffee. The liquid was still too hot. It burned her tongue, but she focused on the pain and let it sharpen her focus. "Okay, think. Come on, Slade. What is something that a lot of people believe is humane and helpful to animals but that some people might think is cruel and unfair to them?"

He shook his head. "Keeping them in cages? Or on leashes?"

"Maybe, but that doesn't narrow it down. Damn it, we need to think of something related to vets specifically. Something that not all vets do that these victims did. What did Rachel Summers do?"

"She had a clinic. A general practice clinic."

“And Patel was a surgeon. And Lee ran a hospice, and Chen administered a care facility.”

“None of that is specific, Faith,” Slade pointed out.

“I know. Damn it, I know.”

She looked at Turk and drummed her fingers on the table. Turk looked at her with his kind, beautiful brown eyes and wagged his tail. His muzzle was liberally gray now. His teeth were still strong, his joints still moved easily, and she had seen many times that he was as capable as ever at doing his job.

But he was getting older. He was over nine years old, and Shepherds rarely lived past the age of thirteen. More likely than not, Faith would bury him before she reached the age of forty.

A rush of sadness broke through her focus. She didn't want to say goodbye to him. She didn't want him to die. Not now and not ever. She wanted him to live forever, to run, jump, play, and fight even after she grew old and tired. That wasn't realistic, of course, but she desperately wished it could be. She loved him so much. She didn't want him to go away.

But one day, she would have to let him go. One day, age would finally catch up to him. His eyes would fog over. His spine would hunch. His joints would stiffen, and his jaws would grow weak. His organs would weaken, and pain would slowly seep into every waking moment until he could no longer find joy in anything but the sight of Faith herself. Eventually, even that joy wouldn't be enough to stifle the agony.

Would she be strong enough to let him go when the time came? Would she be able to tell the vet to go ahead and inject him with the poison that would kill him? Would she accept that peace and rest were more important than life to an old dog who could only

feel pain?

She would be. She knew Turk well enough to know that he wouldn't want to spend his last moments in agony, too weak to fight the thing that was killing him. He would want to go out with his head held high, strong, and dignified. He was a fighter, a Marine, and a hunter of evil people. He wouldn't want to die a trembling, whimpering, hurting shadow of himself.

But God, it would hurt. And even knowing she was right wouldn't be enough to stop her feeling guilt for a long time. It would be her decision that would decide the moment of his death, and even if that was the right thing to do, it would feel like the wrong thing.

The answer hit Faith so hard that she jumped. Her coffee spilled over her hand, and she cried out and pulled it away. Turk leaped to his feet and barked loudly, turning in circles and snapping his head around, looking for the threat that had alarmed his handler. The other patrons and employees at the café gasped and backed away, certain that the powerful German Shepherd had just gone insane and was now looking for someone to eat.

“I’m okay, Turk,” Faith said. “I just figured it out.”

Turk looked at her irritably as if to ask what the hell she had figured out that caused her to freak out like she was being attacked.

“What?” Slade asked. “What did you figure out?”

“I know why the killer’s taking these victims.”

“Why?”

“They put animals to sleep.”

Slade blinked. “Don’t all vets put animals to sleep?”

“I don’t know. But we need to find out. And we need to find out how many animals these vets put to sleep.”

“How the hell do we do that?”

“I don’t know , Slade. Let’s find the answer to that question, then find the answer to the other question. But that has to be it. Putting animals to sleep when they're sick or elderly is considered humane, but putting people to sleep when they're sick or elderly is controversial. Some people say it's humane, but other people say that you should never give up on life. You should fight for every moment you can."

“Most people say it should be up to the person to decide how they go.”

“But animals can’t decide that. They can’t tell us if they’re ready to go or if they’d rather stay. Humans make that decision for them.”

Slade’s eyes widened. “Huh. You’re right. And if someone thought that people were making the wrong decision about something so serious, they’d be mad as hell.”

“Or they’d understand that the humans are doing their best. It’s just that their best is really, really wrong.”

“Okay,” Slade said, leaning forward and steepling his hands again. “We’re on the right track. But it’s the owners who make those decisions, right? Not the vets.”

“The owners have to give vets permission to euthanize their pets, but I’d bet anything that in most cases, the owners have trouble letting go and the vets convince them that

it's the right thing to do."

"Little Fido is sick and old and tired, and he needs to go to puppy Heaven now," Slade mused. "Yeah, that makes sense. My first dog died when I was thirteen, and my parents sat me down and had that conversation."

"Really? They called it puppy Heaven?"

"They did. I was mad at them for treating me like I was five, but I figured they were hurting too, and they were doing their..." His eyes widened further. "They were doing their best. So I forgave them."

"Exactly!" Faith said. "That's it! That's the profile! Our killer is a pet owner who lost his or her pet to euthanasia and now blames the vet for pushing that decision. But they're not angry at the vet because they know he or she was only trying to help."

"But if you murder a pet trying to help them, then you're still a murderer."

"And where do murderers go?"

"Not the same place pets go."

"Exactly. So the killer is trying to help people who love animals but have committed grave sins against animals thinking they were helping them. He's trying to absolve them of those sins and get others to see the mistake they made so they don't earn themselves an eternity away from the animals they love."

Slade nodded. His eyes burned with excitement now. "All right. Now we need to figure out if our victims were more 'helpful' than others."

Faith tapped buttons on her phone. "Okay, it says on Google that most vets can

euthanize pets, so we need to figure out if these vets just happened to euthanize more than others.”

Slade opened his laptop. His fingers flew across the keys, and his eyes continued to burn. “Okay. So Lee ran a hospice. That’s end-of-life care right there, and that includes euthanasia. So she’s the obvious one now. As for Chen... Okay, I have his bio up on the clinic he administered.” He scanned the bio. “Nothing there.”

“Try looking up euthanasia or end-of-life care. There should be a link on the website for pet owners to browse services.”

“Yep. Euthanasia and end-of-life. Okay, dot da da... Here we go. ‘All end-of-life decisions are a collaborative process between the pet parent, their veterinary care team...” He grinned. “And the administrator of Hamilton County Pet Wellness Center, Dr. Mark Chen.”

Faith pumped her fist. “That’s two down. What about Dr. Patel?”

“Let’s see.” His fingers danced again. “Okay, I’m on the Indianapolis Animal Hospital website. Let’s look at Emergency Medical Clinic. Check Carmel... okay, here’s Patel. Specialties: emergency surgery, preventive surgery, spaying and neutering... and euthanasia and end-of-life care.”

“Awesome. That’s three down. Now Dr. Summers.”

“Looking up her website. Well, would you look at that? Right on the front page. Dr. Summers is a leading expert on humane end-of-life care and euthanasia for the Greater Indianapolis region and has authored several acclaimed essays on appropriate end-of-life care for animals of many different species.”

Faith was so excited she was bouncing in her chair. “That’s it. That’s our motive.”

“So now we need to find our killer.”

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The Angel stared at the bulletin board, muttering softly at the different names represented there.

“Got to turn them away before they fall over the cliff. They’re rowing the wrong way. They’re heading left on a right turn.”

The Angel recognized that the words symbolized a wandering mind and quieted. Focus was critical right now.

These people meant to do well. They were just horribly misguided. They thought that murder was rescue, that death was rest, that pain was unconscionable. They tried, but they were too far gone to understand how dangerous their mindset was.

But they didn’t deserve eternal damnation for it. They didn’t deserve to suffer for their crimes. They meant to help.

Just like Dr. Robertson had meant to help Ralphie.

“He’s in pain,” the Angel whispered. “He’s suffering. There’s no hope for him anymore. He’ll only live in agony for years. Better to let him go now.”

And the Angel had listened. Of course. Because Ralphie didn’t deserve to suffer.

But the more the Angel thought about it, the clearer it became that they didn’t have the right to decide for Ralphie if he wanted to suffer or not. People suffered all the time. People lay in hospital beds clinging to life because they would rather suffer than die. People pushed oxygen canisters with them everywhere they went because getting

outside was worth the risk of suffocation. People with no limbs screwed metal into their bodies and ran marathons because doing something was worse than being incapable of doing anything ever again.

People fought for every moment of life. Why shouldn't animals fight too?

Ralphie fought. When the needle entered his body, Ralphie fought. His eyes flew open. His paws scrambled weakly. His eyes met the Angel's eyes, and the Angel understood later that the expression they held wasn't love but fear. He cried out for help. He didn't want to go.

The Angel realized that too late. Punishment would come certainly, but the Angel would accept it. Or perhaps when the Angel finished with the others, the last dose would remain. The Angel could use that to atone. It was up to God and the Archangels whether that would be enough, but perhaps it was worth a try.

No, it was definitely worth a try. The chance to see Ralphie again was worth a try. The Angel would try.

In the meantime, there were a few others who needed rescue. No, there were many others, but the Angel would continue to focus on those who needed it the most.

"Amanda. Carpenter. Like Jesus was a carpenter. He built shelves and beds and cradles and headboards."

The Angel didn't try to stifle speech anymore. It helped with focus because all of those distracting thoughts could leave and stop interrupting.

"Amanda Carpenter built plans for pets, plans for sick pets to leave this world whether they wanted to or not. She meant to help, but she only hurt, and the pets couldn't speak to tell her to stop. She misread their cries as cries of gratitude, not

cries of fear. She thought she was helping, but she was only digging her hole straight to Hell, straight to Hell.”

The decision made, the Angel walked away from the board and fell silent. The pentobarbital sat on the desk next to the syringes as always. Amanda Carpenter was five-foot-seven and weighed one hundred forty-two pounds according to her driver license. The Angel would measure fifteen cc’s for her.

The poison prepared, the Angel checked the distance to the clinic where Amanda Carpenter worked. Twenty-six minutes.

“Twenty-six plus four to get dressed plus three to walk to my car plus two to walk into the building and see the doctor. The doctor will be alone because she stays late to eat ice cream and watch a movie before going home to her husband who doesn’t like movies or ice cream.”

The Angel packed the poison in its case, still muttering. "Twenty-nine minutes to kill the doctor, then nine minutes to take her to the car. Five minutes to drive to Fountain of Life Pet Cemetery. Five minutes to find a spot. Eight to lay the stones. Seven to lay the doctor. Then three to, place the honey and wine, and flowers. One more to say the prayer. Twenty-nine minutes to kill the doctor and twenty-nine to save her soul. Fifty-eight minutes to rescue another."

The Angel began to dress. “Good, good. Another saved and only an hour spent. Ralphie will be proud. Ralphie will forgive me. Ralphie knows I meant well. Ralphie is a good dog.”

The Angel fell quiet outside of the apartment. The pizza delivery boy had been too concerned to hear speech. He might have asked questions. People shouldn’t ask questions, or they would get in the way, and the Angel could not help people if there were others in the way. The Angel was not strong and couldn’t hurt people.

The words continued in the Angel's head, though. Fifty-one minutes to rescue another. Fifty-one minutes to send another soul to safety. Please, God and the Archangels, forgive her. Please, God and the Archangels, let Amanda Carpenter go home to her pets and be loved and accepted by them. Please, God and the Archangels, let her tell Ralphie that I love him and will see him soon.

Fifty minutes.

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Faith paced the outside of the café. Slade sat on a bench, his open laptop resting on his thighs, his fingers continuing to fly over the keys. Turk looked back and forth between both of them, eagerly awaiting the explosion of activity he knew would come when they finally had their answer.

“There’s too many people,” Slade said. “There are entire websites full of people in the area who regret euthanizing their pets, and a lot of them are saying some heavy stuff. It’s all punishment-based too. ‘They deserve to rot in Hell’ is a disturbingly common message. We’re pretty sure our killer wants the victims to be forgiven and join the animals in Heaven.”

Faith shook her head. “Okay. So we won’t find the killer by looking for possible suspects. What about looking for the next victim?”

“Okay. How do we do that?”

“Our victims were known for end-of-life care and euthanasia. Look up best vets for end-of-life care.”

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know. Try Google and look for a reputable-looking website that rates local veterinarians.”

Slade nodded. “Got it.” He tapped his keys for a couple of minutes, then said, “Okay. I’m on RateMyVet.com searching the top vets for hospice and end-of-life care in the Indianapolis area. It looks like our four victims are all at the top. Summers, Lee,

Chen, Patel.”

“Really? One through four?”

“Yep.”

“Who’s number five?”

“Let’s see... Doctor Amanda Carpenter. She runs the Restful River Animal Hospice facility in Cumberland. That’s a suburb just east of Indianapolis.” He met Faith’s eyes. “I think that’s her.”

“And it’s after ten at night.”

A chill ran down Faith’s spine. She saw the same fear reflected on Slade’s face. Their killer could be after Dr. Carpenter right now.

“Call the facility,” Faith told Slade.

“It’s after business hours.”

“I don’t care. Someone might still be there. Call them anyway.”

“All right.” He dialed the number and waited. “Nothing. No answer.”

“Dial them again.”

Faith crossed her arms and tapped her foot while Slade held the phone to his ear. He shook his head. “Nope. No one’s home.” He paled. “You don’t think we’re too late, do you?”

“I hope not,” Faith said.

“We could look up pet cemeteries near Carpenter’s Hospice,” Slade suggested. “Maybe we can catch our killer in the act.”

Faith shook her head. “No, I’m not ready to give up on her yet. Is there a cell phone number there?”

“Not for Carpenter. Just the facility number and her private line.”

“Call her private line.”

Slade obliged. His shoulders slumped a moment later. “Straight to voicemail. Not even a dial tone.”

Faith swore. “What other numbers are there?”

“There’s a palliative care line, a hospice line, a euthanasia line, and a general reception line.”

“Try all of them. Try the euthanasia line first.”

She shivered as Slade dialed the number, not from the cold but from anxiety. Come on. Don’t be dead. Not yet. Not when we’re right here to save you.

Slade sighed. “Nothing. The place is closed, Faith. I’m sorry. We need to think about saving other people. It’s still early. We might catch the killer at the pet cemetery if we move now.”

“Try the general reception line,” Faith insisted. “Please, Slade.”

Slade sighed again, but he didn't protest further. Faith bounced up and down on her toes, pleading silently that someone would—

“Hello?” Slade said. “Yes, hello!”

Faith leaped in the air. Coming down, she nearly slid on the icy ground, much to Turk's consternation. He ran to steady her, and when she caught her balance, he growled at her like a parent scolding an overactive child.

“Hi. Wow. I'm so glad you answered,” Slade said. “I'm Detective Chester Slade with the Carmel Police Department. Is your facility still open?”

He put the phone on speaker so Faith could hear the answer. The man on the other end sounded a little annoyed but did a passable job of keeping professionally pleasant. “No, I'm sorry. We close at nine o'clock. If this is an emergency, you can contact the Indianapolis Animal Hospital at—”

“Different kind of emergency,” Slade interrupted. “We need to speak to Dr. Amanda Carpenter. Is she there with you?”

“No, I'm... I'm not at the Hospice.”

Slade blinked. “What? How are you answering this number?”

“This is my work cell phone number.” In an exasperated voice, he explained. “Dr. Carpenter believes that someone should always be available to provide patients and prospective patients with information on our facility and the services we provide. For some reason, she feels a receptionist is better suited to do that than the owner and administrator of the facility.”

“Do you have Dr. Carpenter's number?”

“I do, but she won’t answer it. Trust me, I know. That’s why I was going to give you the number of the Indianapolis Animal Hospital.”

“Do you have her home address,” Slade pressed.

“Her home...” the receptionist paused, then said suspiciously, “Excuse me, who did you say you are?”

“I’m Detective Chester Slade with the Carmel Police Department. I’m here with Special Agent Faith Bold of the FBI.”

“Carmel? We’re in Cumberland, sir. This is sketchy. I’m going to hang up now.”

“No, listen!” Slade shouted. “You know all those vets who are dying? I’m investigating that case.”

There was a slight pause, then a wary, “Okay?”

“Look, we need to contact her now . Her life is in immediate danger.”

Another slight pause, then. “Oh, shit. Um... shit. Look, she won’t answer her phone. I’ll give you the number if you want, but she won’t even check texts until the morning. That’s probably why she’s number five and not number one on that list.”

“Focus!” Slade snapped.

“Right. Shit. Sorry. Um... Okay, she’s probably still at the hospital.”

“This late? You’re sure?”

“Yes. She doesn’t like going home right away because her husband doesn’t like

movies and gives her shit for eating ice cream. I guess he's really into skinny women, so he gets grouchy that she's not a stick figure like she was when they were married. They've been having problems for a while, and—"

"Okay, so she's at the hospital until what time?" Slade interrupted.

"Umm... she usually watches a movie and eats ice cream. Sometimes she drinks a glass of wine too. If she drinks, she'll be there until after midnight. If not, then she could be on her way home already. Probably not, though. I'm thinking she's still at the hospital."

"We'll go to the hospital," Faith told Slade. "Send units to her house. You, on the phone."

"Danny."

"Danny, give Detective Slade Dr. Carpenter's address and personal phone number. Slade, give him your phone number and mine. When we hang up, Danny, call and text Dr. Carpenter. Tell her what we told you, give her our numbers and tell her to call us."

"Okay. Um... okay."

"Slade, give me the keys."

Slade's brow furrowed, but to his credit, he didn't balk. Faith tossed the keys out of the air and sprinted for the car. Turk followed, barking for her to slow down and be careful. Instead, she slid the last three yards and slammed into the car hard enough to leave bruises on her legs.

Turk gave a resigned bark and checked on her. Faith ruffled his fur quickly and

opened the door for him to get inside. The roads were icy, but Faith was used to driving quickly on ice. She couldn't move that quickly, but she would probably move more quickly than Slade would.

She pulled up to the café, and Slade climbed into the passenger seat. "Okay. We're going to take the four-sixty-five south to... Jesus!"

He gripped the grab handle and pressed his left hand on the dash as the cruiser spun around and accelerated toward the road. The rear wheels fishtailed dangerously when Faith turned out of the parking lot, but she feathered the accelerator, and the wheels found their traction a moment later.

"Does this cruiser have winter tires?" Faith asked.

"Yes, but—"

"Studded?"

"Um... no, but—"

"That's all right. I'll make it work."

"Are you kidding? Faith!"

He cried out again as she drifted onto the freeway. The freeway was less icy than the surface streets, but there was still a dusting of snow, and the cruiser flinched and slid slightly as she headed south toward Cumberland.

"Faith, if you get us killed on the way there, we won't be able to help anyone," Slade reminded her, struggling to control his voice."

“I’m well aware of that fact,” Faith said. “Trust me. I’ve done this...”

She paused to navigate a particularly perilous stretch of snow that tried to turn the cruiser sideways. Once they were straightened out, she finished. “I’ve done this before.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Then deal with feeling like crap for a while,” Faith retorted. “We’re twenty minutes from Cumberland, and Carpenter’s vulnerable.”

“Yeah, I know. Just please don’t kill us, okay?”

“I won’t. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, telling me not to worry isn’t going to make me not worry.”

“Well, then worry quietly.”

He glared at her. “Your partner must love you.”

“He used to.” Slade raised his eyebrow, and Faith quickly changed the subject. “Call Dr. Carpenter again. Keep calling her until she answers.”

Slade dialed the number, and Faith counted the minutes. Hang in there, Dr. Carpenter. We’re on our way to rescue you.

The thought came to her that the killer could be saying the same thing. He or she was convinced that this was the only way to rescue the victims’ souls. It disturbed Faith to know that she and a serial killer could be having the same thought at the same time about the same person.

Drastically different means of achieving that goal, though .

They reached the Cumberland exit eleven minutes after getting onto the freeway. Faith looked ahead at the exit and saw that it was clear of traffic. “Fair warning, Slade. You’re going to hate this.”

“Hate what? Oh my God !”

Faith twisted the wheel and feathered the brakes, drifting down the ramp. Snow and dust plumed behind the cruiser as she spun the tires, using the centrifugal force of the drift to propel them forward when they exited the ramp.

The Hospice facility was three miles up the road. Even driving at this pace, it would take five minutes to cover that distance. She wasn’t comfortable driving faster than this.

Slade wasn’t comfortable either. His eyes were closed, and his hands trembled as he gripped the handle and mouthed words that Faith guessed were prayers. It was a good thing she had chosen to drive. He wouldn’t be brave enough to do it himself.

The minutes passed with aching slowness. Faith watched the road drift lazily by and wished to hell this was summer when she could have burnt rubber and reached the hospital in no time. When she finally pulled into the parking lot, she didn’t bother trying to park in a space or on a curb. She just let the cruiser stop where it wanted to and set the brake.

She switched on the lights, and the three of them got out of the car and rushed into the hospital. Turk began to bark immediately when the door opened. He jetted ahead, Faith and Slade close behind, weapons drawn.

“Dr. Carpenter!” Faith shouted. “Amanda Carpenter!”

She heard a cry from the room ahead just before Turk burst through the door. The two human investigators sprinted forward.

Faith entered the room to see Turk standing in front of a terrified looking woman in a white lab coat. A pint of ice cream and a bottle of white wine sat on an end table next to a sofa. A fifty-inch television hanging from the wall was playing a movie about a woman who left her husband for a childhood sweetheart.

“What the hell?” the woman cried out. “What is going on?”

Turk whined and looked around, dipping his head from side to side. He fixed on the doctor and barked in alarm.

A hand shot out from behind Carpenter, seemingly out of nowhere. Faith shouted for Carpenter to move, but she knew it was too late. She was about to watch Carpenter die right in front of her.

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Then Turk hit Dr. Carpenter, planting all four paws on her chest and sending her sprawling to the ground. The needle passed harmlessly over her head and only a fraction of an inch over Turk's nose.

The figure revealed when Dr. Carpenter was kicked out of the way stared at the investigators in shock. Faith's eyes widened. The killer was a woman!

Slade recovered from the shock—if he had felt any shock at all—first. “Drop the syringe! Drop it now!”

He aimed his weapon at the woman and approached slowly. The killer was about five-foot-seven and a sturdy one hundred forty pounds or so. She looked to be in her early forties and had a few stray grays in her nutbrown hair.

Her eyes were wild, and her lips moved soundlessly as she muttered something under her breath. More importantly, she kept the syringe raised.

“Oh my God!” Dr. Carpenter shrieked. “Oh, God!”

She crawled backwards on her hands and knees, putting distance between herself and the killer. Turk bunched his shoulders, ready to pounce, but Faith called him off. “Turk! No! Go to the vet! Protect, Turk!”

Turk obediently ran to his place in front of Dr. Carpenter and turned around, teeth bared, ready to give his life to protect her if necessary. The killer's eyes flicked toward the two of them, and Faith quickly ran to put herself in between them.

“Drop the syringe,” Faith said. “It’s over.”

“We know you’re trying to help,” Slade said, stopping well out of range of the syringe, “but it’s over now.”

The killer paused. Her lips stilled. She blinked, then smiled and said, “Hello. I’m Meredith Sawyer.”

Her voice was pleasant and soft. She looked at Slade and said, “You must be Officer Slade. Or no, you’re not wearing a uniform. Detective Slade, then.”

“I am.” Slade frowned. “Do you know me?”

“No. But you know me because you’re a detective. You detect. You detected that I was here. Good job. You’re a good detective. That must be why the police made you a detective.”

She inflected her words with an almost childlike innocence. Maybe they could reason with her, and this situation could end without anyone else getting hurt.

“I’m Special Agent Faith Bold,” Faith called.

The killer turned to her. “Faith Bold. Two good character traits. Faith in God. Boldness to do what is right. This is right. Rescuing people is right. Saving people is right.”

“What’s your name?” Faith asked.

“Meredith. Meredith Sawyer. Not Sawyer. I don’t saw things. I’m not a carpenter. Jesus was a carpenter. Jesus was good. Jesus was a good carpenter.”

Dr. Carpenter burst out with, “What the ever-loving—”

Faith waved her hand to cut Dr. Carpenter off. The doctor clammed up, and Faith said, “Meredith, can we talk to you, please? Can you put the syringe down?”

“I can, but I won’t. So does that mean I can’t? I choose not to. I could, but it’s wrong, so I won’t.”

“Meredith, you’re not helping people,” Faith said. “This isn’t going to help Dr. Carpenter.”

“I have to help her. I have to save her. She did a bad thing, a very bad thing. Lots of bad things. Little bad things running around her soul, pointing at her and telling God, ‘Look! She’s bad! She’s bad, send her to Hell!’ But she didn’t mean to be bad. She tried to be good. She thought killing them would help them.”

“What the hell are you—”

“Dr. Carpenter, be quiet,” Faith said firmly. To Meredith, she said, “Can you put the syringe down, please? We can talk about helping her. We can talk about saving her, but I need you to put the syringe down.”

"Fifty-eight minutes to save her soul. Twenty-nine minutes to get here and twenty-nine minutes to save her soul. Fifty-eight minutes, but there's twenty-four left now. Maybe more because you won't let me save her." She frowned. "Why won't you let me save her?"

“You’re not saving her, Meredith. I know you think you are, but you’re not. You’re hurting her.”

“No, I’m not hurting her. I’m saving her. She thinks she’s helping them. She thinks

she's saving them, but she's not. They don't want to die. They never want to die. Ralphie didn't want to die. He tried to live. He looked up at me with his big eyes the color of chocolate drops, and he tried to tell me to help him. His paws scraped on the table that was made of aluminum mixed with chromium, and he tried to run away, but it was too late because the needle had bit him already. And he died, but he didn't want to die. He could have lived."

Her eyes began to flick rapidly back and forth. She was growing manic again. That was bad. They needed to get that syringe quickly, or she would lose control, and they'd be forced to shoot her.

"Meredith, who was Ralphie? Tell me who Ralphie was."

"Ralphie was a good boy. He was a good dog. I loved him, and he loved me, and he trusted me, and he trusted Dr. Robertson."

"Was Ralphie your dog, Meredith? Tell me about him."

"Dr. Robertson was trying to help, but he was wrong, he was bad, he was wrong, wrong, wrong. I was too late to save him because he fell three hundred feet and shattered his skull on a rock in the Badlands of New Mexico. Now he's in Hell, and he'll never see pets again because he can't go to Heaven because he's in Hell, he's in Hell, he's in Hell, Hell, Hell !"

She shrieked and sprinted toward Faith. Faith was too startled to fire, but Turk leaped forward and caught Meredith by her wrist. The killer screamed as Turk dragged her to the ground.

Faith rushed forward and pried the syringe from Meredith's fingers while Slade dropped onto her other arm and held her down.

“No!” Meredith screamed. “No, no, no, no! I’m helping... I’m saving... Oh God, no, don’t take her to Hell, please!”

“No one’s going to Hell, Meredith,” Faith promised her. “It’s okay.”

“No, please! He was a good dog! He was a good dog, and I’m a good dog, and I’m trying to save them because they’re good dogs too, they just don’t know! They don’t know, they don’t knooooow!”

Faith pulled the syringe away, tossing it to the floor and out of reach. Meredith went limp, weeping bitterly. Slade handcuffed her, and she offered no resistance as Turk released her other arm, allowing Slade to roll her over and finish cuffing her.

“I’m sorry,” Meredith wept. “I’m sorry, Ralphie. I’m sorry, Jesus. I’m sorry, Dr. Carpenter. I tried. I tried to save you, and I’m sorry.”

Faith glanced at Dr. Carpenter. Her face was white as a sheet, her mouth and eyes open wide with disbelief. Faith didn’t blame her. She had witnessed insanity for probably the first time in her life. Not to mention the fact that she’d narrowly avoided being killed.

“Dispatch, this is Carmel PD Badge four-two-eight. I’m at six-forty-seven Gap Road, Cumberland. Send EMS and a wagon, please. We have one suspect, female Caucasian, five-foot-seven, one-forty. She’s in severe emotional distress. We’ll need to take her to the hospital, then figure out who’s going to process her.”

A stunned dispatcher acknowledged the call and informed them that units were on the way. Faith and Slade shared a look. There was no triumph on either of their faces. This wasn’t the first time Faith had arrested a killer whose sense of reality was too warped for them to understand right and wrong. She couldn’t feel good about sending someone to jail who didn’t understand what she was doing.

She felt good about saving an innocent vet, though. She turned to Dr. Carpenter and asked, “Are you all right? Do you require medical assistance?”

Carpenter blinked. “Medical... No, no, I’m fine. Was she... was she going to kill me?”

Faith sighed. “Yes, ma’am. She thought she was... well, it doesn’t matter. It’s over now.”

“Noooo!” Meredith wailed. “I’m sorry, God!”

Turk whined mournfully, and Faith reached over and stroked his fur. “I know, boy. I know.”

Faith accepted the cup of coffee Slade handed her and looked at the EMS wagon. Meredith was strapped down firmly, a good precaution but a pointless one. Meredith hadn't shown any signs of violence since Faith took the syringe from her.

“So we won,” Slade said. “Yay.”

Faith chuckled softly. “Yeah. That was a rough one.”

“You know, I didn’t feel sorry for her until I saw her. I bought your whole theory about the killer trying to help people. I knew that she was doing what she thought was right, but I didn’t care. I wanted to stop her, and I wanted to enjoy watching her realize that she failed. But... after I saw that...”

His voice trailed off, and they watched in silence as the EMS moved away. The Cumberland PD officers gave the two of them a thumbs up. They’d already talked

and agreed to meet in the morning to wrap up the paperwork necessary to give Cumberland PD authority in the case. Slade figured it would be better to keep Carmel out of it since they were still embarrassed over the issue with Faith.

As for Faith? Well, this would probably mean the end of her career. Soon, she would feel a whole slew of emotions about that, but right now, she was all right with it. She'd caught another bad guy. She'd saved another innocent. That's what really mattered.

Still, she felt the same as Slade did. Meredith Sawyer wasn't really bad. She was just a disturbed woman who had lost her dog and then her mind and tried in the only way she knew how to make sure others didn't have to suffer the same fate she was sure she would.

Slade chuckled. "You know, my old partner, he was a long-term veteran. Fifty-one years."

Faith's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah. He was seventy-three when he retired. He told me something when he left that I didn't really understand until now. He said, 'The ones that hurt are the ones that think you're the criminal.' I kind of put that to the whole All Cops Are Bastards thing. Like it hurts to hear people call you names because they hate the badge. Now I'm thinking he was talking about people like Meredith, people who think that they're doing the right thing and you're wrong to stop them."

Faith nodded. She was pretty sure that Slade's partner couldn't have predicted a killer like Meredith and probably was referring to that small but very loud minority of citizens that thought wearing a badge meant that you were an evil person. But who knows? In fifty-one years, you saw a lot. Even in quiet towns like Carmel that had never seen a killer like Meredith before.

It made sense in another way, too. Faith was right to help Slade. She was right to try to stop Meredith. More people would have died if she hadn't, including Dr. Carpenter, who was now on her way to a different hospital from Meredith to be checked out despite her assurances that she was fine.

She was right to fight Tabitha and Smythe and everyone when they tried to stop her. She was right to do the right thing regardless of the risk.

She was right, but Tabitha still thought she was a criminal. The news still highlighted her mistakes and decided that her mistakes were all that mattered. People still commented online that she was a fascist who was worse than West.

And it did hurt. It hurt very much. But it wouldn't stop her.

She reached for Turk, who sat loyally by her side. "Good dog. You're a damned good dog."

Turk looked at her and barked with a touch of confusion. Of course I am. Are you all right?

She laughed. "I'm good, boy. As long as I have you, I'm good."

Slade smiled at the two of them. "Maybe I should get myself a dog."

"You should," Faith agreed. "They're worth every second of pain you'll feel when it's time to let them go."

Slade's smile softened but didn't disappear. "Yes. I think you're right." He stood. "Come on. I'll take you back home. I hate to end our liaison by kicking you out of my fine neighborhood, but this place is going to become a media madhouse pretty soon here. It's probably in your best interests to get out of Dodge before Dodge becomes

Hell on Wheels.”

“A double Old West reference. Nice.”

The three of them headed to the car. Slade drove them much more cautiously and slowly back to Carmel. Faith watched the lights of the Restful River Animal Hospice Facility fade into the background and felt a touch of melancholy.

One day, Turk would find his restful river. She doubted he'd ever go into hospice. He was the kind of dog who would need to feel the wind in his face when he passed on. And it would hurt like hell when he kept running, and Faith needed to stay behind.

But he was here now. And the love she felt for him was worth all of the pain she would feel when it was time to let him go.

She ruffled his fur and said, “I love you, buddy.”

Turk might not be able to speak English, but there was no mistaking his meaning when he laid his head against her chest.

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Faith's reprieve was short-lived. On the way back, Slade got a call from the Carmel Police Department telling him to return to the station immediately. "And just so we're clear," the police captain said, "the presence of Special Agent Bold in your vehicle is why you're being called back here. Bring her with you, or we'll have problems."

"I'm on my way back, sir," Faith replied over the radio, guessing at the reason for the police captain's anger. "You can tell ASAC Gardner that I stand by my decisions and I'm ready to answer for everything I did."

Slade pursed his lips. There was silence on the other end for several seconds before the police captain replied, "I'll do that, Special Agent."

The signal disconnected, and Slade released the breath he'd been holding. "Damn. I wish I was ten percent as brave as you."

"You're brave enough. You kept fighting for this case even when the brass tried to take it from you."

"Yeah, but brazenly telling my superior he was wrong? That's a whole new level of badass."

Faith managed a smile, but she was far more anxious than she'd let on. She'd accomplished what she wanted. She'd solved the case. Now, the other shoe was dropping, and she wasn't sure anymore that she was ready to handle that.

But she didn't have a choice. The shoe was dropping whether she wanted it to or not. She might as well face the music.

And she was right. A murderer was in custody. An innocent was alive. Hopefully, ASAC Gardner would accept that and not feel a need to punish Faith for fulfilling the FBI's mission.

Slade took a deep breath when he pulled into the station. "There's a shot. This will be the last time we see each other, depending on how angry our bosses are. So I just want to say thank you. I wouldn't have been able to solve this case without you. Not in time to save Carpenter anyway, and probably not in time to save anyone. Whatever happens in there, I'm glad we worked together."

"Me too," Faith replied. She squeezed his shoulder. "Good luck in there."

"Yeah. You too."

The three of them walked inside. Even Turk looked anxious about what was to come.

So when they walked inside to the sound of applause from the gathered members of the Carmel Police Department, it took them a moment to process what was happening. It wasn't until the captain approached with a grin on his face and shook both of their hands that Faith realized that they weren't in trouble after all.

Well, Slade wasn't in trouble. ASAC Gardner was there, but she had a frosty smile underneath eyes hard enough to cut diamond. Faith had a feeling that she was going to get a very different greeting in a few minutes.

The officers took turns congratulating each of them. Faith made small talk with several of them, and Turk, of course, was the star of the show. He sat in the middle of the room with his chin lifted, smiling contentedly as everyone hugged, pet, scratched and loved on him. If he ever did retire, he would be the world's happiest lapdog.

Faith kept a smile on her face, but she kept an eye on Tabitha out of the corner of her

eye. The ASAC was clearly just counting the minutes before she could pull Faith aside and give her a tongue-lashing and possibly something worse. Part of Faith just wanted to get it over with, but another part of Faith took some pleasure in making Tabitha wait while all of her admiring fans thanked her for doing what Tabitha had expressly forbidden her to do.

Finally, the ASAC had enough. She approached Faith, her frosty smile now the grin of a crocodile approaching her prey. “Special Agent, will you join me for a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke,” Faith replied. She was sorely tempted to leave it at that, but it was probably best not to push her luck. “I’ll step outside with you for a moment, though.”

“Thank you.”

The two women made their way to the side of the building where Tabitha had first warned Faith to stay away from the case. Tabitha did light a cigarette, some fancy high-class brand that Faith didn’t recognize. She took three deep puffs, then turned to Faith. No smile this time.

“Well done, Special Agent.”

Faith blinked. “Ma’am?”

“Well done. You solved the case. You caught the bad guy. And the press loves you.”

“The press?”

“Yes. The Indianapolis Field Office informed them that due to the Bureau’s pressing needs, you were unable to speak with them. However, they express their sincere gratitude to the Philadelphia Field Office for lending your expertise and allowing

them to apprehend Ms. Sawyer as quickly as they did. You are once more America's darling."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Screw you, Bold."

"Ah," Faith replied drily. "There it is."

"Yep," Tabitha said curtly, taking another puff on her cigarette. "There it is. You'll notice I'm still here and not in Philadelphia."

"Yes, ma'am. I assume you knew that I was going to disregard your instructions."

"I knew. I was going to catch you in the act and have you suspended indefinitely without pay until I could have you dismissed. Obviously, that didn't work out. Technically, I could still do that since you worked while suspended due to a failed psych exam, but that would be bad press, and the FBI sorely needs good press right now."

"In other words, ma'am, you got what you wanted, and I got what I wanted. We prevented further murders, and the world isn't demanding to burn the FBI to the ground. Funny how that works."

"As I said, well done. And I suppose you've earned your little bit of sarcasm. Now here's the risk you've taken."

She took another puff and said, "Are you sure you don't want a cigarette? I have a feeling you'll need one when you hear what I have to say."

"I'm all right, thank you, ma'am."

Tabitha shrugged. “All right. Because you ignored my instructions, Franklin West might go free.”

Faith’s jaw went slack as a wave of dizziness washed over her. “What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You investigated a case after failing a psychological evaluation. Retroactive to your discovery of Dr. Patel’s body, you officially investigated a case after failing a psychological evaluation. I realize that court isn’t your thing, but I’m sure you’re aware of how damaging such a breach of protocol can be to a prosecution.”

Faith’s mind scrambled for purchase. “But... that’s okay. It’s okay. Meredith Sawyer isn’t evil, she’s unwell. She’ll be in a mental institution regardless. And this has nothing to do with West.”

“At least until his defense attorneys catch wind of it and call into question your handling of his case and by extension the entire FBI’s.”

“I was cleared for duty at the time.”

“But you were not cleared to investigate West’s case. You weren’t, for example, cleared to track him down twice, by yourself, and attempt to arrest him without backup and without telling the FBI where he was. You weren’t cleared to break into Jared Greenwood’s house and assault him. And then there’s that little issue with your K9 attacking a foreign citizen in a subway.”

Turk growled softly, but Tabitha didn’t react. “The point of everything I’m saying, Special Agent, is that it would be very easy to paint you as violent and unstable and claim—no, prove—that your handling of the West case was severely unethical. And when that happens, the defense is going to move to have the case dismissed.”

“But they can’t do that!”

"Oh yes, they can. I seem to recall a very famous case of murder where a certain football star was acquitted of a crime everyone knew he committed because the police mishandled evidence. I can't imagine that being an FBI agent will absolve you of your own personal responsibility."

Faith’s legs felt weak. “But... you can’t do that. You can’t tell them I failed my psych. You can’t put West back on the street.”

“I won’t. I don’t want that psychopath on the street any more than you do. So here’s what happened. We threw your psych eval out. We shredded all the documents, wiped all of the emails and called Dr. Perth to let her know to purge everything on her end.”

“Did she?”

"She says she did. But she was very angry. She said"— Tabitha pulled out a piece of paper and read—"two wrongs make a right this one time, but I am extremely disappointed in the Bureau for ignoring my recommendation. Special Agent Bold's recovery has been set back by possibly years, and the danger she poses working in her current state of mind is unconscionable. Were it any killer other than Franklin West, I would immediately report this action. But I grudgingly admit that he is even more dangerous than she. I resign as Bold's therapist immediately and strongly urge you to remove her from duty at once—and I'm doing that, by the way—' or she will present a very real danger to the innocent people around her.'"

A knife twisted in Faith’s gut. She didn’t believe that Dr. Perth was her friend, but she thought the doctor respected her more than that. To suggest that she was dangerous to others... that West was only just worse than she was... that was wrong. For Heaven’s sake, she was sad about the Boss’s death, she wasn’t a crazed

psychopath.

“To be clear,” Tabitha continued. “The FBI’s position is that you should be kept on administrative leave and eventually brought back into the fold as a field agent. Like I told you before, you are a damned good detective. Possibly the best since Elliot Ness and possibly even better. But you have to learn to follow the rules. Very, very bad things happen when you don’t. I don’t know how to make this any clearer.”

She took another puff. “We think we put a lid on this before it got out of hand. We don’t think anyone knows that you failed your psych. Against all odds, it actually looks like we’re going to get away with this.” She met Faith’s eyes. “But please, for the sake of everyone, get yourself under control.”

She dropped her cigarette on the ground and crushed it with her heel, then stooped to pick it up and toss it in the trash can nearby. “They really need to bring back ashtrays in front of buildings.” She gave Faith one more look. “Walk the line, Special Agent. You’ve absolutely run out of room to do anything else.”

So saying, she left, her heels scraping rather than clacking over the icy ground. Faith stayed with Turk until her heartbeat calmed. Then she took a deep breath and rejoined the others. She managed to put a smile on her face and share in the celebration, but in the back of her mind, she could see West’s contemptuous leer and hear him promise as he had so many times before.

I will break you.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:16 am

“Where are you gonna go?” Jacob asked.

Faith zipped her suitcase and said, “I called my cousin in Missouri. He’s got a guest house I can stay in for a while.”

“Missouri, huh? Where at?”

“Sunrise Beach.”

“No idea where that is.”

“The Lake of the Ozarks. It’s a little resort town, but it’s a quiet one set a little bit away from the bigger towns.”

“Ah. Well, that sounds muggy and miserable.”

She laughed. “In the summer, maybe, but it’s actually snowing there right now.”

“Yeah, today it might be. The next day, it might be eighty degrees and humid as hell.”

She grinned. “I guess I’ll have to suck it up.”

Jacob chuckled. “Yeah, I guess so.” His expression softened, at least as much as a twenty-seven-year veteran of the Marine Corps could soften. “It was good to see you, Staff Sergeant. I’m glad you’re doing well.”

She wrapped him in a bear hug. “You too, First Sergeant. I’ll keep in touch, okay?”

“You’d better. If I have to go to the swamplands of Missouri to talk to your ass, I’m going to make you regret it.”

“I believe you.”

She released him, and Jacob squatted down to say goodbye to Turk. “You be good, Marine. Take care of your squad leader, okay?”

Turk barked in agreement, and Jacob patted his head. "Good dog."

He escorted the two of them outside to Faith’s car. The city had salted the roads the night before, so driving was a far less terrifying prospect than it would have been otherwise. Not that it would have stopped Faith. She’d dealt with far more dangerous things than ice on the roads.

Jacob watched them as they pulled out of the driveway and headed south. She gave him one last wave goodbye, and he returned a crisp salute that would have warmed the heart of any drill instructor.

Then they were on the road again.

She drove for about three miles when a police cruiser pulled in behind her and put its lights on. She frowned for a second, but when she saw the officer grinning in the driver’s seat, she smiled and pulled over.

Slade came to her window, and she batted her eyes innocently. “What seems to be the trouble, officer?”

“Well, it occurred to me that a brief wave wasn’t enough of a goodbye for someone who saved my career, so I thought I’d buy you breakfast instead. Got time for a donut?”

Faith chuckled. If only Michael could have been here to meet the wisecracking detective. “There’s always time for a donut, right boy?”

Turk barked enthusiastically, his tail thumping against the dash as he thought of the sweet treat that awaited him.

“And me makes three,” Slade said. “Follow me.”

He led them to a donut shop a mile down the road. Faith got herself a chocolate ring. Slade got a Boston crème, and Turk got a plain glazed.

“Huh. I thought you’d get a maple bacon bar,” she remarked.

Slade grimaced. “Why would I eat that?”

She shrugged. “No reason.”

The donut shop was crowded for the early morning rush, so they ate in Faith’s car.

“I miss the old Crown Vics,” Slade said. “The new cars are slick, but the Crown Vics had a weight to them, you know? They felt like trucks.”

“They almost were. Body on frame, solid rear axle, recirculating ball steering until 2003: basically trucks with sedan bodies.”

“Yeah. Good old days. Glad to see someone’s still keeping the old ways alive.”

Faith laughed. “Yeah, that’s me. Old soul in a young body. Well, young-ish.”

He shrugged. “Eh, age is just a number.”

“I wish that were true.”

They fell silent for a moment. Inside the donut shop, a very elderly woman leaned on the arm of her daughter and mumbled something under her breath. The daughter helped her sit, and the woman frowned at her, confused for a moment, before smiling widely and patting her arm. The daughter smiled at her mother, but Faith could see the pain in her eyes.

“I hope I don’t live long enough to lose my mind,” Slade said. “I couldn’t imagine putting my wife and kids through that.”

“It’s not like she has a choice.”

“No, I know. I just... hope it doesn’t happen to me.”

“Me too.” Faith sipped her coffee and decided a change of subject was in order.

“What’s going to happen to Meredith Sawyer, you think?”

“A lifetime in a padded room taking happy pills,” Slade replied. “A lot of people fake insanity, but hers isn’t fake.”

“Where is she now?”

“Still at the hospital. They have her in the secure ward in a private room. She keeps asking if someone’s taking care of Ralphie.”

“Damn. She went quick, huh.”

“I guess so. The doctor I talked to said it happens that way sometimes. They go a little bit at a time and then all at once. Her neighbors told us that she started showing signs of slipping after her dog died. That usually means they were slipping for years

before that and just didn't look it."

Faith's brow furrowed. "So she was showing signs of mental decline and no one did anything about it?"

"People don't want to step into a situation that isn't their business," Slade opined. "They probably assumed she had family or friends to help. And no one could have predicted she'd decline the way she did. How many people do you know start getting dementia and end up going on a killing spree where they try to absolve people's sins by murdering them and laying them to rest using a warped modification of a Celtic ritual?"

"Still, they could have helped her. Even if she was harmless to others, she wasn't harmless to herself. They could have called for a welfare check or taken her to the hospital. They could have gotten her the care she needed before it was too late."

Slade smiled with a hint of bitterness. "Welfare checks don't do as much as people think they do. All we would have done was show up, ask if she was okay, and then make sure she wasn't injured and could tell us basic things like what day it was, who was the President, what her name and age were... Traffic stop questions, basically. We value individual privacy and freedom in America. It takes a lot to have someone removed involuntarily from their home."

"Even still," Faith insisted, "some sort of intervention would have been better than nothing. We could have protected the victims. Even if Meredith was destined for a psychiatric hospital no matter what, we could have sent her there without the blood of four innocent people on her hands."

"Maybe."

Slade's pessimism was beginning to irritate Faith. She turned to him and asked, "Do

you really think there was no chance? We should just throw our hands up in the air, say, 'That's the way it is,' and just deal with it?"

To her surprise, Slade didn't respond by apologizing or by defending his position. He cocked his head and thought for a while. Then he said, "I think that there need to be people who can accept things the way they are and people who can't."

"But how does anything change if people don't believe they can change?"

"Slowly, painfully, and over a very long period of time. Just like things always change."

Faith pressed her lips together and looked away. She understood the point Slade was making, but she really couldn't accept it. "You don't think they'd change faster if everyone could agree that they need to change and act on that?"

"That's a huge if, Faith. Change requires sacrifice. For some people, change requires great sacrifice. I don't know if it's fair to expect others to sacrifice greatly so that the species as a whole improves. Maybe it is. Maybe people should be willing to make that sacrifice. Maybe it would be better to let go of a little personal freedom so that people like Meredith Sawyer aren't allowed to rot until all that remains is the worst parts of themselves. I think there should be people like you who are fighting to say they shouldn't be because it will raise awareness of these circumstances and maybe inspire people to take the initiative that governments won't. I also think there should be people who can handle it when things don't change the way they should because we can find ways to help people with the resources we have instead of ramming our heads into the wall and demanding resources we don't have. It's not a fun way to look at things, I guess. We don't ever have everything we want. But a lot more people have enough."

He finished the last of his coffee. "Anyway, I waxed philosophical and went on a

tangent that only partly has to do with the case. I guess I've just been thinking about the reasons my captain gave me for why I need to let the case go and about why I didn't let the case go anyway. I've been trying to reconcile how he can be right and I can still be right. That's the closest I could come to an answer."

He leaned over and gave Faith a half hug. "Either way, I'm damned glad you came to visit us. If it helps, think about all the people who didn't die because we caught Meredith. Think of Dr. Carpenter, who got to go home to her children."

She smiled. "That's the goal, right?"

"Always. Goodbye, Special Agent."

"See you on the other side, Detective."

Slade walked to his car and pulled out of the parking lot. Faith gave him a wave before starting the engine and pulling out in the opposite direction.

The other shoe would drop soon enough. The people who wanted things to stay the way they were would be very unhappy with Faith's refusal to accept things the way they were, and that would result in consequences, possibly severe ones. Tabitha was confident that they had prevented Faith's psych evaluation from becoming a thorn in their side, but there was that slim chance that things could go very wrong and Faith's greatest adversary could be released to plague her again.

But for now, Faith was content. More importantly, she was proud of herself. Once more, she faced adversity that seemed insurmountable, and once more, she overcame that adversity and did the right thing regardless of the risk. As long as she could do that, she'd be all right. And if West did rear his ugly head again, she'd be ready to put it right back where it belonged.

Turk laid his head on the center console, and Faith scratched him behind his ears.
“On to new adventures. You ready boy?”

Turk barked, and Faith laughed and looked toward the horizon and whatever lay on the other side.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:16 am

“You have fifteen minutes,” Jorge said quietly as he led Michael through the ward toward the meeting room where he would talk to the most prolific serial killer since John Wayne Gacy.

“What happened to thirty.”

“Screw you is what happened,” Jorge said curtly. “We are even after this, Michael. Have I made that clear?”

“Abundantly,” Michael said. “Relax. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You mean besides having the case thrown out?”

“They won’t do that. I’ll record the whole conversation, and—”

Jorge stopped so quickly his shoes squeaked. “Excuse me? You sure as fuck will not.”

“Relax. I won’t share the recording with anyone. It’s a failsafe in case they do try to claim I’m interfering. I’ll record it, and when people read it and see that we didn’t discuss West’s case, it will fall through. Worst case, he’ll get a new trial, but he’ll stay in custody until then.”

“Yeah, and my career will be ruined.”

Michael held his gaze. “Your career would have been ruined years ago if it weren’t for me.”

“Your career will be ruined too, dipshit.”

“I’m willing to take that risk.”

Jorge stared at him for a moment before sighing and shaking his head. “Fifteen minutes.”

He pressed a button on the wall, and the door opened to reveal an interview table with a chair in front of it. On the other side was another chair. In that chair sat the man who had once been married to Michael’s wife, the man who had psychologically and on a few occasions physically tortured Michael’s partner, a man who had killed at least thirty-two people, and—according to Faith—possibly twice that many.

Franklin West looked through the door and smiled. “Ah. What a pleasant surprise. Not as pleasant as the surprise I hoped for, but still pleasant. Won’t you come in, Special Agent?”

Michael’s hands curled into fists. He reminded himself that he was here for a reason and forced them to uncurl.

Then he stepped inside the room. West was shackled at his ankles and wrists, but Michael still felt like a mouse stuck in a room with a cat. West’s unblinking stare and piercing blue eyes exacerbated that image, and Michael had to stifle a shiver as he took his seat.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” West said. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Trust me, it’s not a pleasure,” Michael countered.

“Oh, but it is to me. I found Faith to be the more interesting of the two of you, but it was your bullet that ended Jethro Trammell’s life.”

“Right. I forgot that you think Trammell is God.”

“That depends on your threshold for deification. Perhaps he wasn’t an old man with a white beard who shot lightning from his fingers and breathed life into dirt. But for those precious minutes, when his victims were in his grasp, utterly helpless, unable to do anything but experience the pain he gave to them, he was God. To Faith, when she realized that not even her own mind, not even her spirit was free of his control, Jethro Trammell was God. And for a brief time, so was I.”

Michael’s upper lip curled. “You were never her ‘God.’ You were a psychopath who hurt her, but you never came close to breaking her. Neither did Trammell. He came close to killing her, but not breaking her. A few weeks in a hospital, and she was back on the street putting assholes like you where they belong.”

West chuckled, but Michael could see the hate behind his eyes and knew he’d gotten to him. “Since we’re done with that,” Michael said, “let’s get to the real reason I’m here.”

“By all means. You’re here to ask me about the Messenger.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. He wasn’t sure how much news West was allowed in solitary confinement, but he wasn’t happy to hear that news of the Messenger had filtered down to him. “Yes.”

“And you’d like to know who I believe the Messenger is.”

“Well, if you have an idea, I’ll take it. My initial thought was to try to understand how a psychopath like you ends up obsessed with Faith and what you hoped to gain from her attention.”

West laughed loudly, leaning back in his chair. Tears welled in his eyes, and Michael had to concentrate on his breathing to keep from leaping across the table and beating

him to death.

“Oh, wow,” West said. “That’s wonderful. Boy. I can see that Faith is the brains of your outfit.”

“Ouch,” Michael said drily. “That hurts so much. I can’t handle how much smarter than me you are. It’s so godlike, and I’m just a lowly worm.”

“Oh, relax,” West replied. “God knows I’ll have precious little amusement where I’m going. I have to take what I can get.” He sat up straight, his smile vanished. “I’ll help you, but you have to do one thing for me. You have to tell Faith it was me who gave you this information. If she catches this criminal, she needs to know that I was the one who gave her what she needed to do that.”

Not a chance. “Fine.”

“Good.” West leaned back in his chair and sighed. “The mistake you’re making is assuming that this killer is obsessed with Faith. That’s not the case.”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“No. This killer is obsessed with me. ”

“Is that so?”

“That’s so.”

“So he’s trying to impress you?”

“He.” West grinned. “Or she.”

“She? Wait, this asshole is in love with you?”

“That wouldn’t tell you whether it was a he or a she. In fact, I don’t know if the person sending me the love letters is a he or a she, but I do know—”

“You’re getting love letters? You’re not supposed to get mail.”

“I’m not supposed to be talking to you either, yet here we are.”

Michael’s lips thinned. “These love letters, what do they say?”

“Mostly the usual saccharine nonsense. How much she loves me, how we’re meant to be together—again, I use her for simplicity’s sake. I can’t guarantee that the killer is female.”

“What else?”

“Well, they say that Faith Bold is an evil... I don’t think you’d appreciate if I repeated the word. Suffice it to say, she hates her, and she promises me that she’ll punish her. She promises me that she’ll finish what I started and break her. And do you know what? I think she’ll succeed. Not the way I would have succeeded. Probably not the way she wants to succeed. But she’ll break Faith all the same. You know the only reason I’m not on death row right now is that Faith has consistently mishandled her cases to the point where the prosecution has to struggle to keep my case from being dismissed?”

Michael leaned forward. “Read my lips, West. You will never get out of here.”

“Oh, of course not. It wouldn’t be allowed. If the case was dismissed, I’d no doubt be shot within seconds of the judge’s gavel falling. But the fact remains that Faith has become so much of a liability that the FBI has chosen to allow the Messenger to keep killing rather than risk letting Faith make another mistake. Eventually, her mistakes will catch up to her. She’ll lose her job. She’ll leave in disgrace. Or—and I find this far more likely—she’ll take justice into her own hands.”

West leaned forward, his grin now a sneer. “I look forward to the day when you have to visit your partner in a cell just as you are visiting me. I look forward to the day when Faith has to come to terms with the fact that stripped of the trappings of justice and ‘right,’ she is no better than I am.”

The door opened, and Jorge called, “Okay, Michael. Time’s up.”

Michael got to his feet and nodded to West. “Enjoy irrelevance, little man.”

West’s laughter echoed across the room as Michael followed Jorge outside. Once the door closed, Jorge said, “Okay. We’re even now. Comprene ?”

Michael turned to the warden, and the look on his face caused Jorge to blanch. “I want every single letter West has received since he’s been incarcerated. Every one. Or I’ll come forward with everything I know.”

Jorge seemed to consider denying Michael for a moment, but only for a moment. “Okay,” he replied softly. “I’ll have them bagged up for you.”

Michael turned away, and Jorge's footsteps echoed behind him a safe distance away as the two men headed outside of the maximum-security ward.

Michael didn’t believe for a second that Faith would end up in prison for murdering a suspect. But it was far from impossible that Faith would lose her career for breaking too many rules.

And if West’s case was dismissed, and if he wasn’t shot on his way out of the courtroom...

He’d seen what West could do by himself. He’d seen what the Messenger could do by himself. Or herself. Or whatever.

But both of them together? That might be more than even Faith could handle.

He had to prevent that from happening. No matter the cost.