

BLAKE PIERCE

SO

LONG

A FAITH BOLD MYSTERY—BOOK #1

SO LONG

(A Faith Bold Mystery —Book One)

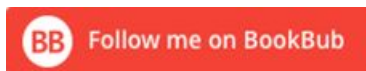
BLAKE PIERCE

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSIE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising twenty-eight books; of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising sixteen books, of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books; of the LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising eleven books; of the ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising fourteen books (and counting); of the A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising nine books, of the AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising six books; of the RACHEL GIFT mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the VALERIE LAW mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); of the PAIGE KING mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the MAY MOORE mystery series, comprising eleven books; of the CORA SHIELDS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting); of the NICKY LYONS mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the CAMI LARK mystery series, comprising eight books (and counting), of the AMBER YOUNG mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the DAISY FORTUNE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), of the FIONA RED mystery series, comprising five books (and counting), and of the new FAITH BOLD mystery series, comprising five books (and counting).

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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PROLOGUE

Jenna came to with a gasp, screaming and flailing as she struggled to breathe. She clawed at her neck, but the fingers around it were gone. She felt something wet and slick and panicked, thinking she was bleeding, but the next moment, she heard splashing and the moment after, she realized she was standing waist deep in water. She stilled, heart pounding in her chest, the only sounds still present the thump of her heart and the soft splashing of the water as she moved.

She blinked as her vision slowly cleared. She looked around, holding her breath, as though any noise would alert her attacker and she would once more feel his iron grip around her throat.

He wasn't there, if it even was a he. She assumed it was, since the attacker was far stronger than she was and had easily managed to lift her off the ground by her throat when he grabbed her.

She looked around, blinking in the soft light. She was at the bottom of a cylindrical tunnel that reached up about forty feet or so, ending in a small ring of light that was quickly fading. It might not have been forty feet. It might only have felt that way to Jenna because of her fear. Forty feet, ten feet, a thousand feet—it didn't matter. The walls were free of handholds or steps. There was no ladder. Above her, the little circle of light was interrupted by a thin plank with a rope wound around it and a bucket sitting on a hook.

A well. She was in a well. Her murderer had thrown her down a well to die.

No! No, she wasn't murdered, not yet. She could find a way out of here. She had to.

She took a breath to steady herself and tried to climb. She scabbled at cracks in the stone wall of the well but couldn't find any grip. She tried over and over and when five minutes resulted in no success, she cried out in fear and frustration. She

ran her hands through her hair and sank against the wall, sobbing.

That's when she heard the voice.

It came from somewhere over her head and sounded tinny and amplified, kind of like those restaurants where they call order names over a speaker system. She looked around wildly at the voice but couldn't find any sign of a speaker or anything that might give her a clue as to where the voice was.

"Poor Jenna," the voice said. *"Are you cold, sweetheart?"*

"What do you want from me?" she shrieked. "Why are you doing this?"

Her cries ended in a choking sob and when the voice spoke again, she covered her ears in instinctive reaction to her attacker's mocking tone. That did nothing to drown the voice out as it said, *"Relax, Jenna. I'm only having a bit of fun. It's a game."*

A game? What kind of game was this? Jenna thought of a movie she saw once where a killer would kidnap a bunch of people and lock them in a room or a maze filled with booby traps and give them a certain amount of time to escape before the traps activated and killed them.

No one ever escaped.

"All you need to do is climb out of here, Jenna. That's all. If you climb out of here in the next fifteen minutes, I'll let you go. If not—well, you know the answer to that question."

Jenna's blood turned to ice. "Why are you doing this, you psycho?" she whispered.

"Look around you," the voice said. *"Some of these stones are loose. You can pull them out and use them as handholds."*

Jenna didn't believe for a moment that he would help her escape, but she didn't have any other choice. She began to pry at the stones, whimpering with fear and shaking with cold as the water soaked through her clothes and chilled her to the bone.

When one of the tiles actually came loose and fell into the water with a clunk, she nearly cried with relief.

“See?” the voice said. *“I’m not a complete jerk. Now reach above you and find the next handhold.”*

Jenna did as she was bid and once more cried with relief when she found the second handhold. She lifted herself up, her foot in the first hole and her left hand in the second. With her right, she began digging around for the third handhold.

“Good girl,” the voice coaxed. *“You’re doing great.”*

Jenna felt her fear soften slightly and when she found yet another handhold, she felt her spirits lift. She was doing it! She had no idea why someone would enjoy scaring a person like this, but she thought that maybe this was all it was. Maybe they were just trying to have a laugh and they would really let her go when she got out.

This continued for a few more minutes. After five minutes, she was fifteen feet off the ground and almost confident that she would make it out of the well. She felt around for another handhold but didn’t find one.

“Hello?” she called. “Hello? I can’t find the next handhold.”

There was no answer.

“Hello? Hello! *Hello!*”

Then she saw the scratches. They lined the stones above her head in an irregular half-circle from where she was standing. She lifted a trembling hand and found the scratches clustered right at the edge of her reach. Shaking, she scraped one of the rocks with her fingernail. A new scratch appeared, and Jenna’s fear returned in force.

She wasn’t getting out of here. The voice had led her on for its own amusement. Her unknown assailant absolutely intended for her to die.

When the voice came back, the tone had changed to one of malevolent triumph. *“Oh, so sorry. I’m afraid that I’ve been pulling your leg. You’re stuck here, Jenna. This is it. This is where you die.”*

“No,” Jenna sobbed softly.

“Take one last look at the sun, Jenna,” the voice said.
“Goodbye.”

Jenna heard a soft scraping noise and looked up to see a silhouette pushing a large lid over the well. “No!” she shrieked. “No, please!”

The lid clanged shut, covering Jenna in darkness.

For the next several hours, muffled screaming could be heard from inside the well.

Then there was only silence.

CHAPTER ONE

Special Agent Faith Bold stared out the window at the hazy gray sky outside. The room was empty at the moment save for Faith, and the only sound was the soft beeping of the EKG and the even softer drip of her IV.

Four weeks, five surgeries, and a dozen other minor procedures later, she didn't hurt anymore. She didn't feel much of anything anymore. She wasn't sure if it was the morphine that trickled into her body at a rate of two point five milligrams per hour that numbed her or if her general disillusionment with life had robbed her of the ability to feel anything.

Ten years. Ten years with the FBI and each year worse than the last. When she graduated from Quantico, she felt on top of the world. She imagined herself at the head of a crack team of super agents, foiling terrorist plots and catching murderers, fulfilling her dream of protecting the innocent from those who would prey on them.

Ten years, and each year, her dreams were chipped away, along with every other part of her, until there was nothing left but the mute, soulless lump of ruined flesh that lay supine on the bed, wires and hoses sticking from every exposed piece of skin.

The crack agents she thought she would work with turned out to be bitter, disillusioned middle-aged men who couldn't give two shits about the innocents they were sworn to protect and treated her as the outsider because she dared to believe in something bigger than herself.

The cases she was assigned didn't involve terrorist cells threatening to blow up cities. She didn't work to stop human trafficking or stop crazed serial killers. She spent half of her time investigating white-collar crimes that she was pretty sure were handed to her to keep her out of the way. On the rare occasions she was assigned to a "real" case, the other agents

made it clear that they didn't give a rat's ass about her opinion but wanted her out of the way.

A bird landed on the windowsill just outside the room. It was a crow, a great big ugly thing with tattered feathers and a chipped beak. It preened itself, pausing to regard Faith for a moment before dismissing her out of hand and ignoring her while it finished cleaning itself.

It flew off without a second look in her direction, and Faith turned her head away from the window and stared ahead at the screen in front of her. The TV was an older model with only one channel, the kind that aired reruns of daytime soap operas interspersed with talk shows where women in their fifties with enough plastic in their faces to make them look in their seventies would pretend that they knew what people in their twenties thought of the world. She had tried to change the channel when she first arrived here, but that didn't work. She tried to turn the TV off, but that didn't work either. Evidently the hundreds of thousands of dollars her insurance company would pay the hospital wasn't enough to cover a working TV.

The mute button worked, at least, so she didn't have to hear the plastic women talk and only had to stare every now and then at their fake, plastic smiles. The plastic surgery had distended their faces so their smiles seemed like exaggerated fools' grins and their wide-open eyes seemed to regard the viewer not with excitement but with fear.

Those smiles brought the memories back.

No, that wasn't right. The memories had never left. She could still see the crazed grin on Jethro's face as he slid the knife across her wrists. She could smell his sour breath as he whispered into her ear, hear his phlegmy cough as he cackled with delight each time she screamed.

She had finally gotten the case she wanted. The Donkey Killer had stymied local investigators for ten years and finally, the Pennsylvania State Police had come to the FBI for help. Faith, already feeling like she was losing her passion for her work, had begged to be lead, desperate for one thing to hold onto to give her a reason to stay and not leave the Bureau for some desk job with a local police force.

SAC Monroe had given her the case, and within three months, Faith had found him.

Or rather, he found her.

She fought him. She fought him so hard. She used every ounce of her training to fight him, leveraging her years of daily practice. She fought him with every last bit of strength she had.

And she lost. Training didn't matter. He was a man, and he was stronger than she was, and he just overpowered her, slamming her head into the concrete until she passed out, waking up to find herself tied to a bed while Jethro Trammell, the Donkey Killer, used a rusty knife to see if her blood was different colors in different parts of her body.

She screamed as the knife bit into her knee, severing tendons and ligaments. Jethro cackled exuberantly, dancing around like a child, although he was nearly seven feet tall and over three hundred pounds. He quickly knelt in front of her and severed the Achilles tendon that bound her ankle to her calf, giggling when the tendon popped and her calf muscle balled up like a tumor under her ruined knee.

She blinked, driving the memory away. It had happened. Dwelling on it would change nothing. Jethro had dissected her like an animal, and if she ever walked again, it would be a miracle, as Dr. Rosenthal had remarked quietly to a nurse when he thought Faith was asleep. She was rescued, of course. Michael—the only part of her career with the FBI that could be called a silver lining—followed her trail from where Jethro grabbed her and—just before Jethro moved from her leg to her throat—burst into the building and dropped Jethro with a single shot.

And that's how she survived. That's how Faith Bold, FBI agent extraordinaire, managed to escape the clutches of a crazed killer—saved by a man while she wept helplessly.

Her eyes drifted to the IV stand that dispensed her morphine drip. The dial was within her reach. Every movement hurt, but if she could withstand the pain a moment longer, she could turn the dial up all the way, and in an hour or so, there would be no more pain.

Her eyes lingered for a long time. No more shattered dreams, no more shattered body. No more disillusionment, no more passive-aggressive misogyny from a bunch of old men who were as bitter as she was. No more anything. Just a moment of calm and peace before her long rest.

The door to the room opened without a knock. Faith turned, expecting to see the nurse coming by to ask her the same questions all over again. Instead, she saw Michael Prince, her partner and one-time lover. He smiled at her, but she could see the pain in his eyes as he looked at her. That pain was the most beautiful thing she had seen in a while because it told her that someone, at least, still cared for her.

“How ya doin’, kid?” he asked in the exaggerated Brooklyn accent he sometimes affected even though he was from Sacramento.

“Can’t complain,” she said, her throat scratchy. The doctors told her that was the morphine, but she could still feel the bruises from Jethro’s fingers.

Michael chuckled. “Yeah, beautiful day, right?”

He fell silent a moment. Faith could see the desperation in his eyes, desperation to do something, anything to help her escape the darkness he could see surrounding her.

Well, darkness to him, at least. To Faith, the world wasn’t black so much as a featureless, formless gray.

“The boys all miss you,” he said. “Everyone’s been asking when you’re coming back.”

That was a lie. Even if Faith didn’t know already what the others thought of her, Michael was a shitty liar, and she could see the deception written on his face. It was his one weakness as an agent and his best quality as a man.

“No they aren’t,” Faith said, “but that’s okay. I’m not coming back.”

Michael didn’t respond right away. When he did, he took a breath and said, “Look, I won’t pretend I have a damn clue what you’re going through”—another lie—“but the Faith Bold I know wouldn’t let some hillbilly prick with a knife fetish derail her future.”

“You don’t know me as well as you think you do, Michael,” Faith replied softly.

She didn’t intend for her words to hurt him, but she could see the pain in his face. He was quiet for a moment, then sighed and stood, replacing the hurt look with a smile that only made the hurt more obvious.

“I got something for you,” he said. “Wait here.”

He disappeared without waiting for a response. A moment later, he returned. His smile was genuine this time, but it wasn’t his smile that Faith focused on.

The dog was older. Not old, but not young either. There was no gray in its muzzle, but its eyes carried a haunted look that reminded Faith disturbingly of her own. Aside from the haunted look, and a long scar that ran from just under its left ear to the tip of its muzzle, the dog was powerfully built and carried itself with an almost professional air. A K9, or a former one.

An injured one as well. It didn’t limp, but it walked carefully, almost gingerly, as though it were much older than it appeared.

Faith looked up at Michael and said, “I can’t take care of a dog, Michael.”

“His name’s Turk,” Michael said. “Jack called him Turkey, but I don’t think he likes that name so much.”

The dog regarded Faith with a look that suggested he didn’t much care what he was called.

“Jack was... well, he didn’t make it,” Michael said. “He and Turk caught up to Jethro the day before you did. Jack tried to take him one on one, but Jethro overpowered him. Turk tried to intervene and ended up with his skull split open.”

Michael watched Faith’s eyes as he recounted this. She could tell that he hoped his words would comfort her. Hey, Faith, I know that you were overpowered, beaten, and nearly murdered by a crazed killer, but if it makes you feel any better, he beat a man and a German shepherd too, so you’re not really any worse than any of us.

She didn't feel better. "Michael, I can't take care of a dog."

Once more, Michael ignored her. "Anyway, Turk here needs a new handler, and the FBI needs someone to take care of him while they find one. I know you're itching for something to do, so here's your something to do. You don't need to train him or anything. Just keep him company and feed him and stuff. Big fan of pork chops, I'm told."

"Michael," Faith said, surprised to find that she could still feel irritated, "I can't take care of a goddamned dog right now."

"I had some of the boys stock your car with dog food, treats, a leash, a bed, some odds and ends you'll need, and a cooler full of frozen pork chops. They're packed in dry ice, so they should still be cold when you get out of here and go home. He's a K9, so he doesn't need you to do much for him. He can even pull your wheelchair to the dog park if you really don't end up walking again, which I'm convinced you will do."

"Michael!" Faith said. "I can't take care of a goddamned dog! Are you listening?"

"No," Michael said, and the vehemence in his tone actually startled her. "No, I'm not listening. You don't get to mope yourself to death. Fuck you. You're taking care of this damned dog so you have something to do other than stare at the dial on your morphine and wonder how high you need to turn it to die."

Faith's eyes widened in shock. She opened her mouth to argue again but closed it when she saw tears well in the corners of Michael's eyes.

"I don't need to sleep with you to care about you, Ness," Michael said. "Get better."

He spun on his heel and walked out of the room without another word. Faith watched him through the doorway until he turned the corner out of the ward and out of sight.

Then her eyes dropped back to the dog, who looked at her with about the same amount of interest she showed in the television. "Turk, right?"

CHAPTER TWO

“Can you squeeze my hand?”

Faith took a deep breath to quell her irritation. Hunter was an excellent therapist. Unlike many therapists, whose knowledge of physical therapy seemed to consist of a three-hour online course and a printed certificate, he was a full doctor with a degree from Johns Hopkins University proudly displayed on his wall. Like many physical therapists, he had the bedside manner of a preschool teacher encouraging a four-year-old to perform simple tasks and celebrating with exaggerated joy when they succeeded.

Faith squeezed as hard as she could. She managed to squeeze Hunter’s hand just enough to feel the pressure of her skin on his.

Hunter smiled as though she’d just won gold in the Olympics. “Outstanding, Faith! That’s a huge improvement over yesterday. You’ll be chasing bad guys again in no time.”

Faith felt a flash of anger at the juvenile comment, but the anger disappeared quickly. Hunter was only doing his job, and his job was to try to help her accomplish what her doctor was convinced only a week ago was impossible.

Hunter continued, “Now let’s see you wiggle your toes for me.”

Faith took a deep breath and struggled to move the aforementioned digits while Hunter continued to encourage her. “Come on, Faith. Dig deep.”

When the toes of her right foot finally complied with her mental command, she felt a rush of excitement that nearly mirrored Hunter’s exuberance. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless, and she smiled at him as her toes slowly curled and uncurled.

“Great!” Hunter said. “Now the other side?”

He waited with bated breath while she performed the same action on the left side. Then he clapped his hand once and said, “Wonderful, Faith. Wonderful! Now, I want you to lift your leg and bend at the knee as you do, okay?”

Faith closed her eyes and took another deep breath. She concentrated, gritting her teeth against the pain as she tried to lift her leg. There was an unpleasant tingling sensation as her atrophied muscles protested the movement, but slowly, surely, her leg lifted.

“Great,” Hunter said, “now hold for three seconds and lower.”

She complied, and when her leg was lowered, she lifted her other leg without waiting to be told, her excitement at her body’s returning abilities driving her forward.

“Look at you,” Hunter said. “You’re ready and raring to go.”

Faith wondered if Hunter ever used that phrase in casual conversation or if that was something special he reserved for his patients. She cast a glance over at Turk, who rested on the floor next to her wheelchair, looking as disinterested as ever.

“Okay,” Hunter said, “I was going to save this for next time, but you’re doing so well today that I think we can go ahead and move on a little sooner. How does that sound?”

Faith’s legs trembled from exertion and the pins she felt in her legs had sharpened to needles, but she forced a smile and nodded.

“Outstanding!” Hunter said. “We’re going to see if you can stand up, okay?”

“Okay,” Faith said.

“Wonderful!” Hunter replied.

Was the man not capable of speech without prefacing it with some overly exuberant exclamation? He reminded Faith of a character she had seen on a sitcom once who would never be anything other than incredibly positive, no matter the circumstances. Predictably, he quickly earned the ire of the

other characters until he was essentially pushed away from their group due to the sheer irritation of being around him.

Under normal circumstances, she might have found his effulgence tiring, but she appreciated his support now. Even exaggerated to an almost comical point, his happiness was infectious, and her doubts receded with each successful movement.

“All right,” Hunter said. “What I want you to do is reach up and grab these lower rails here.”

He pointed to two chrome bars situated about eighteen inches off the ground on either side of her. “Use these to pull yourself to a sitting position. Take your time.”

Faith grabbed the bars and slowly pulled her protesting body off of the mat she was placed on earlier. Her body screamed and she grimaced and gritted her teeth to keep from crying out. She had come this far. She was slowly but surely escaping the despair she was mired in ever since Jethro hurt her, and she would not slip backward now.

“Good,” Hunter said. “Now grab these upper rails and pull yourself to a standing position. Don’t worry so much about your legs right now. In fact, let’s just get to a squat first. We’ll worry about standing later.”

She pulled herself agonizingly upright until she was able to pull first one foot, then the other under her hams. When she was finished, her breath escaped in a rush and her body was trembling uncontrollably.

“Good,” Hunter said, “good, good. We’ll just rest here a moment, okay?” He turned to the dog and said, “Are you proud of your mama, Turk?”

Turk continued to stare straight ahead, not even deigning to look their direction.

“All right,” Hunter said when it became clear that Turk wasn’t going to be of any help. “Now, we’re going to lift ourselves to our feet.”

Faith took a deep breath, concentrated, and slowly pulled herself up. She pushed with her legs, but her legs trembled.

She tried to switch the effort to her arms, but her arms were unprepared, and her elbows bowed wildly, then collapsed.

Hunter lunged for her but missed. Faith braced herself for the impact of her body on the floor, but instead, she landed on something furry and powerful. She grabbed it instinctively, turning her shocked face to look at Turk's own.

He stood strong, pressing himself into Faith's side while she wrapped her arms around him. Something flickered across his eyes. Faith wasn't sure if dogs could feel the same emotions people could, but it seemed to Faith that the look in Turk's eyes was pride in himself for protecting his handler.

The look disappeared as quickly as it came, and as soon as Hunter grabbed her and helped her sit back down, he left and sat next to her wheelchair, where he promptly ignored her again.

"Great job, Faith," Hunter said. "We made excellent progress today. We'll work on standing again tomorrow."

Faith smiled absently, but her thoughts remained on the dog, who, despite its apparent indifference, had leapt to her aid without a moment's hesitation. Hunter helped her to her wheelchair and Turk got to his feet, sensing that they were about to leave the room.

Faith let her hand fall to the shepherd's neck. She stroked softly and whispered, "Good dog."

Later that evening, Faith pulled herself to a sitting position and grabbed the sheaf of files Michael had left on the tray next to her bed. She opened it and pulled out the first page. There was a picture of Turk on top, wearing the same impassive stare he always did, but with an air of pride and excitement behind his eyes that seemed gone now. Maybe that was only Faith's imagination.

Next to his picture were his vital signs: length: 1 meter; height: 0.62 meters; weight, 38.4 kilograms; DOB:

11/17/2016. That made him about six years old. K9s typically retired around nine years old, so Turk was on the older end of the spectrum but far from over the hill.

She continued to read the dossier. The first page was essentially a list of dates. Recruited by Marine Corps 12/23/2017, graduated 6/27/2018. First deployment 8/26/2018–5/31/2019. Second deployment 9/13/2019–4/30/2020, deployment cut short due to shrapnel injury. Upon recovery, unit transferred to FBI 8/19/2020.

Faith stared at those dates, her interest piqued. Turk had served in the Marine Corps, just like her. She had enlisted right out of high school and in lieu of the typical eight-year commitment had accepted six years of active duty with no time spent in reserve. She had also deployed twice, although in her case, she had deployed to Iraq while Turk had served in Afghanistan.

She flipped through the file to find that Turk, like herself, had an exemplary service record. There was a full page of entries for each deployment listing his successfully completed missions. Unusually for a dossier, there were also pictures of him with his handler and other K9 units. In some of the pictures, he was smiling and playing and in others he stood proudly next to his fellow Marines. She chuckled a little when she saw one photo with his paw raised in salute.

She continued to read, and her smile faded when she learned of the injury that sent him home from the Corps. His unit's Stryker armored vehicle had rolled over an IED, and the shrapnel had killed Turk's handler and injured his rear left leg.

The entry below that was his citation for the Lois Pope K9 Medal of Courage, the K9 equivalent to the medal of honor. One paragraph in particular stuck out to her.

K9-38694, "Turk," continued to evacuate the wounded from the damaged Stryker under heavy fire, dragging four Marines to cover in spite of his grave injuries which prevented the use of his rear left leg. When all personnel were safely evacuated from the vehicle, Turk attacked the enemy forces without regard to his own safety, distracting the enemy and allowing his unit to mount a successful counterattack.

A flashback gripped her, a memory of the mission that won her her own citation.

“Bold to Echo-base, be advised we are taking heavy fire. Request immediate air support, over.”

“Negative, Specialist Bold, no air support available, repeat, no air support available, over.”

“Dammit!” she swore. “Request immediate evac. Three Marines wounded in need of immediate CASEVAC, over.”

“Negative. Airspace is too hot for CASEVAC, over.”

“Goddammit!” she shouted into the radio. “There are wounded Marines here, asshole!”

“Understood, Specialist. Proceed to the drop zone for immediate exfiltration, over.”

“Exfiltration? You want me to leave them behind?”

“Proceed to the drop zone for immediate exfiltration, Specialist.”

“Fuck you!”

She rushed forward, snarling, tossing one grenade then another. The smoke allowed her just enough cover to approach the enemy forces without being cut down. She drew her Ka-Bar and moved through the enemy, not using her rifle for fear the muzzle flash would give away her position. She saw a flash of light and felt a searing pain in her side, but didn't slow or stop, not until—

Faith gasped, feeling soft fur under her hands. She turned to see Turk staring at her. His eyes wore the same scars hers did, and for the first time since Michael had brought him over a week before, she felt a connection to the dog. They had served in different theaters of the war, but all soldiers could relate to being in the suck, as the Marines called it.

“We had a rough go of it, didn't we, buddy?” she said. “I'm glad we made it home.”

Turk didn't make any noise in response, but his knowing gaze held hers. She smiled softly a moment, then ruffled his fur again and continued to read. Turk settled down but remained at her side, not returning to the dog bed.

The rest of the dossier was fairly mundane. He was returned to the States, fixed up, and given an honorable discharge. He was sold to the FBI, where he was placed with Special Agent Jonathan “Jack” Preston. She barely knew Preston. He was assigned to the Donkey Killer case, but spent very little time at the office, so most of their communication happened over the phone as he hunted Jethro down.

She shivered when she read the last entry. It described how Preston had reported that they had found the killer and needed backup. It didn’t describe the events, of course, but it described the wounds they had found on Preston and Turk, along with pictures of the crime scene. She caught a brief glimpse of Turk bleeding over the mangled, twisted body of Special Agent Preston and closed the file.

She had another flashback, this one of Jethro’s mad grin as he stared at her. There were three deep depressions on his right cheek. At the time, she hadn’t put two and two together, but now she thought those indentations were about the size and shape of tooth marks from a German shepherd.

She looked ahead for a long moment before turning back to Turk. The dog remained at rest, staring ahead with a deep pain in his eyes that Faith understood all too well.

She reached down, grimacing at the effort it took for her to reach him, and stroked his fur. “Got a piece of him, huh?” she said. “Good dog.”

CHAPTER THREE

Faith let go of the rail and braced herself. Her eyes widened when she stood steadily and didn't collapse or waver.

Hunter smiled at her. "Outstanding, Faith. Let's see you walk around the room."

She moved forward, haltingly at first, but with more confidence as she continued to maintain her strength and balance. She looked down and smiled at Turk, who kept pace right next to her, ready to catch her if she should fall again.

Turk looked up at her and nodded his head. Faith recognized this as his way of acknowledging her. He wasn't the most exuberant of animals, but he wasn't completely shut off anymore either.

Neither was Faith. Incredibly, she found herself in—well, maybe not high spirits, but not so depressed either. She found she could look forward to the next day. Maybe it was wrong to say she was eager to see what the future held, but she wasn't so apathetic to it either.

The past few weeks had been a slow, but steady improvement.

And now, one month to the day since her admission, she was slated for discharge. Well, her discharge would take place the next day officially, but all of the tests and paperwork would happen today.

This was the last and most important test. She was now proving to Hunter that she could handle taking care of herself and could be released to her own home without putting herself at risk of reinjury.

She hated to admit that Michael was right, but Turk's presence had aided a lot in her recovery. Knowing that he was there gave her confidence to push herself because if he could overcome his own near-death experience enough to help her recovery, then she could accomplish that recovery.

It wasn't just the physical benefit of his presence that helped. He was her rock in more ways than one. When she read his file and learned that he had an almost identical background to Faith herself, she saw him no longer as a burden but as a fellow Marine and a fellow agent.

That dynamic was something that a civilian would never understand. Warfighters were often referred to as brothers, but the bond was stronger than that. People who fought in combat together were connected in ways that went deeper than friendship, deeper than blood. Only another veteran could understand the experiences that other veterans had.

She completed the circuit and Hunter's smile widened. "Outstanding job, Faith!" he said. "I think you're ready to go home!"

She returned a smile of her own and said, "Thank God for that. No offense, but if I have to see another daytime talk show, I'm going to empty a clip into the TV."

Hunter laughed, a rich, mellow sound that sounded exactly like what a physical therapist's laugh should sound like. "You know what?" he said. "I wouldn't blame you."

He had Faith sign some paperwork before she headed back to her room under her own power, blithely ignoring Hunter's half-hearted protest that he had to wheel her back in her chair. She turned to get one last look at him and wasn't surprised to see him shaking his head and chuckling.

She grinned and looked down at Turk. "You ready, buddy? We're going home."

Turk looked up at her and barked once. It was the first time he had ever made a noise in Faith's presence and the entire hall jumped at the sound. One of the nurses cast an irritated glance at them and seemed about to say something, but a second glance at Turk made her think better of it, and she turned away, muttering under her breath.

After dinner—meatloaf for Faith and another pork chop meal for Turk—Faith packed for home. Turk fetched items for her without being asked, and Faith considered the change in the dog's behavior. Where earlier, he had been indifferent,

even despondent, he now seemed alert and almost happy. His eyes were bright and inquisitive and when he wasn't moving, his tail actually wagged.

“If I didn't know any better, I would say you were a dog, Turk,” Faith quipped.

Turk cocked his head to one side, and Faith laughed. She reached forward and scratched him under his chin. “Good dog,” she said.

The doorbell rang, followed by a familiar rapid-fire knock. Faith looked up from her recliner and turned to Turk, who lazed on her couch like he owned the place. He met Faith's gaze as though daring her to tell him to move, which was exactly what she did.

“You want to get that?” she asked.

He huffed and trundled slowly to the door, then lifted himself on his hind legs and tried to open it. Faith's eyes widened. “Wow. I didn't think you'd understand that.”

Turk continued to try to turn the knob, but when it became clear that the locked door wouldn't open, he cast a mildly irritated glance back at Faith.

She laughed and pulled herself out of the recliner. There was a twinge of pain in her ankles and knees, but it was not nearly so severe as before. “Relax, grampus. I'll get it.”

Turk huffed and stood aside, but kept close to Faith, ready to eliminate any threat that came through the door. Faith imagined he was going stir crazy just like her. He was recovering faster than Faith, and she could only imagine how frustrating it was for him to have to sit still when his entire life had been spent moving.

The doorbell rang again, and Faith called through the door, “All right. Calm down. Waiting five seconds won't kill you.”

She unbolted the door and opened it, revealing Michael's slightly miffed face. “Don't count on it,” he said. “What, you

don't answer your phone anymore?"

Turk barked once and stepped in between them.

"Oh, come off it, Turkey," Michael said. "You know who I am."

Turk warbled a hurt sound and slunk off to the couch with a stiffly dignified air. He leapt onto the cushion and turned to Michael to stare pointedly at him. Faith giggled and Michael raised an eyebrow. "Well, well," he said, "I guess the goddamned dog wasn't such a burden after all."

"Don't push it," Faith said, "I like you, but not that much. You want a beer?"

"Of course I do," Michael said, "you should know that. It's only been a year since we broke up for Christ's sake."

"Did you come here to talk about our relationship?" Faith asked, opening the door and grabbing two cans of lager. She tossed one to Michael and cracked the other open with one hand, taking a long, deeply satisfying sip.

Michael took a much more reasonable sip and grimaced. "Christ, how can you drink this stuff?"

"Gee, I'm sorry I don't spend twenty dollars a six-pack on San Francisco Fart Juice like you do. I'm perfectly fine with good old-fashioned American beer."

"God, how the hell did I ever live with you?" Michael said.

"You never did," Faith reminded him.

"Lucky me," Michael quipped.

"Seriously," she said, sitting on her recliner, "did you come to talk about us? We can if you want to. There really isn't anything more to say, but if it'll help you to hear it again—"

"All right, all right," Michael said, lifting his hand and pulling her office chair away from the desk. "Truce."

He sat in the chair and took another sip of his beer, then said, "Actually, I came here to check on you."

"How thoughtful of you," Faith said, "coming to visit me again after five weeks."

That wasn't entirely fair. She had spent those weeks recovering and helping Turk in his own recovery, and when she wasn't working on the exercises Hunter sent her home with or encouraging Turk to run and jump and chase in her backyard, she was too tired to do much besides sleep or watch reruns on TV.

"Hey, I was busy wrapping up all of your paperwork," Michael said. If he was hurt by her jab, he didn't show it. "Besides, you told the head nurse not to let me come back after I dropped off King Turkey over there."

Turk barked in irritation at the name and Michael grinned and offered him a finger.

"Oh yeah," Faith said, "sorry about that."

"Water under the bridge," Michael said. "Anyway, you seem to be in a better mood now, so I was wondering what your thoughts were on getting back to work?"

She sipped her beer again and stared pointedly at him. "Boss send you?"

"No," he said. "Believe it or not, despite your clear disdain for me, I still care about you. I know you were in a dark place in the hospital, and if you were serious about leaving the Bureau, I would respect that."

"Bullshit," Faith said, "you'd drag me back by my hair if you had to."

Michael grinned lasciviously. "You used to like when I pulled your hair."

"All right," Faith said, getting to her feet. "Thank you for dropping by, Michael. Good to see you as always. Tell the Boss I said hi."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," Michael said, lifting his hand in protest. "Christ, do you always have to be so touchy?"

"Just tell me what you want, Michael," Faith said.

Despite her tone, she wasn't nearly as irritated as she seemed. She would never admit it out loud, but a part of her would always have feelings for Michael, and seeing him again was a breath of fresh air she didn't know she needed. She

couldn't always express that—and if she was being honest with herself, that was a big part of the reason the two of them hadn't worked out, but she was grateful to have him in her life.

“I want you to come back to work,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

Her eyes narrowed. “The Boss did send you, didn't he?”

Michael sighed. He tapped his knee and Faith could see he was weighing his answer.

“Straight answer, please,” she said.

“Straight answer?” he replied. “No. Well, yes.”

She rolled her eyes and sat back down. “Straight as a hockey stick, as always.”

“He wants the dog back,” Michael said. “By nine tomorrow morning so he can be reassigned. He sent me to pick him up.”

Faith was a little surprised to find she didn't want to let Turk go. She had never been much of a dog person, but Turk was different. He wasn't a pet. He was a partner. She was walking now, and not with the cane Dr. Rosenthal insisted she take home with her. She was healthy and in good spirits, and Turk had as much or more to do with that than anything.

“What if I don't want to give him up?” she asked.

“Then you have some convincing to do,” Michael replied.

“Why? What are people saying?” she asked.

“The same shit you said in the hospital,” Michael said, anger in his voice. He controlled himself and sighed. “Look, everyone's... well, after what you went through, pretty much everyone assumes you're done. Except me. That's why I'm here. I want you to come back to work tomorrow. The Boss is going to meet with me at nine a.m. sharp. If you're there, and you convince him you really want this, you get to stay with the Bureau. If not, you get to leave with a flurry of honors, a nice stipend, and a commendation in the newsletter.” He met Faith's eyes. “I don't think you're interested in a commendation.”

“No,” Faith said, “I'm not.” She glanced back at Turk and felt a wave of affection for him. “We're not,” she said.

Turk nodded to her, and she smiled at him before turning back to Michael. "All right," she said, "it's unanimous. We're there at nine in the morning tomorrow."

Michael smiled. "Outstanding."

He finished his beer, grimaced, and said, "God, I don't know how you can stand this stuff."

He stood and headed for the door. "I'll be by at eight to pick you up. That way we can stop for coffee on the way."

He nodded to Turk, then put his hand on the door handle. Before he could turn it, Faith called, "Wait."

He turned to her, eyebrow raised. She nearly considered inviting him to spend the night, but that would open wounds that were best left closed for both of their sakes. She finally finished with, "Thank you for checking on me. In the hospital, I mean."

He smiled, and though there was sadness in his smile, his understanding outweighed the sadness. Perhaps he knew like she did that some things were better left in the past.

"You're welcome, Faith," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," she replied.

He left then, and Faith felt the aches she had suppressed return. A moment later, Turk brushed up against her. She looked down at him and smiled, then ruffled his fur. "How about a movie, Turk? Maybe the one with the dog that plays basketball?"

Turk barked assent, and Faith laughed, then followed him back to the living room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Faith stared out the window at the Philadelphia skyline. She had lived here for the better part of six years after the FBI transferred her from Langley, but it had never truly felt like home. Nowhere had truly felt like home, not even when she and Michael were head over heels for each other. The last place that had felt like home was the Corps, and she wondered for the hundredth time if she had made a mistake by leaving. If she had stayed, she would be an E-7 by now, maybe an E-8, advising generals and making a real difference.

She felt Turk's head nuzzle under her shoulder and turned to the dog. He regarded her with his wide, understanding eyes, and she smiled. "I guess you and I are in the same boat, huh?"

"Nah," Michael said, "you're a hero. Everyone wants to be you right now. Me, I'm just a veteran. Not even the other veterans want to be me. You're on your way up and I'm on my way out."

Faith wasn't talking to him, but she decided to allow Michael to believe she was. She smiled at him, surprised to find her gratitude wasn't forced. His attempts to make her feel better were as clumsy as always, but it was nice to know someone cared.

She didn't feel guilty over the breakup anymore. Michael was an adult, and he knew what they were and what they weren't. He had made that clear a year ago when he told her they could still be friends and he wasn't angry with her.

She was grateful for that friendship now more than she had ever been.

"Here we go," Michael said, staring out the windshield to Faith's right.

Faith turned to see the Federal building, which housed offices for several government agencies. The FBI field office occupied the fourth and fifth floors. Faith stared at the building and tried to gauge how she felt about it. On one hand, she was

grateful to have a chance at a real return to normalcy. This was almost a second home to her, at least in regard to how much time she spent here.

On the other hand, her feelings about the Bureau had been mixed even before her run-in with the Donkey Killer, and she wasn't sure even now if she really wanted to be here. The night before, she had been eager to get back to work, but now that work stared her in the face, she wondered if she was making the right choice.

Turk nudged her again and when she looked at him, there was strength and purpose in his eyes. She scratched him behind his ears and said, "All right, buddy. You ready?"

He barked once and Michael flinched. Faith covered her mouth to hide her giggle and Michael glared at her. "Yeah, yeah, real funny. You guys make quite the pair."

Faith looked back at Turk. "You know what? I think you're right."

Michael sighed and muttered, "Christ, what the hell was I thinking?"

They pulled into the parking garage and Michael flashed his badge to the bored-looking guard at the gate. They parked near the elevator. Faith knew that Michael had parked there for her benefit so she wouldn't have far to walk. He meant well, but she felt a pang of irritation anyway. She hated the way her body screamed in protest as she pulled herself out of the car, and she hated that the pain didn't go away when she straightened and began to walk.

Michael looked like he wanted to help her, but Faith glared at him, and he remained silent. She felt immediately guilty for her reaction. It wasn't his fault that she was hurt. In fact, it was thanks to him that she wasn't hurt far worse.

Turk either didn't know that she wanted to do this herself or didn't care and remained close by her in case she needed him. She was envious at the progress he had made. He still walked a little more carefully than a dog in the prime of life should, but he didn't seem bothered by pain the way Faith was.

Despite Michael's insistence that Faith was a hero and a celebrity, the other agents in the office barely acknowledged her as they made their way to the Boss's office. She wasn't surprised. She was the dreamer, and people who had lost or surrendered their dreams didn't like dreamers.

The Boss's real name was Grant Monroe, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Philadelphia field office, a thirty-year veteran of the Bureau and a living legend. An argument with a senator on an oversight committee had destroyed his chances at a directorship but hadn't destroyed his passion. Everyone just called him the Boss.

Among his agents he was known for being a hardnosed, no-nonsense dictator who considered good behavior its own reward, came down hard on bad behavior, and had a tolerance for bullshit that measured in the negative. Faith was not the type to be intimidated, but if anyone intimidated her, the Boss did.

Michael led them straight to his office and offered his usual rapid-fire knock.

"Cut that racket and get your ass in here," the Boss called through the door.

They walked inside and the Boss gestured for them to sit. If he was surprised at all to see Faith, he gave no sign. He wore slacks and a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Both were pressed immaculately, as usual, and his close-cropped hair was perfect military standard. He was more well put-together than many of the drill instructors Faith remembered from the Corps, but oddly, he had no military experience. He lived and breathed and would die the Bureau.

As soon as they were seated, Turk seated on the floor to Faith's left, the Boss said, "All right, Special Agent Bold. I have three questions to ask you, and I expect straight answers. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Faith replied. "Understood."

"Good," he replied. "Question one: How are you feeling?"

Faith stared at him in silence. She blinked, not expecting the question. The Boss's eyes bored into her, and she blinked

twice more before responding, “Umm, good, sir. I’m good.”

“Outstanding,” the Boss replied without any further comment. “Question two: Are you coming back to work?”

“Umm,” she said, “I mean... am I?”

“You tell me,” he said.

Michael cleared his throat, but before he could speak, the Boss said, “I don’t want to hear it from you, Prince, I want to hear it from Bold. Bold, are you coming back to work?”

She thought a moment. This was the moment of truth. If she said no, she would be discharged—that same day, knowing the Boss. She would get the accolades, the stipend, and the notoriety Michael had promised, but she would be an outsider, now and forever. She would be a civilian, free to live like all of the other people who had the luxury of accepting the world for what it is without a thought for the people who fought and died every day to make that life possible.

If she said yes, she would once more be one of those people who fought and died. She would find herself in danger again and again and again. One of those times, as likely as not, she would end up like Preston, broken, leaving nothing behind but a folded flag and a signed form letter.

But she would make a difference.

She took a breath, looked the Boss straight in the eye, and said in a clear voice, “Yes, sir. I’m coming back. I want serious cases, though. Real cases. I’m tired of being shunted to the side.”

The Boss raised his eyebrow. “The Donkey Killer was a real case and it almost got you killed. Are you sure you want more of the same?”

Faith recalled the crazed look in Jethro’s eyes as he sliced into her knee. The truth was she never wanted to find herself there again. Then again, after her first firefight in Iraq, she had never wanted to find herself in a firefight again, but she had run without hesitation into half a dozen more after that first. Whatever else she was, she was a soldier and a fighter, and she wouldn’t run from her duty to the Bureau just because she nearly became one of the many who died performing that duty.

Jack Preston didn't run. Turk didn't run. She wouldn't run either.

"I'm sure, Boss. I want to come back. Just let me be useful."

It may have just been her imagination, but she thought she saw a small smile flash across the Boss's face before he replied, "I can do that, Special Agent. Glad to have you back."

Michael turned to her, eyebrows raised in amazement. That kind of recognition wasn't typical of the Boss. Faith kept her eyes on the Boss and said, "Thank you, sir."

"Third question," the Boss said, ignoring her gratitude. "Do you want the dog, or do you want him reassigned?"

Faith blinked. "Sir?"

"You heard me, Bold," the Boss replied. "Either you keep the dog, or we find him another handler, but I need to know now. What do you want to do?"

Faith turned to Turk, who regarded her with an expression of solidarity and trust she had seen on few other living beings. She thought of the citation he received for his Medal of Courage. She thought of the bite marks on Jethro Trammell's face. She thought of the way he had caught her when she fell, and the way he stood by her side everywhere she went.

She thought of that, and her answer was easy.

"I want to keep him, sir," she said, looking at the Boss.

"Good," the Boss said. "At some point soon, we'll need to get you trained and licensed, but right now, we have something more important for you. A case just dropped, and they want you. You might as well take the dog—what's his name?"

"Turk, sir."

"Turk? Good name. Strong. They want you and Turk." He turned to Michael. "You can go too."

"Thank you, sir," Michael replied drily.

"Who wants me, sir?" Faith asked. "Us, I mean."

"Morgan County, Missouri," the Boss said.

"Why me?" she asked. "I mean..." She glanced at Michael.

“As far as the public knows,” the Boss said, “you and Prince both apprehended Trammell together. You were injured in your heroic efforts to prevent him from escaping.” He stared at Faith, and his eyes bored into her. “That’s all they’ll ever know, are we clear, Special Agent?”

Faith nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good,” the Boss said. He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a file. He tossed it on the desk and gestured for the two agents to take a look. Faith opened the file and pulled out the crime scene photos.

Her stomach turned when she saw the first bloated body.

“Christ Almighty,” Michael whispered under his breath.

“Two so far,” the Boss said, “both found in wells. Both of them with signs of a struggle before their death. Sheriff’s department is getting nowhere.”

“What do we know?” Faith asked.

“We know the victims are both women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. We know that they were both strangled at some point before their death, but the strangulation is never fatal.”

“So he chokes them out and throws them into a well,” Michael interjected.

“Looks that way,” the Boss said. “We know that the victims tried to escape. There are contusions on the limbs, torn fingers and toenails, raw skin, scrapes on the knuckles, the whole shebang.”

“So they’re conscious when they’re in the well,” Faith said.

“Yep,” the Boss replied. “It gets worse. In both cases, the victim managed to climb to a fixed point from the bottom of the well, usually ten to fifteen feet, then made it no further. CSI reports show that several stones were loosened and replaced in the lower portion of the well to make them easier to remove. Past that point, they’re cemented together. Some of the upper stones were even sanded down to make sure they’re too smooth to climb.”

“Jesus,” Michael said, “he’s toying with them. Giving them false hope, then letting them die.”

“Yes,” the Boss said. “The going theory is that he fucks with them a bit, then covers the well and leaves them to die. Neither of the victims were killed beforehand and the fall wasn’t enough to kill them, only to injure them enough that they can’t make any further attempt to escape, not that escape is possible since he preps the wells.”

“Any evidence at all?” Faith asked. “Footprints, fingerprints, hair, semen?”

“Semen?” Michael said, turning to her.

“He obviously gets off on this,” Faith said. “Most of the time, cases like this are broken from biological material recovered at the scene.”

“No such luck this time,” the Boss said. “There’s nothing. Whoever this guy is, he knows his shit.”

“Law enforcement?” Michael asked.

“Maybe,” the Boss said, “but he doesn’t have to be. Anyone with an internet connection can learn how to hide evidence these days.”

They fell silent a moment. Finally, Faith said, “When do we start?”

“Now,” the Boss replied. “Your flight leaves in an hour.”

“Now?” Faith’s eyes widened. “Sir—”

“Your badge and service weapon are waiting for you in the armory, along with gear bags for both of you. Anything else you need, you can buy from a convenience store. Now get the hell out of here, you have a plane to catch.”

Faith stood and said, “Thank you, sir,” then turned on her heel and started to leave, Turk at her side.

“Bold,” the Boss called.

She stopped and turned to face him. His eyes were deadly serious. “You got lucky with Trammell,” he said. “You can’t bank on luck anymore. You need to solve this case, and you need to do it quickly. Show me you can handle it, and you get

your wish. No more B-level cases. If you don't, then you're back to crap work. Understand?"

Faith took a deep breath. "Yes, sir. I understand."

"Good. Dismissed."

She nodded to him, then left the office. Her ankles and knees screamed at her, but she kept a brisk pace as she headed to the elevator. She heard Michael rushing to catch up and couldn't quite quell the smile that came to her face.

She was back.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tamara groaned and turned off the water. She grabbed a kitchen towel and dried off her hands. The noise was unmistakable. She cursed herself for once again neglecting to make sure the trash can lid was secure. The slightest crack meant the trash attracted wildlife, and the clanging of the lid hitting the driveway seemed to echo through the night. At least, she heard the noise over the water at the tap.

She turned the porch light on and looked through the window. Sure enough, she could make out shapes at the front of the driveway climbing on top of the trash. Ordinarily, she didn't mind too much but it did irritate her that she was already in her pajamas. She grabbed the broom and stepped out the front door.

The night was brisk, and her breath shot a white cloud in front of her. The cold didn't seep through the thin cotton trousers and the plain T-shirt. On the contrary, it enveloped her as though she wore nothing at all. She shivered and said, "Boys, ordinarily I wouldn't mind getting a break from the dishes but not tonight." She hesitated and then shouted, "Go on, now! Get!"

The raccoons, and she could tell now they were raccoons, ignored her. She sighed, briefly considered heading back into the house and getting her slippers on, but instead just gritted her teeth, clenched her jaw, and ran from the porch to the driveway and toward the trash, shouting and waving the broom as she did. This time, the raccoons reacted. She watched them leaping from the trash and scurrying away before she put the broom down and hurried to the can.

The lid rested against the can at an angle and when she lifted it up, she screamed, "God!" and jumped backward as a raccoon hidden there leapt away past her and then ran into the darkness. She stared for a second and then giggled as the adrenaline of the moment faded. She put the lid on the can and pressed firmly to make sure she'd see no more critters that

night. Then she picked up the broom, which she'd dropped when the last raccoon startled her, and headed back to the house. "Tamara the mighty," she said, "vanquisher of rodents."

As she walked, it occurred to her that she didn't know if raccoons were actually rodents. She repeated that in her head several times so hopefully when she got back to her phone she'd remember to look it up. By now, the chill had settled into her enough she thought perhaps she'd leave the dishes for the morning and just dive under the covers right away. She felt both stupid and grateful that she'd left her door ajar when she stepped out. It wasn't wise, and the fact that the wind had blown it open further proved that. On the other hand, she was inside in the warmth with the door shut behind her far faster than she ordinarily would have been.

She breathed out "Thank God" for her heater as the warmth seemed to hit her just as fast as the cold had from outside. *Are raccoons rodents?* Where had she left her phone? She looked toward the kitchen and saw it on the counter. She headed over and just caught sight of a form dressed in black before pain and fireworks exploded behind her eyes and her world went dark.

CHAPTER SIX

As the plane started its descent, Turk seemed unconcerned about the change in the angle of the plane, but the beep of the seatbelt sign startled him a bit. He instantly jumped to his feet, alert and ready to spring into action. It made Faith question (for about the thousandth time) the wisdom of keeping the dog with her in the cabin rather than in a crate somewhere below. Turk didn't seem to care about the muzzle required by the gate agent if she was to bring him in the cabin, a decision the gate agent very clearly disapproved of. Turk accepted the muzzle easily, and it occurred to Faith that he'd no doubt flown many times in similar circumstances with Preston.

She reached over and stroked him behind his ears, and he gradually relaxed and settled on the floor in front of her. Several of the passengers cast disapproving glances her way, but she ignored them.

Michael said, "There's no field office out here. There's a liaison working out of the police department, though. I told him he didn't have to take the trip with us but he insisted. Anyway. Agent Abel. That's a last name. Clyde Abel. He's going to meet us at the gate."

"But we don't know how long we'll be there," Faith said. "We need our own car and the freedom to stay as long as we want."

"Yeah," he said. "I know. He said he'll stay as long as we do."

"That's not the point," she said irritably. The point was that swiftness was critical to cases like this. The killer was still active and a third member of this investigation, particularly one who wasn't sleeping in the same room as she was, would slow them down and increase the likelihood that the killer could strike again.

Michael knew her well enough to know this without her needing to say it. "Well, what do you want me to do?" he

asked with the same irritability in his tone.

She wanted to snap at him and say he could resist the agent's insistence, and tell him they would reach out if they needed him. Instead, she sighed and asked, "How far away from the city is this place?"

"Two and a half hours," Michael replied.

"Jesus!" She took a breath. She took another. Political crap like this wasn't new or unexpected. Chances were Michael had handled the conversations only because he wanted to save her the trouble. She had to get her anger under control. This wasn't the Faith she knew, the Faith who approached her job with a more... What was it? Refined approach? Professional approach? She just didn't know. She wasn't herself, though. Her earlier excitement at getting back to work had faded, leaving behind an uncharacteristic sunburn-like irritation that caused her to fret over details she would never have spared a thought for in the past. Perhaps her scars were deeper than she believed.

"Mike," she said in a much more agreeable tone, "thanks for dealing with him. I'm going to suggest we rent a car and he follows us out if he wants to. If it comes down to it, I'll be the one to tell him to go pound sand, okay?"

He smiled at her, and she felt exposed, like he knew the little battle she'd waged in her head. When he spoke, though, she realized his smile came from a very different place. "You haven't called me Mike in a long time."

Faith wasn't in a mood to reminisce about the two of them, so she didn't respond. She looked out the window, not to see the landing's progress, and asked, "Where are the locals?"

"I don't think they're guarding the scene. Place like this, they probably tape it off but don't post anyone."

"No," she said, "I mean where are they with the investigation?"

The question was foolish. They left Philadelphia less than an hour after speaking with the Boss. The chances of a major break in the investigation in the past four hours was essentially nonexistent.

“Not as of when we boarded,” Michael replied. She felt his hand on her arm. “Look, Faith, I’ll deal with the agent if you want me to, okay?”

She sighed. “No. I’m fine. Thanks. I just want to do my job and none of the rest of it, you know. I forgot part of my job is this. If he were local law enforcement, we throw him a bone but we’re still in charge, you know. With another agent, we have to do so much ego management it’s crazy.”

There was no need to explain this to a fifteen-year veteran of the Bureau, especially when eight of those fifteen years were spent as her partner and four of those years were spent as her partner in more ways than one. Not to mention the fact that she could be dead wrong about Agent Abel. A liaison to the Morgan County, Missouri Sheriff’s department wasn’t likely to have had a chance to do any kind of real work. As far as Faith knew, he could just be eager. She wasn’t thinking as clearly as she should. That worried her.

She stroked Turk’s back and then turned and stared at him. She realized she’d started to treat him as a pet more than an asset. She didn’t know how to feel about that. She especially didn’t know how to feel about how the feel of his fur on her fingertips soothed her. She kept her hand on him as the plane landed and noted with satisfaction that the dog remained calm during touchdown. As the plane taxied, a flight attendant walked to their seat and said, “Captain Brooks is going to keep the seat belt light on when we arrive so you can get to the door before any of the other passengers get up.”

Faith smiled and nodded and as they made their way down the Jetway a few minutes later, she realized she appreciated the gesture from the pilot because it saved her the anger she might have felt at passengers doing nothing but arriving at their destination and leaving. She didn’t like being angry. She didn’t like that her anger was motivated by a wholly uncharacteristic concern that she would fail.

She didn’t like that at all.

They stepped out the Jetway and she saw Clyde Abel right away. He held a sign with Mike’s name but when he saw them, he put it down and walked up to them. Faith heard Turk let a

low growl behind the muzzle until Michael offered his hand. Abel said, “God, I’m sorry. We’ve got a lead on a bank robbery I’m running lead on. I can’t get out there with you, but I came by to give you a Bureau car.”

“You have more than one here?” Michael asked.

He shook his head. “No, but I’ll drive a detective’s sedan until you guys get back.”

“Thank you,” Faith said and offered her hand. “Faith Bold.”

“Special Agent Bold,” Abel said with a smile, “I was looking forward to seeing you work. Sorry I can’t be there.”

The man was very attractive, Faith thought. His smile seemed very sincere, and he had kind eyes. She felt guilty for her angry response at the thought of having him as a tagalong. “It’s our loss,” she said, “and if there’s any inconvenience, we’d be happy to rent a car.”

Michael raised a questioning eyebrow at her but didn’t say anything as Abel continued, “I said it was a Bureau car but it’s really a Bureau SUV. I figure your four-legged agent will appreciate that and who knows what kind of muscle you’d have to flex to get one to rent?”

“We appreciate it,” she said. She did appreciate it, actually. She was glad for that. Other than their carry-ons, they had no baggage, so they followed Abel to the front of the airport where he’d parked the SUV in a zone reserved for loading and unloading passengers. The FBI placard on the window kept it unmolested. He opened the back, and Faith was surprised to see a crate for Turk.

Abel said, “I borrowed it from the police K9 unit. Anyway, I have the GPS pre-programmed to take you to the sheriff’s department. The sheriff will meet you there. There’s a full tank and if you want, I can process your expense report at this office. Take all the time you need but give me a call every week if you stay longer. Anything else I can do for you?”

“You’ve been very helpful,” Faith said, “and we owe you one. You ever need anything, help with an investigation, hospitality, or even a good word with someone at Quantico, I’ll do everything I can.”

Abel smiled and said, “All I did was give you a car for Christ’s sake. On the other hand, if you can get me promoted to the Special Agent in Charge of somewhere in Hawaii or... um, Key West or something, let me know.”

She smiled. Michael said as he took the keys from Abel, “If I hear about an opening in Maui, you’re my first call.”

A few minutes later, Faith sat in the passenger seat as they drove from the airport in silence. The silence didn’t last long. As soon as they pulled onto the highway, Michael said, “Jeez, are you practicing to be a motivational speaker or something?”

She rolled her eyes. “I knew you were going to have something to say about Abel.”

“Hey, I’m not saying you’re an asshole, I’m just saying I’ve never seen you so concerned with a junior agent’s feelings before. You sure you’re okay?”

She wasn’t at all sure she was okay, and that manifested as frustration when she said, “I’m fine. Christ, can’t I be nice to someone without it being the sensation of the century?”

“All right,” he said mildly, “I’m just saying it’s different.”

She stared at him, but his expression remained placid and after a moment she decided she was too tired to argue. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

She woke when she heard, “Your destination is on the left.”

She straightened and looked around. The urban conglomeration near the airport had given way to the wooden buildings and signless intersections of a truly small town. “God, why did you let me sleep?” she asked.

Michael pulled into a parking lot and pointed at the cup holder on the dash. A twenty-ounce cup of gas station coffee sat there. “It’s fresh,” he said, “just got it a few miles back.”

She still felt irritated about napping, but she mumbled her thanks and picked up the cup and drank as Michael parked.

The coffee cleared her head of the sleep and eliminated most of her irritation. She thanked him again, this time without mumbling. When she exited the vehicle, she almost commented on how the building described by a sign as *Morgan County Sheriff's Department Adjunct Office* seemed a lot like what a set designer in a low-budget television show might put together. It looked more like an old strip mall from the seventies or eighties than an office for law enforcement.

Then again, this was likely the first time they'd ever had a need for real law enforcement.

She looked at the surrounding area. There were no buildings immediately adjacent to the office. A small engine repair shop across the street showed signs of activity with two men talking in front of an open roll-up door. A field of perhaps an acre separated the adjunct office from its closest neighbor on this side of the street, what looked like a farm or construction equipment rental office. "Do we know anything about the sheriff?"

"Philip LaCroix, Louisiana transplant. Served with the Lafayette Police Department for ten years before taking the sheriff's job here fifteen years ago. Never dealt with anything worse than drunk and disorderly in those fifteen years. Not until now. He called the Bureau after the second body was found."

"Well, good for him," Faith said, getting out of the car.

Local law enforcement was rarely helpful, or at least rarely helpful without being forced into it. They viewed the FBI's presence as an insult to their abilities and tended to spend the first days of an investigation stubbornly insisting that they had things under control. A sheriff who called for help the moment he realized he was out of his depth was a welcome change.

They walked into the office and were met immediately by a middle-aged, heavysset man with a bushy mustache who wore suspenders and a vest with a comically oversized five-pointed star. He stood and extended a hand to Faith. "Special Agent Bold. It's good to see you. I'm Sheriff LaCroix. Thank you for coming down to help us out. We heard about the work you did

with the Donkey Killer up in Pennsylvania, and we thought you'd be perfect to help out with our little problem here."

Faith nodded politely. She didn't want to dwell on Jethro Trammell, so she asked, "Can you take us to see the second body?"

"Well," he said, shuffling his feet, "I don't know if I can do that. We're a small county here, and folks might not take kindly to strangers poking around at one of our own. I can show you the coroner's report if you like. It's what you might expect. This body was found two or three weeks after death and was rotted and waterlogged to the point where it was unrecognizable. We eventually ID'd her by cross-referencing against missing persons."

"How can you expect to find a positive ID from a guess?" Faith asked.

She didn't intend her words to offend, but she could tell from the way the sheriff's lips thinned that he didn't appreciate her comment. "We're a small county," he repeated. "Folks don't go missing. There was only one person who could've matched the body, and we were able to match the clothing and jewelry found on the victim to those owned by Jenna Nilssen."

"Thank you for your work, sheriff," Michael said, preventing Faith from getting into an argument. "We'll want to see that report, but first, let's have a look at the crime scene."

The sheriff hesitated and finally sighed. "I guess if anyone wants to complain about strangers in suits poking around, I'll ask 'em if they think Jenna cares about that anymore."

"Thank you," Faith said, "and that's the point, isn't it? We're here to be a voice for Jenna."

"Sure thing," LaCroix replied, and Faith thought perhaps he was happy to turn the subject away from his possible procedural mistake. "I'll drive you out there."

Faith, Michael, and Turk followed the sheriff to an old Ford pickup with a faded Sheriff's Department logo on the side. The engine started with a puff of smoke and rattled like an oversized lawnmower as the sheriff accelerated out of the

parking lot down a dirt road that led into the farmland beyond the town.

“What can you tell us about Jenna?” Michael asked.

“Good kid,” LaCroix replied. “Studied at the University of Missouri. Used to play around in the woods behind the old Sheridan place with my son when she was a kid. He’s out in Boston now, getting his degree in computer engineering or something like that.”

Faith listened patiently as the sheriff recounted personal details of Jenna’s life. She had learned from experience that details that seemed trivial could prove critical later on in an investigation.

“Who found the body?” she asked.

“Some hikers from out of town,” LaCroix replied. “They came across a closed well out near an old hunting lodge, and when they opened it, they saw Jenna. We interrogated them, of course, but they didn’t give us anything useful. They’re kids from California out looking to connect with nature or something. I verified their alibis and sent them home.”

Faith almost made another comment about that, but she held her tongue. She managed to say in an even tone, “Well, if something comes up and we need to talk to them, I think California is nice this time of year.”

LaCroix smiled. “When it comes to the weather. Not so sure it’s nice in any other way.”

Michael chuckled. Faith managed a smile. Turk let out a little whine that almost sounded like participation in the joke. That made Faith’s smile more genuine. They made their way to the sheriff’s car, and he said he was fine with Turk just climbing in. Faith felt a measure of comfort with the weight of the dog over her lap as they drove. She stroked his back idly and thought about how she probably needed to stop thinking of him as a pet instead of an agent.

When they reached the scene, a far too pastoral scene in Faith’s mind given the terrible events that brought them there, she opened the door and Turk bounded out but waited for her to exit. LaCroix said, “The well is this direction,” and started

for it. Turk walked beside Faith as she followed, and Michael walked beside Turk. She noticed the dog seemed nervous, whining occasionally and somehow appearing to want to run forward and backward at the same time.

A thought hit her, and she asked, “Why would they open the closed well?”

“Because they’re kids,” LaCroix said, “but in this case, specifically, they wanted to toss in some coins. They figured it would be like their own wishing well, I guess. Back at the station I have their pictures of the body, what they took from the top of the well.”

“Damn,” Michael said, “tell me they didn’t post them online.”

“I have a girl at the station who does that sort of stuff for us,” LaCroix said, “and she’s been monitoring their social media accounts. They’ve been warned to high heaven about it and when we returned their phones to them, the photos were already removed but she checks every day.”

“That’s good,” Faith said. “Did she clone the phones?”

“What does that mean?” LaCroix asked.

“Did your girl make copies of everything that was on the phones or just the pictures?”

“She printed some things,” LaCroix replied, “calls and texts to verify the alibies. I guess phones these days record where a person is when they do that. I don’t know what else.”

By then, they’d reached the well, and she stared for a moment at the cover, a circle of old, weathered lumber formed by what might have been two-by-fours or something thinner. She wondered about the regulations in a place like this. She remembered reading somewhere about urban sprawl and how prior to hooking up to city water, residents were required to seal their old wells. There was a process. She wondered if such processes existed here and why they wouldn’t be enforced if they did.

The sight of the well cover caused her a great deal of trepidation, and from Turk’s still quiet and tentative whines and whimpers, she could tell what happened here made him

apprehensive as well. She swallowed hard and said, “Any prints on the cover?”

“Only from two of the kids. We have partials of all of them holding onto the rim when they looked down, though.”

She nodded and said, “Let’s look inside.”

LaCroix gestured to Michael and the two of them lifted the lid from the lip of the well. The cover came up more easily than she expected. “Does it take two people?” she asked.

“No,” LaCroix said, “one person could have removed it and put it back.”

She nodded and looked inside. She could almost make out the reflection of light below, far below. She almost reached for a rock to test the depth of the well. She resisted and said, “How did you get her out?”

“Backhoe,” he said, “and a chain. Coroner went down in a sling at the end of the chain and got her into a bag.” Faith didn’t know if that was proper procedure but she also didn’t know that there was such a thing as proper procedure for removing a body from a well in the first place.

“And you have the exact measurements of the distance?” she asked.

“From the top to the water and from the water to the bottom,” he replied.

“How deep is the water?”

“Just under three and a half feet,” he replied. “Waist deep.”

“He didn’t weight down the body to make her drown,” she said, remembering what the Boss told them.

“Yeah,” LaCroix said. “Um. She was put in there alive. The coroner saw evidence on the walls she tried to climb up, scratch marks and broken stone and dirt.”

“Right. That’s in our report,” Michael said.

Faith took a few steps back and asked, “Did you get pictures of the walls?”

“Yeah. Had an officer go down on the chain after the coroner came up.”

“Okay,” she said, “close it up.”

“I’ll drive you back to the station and you can look at the files,” LaCroix said as he and Michael attended to the lid.

“No,” she said, “I want to go talk to her family.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Faith sat across from the Nilssens in a small folding chair that Stefan Nilssen had wordlessly set up for her when the three of them arrived. Turk sat next to her, remaining still and quiet.

Michael sat on the couch next to Amanda, the victim's mother. Jenna's mother. He held her hand in both of his and smiled tenderly while Stefan stood to the side, his stony face masking a grief too deep and terrible to express.

Amanda's lap held a photo album, opened to a page where a smiling, freckle-faced girl of five proudly displayed the toad she caught at the small pond just behind the house. Amanda wore a smile herself, but hers was laced with sadness.

She turned the page, revealing the same girl, now a few years older, grimacing with her arms flailed crazily in front of her. The photo captured the precise moment the water balloon impacted her face, just before it burst.

Amanda laughed and said, "This is Jenna's eighth birthday. She wanted to do a water balloon fight, so Stefan and I went to the mall up the way and bought something like five hundred balloons. You know, the kind you can fill up fifty at a time by screwing it to a spigot?"

"Those were the best kind," Michael said, smiling, his hand still holding Amanda's. "My friends and I used to have water balloon fights pretty much every day over the summer."

"Yeah," Amanda said with another laugh. "Jenna loved summer. It was always her favorite season. She was always out playing in the grass or digging for worms or catching toads. Even when she grew up, she was always outside. She just loved being in nature."

Her smile faded as she regarded the photo and Faith saw her hand squeeze Michael's softly. Stefan continued to stare ahead stonily, arms crossed in front of him. On the surface, he looked angry, but to Faith he looked on the verge of collapse,

holding himself together through sheer strength of will. Faith wondered how much longer it would be before that will snapped and he turned to drink only to find that too would never be enough to replace the child he had lost.

“She was so beautiful,” Amanda said. “She was so beautiful and bright and happy and... she was just so perfect.”

Her voice trembled as she spoke, but her eyes remained dry. By the redness in them, Faith guessed she had long since expended all of her tears.

“Why would someone do this?” Amanda asked, turning to Michael. “Why would someone possibly want to hurt my baby?”

There was no anger in her voice. That too, had long since faded away. There was only confusion. People like Amanda Nilssen couldn't conceive of an evil so great that it would delight in snuffing out the light of a mother's life.

Michael squeezed her hand. “We're going to do everything we can to find the man who did this to Jenna,” he said, “I promise you.”

The promise was the typical empty promise all investigators made. It promised no results, only effort. Still, the gentle earnestness in Michael's voice and the tenderness in his eyes drew a smile from Amanda. Even Stefan's stony expression softened when he heard Michael's promise.

“Thank you,” Amanda said.

Faith felt a pang of envy at Michael's ability to empathize. She was far more capable as an investigator, able to see patterns that escaped even the sharpest eyes and piece together the sequence of events that preceded and followed a crime, but she could not engender trust in others the way Michael could. She could not convince criminal, accomplice, victim, or person of interest to open up to her the way Michael so effortlessly made people open up to him.

“Mrs. Nilssen,” Michael began.

“Amanda,” the older woman replied. “Please.”

Michael smiled. “Amanda. I hate to have to ask this question, but do you know of anyone who might want to hurt Jenna?”

Amanda shook her head and said, “No. No, everyone loved Jenna. She was so kind and happy and bright to everyone around her. I just don’t understand why anyone would do this.”

“Did Jenna have a boyfriend?” Michael asked.

“No,” Amanda said. “No, no boyfriend. She... she dated a guy in college, but he broke up with her for another girl and moved to Sweden a few years ago.”

“Hmm,” Michael said. “What about friends? Anyone you thought she shouldn’t be around? Anyone who rubbed you the wrong way?”

“No,” Amanda replied, shaking her head. “No, I’m sorry. Jenna’s friends are all good kids. They were devastated to learn she was dead. We were all hoping...”

Her eyes squeezed shut, and Faith saw that she had not exhausted her tears after all. “We were all hoping she was still alive.”

She burst into sobs and Michael pulled her close and held her, his expression as deeply grieving as Stefan’s. Faith watched Stefan’s face while Amanda spoke but saw no sign that he knew anything he wasn’t sharing. He, like his wife, was devastated by his daughter’s loss.

Michael held Amanda until her sobs subsided. She pulled away and wiped her tears from her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice trembling.

“No need to be sorry,” Michael said gently. “Thank you so much for talking to us. If you think of anything, either of you, please don’t hesitate to call us. Anything helps, even if you think it might not.”

Amanda nodded. “Okay,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Michael squeezed her hand once more, then stood. He nodded to Faith, and she stood. Michael led them to the

waiting car. Faith looked back at the house and saw that Stefan had replaced Michael at his wife's side.

They drove silently away from the house, their expressions grim. Turk lay with his head on the center console in between them, his expression as bleak as theirs.

The coroner was an aging man with thinning white hair, a burly body that would have been powerful when he was younger but had now gone mostly to fat, and a tired expression that wore every one of his sixty-plus years heavily. Faith wondered if that expression had arrived recently or if he had lost his passion long before the past months had brought a surfeit of sorrow to his quiet rural county.

He introduced himself as Beau Heston, offering a meaty hand with a grip that remained strong despite the years. He regarded Faith and a flicker of what might have been hope crossed his eyes. "Sure are glad you came down here, Special Agent. After watching the way you handled the Donkey Killer, we all sort of figured you'd be the woman for the job."

Faith nodded and smiled briefly. She had no desire to talk about the Donkey Killer. "Can we see Jenna's body?" she asked.

Michael cast a surprised glance at her, but she ignored it. The sheriff might not want them to see the body, but it wasn't the sheriff's investigation anymore. She was sure that LaCroix and Heston had done their jobs, but she was just as sure that they were out of their depth in this case.

Heston hesitated only a moment before nodding. "Sure," he said. "Just do me a favor and don't tell the family. Or the sheriff. LaCroix's a good man, but he's taking this case hard."

"He hasn't had experience with murder before?" Faith asked. "In Lafayette?"

"He was a traffic cop in Lafayette," Heston said as he sidled to one of the drawers built into the back wall of the

morgue.

“You guys hired a traffic cop to be your sheriff?” Michael asked. “I mean, no offense but... you don’t think that was maybe the wrong choice?”

Heston’s eyes met his, and his voice was heavy with exhaustion. “These murders are the first in this county in forty-seven years.”

He offered no further explanation and neither Michael nor Faith asked any other questions. Turk whimpered softly, and Faith leaned down and stroked him behind his ears. Heston unlocked the drawer and pulled it out. The smell was moderated slightly by the refrigeration and embalming efforts of the coroner, but the odor was still strong enough that Faith’s breath caught in her throat. Michael gagged and Turk sat bolt upright, shaking his head and chuffing.

“Not very pretty anymore, is she?” Heston asked, his voice deeply sorrowful.

Jenna Nilssen—as Heston said—was not pretty anymore. The autopsy had resulted in most of the water draining from her body, and the flabby, wrinkled mess it left behind seemed to belong to a woman thirty years older. The eyes—once a bright blue—now regarded the agents with a filmy gray. Her fingers still bore the marks of a struggle, the nails chipped and the skin shredded.

Heston gently turned her head to show them a ragged tear in her scalp on the top of her crown. “She was hit from behind,” he said. “There are marks of strangulation, but it looks like she didn’t go down fast enough for him, so he hit her with some sort of blunt object. Best guess is the pommel of a hunting knife.”

“Did you take an impression of the wound?” Faith asked. “Maybe we can match the wound to a particular knife.”

“Do you know how many people own knives here, Special Agent?” Heston said.

“Every knife is different,” Faith said. “We have access to equipment that can read the most minor variations in shape

and size. An impression could potentially solve this case if we can find the knife it belongs to.”

“Won’t have an easy time convincing people to let you look at their weapons,” Heston said. “We take the second amendment seriously out here.”

“All the same,” Faith said.

He sighed. “Yeah, I took an impression. Of her and the other victim.”

“Is the other body here?” Michael asked. “Could we see her?”

Heston shook his head. “No, she was buried last week. I have pictures and reports you can look at if you want to see them.”

“We’ll take those with us,” Faith said. “Any other wounds on Jenna we should know about?”

Heston turned back to the wasted body on the table. “Other than the injuries to her fingers from trying to climb out, there’s a fracture on her right fibula and a hairline crack on the right tibia. Best guess is she fell from ten or fifteen feet when she tried to climb out.”

“That’s consistent with what we know,” Michael said. “Anything else?”

Heston shook his head. “It’s all in the report. I’ll give you that too, but—” He lifted his hand and let it drop. “You know everything I know.”

He stared forlornly at a point between the two agents. “These are good people, Agents. This is a quiet town. We don’t bother anybody, and nobody bothers us. I just don’t understand.”

Faith thought of Jethro’s sour breath as he wondered whether her blood was different colors in different parts of her body. “Sometimes it doesn’t make sense,” she said.

She reached down to stroke Turk’s fur, but the dog had walked ahead of them and now rested its head on Heston’s lap. Heston looked down at Turk, who regarded him with more empathy than human eyes could express.

Heston smiled softly and stroked Turk behind his ears. “Good dog,” he said softly.

He tilted his head up a moment, then said, “Come to think of it, there is something else you might want to know.”

Faith’s ears perked up. “Yes?”

“He drugged both victims,” Heston said. He stood and turned Jenna’s arm. “It might be hard to see now, but there was a needle mark in the basilic vein of her left arm. Tamara too—that’s the other victim. Not sure what the drug is—it was washed out of both their systems when we recovered them, but he definitely drugged them after knocking them out.”

“That is very helpful, thank you,” Faith said.

She decided not to mention that it was something they should have been told the moment they arrived. The locals here were clearly out of their depth, aside from the fact that sorrow was preventing them from thinking clearly.

Out of their depth? Actually, they were completely and utterly out of their depth in a way that bordered on incompetence. From a professional standpoint, Faith found it unacceptable and deeply troubling. As she drove from the police station and Michael served as navigator on the way to their motel, she still felt troubled by their performance.

That was what Faith the FBI agent felt, anyway. As a normal, run of the mill human being, Faith felt sympathy for them. Things like what happened in the well didn’t happen in a place like this. The coroner looked at bodies who died from natural causes or from bar fights or domestic disputes that were, essentially, open and shut cases. Sheriff LaCroix likely never...

It was even worse, actually. She recalled that in his fifteen years as sheriff, LaCroix never dealt with worse than drunk and disorderly. He’d been with the police in Lafayette. That meant he’d likely been exposed to more but the fact that he left that department to be sheriff in the middle of nowhere told her he had no taste for dealing with serious crime at all. They were out of their depth and incompetent because a place like this

shouldn't require someone with competence in this sort of a crime.

"We need to catch this asshole," she said. In the rearview mirror, she saw Turk raise his head at the sound of her voice. The mesh of the crate reminded her of a jail cell.

"Yeah," Michael said, "and we will."

"No," she said, still balancing keeping her eyes on the road and glancing at Turk in the mirror. "I mean we need to catch him before he kills again."

"Faith," Michael said, "look, all we—"

"We have to, Mike!" she said. Turk changed from casually glancing at her to stiff and tense. She reminded herself to be careful about her tone.

"We're just up ahead," Michael said, "Traveler's Palace." She saw it. She didn't think the most generous person on Earth would refer to the motel as a palace, but it appeared more well put together than many chain motels and she imagined it was better inside than many. "I got us a room on the first floor," he said.

"Good," she replied. They'd shared the same hotel room for most of their partnership when they learned it was a workaround for expenses. They were able to spend more on meals and incidentals when the costs of lodgings were carefully controlled. Faith didn't imagine they'd find any restaurants in the area expensive enough to make it necessary this trip but there were advantages to a joint base of operations anyway.

And they'd done away with the potential disadvantages a very long time ago.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Michael looked more well-rested than Faith felt. Turk looked very well-rested, and again Faith thought about how she had a hard time not thinking about him as a pet, which made absolutely no sense. She didn't want a pet and she didn't yet know that having him a part of any investigation was something that brought value to the situation. Still, she couldn't deny that she was grateful for his presence now.

"Do you want to go back to the scene?" he asked.

Faith couldn't say for certain there was nothing at the scene that had anything left to offer them, but she didn't think there was much of a possibility. "We might have to return there later but I think we need to approach this from a different direction."

"All right," Michael said, "I'm all ears."

"I want to stop trying to solve the murder of Jenna Nilssen," Faith said.

"Hey," Michael said sympathetically, "I know this seems like it's not going anywhere, but you're doing fine. We're going to solve this, and I have a lot of confidence in you."

She rolled her eyes. "No, not like that. I'm not giving up. I'm saying we need to investigate the other girl, the first victim. One thing we know is killers get better at it with each kill, especially when they're already at this stage, killing, I mean. We put Jenna on hold and focus on Tamara first. Maybe we find something he missed."

"There's no doubt LaCroix missed something."

"Sure," Faith said, "but I mean the killer. Maybe we find something he missed covering his tracks if we start at the beginning."

Michael flipped through the file. "There's a sister, Allison, about thirty minutes from here," he said, "so we can start

there.” He flipped another page and sighed. “The notes on their interview with her are about... God, three lines.”

“They’re doing the best they can, Mike. They don’t handle things like this.”

He looked at her in surprise and said, “I think you’re really back now, Faith. So we’re agreed? Shall I call the sister?”

She shook her head. “Let’s just drop in unannounced.”

He looked at his watch. “Breakfast first? It’s a little early.”

“Which means there’s a better chance that she’ll be there,” Faith replied.

“Fair enough,” he said.

They left Turk at the motel with a bowl of food and water. Faith didn’t think he’d serve any purpose for the interview, and she also didn’t relish the thought of there being a barking match or other aggression if Allison McKenzie happened to have a pet dog. More to the point, Turk was scary looking in his FBI vest. Most local law enforcement K9 units were self-funded, and many couldn’t afford bulletproof vests. The Bureau had no such limitations and it made Turk look like a war dog.

Which, she supposed, he was.

Turk was clearly unhappy about being left behind. He chuffed and whined, and three times tried to follow them out the door. Finally, Faith stopped and kneeled in front of him. “Hey, Turk,” she said softly. “We have to go away for a little while, but we’ll be back, okay?” she said. “I promise you, we’ll be back.”

Turk regarded her with an expression that seemed almost humanlike. He met her eyes for several seconds before finally walking back to his spot in between their beds and lying down.

She smiled at him once more, then stood and led Michael out of the room. Michael wore a slight smile but wisely chose not to comment on Faith’s behavior with the dog.

They spoke little on the drive to Allison’s house. Faith knew that both of them were ruminating, letting the facts they’d gathered so far cook a little. This was an important part

of the investigative process. The subconscious was often better at finding the little details that could be critical in cases like this than the conscious mind was. The “hunches” that good detectives got were really the product of the subconscious mind analyzing details with a comb much finer-toothed than anything the conscious mind could wield.

They reached the house, a small log cabin that looked like exactly what Faith imagined a rural log cabin in the middle of the Missouri woods might look like. The wood was unpolished and unpainted and stacked across each other like those old building block toys from when she was a kid. What were they called? Lincoln Logs. That was it.

There was a clothesline in the unfenced front yard next to the gravel driveway where an old Ford F100 pickup was parked. The pickup was rusty and the clothes hanging on the line were of dubious cleanliness, but Faith wasn't here to judge. Still, whatever the politically correct crowd might have to say about it, crime rates were higher among lower-income communities and especially higher within lower-income families. She would reserve judgment until after speaking with the sister, but when she passed the shrubbery that separated the road from the house and saw a thick oak stump with a polished axe embedded in it that had no sign of rust, she wished she had reconsidered leaving Turk behind.

Her preconceived notions vanished when Michael knocked on the door and the woman that answered was frail, thin, and clearly crying. Michael smiled softly and held up his ID. “Good afternoon, ma'am,” he said. “I'm Special Agent Michael Prince with the FBI. This is my partner, Special Agent Faith Bold. Are you Allison McKenzie?”

The woman sniffled and took a breath to gather herself, then said, “Yes. I'm Allison. Sorry for crying. I—”

Her lips trembled, and she took another breath, then spoke in a steadier voice. “Yes, I'm Allison McKenzie. I apologize for crying. You're here to ask about Tammy?”

Faith nodded. “We're investigating her case, and we'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right.”

Allison nodded and stood back, opening the door wide. “Come on inside. Would you like anything to drink? Coffee? Water? Whiskey?”

“No ma’am, thank you,” Faith said. “We’ll only be a few minutes.”

She followed Michael inside and saw that the interior of the house was in better shape than the exterior. The furniture was sparing and cheap and the TV set was probably the last tube TV in the United States, but it was clean and comfortable and cozy. She noticed no sign of anyone else in the house, but just to be sure, she asked, “Is anyone else home with you?”

Allison shook her head. “No, it’s just me. My husband is on deployment for the past six months. Syria.”

“What branch?” Faith asked.

“Marines,” she said, “second armored.”

Faith grinned. “Third infantry.” She lifted her sleeve to show her tattoo and Allison brightened a little.

“Semper fi,” she said with a soft smile that disappeared almost immediately. “Have you figured out who killed Tamara yet?”

“Not yet,” Faith said. “But we have some leads that we’re following up on.”

That wasn’t entirely a lie, but it was painting the truth in a much kinder light. Still, anything they could do to keep Allison hopeful would help. People talked more when they were hopeful.

“Mrs. McKenzie,” Michael began.

“Allison,” Allison said, “please.”

Michael flashed a warm smile and said, “Allison. Can you tell me what your sister was like?”

Allison chuckled. “Well. She was tough. Thick-skinned. Independent. She was a lot like her father. No-nonsense, self-sufficient. She lived by herself a few miles from here out near the creek. I guess you know that, though.”

“You said her father,” Faith said. “You don’t have the same father?”

Allison shook her head. “Our mother remarried after her father died. She takes after her father. I take after our mother, I guess.”

“How would you describe your relationship?” Michael asked. “Would you say you two got along well?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Allison said, bobbing her head up and down for emphasis. “She was wonderful to me. She never called me her half-sister or treated me bad. I was her sister, and it didn’t matter who my dad was. She loved me. She always took such great care of me.”

She smiled wistfully. “Today would have been her birthday.”

She shut her eyes tightly and Faith saw tears leak from the corners. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just... it’s so hard.”

“No need to apologize,” Michael said gently. “I understand.”

“Did she approve of your husband?” Faith asked.

Allison looked at her in surprise. “Gary? Of course. Why wouldn’t she?”

“We’re just trying to get an understanding of who Tamara was,” Faith replied. “What she thought of others, what they thought of her.”

“Are you saying that she might have made someone want to kill her?” Allison asked.

“No, not at all,” Faith quickly replied. “But we need to know if anyone might have had a reason to want—to want to hurt her.”

“Well, Gary would never touch her,” Allison said. “She liked him, and he liked her. Not... not like that. I just mean that she liked him for me. I was always... more fragile than she was. She wanted me to be with someone who would take care of me and be gentle with me.”

“And does Gary take care of you?” Michael asked.

“Oh yes,” Allison said with a smile. “Yes, he’s wonderful. When Tammy met him, she said, ‘That’s the one, Allie. That’s your man.’ And she was right.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Michael said.

His smile was so genuine and earnest that Faith herself could have believed that the best news Michael had received all day was that Allison’s marriage to Gary was going well. She waited a moment longer, then said, “Allison, is there anyone at all you can think of who might have wished Tammy ill? I don’t mean someone who would have actually hurt her, just anyone who might not have gotten on so well with her.”

Allison shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Tammy was strong-willed, but she was kindhearted. She wasn’t the kind of person who would fight with anyone. Everyone thought of her as a gentle giant. Not that she was a giant herself, just her personality.”

Giant personalities sometimes led to giant conflicts, even if a sister was too close to see it, Faith thought privately. They needed to attack this from another angle.

“Tell me about her social circle,” Faith asked. “Did she have any close friends besides yourself and your husband?”

Allison offered what Faith could only describe as a patronizing smile. “We’re a small town, Special Agent,” she said. “Everyone’s friends.”

Faith felt herself grow frustrated. She didn’t have anything against small towns in general, but they operated almost like a family. Problems and arguments stayed within the family and were not to be shared with outsiders, not even FBI agents whose job was to catch a serial killer.

Michael tried again. “Did she have any trouble with any of her friends recently? An argument or a disagreement? A falling out?”

Allison shook her head. “I’m sorry. I know I’m not helping much. It’s just hard to believe that this could happen. This kind of thing doesn’t happen here.”

Except when it does, Faith thought grimly.

Michael smiled again and lied. “You’ve been a great help, Allison. Thank you.” He pulled a card from his wallet and said, “If you think of anything else, please give us a call, okay?”

He stood and Faith followed, but halfway to her feet, Allison’s eyes lit up. “Wait!” she said. “There was something! Oh, I can’t believe I forgot about it!”

“That’s all right,” Faith said, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. “What is it?”

“There was a man she was talking to. Vincent Crowley.”

Now they were getting somewhere. Michael sat back down and asked, “Vincent Crowley?”

“He’s a good-for-nothing,” Allison said with the contempt that only the good Christian folk of Middle America could express. “He lives out by the creek a few miles beyond where Tammy lives—lived. They were arguing in front of the general store one day. It was pretty bad. I wasn’t there to see it, but when Tammy was home, she called me. I’d never heard her so upset.”

“Did she say what the argument was about?” Michael asked.

“No,” Allison replied, shaking her head. “No, she was very private, my sister was. She never wanted to trouble me. That’s why that argument sticks out. It must have upset her a lot for her to call me like that.”

“She didn’t mention anything that might have caused the fight?” Faith asked. “Anything at all?”

“No,” Allison said, “I’m sorry. I wish she had.”

“And you have no idea what it might have been about?” Faith asked.

Allison smiled sadly. “I’m sorry, Special Agent. That’s all I know.”

Well, it was a start. Faith smiled and stood. “Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. McKenzie.”

“Oh,” Allison laughed. “I forgot to tell you. It’s Parks, not McKenzie. McKenzie is my maiden name. But I guess you

knew that.”

Faith gave herself a mental head-slap. Of course. Tamara’s last name was McKenzie.

Michael smiled. “Thank you for your time, Mrs. Parks.”

They walked out of the house. They made it a few steps past the door when Allison called, “Agents?”

They turned and Allison said, “If that sonofabitch Crowley hurt my sister, you tell him from me that I’ll see him in hell.”

Her eyes blazed fiercely, but there was more grief than strength. Faith nodded and then followed her partner back to the SUV.

As soon as they were on the road, Faith called the sheriff. When he answered, Faith put him over the car’s Bluetooth speakers and said, “Sheriff, we have a suspect.”

“*A suspect?*” LaCroix asked. “*Who?*”

Michael raised his eyebrow at her, and she rolled her eyes. “Okay, a person of interest. Vincent Crowley. What can you tell me about him?”

LaCroix swore. “*That son of a bitch. I should have known.*”

“We don’t know for sure that he’s a suspect yet, Sheriff,” Faith reminded him. “But Tamara McKenzie’s sister said Tamara told her about an argument she had with him a few weeks before her death. Said it was bad enough that Tammy called her right after very upset. Any idea what it might have been about?”

“*Yeah, I remember. Crowley lives in an illegal camp a few miles past Tammy’s house on the creek. They used to fight all the time over Crowley sending his dog to steal chickens from her coop or fishing behind her house on her property. He’s a mean son of a bitch. Good for nothing, if you know what I mean.*”

Faith thought wryly that Allison might know what he meant. “The particular incident to which Allison is referring. Was that related to his theft of her chickens or his use of her property?”

“No,” LaCroix responded.

Of course not, Faith thought to herself. Why would it be?

“Vincent ran drugs out of that cabin for a while. Oxy. Tammy caught him once and had him busted. He had it in for her ever since. The day of the argument, Vincent was shouting something about her needing to mind her own business or she’d learn what happens to people who stick their noses where they shouldn’t.”

“And you never thought of mentioning this to us?” Faith said. “You didn’t think, ‘Hey, this man threatened a murder victim with physical violence, maybe I should tell the FBI investigators here to stop the rash of murders taking place in my county’?”

Tact was no longer a thought in Faith’s head. Former traffic cop or not, this was beyond the pale. LaCroix’s tone was wounded when he said, *“Look, Vincent’s been in jail for assault a time or two, but a barfight here and there doesn’t mean he’s killing women and dropping them in wells. That kind of thing doesn’t—”*

“Are you *serious!*” Faith shouted. “He has a *record?* Of *assault?*”

“Agent, this kind of thing—”

“Sheriff, this kind of thing happens here. It happened here. Sorry to be the one to tell you, but two women in *your* county have been murdered. It *does* happen here, and unless you pull your head out of your ass and tell me every damn thing there is to know about Vincent Crowley and anyone and anything else that involves so much as a dirty look between two people in Morgan County, it’ll happen again. In fact, just send me his file. Email it to the address on the card I left you.”

Faith was furious and long past feeling sorry for the sheriff. When he sighed and said, *“Okay. I’m sorry,”* she didn’t bother responding before hanging up.

She stared straight out the window, nearly trembling with rage. “Jesus, what a shitshow,” Michael whispered.

She turned to him and could see by the set of his jaw that he was as pissed as she was.

“We need to cast a wider net,” she said. “If the sheriff is really this stupid, I’ll bet you my badge that this guy’s been killing longer than a year.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Michael said. “We have a real lead here. Let’s follow it.”

“You’re right,” Faith said. “I’m just...” She lifted her hand and let it fall.

“I know,” Michael said.

“It takes more than a big heart to be a law enforcement officer,” she said.

“I know,” Michael said.

“I just can’t understand how anyone can be so fucking stupid.”

“I know,” Michael said.

They lapsed into silence that remained unbroken until they reached the motel.

When they reached the motel, Turk nearly bowled Faith over when he jumped into her arms, licking and chuffing and whining in pleasure. He even released a few barks in his excitement.

“Hey, boy,” Faith said, laughing and trying to keep him from licking her face. “Hey, good boy. Good boy. Did you miss me?”

Turk barked, and Faith laughed again. She gave Turk a bear hug, then set him on the floor where he instantly adopted a professional demeanor and trotted by her side to the computer. Michael watched, a bemused expression on his face which Faith pointedly ignored.

They looked up Vincent Crowley. There was very little information in the file the sheriff sent. Three arrests for assault, one for possession with intent to distribute. A scattering of drunk and disorderly. His social media accounts consisted mostly of pictures of his truck and his dogs and various memes that labeled him a strong right-wing conservative, not particularly surprising.

There was one interesting piece of information. Faith motioned to Michael and pointed at it. Michael leaned over, and his eyes widened when he saw it. “Well, what do you know.”

Among the few friends Vincent Crowley had on social media, one name stood out.

Jenna Nilssen.

Michael turned to Faith. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I’m thinking it’s time we talked to Mr. Vincent Crowley,” Faith replied.

“I think you might be right,” Michael said. “Bring the dog this time. Not that I don’t enjoy a good scuffle, but we owe it to him for leaving him at home all morning.”

Faith smiled at Turk. “What do you think, boy? You want to help us catch a bad guy?”

Turk barked and Faith’s grin widened.

CHAPTER NINE

Before going to see Crowley, Faith and Michael spent the afternoon poring over files and making notes, trying to better orient themselves to the remote Missouri location. With little to no help from the sheriff's department, they felt they were going in blind and needed a lot more information about the area and its inhabitants before questioning suspects and looking for more leads.

The sun was low in the sky when they left the motel, and by the time they reached Tamara McKenzie's house, it was half-obscured by the horizon, or at least Faith assumed it was by the shade of the sky when they continued down the road toward the house where they hoped Vincent Crowley still lived. The sun and horizon were both hidden by the trees and hills that surrounded them on all sides. As a child, Faith had scoffed at movies that suggested that getting lost in the woods was scary. I mean, sure, if you were completely helpless and didn't know the first thing about survival then getting lost anywhere more than a mile away from a convenience store would be scary, but if you knew anything about living off of the land at all, a forest would be the best place to lose yourself. Plenty of food, plenty of water, plenty of shelter, plenty of firewood; it was practically a paradise. Faith had read somewhere that a quarter of a million people lived "off the grid" in places like these.

Today, though, the woods seemed haunted, and she was grateful for Turk's presence, and—though she would never admit it to him—for Michael's. Interrogating a violent suspect was tricky enough in daylight. Doing so at night just complicated things. She'd never been concerned about a suspect before, but since Jethro "The Donkey Killer" Trammell had practiced for an anatomy test on Faith's body, she wasn't quite so bold.

The SUV purred happily as Michael slowly navigated the rough dirt road into the woods. His headlights were on, brights

included, and a swath of forest in front of them twenty yards wide and two hundred deep shone like daylight in front of them. Turk sat close to Faith, sensing her unease, and she wrapped an arm around him and found that it helped calm her.

They reached the house after about ten minutes. It was only a house in the loosest sense of the term. It was a ten-foot-by-twenty-foot shack constructed of heavily corroded corrugated aluminum siding. The roof appeared to consist of more aluminum siding riveted on top of the walls and covered with strips of tar-paper. The door looked like it came off of an old Farmall truck sandwiched into a rough cutout in the front of the house. Another cutout served as a window. There was no glass, but a square of canvas protected the interior of the shack from the elements.

The shack sat directly atop a mound of hard-packed dirt and didn't appear to have a foundation of any kind, not even the crude wooden posts she had seen anchoring tar paper houses in the past. It was very clearly meant to be a temporary location, and when there was no sign of life when the SUV pulled to a stop in front of the house, Faith feared that Vincent had fled town.

“Here we go,” she said under her breath as the three of them exited the SUV. As soon as Turk stepped outside, barking came from inside the shack.

Well, his dog was still here, at least.

Turk's ears pricked up at the barking, and a low growl sounded in his throat, but he remained otherwise calm as they approached the door. Faith quietly pulled her weapon from its shoulder holster and tucked it into the waistband of her slacks where she could reach it easily in case Vincent decided to roll out a particularly unpleasant welcome mat.

Michael drew his own weapon but kept it in his hand as he used the other one to knock on the door. “Vincent Crowley?” he said. “FBI. Open up!”

There was no response save for the barking from the dog inside. Turk growled again and his attention turned toward the window. Faith noticed that and began to back away slowly so she could see either side of the house where it was illuminated

by the SUV's headlights. Turk looked at her, and she motioned for him to stay.

Michael knocked again, calling once more, "FBI! Open up!"

Turk was the first of the three to react, growling and leaping toward the window a split second before Faith drew her handgun from her waistband. An instant later, Vincent Crowley's dog—a huge, shaggy mutt that looked vaguely like a long-haired mastiff—leapt through the window. He landed directly in front of Turk and snapped at him with massive jaws.

Turk leapt lightly out of the way and snapped at the strange dog's shoulder. The mastiff yelped and lunged at Turk, but once more the shepherd leapt out of the way and snapped again, this time at the mutt's hind legs.

The mastiff yelped again and jumped into the air. When it landed, Faith could see it was limping. It whined and backed away from Turk, who growled at it and kept in between the dog and the agents. Faith felt a rush of pride and joy seeing Turk in action. His injuries didn't seem to bother him anymore, and though her own injuries still plagued her, she no longer felt so handicapped.

Faith heard a branch snap behind the house and turned just in time to see a human form rush from the view of the headlights.

"Shit!" she cried, pulling her flashlight out with the hand that wasn't holding her weapon. "FBI!" she called after the form. "Stop!"

Turk turned his attention away from the mastiff for the briefest of instants, and the big dog took advantage of the distraction to leap forward, brushing past the shepherd and limping off into the woods.

Turk started after the dog, but Faith called, "Leave him! Get Crowley!" and the shepherd pivoted and launched after the fleeing suspect.

Faith could hear Michael's footsteps behind her and didn't bother to turn to confirm her partner was following. She kept

her flashlight pointed ahead and tried to pick up the noise of Vincent's flight, but she couldn't hear him over her and Michael's footfalls.

Jolts of pain shot up and down her legs like electric shocks, and Michael soon outstripped her, but even he wasn't moving fast enough to catch up to Crowley. "Dammit," she swore under her breath. Just when they had a suspect, they were about to lose him.

She saw a flash of brown and black as Turk bounded across the beam of her flashlight, but then he was gone, outstripping the two agents and chasing what Faith desperately hoped was an unarmed Vincent Crowley.

"FBI!" she called. "Stop!"

There was a cry a few dozen yards ahead of them, then a very legible, "Ow! Leggo! Stupid mutt!"

A few seconds later, Faith and Michael came upon Vincent Crowley. He was on the ground, shaking and thrashing and screaming. Turk was holding his arm, biting down fiercely and refusing to let go even when Vincent began driving his fist into the dog's ribs. In desperation, he clawed at Turk's eyes, but the shepherd simply closed them.

Faith suppressed a chuckle. Turk's expression almost seemed bored. Faith nodded in approval. She saw now why having a dog could be useful to an investigation.

She holstered her weapon as she addressed Vincent. "I'd relax if I were you. He's being gentle right now."

Vincent cast wide, bloodshot eyes up at Faith, and continued to struggle a moment longer, but stopped when his eyes turned toward the barrel of Michael's still-drawn service weapon.

"Your choice, buddy," Faith said.

Vincent released a sound that almost exactly matched the whimpering his dog released when Turk nipped his leg. He stilled and said, "You can't touch me! I got rights!"

"Yeah, sure you do," Faith muttered.

She called Turk off and rolled Vincent—not gently—onto his stomach. She put a knee into his back and Vincent howled, “Ow! Get off me!” He sounded like a petulant child, and Faith resisted the urge to drive her knee harder in between his shoulder blades.

She patted him down for weapons, removing a rusted pocket knife that would probably have disintegrated before it pierced anything, cuffed his arms at the small of his back, then stood up. She stood him up—again, not gently—and began marching him back to the house.

“Hey!” Vincent shouted. “I got rights! You can’t cuff me unless I’m under arrest!”

“That’s not true,” Michael said, “but if you’d like, we can place you under arrest for assault.”

“Assault?” Vincent howled. “You assaulted me! I was running for my life and your savage mutt damn near tore my arm off!”

“This was after your own savage mutt attacked us, remember?” Faith reminded him.

Vincent stuck his lower lip out and once more Faith had to resist an urge to drive a knee into his back. “Fat lot of good that did me. Damned cur. Fed him out of my own hand and he ran off with his tail tucked between his legs.”

Faith seriously doubted that Vincent was as good to his dog as he claimed to be, but she didn’t say anything. They led Vincent back to his house. Before they entered, Faith spun Vincent around so her face was inches from his. His breath was foul, and his eyes darted crazily from side to side. He might once have been strong, but his muscles had wasted away from years of drug abuse, and he was now only a wasted shell of a man.

“Are we going to find anything in there that will hurt us?” she said. “Any tins of boiling water, nails in your floorboards?”

“Ain’t got floorboards,” he pouted morosely.

“Answer the question,” Michael snapped.

“No!” he shouted. “Okay? I was just here in my own house minding my business and enjoying my rights as a free citizen of this country when you barged in here and threatened to hurt me! I was scared for my life!”

Neither she nor Michael had threatened him, but Faith wasn't in a mood to argue that point with him right now. Neither, it seemed, was Michael, because he offered a deadly smile and stepped closer to Vincent. Vincent shrank from his gaze and Michael asked in a low, deadly voice, “Would you like us to threaten you some more, Mr. Crowley?”

That threat itself was a rather serious breach of protocol, but Faith would have that discussion with Michael later. Vincent shook his head and Michael's smile widened. “Wonderful!” he said cheerfully. “Let's go inside and talk.”

CHAPTER TEN

They walked inside, and Faith saw the inside of the house was more drug lab than house. A dirty chemistry set occupied two eight-foot folding tables set next to each other on the back wall, and jars of pills and powders sat under the tables and around three of the walls. The only signs that this place was lived in at all were a dirty mattress sitting directly on the dirt and a small tube TV connected to an extension cord that led underneath the wall of the house, presumably to a generator.

There was a single chair and Michael pulled this from the table and turned it so Faith could deposit Vincent—once more not gently—into the chair. Turk stood in front of Vincent, tail switching slowly from side to side.

Vincent sniffled and his lower lip trembled, and if there was a small part of Faith that might have wondered about trying anything harder than a cigarette, the sight of a grown man sniffling like a child caught stealing from a cookie jar killed it.

“All right, Vincent,” Faith said. “Let’s talk. You know how this goes. We ask questions, you answer them, right?”

Vincent sniffled and looked petulantly up at Faith. “Can you take these damn handcuffs off, please?”

“No,” Faith said. “First question. How did you know Tamara McKenzie?”

Vincent’s eyes widened in fear. It occurred to Faith that he probably assumed they were here about his little drug operation. Now he realized what they were really here for, and the seriousness of the trouble he was in had finally dawned on him.

“I didn’t kill her!” he protested. “I didn’t, I swear!”

“Did we ask you that?” Michael said, his tone genuinely confused. “I don’t remember asking that. Did we ask that, Special Agent Bold?”

“We did not, Special Agent Prince,” Faith replied. “As I recall, I only asked Mr. Crowley here how he knew Miss McKenzie.”

“That’s what I thought,” Michael said. “Now, are you going to answer us, or do I let Special Agent Turk here have some fun?”

Turk growled low in his throat, and Vincent gulped audibly. “We were neighbors,” he said. “That’s all.”

“Neighbors, huh?” Michael said. “That’s fun. I have neighbors. You have neighbors, Special Agent Bold?”

“I do,” Faith replied. “Good people. They bring me kugel every Hanukkah even though I’m not Jewish.”

“Yeah, I like neighbors,” Michael said. “You like your neighbors, Vincent?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Vincent protested.

Michael clucked his tongue and squatted in front of Vincent. When he spoke, his tone was one a parent might use when lecturing an unruly child. “Vincent, you seem to be having trouble keeping our questions straight. I didn’t ask you if you did anything. I asked you if you liked your neighbors. Did you like Tamara McKenzie?”

Vincent glanced at Turk, who growled low in his throat at him. He swallowed and said, “No, I didn’t like her.”

“Good boy,” Michael said, patting his knee. “Why not?”

“She was a fucking snitch!” Vincent shouted.

He clammed up and paled, too late to prevent his mistake.

Michael smiled. Faith smiled too. Vincent did not smile.

“Don’t look so upset, Vincent,” Faith said. “You finally get to answer the question that’s been burning in your mind. Tell me what you did, Vincent.”

“I didn’t do anything!” he shouted. “I didn’t kill her!”

“What *did* you do, Vincent?” Faith asked patiently. “What did Tammy snitch about?”

Vincent sniffled and actually pouted, his lower lip jutting over his chin. He looked like the world’s worst impression of a

toddler, and Faith's lips curled downward in contempt. "I was selling drugs," he said. "*Was,*" he emphasized. "What you see here is for personal use only."

"I'm sure," Faith said. "So you're selling on the side, and —"

"*Was!*" Vincent insisted. "I *was* selling on the side."

"Sure," Faith said. "You *were* selling on the side, and Tammy told the cops about it. You do a little time—no point in trying to lie about that, we've seen your record—and you come back with a chip on your shoulder. Maybe you decide this tattletale bitch needs to be taught a lesson. Maybe you drop her down a well. You don't think you'll like it as much as you do, but then Jenna Nilssen comes along, and you think, hey, here's another uppity bitch who needs a lesson. How'm I doing, Vincent, am I close?"

Faith kept up the front, but she watched his face as she spoke, and she could tell even before he shrieked "No!" almost plaintively that she wasn't close. This guy wasn't their killer. When she mentioned wells, his face twisted in genuine confusion, and that confusion only grew when she mentioned Jenna.

"I didn't even know Jenna Neilson!" he shouted.

"Nilssen," Michael corrected.

"Whatever!" Vincent said, his lip jutting forward again. "I was out of town anyway. I just got back a few days ago. I can prove it, okay? I was at a music festival in California. I didn't kill her, and I didn't kill Tammy! I don't know about any goddamn wells! I'm glad she's dead though. Sniveling bitch deserved it!"

He jutted his chin forward defiantly when he said that, as though daring the two agents to hurt him for saying it. Fortunately for him, being an asshole wasn't illegal, and they weren't here as vigilantes anyway.

Faith looked at Michael and saw the same frustration she felt written all over his face. They would verify the alibi, of course, but Faith knew he was telling the truth. He wasn't their killer.

“Wait,” Vincent said. “Jenna Nilssen? Was she that bitch who liked my photos of Butch? Yeah, I remember her. She was a tight piece, that one. I sent her a message asking if she wanted to meet him in person, but she never responded. I never killed her, though!”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “We believe you.”

He pulled Vincent roughly upright and began walking him to the car. “Hey, wait! Let me go!”

“Are you kidding?” Faith said as she and Turk followed them outside. “You have enough oxy in here to supply the whole county for the next three months.”

“Hey! You said you weren’t here for the drugs!”

“We weren’t,” Michael said, sitting him down in front of the SUV. “You’re under arrest for possession of illegal substances with intent to distribute and a whole bunch of other charges. You have the right to remain silent...”

As Michael read the now-weeping Vincent his rights, Faith patted her jacket pocket right where she would have found cigarettes if she hadn’t quit four years ago. She swore under her breath and shook her head, then called LaCroix.

Faith took a drag on the cigarette one of the deputies had helpfully offered her when he arrived. Michael glanced disapprovingly at the cigarette but wisely chose not to comment. She took another drag, and when the nicotine didn’t provide the light-headed rush she wanted, she tossed it onto the ground and stamped it out with her boot.

What a waste. What a goddamned waste. All of that effort and energy, and their only suspect turned out to be a small-time junkie/dealer who might get ten years and serve five if the judge was bored enough to even look at the case and not just release him on his own recognizance after destroying all of the pills.

What a goddamned waste.

Turk walked up to her, and she squatted down and stroked his fur more to give herself something to do than anything else. As she scratched him behind the ears, she realized this was providing her the relaxation that the cigarette didn't, so she remained there and continued to pet him.

Petting Turk helped relieve her physical anxiety, but it did nothing to help her mood. They were back to square one. While they waited for the locals to arrive, Faith and Michael interrogated Vincent a little more, but he had absolutely nothing helpful to offer them. He hadn't seen anyone else by Tammy's house or in the surrounding woods. He had heard about the murders but didn't know anything about them.

Congratulations to us, she thought. We put away a small-time pill-pusher and forced dozens of addicts to spend a whole afternoon finding someone else to supply them with their daily hit. Yay, FBI.

She stood and walked with Turk back to the SUV where Michael was talking with the sheriff. LaCroix glanced at her, then quickly lowered his eyes. He felt guilty and he deserved to feel that way, but Faith wasn't here to rub anything in.

"He says he doesn't know anything," LaCroix said, "but we'll lean on him a little—all within legal parameters, of course—and see if—"

"Don't bother," Faith said. "He doesn't know anything. He's not the guy."

The sheriff's eyes widened. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," Faith said. "Have your guys check all known wells—functional or not—within your jurisdiction and have them check them daily."

"Daily?" LaCroix began.

The look on Faith's face stifled whatever protest he might have offered. He lowered his eyes and nodded. Just so he understood why it was important, Faith explained, "That way when something else happens, we catch it before it's too late."

"When?" the sheriff replied, eyes wide again. "You mean *if* something happens."

“God, I hope so,” Faith said.

She nodded to Michael and her partner said, “We’re going back to the motel. I assume your boys don’t need our help with genius over there?”

He hooked a thumb to the weeping Vincent Crowley, who sobbed in the back of a police cruiser now.

“No, we’ll be fine,” LaCroix replied.

“Any news on the dog?” Michael asked.

“Animal control picked him up,” LaCroix said. “He’s scratched up a bit, but not too bad. We’ll put him in the no-kill shelter in Versailles and make sure he’s taken care of until he’s adopted.”

Well, at least there’s some kind of silver lining to this case, Faith thought.

“We’ll call you in the morning,” she told LaCroix, “but if you find anything—literally anything, sheriff—call us.”

“Will do,” the sheriff said.

Faith didn’t have confidence that the sheriff would know what was important or not, but she was too tired and frustrated to worry about that anymore tonight. She got into the passenger seat. Turk jumped into the back and posted up right behind the center console while Michael got into the driver’s seat.

They were silent for the first few minutes of the drive. Then Michael interrupted the silence with a whispered, “Dammit.”

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “Dammit.”

They fell into silence again, and this time the quiet was unbroken until they reached the motel room.

They took turns showering. Faith didn’t bother to avoid dressing in front of him and Michael’s face made it clear her briefly naked body was the last thing on his mind.

What a goddamned waste of a day.

She climbed into bed, and Turk, perhaps sensing her frustration, jumped into bed next to her. She scooted over to make room for him, which left her nearly hanging off the edge

of the mattress. She heard Michael chuckle as he stretched out luxuriously on his own bed.

Prick, she thought silently.

Still, despite the lack of room, she found Turk's presence oddly comforting. This wouldn't work as a regular thing, but tonight, she allowed him to curl up on the mattress next to her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He grunted softly as he lifted the unconscious woman and put her into the back of his truck. The woman was heftier than the others, not quite plus-size, but definitely on the curvy end of the spectrum. Still, it was fairly light work getting her strapped into the back seat. He worried a little that he might have given her too much fentanyl. He used a slightly higher dose this time to compensate for the fact that she was a tad heavier than the other two, and she had fallen asleep much faster than they did.

He checked her breathing again just to be sure and nodded with satisfaction when he confirmed that she was all right. She was deeply asleep, but she was healthy. For now.

He got into his truck and pulled slowly and easily out of his driveway. He whistled a tune underneath his breath to take the edge off of his anxiety. He was nervous, and he didn't like that. He hadn't been nervous with Tamara. He hadn't been nervous with Jenna. He hadn't been nervous with any of his other victims either, the ones the cops didn't know about.

This time, though, they were onto him. Not really onto *him* but onto his case. If *they* were LaCroix and his ilk, he wouldn't worry a lick about getting caught. LaCroix wasn't a bad man, but he was a godawful cop. He could probably slice a woman's throat in front of LaCroix and the man wouldn't figure him as the killer.

He chuckled a little at that thought as he pulled onto a narrow, unmarked dirt road. He relaxed slightly when he left the highway. He knew the sheriff and his deputies were searching the wells in the area for bodies, but they wouldn't be up here until long after it was too late.

His anxiety returned a little as he thought of the dog and the agents who worked with it. Dogs could smell from farther away than people could see. If that dog was ever out when he was, the jig could well and truly be up.

And those agents were smart. Not like LaCroix. They'd get him eventually if he wasn't careful.

Well, he could be careful. He was good at that.

He reached his destination and parked with the bed of the truck and the hoist attached to it backed right up to the well, keeping the engine and headlights on. This well was a solid five miles away from Vincent Crowley's house, and if the cops were starting there, then it would be at least a day but probably two or more before they reached this one. He had time.

He got out and stretched briefly before opening the back door. He reached inside and checked Carla's breathing.

Carla.

It was a beautiful name. It ended with a saucy little flick of the tongue over the top teeth. *Car-la*. He smiled as he traced a hand lightly over her curvy body. He didn't derive any sort of sexual pleasure from his work, but he appreciated a work of art when he saw one.

This one would be fun.

He hefted Carla out of his backseat and hooked her arms and legs through the straps attached to the hoist. Then he slowly lowered the unconscious woman down into the well.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Faith startled awake. She tried to stand only to find her legs and arms were bound tightly to a rough-hewn wooden chair. An icy tendril of panic started up her spine, but she pushed it away easily thanks to years of training and experience handling life-threatening situations.

Her head hurt. There was a dull pain behind her eyes and a sharper one on the back of her head where the pommel of Jethro's hunting knife had impacted her skull.

Jethro-fucking-Trammell. Of course it was him. How the hell could they have missed that? The victims were found literally crushed to death—those who weren't sawed in half, that is. The only person within a hundred miles capable of that kind of thing was Jethro Trammell, the six-foot-eleven, three-hundred-fifty-pound giant famous in Stewartstown for carrying a full-grown donkey on his shoulders for a quarter mile and winning the same donkey at the county fair for the feat. She wondered how long the donkey lasted under Jethro's tender loving care.

Probably longer than she would if she didn't get out of here. She looked over her surroundings, moving slowly to keep the ache in her head from worsening, and saw she was in a barn. Probably the one on Jethro's farm. Not good. This was almost certainly where he brought his victims to kill them before transporting them to wherever he felt like dumping them.

Well, Jethro wasn't here right now. That meant Faith had time to figure out where she was and potentially find a way out of here.

She tested her bonds again. Tight. Very tight. She might be able to loosen the rawhide straps eventually, but it would be better if she could find something sharp she could use to cut through them.

She looked around, but through the dim light, she couldn't see anything that might be useful. She took a breath, staving off another icy finger of panic, but then she heard it. Heard *him*.

"Hello there, pretty lady," said a soft, lilting tenor that sounded like it belonged to anyone other than the deranged giant in whose clutches Faith now found herself. "I'm so glad you stopped by to play. It's been so long since I had a girl over." A nauseating, tittering laugh, then, "Girls are so much softer than boys."

"You won't get away with this," Faith said. God, had she actually said that?

"Sure I will," Jethro said, in a gently reassuring tone. "Don't worry about me. I'll be okay. I don't know about you, though." Another nauseating giggle, as though he'd just made the funniest joke in human history.

He walked closer, each footfall a heavy, sickening thump. He passed in front of the stream of light that trickled downward from a gap in the wall above Faith. The light seemed to ignite his eyes so they gleamed with flame as he smiled down at her. "Now, where shall we begin?"

The tendril of ice in Faith's spine hardened to a tight steel rod. She felt her heartbeat quicken and tried to calm herself by breathing deeply, but she didn't succeed.

Someone will come, she thought. Someone will come and rescue me. It will be okay.

But, of course, no one came. Not until after Jethro severed the tendons in both of her ankles and behind both of her knees and cut her forearms and the undersides of her breasts and she bled so much she nearly died before the ambulance arrived.

Jethro lifted a wicked-looking knife, burnished with rust, and grinned at her. "Let's see what color your blood is," he said.

There was a crash and Jethro looked up, shocked. His eyes widened and he got his arm up, but not before Turk's jaws clamped around his neck.

She felt something wet slide across her face and frowned, wondering what it might be. She stared at Jethro, but Jethro was gone. Turk stood in front of her, staring intently and licking her face.

Faith woke with a start. Turk stood over her, licking her face and whining. She groaned and sat up. Turk sidled up next to her, his nose pressed against her cheek. She smiled and chuckled a little. “Well, good morning to you too,” she said groggily, stroking his fur.

He whined and looked plaintively at her, and she said, “It was just a nightmare, Turk. Nothing to worry about.”

She thought of Jethro’s grin and sour, alcohol-soaked breath. “Just an old nightmare.”

She got out of bed to see Michael still sleeping. She chuckled and smiled at his supine form. Michael was a good agent, but he could sleep through a thunderstorm. She herself was a relatively light sleeper. Thank the Marine Corps for that.

Her smile softened slightly as she recalled the mornings waking up next to Michael, back when she would wake in the same bed. She would sometimes spend the first fifteen minutes awake just looking down at him or tracing her fingers softly over the hills of his chest and the contours of his face.

But that was a long time ago, and things were different now. Her smile faded completely, and she got up and headed to the shower.

Michael was awake when she left the bathroom. She was naked under her towel, but his eyes never left hers when he looked up and said, “Morning, sunshine. You were up first, and you know what that means.”

She allowed herself a half-second to mourn the past, then smiled and said, “I’ll make the coffee, but you’re driving.”

“Works for me. I love driving.”

“I hope you like instant motel coffee too, because I’m not wasting time trying to figure out that damn press pot you insisted on packing.”

“Oh come on,” Michael said, “it’s easy. You boil some water, preheat the pot, measure the grounds, pour in the water, then—”

“Yeah, see? You’ve already lost me. You want decaf or hazelnut?”

He sighed dramatically. “Never mind. I’ll grab a cup at the station. The sheriff’s department here might not know how to run a murder investigation, but at least they can make a decent cup of coffee.”

“We’re going to the station?” Faith asked.

“Yep. We need to touch base with LaCroix and make sure they have an actual plan for checking out these wells. We also need to get a map for ourselves so we can do the real work while they’re keeping themselves busy.”

“What do you think about bringing the Boss in on this?” Faith asked. “We’re not making any kind of headway with just ourselves and the Keystone Kops. If we could get a real team out here, we might be able to put some pieces together faster.”

“No can do,” Michael said. “I already ran it by the Boss. They’re wrapped up in a Ponzi scheme running out of Pittsburgh. They need all hands on deck out there.”

“They need all hands on deck for a Ponzi scheme, but they don’t need it for a serial killer?”

“Between you and me,” Michael said, rolling out of bed and dressing, “the Donkey Killer was a bit of a press nightmare for the Bureau. It looks good if you and I—the principal survivors of the Killer—stop another serial killer in his tracks. It looks bad if we don’t, but it looks worse if a whole team of agents can’t bring him in.”

“And the Bureau can’t pin the failure on us if we don’t succeed,” Vanesa finished.

“Yes,” Michael said. “But that’s the life we chose, right?”

“Speak for yourself,” Faith muttered under her breath.

Politics would be the death of the Bureau. Hell, they already were. It had long since ceased being about catching bad guys to the top brass. It was all about appearance, and right now, she and Michael were bad press, or at the very least risky press. She recalled the Boss’s line about the Morgan County sheriff specifically requesting her. She had felt honored at first. Now she thought that the Boss might have simply been moving them out of the way. Not on his orders. He would never do that himself, but the Boss had bosses of his own, and while he was known to butt heads with them from time to time, he wasn’t entirely suicidal.

And he probably didn’t trust Faith. They had a rocky relationship to begin with. The Boss saw her as an already-jaded up-and-comer looking to make a name for herself whatever the cost, and she saw him as another Master Chief or Warrant Officer who had been around long enough to stop caring if others respected him so long as they did what he said.

The years had improved their relationship, and before the Donkey Killer, Faith respected him, and he respected her. Then she had gotten hurt, and—

Well, there was no use speculating. She could be completely wrong about the Boss’s motives. This situation could have nothing to do with the past and be nothing more than the effect of some pencil-pusher in a budget committee deciding the Bureau’s efforts were better spent chasing money than chasing murderers.

Still, it sucked.

Then an idea came to her. “What about Special Agent Abel? The guy who met us at the airport.”

Michael cocked his head to one side. “Yeah, that might work. I think he’s still on that bank robbery, but I’ll give him a call. What are you thinking of using him for?”

“Anything we need,” Faith said. “We just need someone else we can trust so we’re not relying on the locals.”

“Works for me,” Michael said. “You ready to roll?”

Faith nodded and looked at Turk. “You ready, Special Agent?”

Turk barked once, very formally, and Faith chuckled. “All right. Let’s go meet with the sheriff.”

They reached the station just as the sun began to heat the day. They walked inside and Michael headed straight to the coffeemaker at the back of the room and poured himself a cup. He called to Faith, “You want one?” and she gave him a thumbs-up and walked into the sheriff’s office.

LaCroix’s eyes were puffy, and she had a feeling that his cup of coffee wasn’t his first. He seemed alert enough when he nodded to her, though, and his voice was even and strong when he spoke. He might not be the most capable sheriff in the world, but he was no stranger to hard work.

“We’re mapping out the wells like you asked,” he said. “But there’s a problem.”

“What’s the problem?” Faith asked.

“Some of the wells around here are old. Well over a hundred years old. A lot of them are not in use but are still open. I had Deputy Faro look through old records at the county courthouse and there’s nothing that might help us find the wells that aren’t in use anymore.”

“Meaning the killer could still use them to dump bodies but we might never find them because we don’t know where to look.”

“Exactly.”

Michael walked in and handed a cup of coffee to Faith before taking the chair next to hers and placing a cup of water in front of Turk. “What did I miss?” he asked.

“I was just telling Special Agent Bold that there are a lot of unmarked wells in the area whose locations we don’t know that the killer could be using while we check out the known wells,” LaCroix explained.

Michael sipped his coffee and offered a small sigh of satisfaction before shaking his head. “I doubt it. Serial killers don’t always want to get caught, but they want people to find their victims. They want the ego boost of stumping the cops and frightening civilians. I’d bet anything this guy wants us to find the next victim. Have you checked all of the marked wells yet?”

“Not yet,” LaCroix said. “We won’t be done for a week at least. The ones we’ve found so far are empty.”

“Keep looking. Something will turn up,” Michael said.

He grimaced a little as he said it, and Faith could understand. Obviously, it wouldn’t be a good thing for another body to show up, but without one, they were dead in the water in this investigation.

That worried Faith. Maybe their killer needed the ego boost Michael described, but he had managed to leave very little evidence behind with Jenna and Tammy. He clearly valued his anonymity. Maybe he would prefer to deposit his victims somewhere more public, but it was possible he would be willing to play the long game and dump his victims somewhere the sheriff didn’t know about and just wait for the missing posters to show up to receive whatever sick satisfaction someone who buried people alive in wells got from knowing that they had destroyed lives and happiness once more.

Maybe part of what he enjoyed was knowing that he was easily fooling them. If that were the case, then he would most definitely be using those unmarked wells.

And now she knew what she wanted Abel to do. There weren’t any local records they could dig through, but maybe the state’s records would yield better results.

“Sheriff,” she said, interrupting a discussion between him and Michael over whether they should search the wells in a

grid pattern or a random pattern determined by picking numbers out of a hat. “Thank you for your time. Please let us know if you find anything else.”

“Oh, of course, Special Agent,” the sheriff said. “I’ll keep you posted.”

Faith led Michael and Turk from the station and into the car. When Michael got into the car, she said, “Drive.”

“Oh, is that what I’m supposed to do? Got it, thank you,” Michael quipped.

Faith ignored his attitude and said, “Have you heard from Abel?”

“Not yet. I wanted to wait until after we talked to the sheriff. Do you want me to call him now?”

Faith nodded and Michael dialed the number, sending the call through the car’s Bluetooth.

Abel answered on the second ring. “Abel.”

“Abel, this is Faith Bold,” Faith said. “We need your help. Can you come down here?”

“Uhh, I’m afraid not,” he said. “I’m needed for depositions tomorrow. We found that asshole robbing banks. He was laundering the money at—get this—actual laundromats. I guess he owns three of them in the St. Louis area.”

Ordinarily, Faith would be more than happy to share in her fellow Special Agent’s victory, but she had a criminal of her own to catch. “Sorry to cut you off, Abel, but we’re on a bit of a time crunch.”

“Understood, Faith,” he said. “I can’t come down until late tomorrow, but I can do some digging through records if you want.”

“Can you access a historical map of the wells and springs in and around Morgan County? Something that might show us the locations of old wells that are no longer in use?”

“You think this guy is going to lay low but keep working while you guys poke around?”

“I’m certain he is,” Faith said. “I don’t think he can stop.”

“They never can, can they?” Abel opined. “All right. To directly answer your question, no, I don’t think I can find a historical map that will tell you what you want to know. I’ll sure do my damndest, though.”

“That’s enough for me,” Faith said. “If you find anything, pass it along to me or Michael and we’ll put in a good word for you back east.”

“Hi, Abel,” Michael said.

Abel chuckled. Faith did not but she did roll her eyes. “Hi, Michael,” Abel said.

“All right,” Faith said. “We’ll talk to you later.”

“Later,” Abel said.

Michael hung up and asked, “So where to now?”

“Now we go back to the motel and wait.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

While they waited, Faith sat with Michael and went over what they knew so far.

“So we can infer some things from what we know already,” Faith said. “We know that our killer prefers single women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.”

“We can’t know that for sure based on two victims,” Michael said.

“It’s a safe assumption,” Faith replied. “Serial killers, especially killers who have a specific ritual they follow when they kill, rarely deviate from a victim profile. The Donkey Killer targeted young white people between the ages of twenty-one and thirty who were athletic and confident physically. Each of his victims were married or engaged, as well. Except for me and Jack Preston, but considering the circumstances, I think it’s safe to say that we were exceptions. He tied his victims to a chair, severed their tendons, and slowly bled them to death by giving them hundreds of shallow cuts over a period of twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“He liked making them feel powerless,” Michael said.

Pain shot through Faith’s legs, and Turk got up from where he sat in between the two beds and walked over to her. Michael must have noticed her expression, because he said, “We don’t have to talk about this, Faith. I get your point.”

“No,” Faith said, “I want to talk about this. I need...” She looked at Turk, and his steady gaze gave her strength. She took a breath and said, “I need to be able to work through what happened to me. Otherwise, the Boss is right, and I might as well sit at a desk for the rest of my career.”

“Okay,” Michael said, “I won’t argue with you. I just want to make sure you don’t sacrifice yourself for the sake of the case.”

She smiled at him and said, “Sacrificing ourselves for our work is what we do, Michael. Our work is the difference between life and death.”

“Fair enough,” he said.

“So,” Faith said, after pausing a moment to scratch Turk behind the ears. “The Donkey Killer liked making people feel powerless, and he chose victims that were likely to feel powerful. He even targeted men preferentially. Other than myself, there were only two female victims as opposed to eight male victims. He selected people who had a great deal of confidence in their physical prowess and then slowly whittled away at that confidence, all the while keeping them bound so they knew the entire time that their physical strength couldn’t help them at all. He broke their will before he broke their bodies.”

“Yes,” Michael agreed. “That was his motivation for torturing and killing the way he did. What motivation does someone have for leaving someone to die in a well?”

“Possibly the same or similar,” Faith said. “Trapping someone in a well and holding out the carrot of escape that will never come could provide a similar thrill. In both cases, the killer has complete say over whether the victim lives or dies. He is in absolute control over them, and they have no choice but to suffer whatever fate he chooses.”

“Do you think there’s a sexual component?” Michael asked.

“There almost always is in cases like this. Trammell had a history of homosexual tendencies growing up, all of which were brutally repressed by his family. It affected him later in life. He never had a relationship with anyone—man or woman. He lived alone on a farm and kept to himself. He was friendly and polite to those around him, but he didn’t have any real friends. It’s too late to interview him now, of course, but I’d bet dollars to doughnuts that the abuse he suffered as a child made him feel small and powerless and the lack of any meaningful relationships contributed to his alienation from the rest of the world. He saw people who felt strong and capable and had loving relationships and he hated them for having something he could never have. And yes, he probably wanted

them sexually—the men especially—but he had spent so long thinking of those feelings as wrong and dirty that he didn't know how to act on them. He might not even have consciously recognized his attraction to them for what it was.”

“So this killer, the guy dumping girls in wells. Do we think he has similar issues with sex?”

“Probably,” Faith said. “And probably with female empowerment. He targets young women, but not especially young. Jenna Nilssen had a master's degree and enjoyed a very liberated lifestyle. Tamara McKenzie was a homeowner, and according to her sister, the kind of woman who didn't take shit from anybody. They were single, so that makes envy of other men unlikely, but Jenna, at least from what we can see on her Instagram account, didn't seem to have any issue with expressing herself as a sexual being. It might bother him that a woman of their age could be unmarried but comfortable with their sexuality and at the same time confident and successful without a man to care for them.”

“So he's a misogynistic man with repressed sexuality who buries them in wells because what, he's sending them to hell?”

Faith's eyes widened. “I hadn't considered the religious aspect before, but you could be right. Jesus was buried in the ground for three days and nights before rising again in his perfected form free of sin.”

Michael's eyes widened. “I didn't know you were religious.”

“I'm not,” Faith said, “but I grew up with a Catholic grandmother, and she dragged me to church every Sunday until I enlisted.”

“You learn something new every day, I guess,” Michael said. “There's a hole in that theory, though.”

“What's that?”

“Jesus rose again after three days. Our victims were buried in that well for much longer than three days, and there's no sign that our killer ever even returned to the well, let alone tried to rescue them. And the torture doesn't fit. Jesus wasn't

offered a chance to rise before the three days were up then cast back down to death.”

“Right,” Faith said. “So that leaves a sexually repressed man who wishes women would sleep with him but at the same time hates them for their sexuality, and most likely himself as well.”

“It’s still worth following up on,” Michael said. “We could canvass the local churches and see if we can find anyone who holds extreme religious views.”

Faith smiled wryly. “This is the Bible Belt, Michael. An extreme religious view is anything that *isn’t* fire and brimstone Baptist.”

“Well, we have to start somewhere,” Michael said.

“Yes, but we can’t chase shadows either,” Faith said.

“Isn’t that what we’re doing now?” Michael asked.

Faith didn’t answer. What they were doing was actually worse than chasing shadows. They were chasing nothing.

“Fair enough,” she said. “We’ll check out the churches, but before we do, let’s see if we can find any more helpful leads. Maybe we can glean something from the crime scenes. The perp preps the wells beforehand, right? He has to have some basic knowledge of masonry to be able to create handholds and sand down the wells before depositing his victims. He also has to have equipment to do that. Maybe we start with contractors and see if any of them fit the profile.”

Michael shook his head. “That’s just another shadow. It doesn’t take a lot of knowledge to know that a power hammer will cut through stone and an angle grinder will sand it down. I’ll give you my car if you can find one house here that doesn’t have both of those tools and at least one person who knows how to use them.”

Faith sighed. “Yeah, I know. This sucks.”

“Yes,” Michael agreed. “It does.”

“Well, what about the location?” Faith asked. “Jenna was found just north of Versailles. Tamara was found just south of

Stover. Whoever this guy is, he might be operating out of an urban base—or what passes for urban out here.”

She dismissed that even before Michael said, “There’s nothing urban here, Faith, and if he were operating close to one of the towns here, why would he operate close to two different towns?”

“Well, that brings us back to general contractor,” Faith said. “Someone on call who would go wherever he needed to go and have a solid working knowledge of the area.”

Michael shrugged. “Worth a shot. I’ll look up general contractors.”

The results were not encouraging. Morgan County had a population of just over twenty thousand and apparently half of them were general contractors. “Well,” Michael said, “looks like we know what we’re doing today.”

“Chasing shadows is better than chasing nothing,” Faith agreed. “Why don’t you talk to the churches and I’ll talk to some of the contractors.”

“Works for me,” Michael said. “Meet back here for dinner?”

“Sure,” Faith said, “unless we find something.”

“Right,” Michael said, “unless we find something.” His tone indicated that he was almost certain they wouldn’t find anything. Faith wasn’t any more confident than he was, but she didn’t want to give in to defeatism, so she clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Chin up, Prince. We haven’t lost yet.”

He chuckled. “God bless your eternal optimism, Faith.”

Faith spent the next several hours learning absolutely nothing. Morgan County might be small, but it wasn’t backwards. The contractors Faith interviewed were all licensed and most of them had dashcam or security camera footage that could prove they were nowhere near the scenes of the murders when they took place. The ones that didn’t had records of

work completed that served the same purpose. Faith called LaCroix and had him assign deputies to go through the alibis just in case, but she didn't have high hopes they would turn anything up.

When she returned to the motel, she wasn't surprised to learn that Michael was similarly unsuccessful.

"I *did* talk to a few pastors and a scattering of other church workers who were convinced the women must have done something really horrible to deserve this, like listen to rock music or have sex outside of marriage, but when I dug a little further, they all either had alibis for the dates in question, or they were old ladies who weighed about eighty pounds."

"Eighty-pound old ladies can have accomplices," Faith reminded him.

"Yes, and I called LaCroix and told him to get some deputies to follow up just in case. If we don't hear from Abel by the morning, we'll get at it again, but frankly, Faith, we're just keeping busy to keep busy."

"Don't," Faith said.

"Don't what?" Michael asked.

"Don't give up," Faith replied. "You know as well as I do that detective work is ninety-nine percent wasting time and just shy of one percent wasting some more time with a few minutes of actual progress."

"And you know as well as I do that the more time we waste, the more likely it is that this asshole kills someone else," Michael said.

"Yes," Faith replied quietly. "That's true too."

"Screw this," Michael said. "I'm going to bed. Wake me up if someone turns themselves in."

Faith went to bed soon after, but sleep would not come easily for her tonight. She lay awake imagining Jenna Nilssen and Tamara McKenzie going about their daily lives, never thinking that soon they were going to die at the bottom of a well. Of course they wouldn't think that. Even if they had known about the killer, they probably wouldn't think that.

People never thought that they could end up as victims of people like Jethro Trammell or Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez. That sort of thing always happened to someone else. It was something to be read about and listened to and discussed in hushed whispers, but not something to seriously fear. The world didn't work that way after all. Sure there was evil, but for the most part, things were good, right?

That veneer of safety was necessary. If people realized how depraved and violent people really were, then society would collapse in fear as everyone scrambled to defend themselves from the threats that lived and walked and breathed all around them. The FBI and other law enforcement organizations existed to keep people safe and put the most violent among them away, but they also existed to preserve that veneer because without the ingrained belief that you were safe and everything was going to be okay, it was all too easy to decide that the only way to ensure your safety was to make others unsafe. The old sayings about cops and Bureau agents staring into the abyss so that others didn't have to carried a great deal of truth.

Faith had spent her whole life staring into the abyss. Long enough to know that most people really weren't depraved and violent but those that were tended to be *very* depraved and violent. Long enough too, to know that the walls that kept people from becoming violent were very thin and easily broken.

When she realized she wouldn't be able to sleep, she rolled out of bed and crept from the motel room. Turk woke the instant her feet touched the floor, but he remained quiet as they left the room.

She sat on a bench that stood in between their room and the adjoining one. The cold of the night bit deeply into her, passing through her T-shirt and shorts as though they weren't even there, but she didn't mind it.

She would have killed for a cigarette right now.

Turk sat next to her and laid his head on her lap. She smiled at him and began to stroke his fur. The action soothed her, and soon her craving subsided. She had heard of people who used

service dogs to help them get over addictions and now she understood why. She looked down at Turk and said, “You’re a miracle worker, you know that?”

Turk didn’t reply, but his eyes communicated his answer. He felt the same way about her. She reached down and hugged him briefly, then stood. “Come on, boy. Let’s get some rest.”

They headed back inside the room, and this time when Faith lay down, she fell asleep almost immediately.

She woke early the next morning, but Michael was already up. “How soon can you get dressed?” he asked. “I need coffee, and if I have to drink this motel crap, I’m gonna murder someone myself.”

“Lovely sentiment to start the day,” Faith said wryly. “Give me five minutes.”

“Make it three,” Michael said. “I’m going stir-crazy here.”

Faith considered a snappy comeback, but the truth was she was just as restless as Michael. She dressed quickly, and as soon as she was ready, the two of them left the room and headed to the car.

Michael drove them to a breakfast café a few miles down the road. The food was exceptional, but to their surprise and Michael’s chagrin, the coffee was just as bad as the motel’s.

“Come on,” he whined when the server was out of earshot. “I thought this was God’s country. Don’t they like coffee in God’s country?”

Faith couldn’t resist twisting the knife a little. “From what I’m made to understand, gratitude for the things one has is a pretty important principle of Christianity. One can assume they hold to that principle in God’s country,”

“Well, someone needs to remind God that he made arabica coffee too, and not just this swill. Christ, I hate sitting still like this.”

Michael shook his head. "Today needs to be productive."

Faith nodded. "I agree. Let's follow up on some more leads."

"I'd rather get some info on the wells from Abel and get started on something that might actually turn up a real lead," Michael said.

"Well, let's hope we don't have to wait too long," Faith said. "But in the meantime, anything's better than sitting still."

"I'll give you that," Michael said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As it turned out, they didn't have to wait long for Abel. After coffee, they headed to the motel to grab Turk. They were just about to leave again when Michael's phone buzzed.

"Prince," he said, putting the phone on speaker.

"The sun shines on you two," Abel said cheerfully, "and a few of its rays fall even on my unworthy head."

Faith smiled. "One of these days, Abel, you'll have a hell of a career as a poet. Right now, though, I would love to hear what you know."

"Of course, Special Agent Bold," Abel said. "But first, I will offer my piece of good news: I have been released from my duties by the SAC in St. Louis and am free to join you on your manhunt."

"That is good news," Faith said. "What convinced him?"

"I told him I would finish all of my depositions in one day. It took a little convincing, but when I promised to let him take the lion's share of the credit for the bust, he agreed most agreeably."

"Well, remind me to send him a bottle of Kentucky's finest when this is all over," Michael said.

"You could do that," Abel said, "but helping to catch a serial killer is quite the career boost. You two seem like standup guys. I'm sure he and I will get the appropriate amount of credit for the work I do for you."

"We'll write your names in gold on the footsteps of the headquarters building," Faith said. "Are you bringing anything with you besides yourself?"

"I am bringing an official map of the wells and springs of Morgan County and the surrounding parts dated 1908," Abel said. "I have a contact in the Missouri State Government who hooked me up."

“Well, tell that person that we’re forever grateful,” Faith said. “He’ll get a star on the building too. How soon can you be here?”

“Check your front door,” Abel said.

Faith shared a glance with Michael, then looked down to share one with Turk, but the dog was already waiting by the door. They walked over, and Faith said, “You’re supposed to bark when you see a stranger, Special Agent.”

She could have sworn that Turk rolled his eyes.

Michael opened the door, and out of habit, Faith stood to one side with her hand on her service weapon. When the door opened to reveal a grinning Clyde Abel, she took her hand off the weapon and greeted her fellow agent with an embrace.

“Welcome back to Morgan County,” Michael said with a smile. “You beautiful son of a bitch.”

Abel laughed and said, “I would tell you not to talk about my mother like that, but she calls me a son of a bitch so much, I’m pretty sure she doesn’t remember my real name.”

Faith decided she liked Special Agent Clyde Abel.

“Well, your mother raised a damn fine son of a bitch if I do say so myself,” Michael said.

“All right, all right, you can pat each other’s backs later,” Faith said. “Show us what you got.”

“With pleasure,” Abel said.

What Abel got was a windfall. The map was perfect. It was as detailed a map as they could hope for, and even had the topography of the terrain so they could identify which areas would be too difficult to drive to. The county had grown some since the map was made, but like many rural areas in the Midwest, not much.

“This is perfect, Abel,” Faith said. “This could break the case.”

“What can I say?” Abel said. “I’m good.”

“So how do you want to attack this?” Michael said.

“I’m thinking we split up,” Faith said. “I take Turk and you take Abel. We make a copy of the map and start on opposite ends. Turk and I will start from the east and you two start from the west.”

“Works for me,” Michael said.

“Me too,” Abel said. “Although if I’m being honest, I’d rather take the dog. I have a Malinois at home. Good dog. Kind of like a shepherd.”

“When this is over, I’ll arrange a playdate between Turk and your dog,” Faith said.

Turk barked agreement, and the three agents laughed. “It’s a date,” Abel said.

The three of them made a plan to meet up at the motel at five o’clock to share what they found. Assuming of course, that what they found wasn’t a dead body. Then they split up, Michael and Abel taking Abel’s car and Faith taking Turk in the SUV.

Faith called LaCroix on her way to her and Turk’s starting point: an abandoned well near the western edge of the county. She asked LaCroix about his progress, and as expected learned that he hadn’t made any. “Keep at it,” she said. “There might still be bodies we haven’t found from before he realized we were onto him.”

“You think the killer knows we’re onto him?” LaCroix asked.

Faith stifled the irritation that came from what had to be the least intelligent question LaCroix had asked so far and said, “Yes, I think so. It’s been the only newsworthy item in the area for the past several months.” She felt guilty about putting it that way and added, “That doesn’t mean he won’t slip up. You and your men stay vigilant, and we’ll get this guy.”

She wasn’t as confident as she sounded, but thankfully LaCroix couldn’t see through her veneer of confidence. He replied, “Will do, Special Agent,” with just the right amount of hopefulness—enough to ensure he did his job well but not enough to suggest he would make a mistake out of overconfidence.

She hung up and took a deep breath. She wasn't surprised to glance at the rearview mirror and see a smile on her face. Now they were getting somewhere. A lot of work remained ahead, but they were moving in the right direction now, and as the cat said to Alice, they were sure to get somewhere if they walked long enough.

It would be a long walk, though. Faith and Turk checked five wells in as many hours. That left her time to check one more well before returning to meet with Michael and Abel. Cell coverage was limited this deep in the forest, but they had satellite phones and they used them to check in frequently. That only meant that Faith already knew that Michael and Abel had come up empty, so she didn't have the luxury of false hope.

Well, it was only day one. It would take at least a week to check all of the wells. She had been an agent long enough to know that impatience was the worst reaction an investigator could have to a setback.

She couldn't help it, though. She was impatient. This wasn't just another case to her. It was personal.

The corners of her lips turned down as she and Turk hiked through the forest searching for the location of the last well. It wasn't good that this was personal, but it was. It was personal because this was her first case back on the job after nearly dying. It was personal because this serial killer, like Jethro Trammell, tortured his victims before killing them. It was personal because Faith was a woman and while she hated that that mattered to her, it did.

She would never tell Michael this, but it bothered her that she'd needed him to rescue her from Jethro. It bothered her that she had fought so hard to succeed in a field that despite all of Hollywood's feel-good token attempts at building equality remained a male-dominated field both in population and

attitude, and when it came down to it, a man had overpowered and nearly killed her, and a man had needed to rescue her.

This killer was overpowering and killing women, and Faith really wanted a woman to bring him to justice. She wanted to be that woman to prove to others but mostly to herself that she still belonged here.

So she was impatient. Every day this man remained alive, he was a danger to more women, and every woman he killed was another crack in her belief that she really was good enough to do this job. She needed to win. She needed to stop him.

She was so caught up in these thoughts that she almost passed the well without even seeing it. When she did, she decided she probably wouldn't have seen it anyway. It was completely covered in leaf litter and grass. She only knew it was there because Turk stiffened and then barked excitedly. He rushed to the mound of litter, sniffed around a moment, then barked again and looked back at Faith.

She walked over and teased the grass and leaf litter aside. It moved easily, revealing a wooden lid with an iron loop handle. She tested it, and the lid moved easily as well. Faith stifled a gasp. It had been used recently and covered on purpose.

Her heart began to beat faster, and she quickly brushed the rest of the grass and leaves out of the way. She pulled the lid off and a blast of foul air knocked her backward. She stumbled and pinched her nose, breathing through her mouth to keep from vomiting. Turk whined and barked again, and Faith knew what she would find even before she gathered herself. She switched on her flashlight and carefully approached the well.

The body at the bottom was in worse shape than Tamara McKenzie and Jenna Nilssen. Far worse shape. It was bloated and patches of skin were missing, revealing wasted, rotting flesh, the source of the odor that nearly knocked Faith unconscious. The skin that remained was green and pulpy and separating from the body in slimy tendrils that floated apart from the rest of it.

Her. Not it. The body might barely be recognizable as human now, but it was human. A living, breathing woman was

once drugged and lowered unconscious into a well, tortured, and then left to die. It was Faith's job to find the person responsible and bring him to justice.

She called Michael and Abel first, then called LaCroix. When both sets of law enforcement agents were on their way, she took pictures of the body, the well, and the surrounding vicinity. She backed up the files to a secure FBI server, then sat next to Turk. The dog gazed forlornly toward the well a few yards ahead.

"Yeah, I know, buddy," Faith said. "Too many bad people in this world."

The sheriff arrived first with a half-dozen uniforms in police pickups and an SUV marked MORGAN COUNTY CORONER. Beau Heston exited with another uniform. Morgan County didn't have a need for a coroner's assistant before, Faith guessed.

The sheriff plodded up the hill, looking far older than he was, and Faith felt a touch of sympathy for a man who should have enjoyed a nice quiet semi-retirement without ever having to worry about a crazed killer or bodies in wells. She wondered if he would remain the sheriff after this was all over. Probably not. Even if he got the credit for catching the killer, the people here would always associate him with the most terrifying events of their county's history. That was if he even wanted to stay. She doubted he would. She wondered if he would allow himself a quiet retirement somewhere in the country where he could watch the fireflies dance through the forest at night and sip coffee and whiskey and look back on a life well-lived if not successfully lived.

She doubted that too.

He reached her a moment later and offered a half-hearted smile. "What do we have?"

"Just what I said," she answered. "I can't tell you anything about the victim. I can't even confirm that it's female."

“That bad, huh?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

He stepped toward the well, and she grabbed his arm. “It’s really bad, Sheriff. I’m just warning you.”

He nodded and she released his arm. When he looked into the well, he muttered, “Jesus Christ,” and immediately turned away. His face was a sickly shade of yellow-green, a look with which Faith was all too familiar. She thought for a moment that he actually would vomit, but he controlled himself and said, “All right. Let’s get the scene taped off. Beau, you’ll have to be careful with this one. She’s likely to fall apart when you pull her out of the well.”

“Who is it?” Beau asked.

“I can’t tell,” LaCroix replied. “I can’t even tell if the body is female or not.”

Heston nodded, and though he had experience with dead bodies, he still blew out a ragged breath and shook his head when he saw the body. The uniform shanghaied to be his assistant took one look down the well and immediately ran over to vomit in a nearby bush.

Fortunately, Michael and Abel arrived just then. Michael took a look at the vomiting officer and said, “I’m guessing this isn’t pretty.”

“Nope,” Faith said, “even Turk nearly blew chunks.”

Turk whined and grumbled, and Faith reached down to scratch him behind the ear. Michael and Abel went to the well, and both of them reacted with the same level of shock as the others. Abel shook it off first. “I’ll help get her out,” he told Heston. “It is a her, right?”

“Officially, that’s pending autopsy. Unofficially, yeah, probably, considering the killer’s MO.”

“Well, let’s get her out and get this scene wrapped up and then we can go from there.”

Michael walked to Faith and said, “Well, looks like we were right.”

He sounded just about as happy about that as Faith felt,
which was not at all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Michael and Faith sat across from each other at the motel room table, clutching cups of coffee that wouldn't mean they would stay up all night—seeing a body so decomposed that it looked more like soggy moldy bread than a human took care of that—but would at least ensure that they operated with some sort of productivity while they didn't sleep. Turk sat next to the table, his expression mirroring their own bleak looks.

They sat in silence, staring ahead and musing privately about the latest development in the case. The coroner called about an hour after they left the scene, to inform them that the body was indeed female. No idea who yet, because her ID and credit cards were too badly corroded to see a name. Time of death was roughly guessed to be eight months ago, placing this victim over six months before Tamara's death. Faith passed the information to the sheriff and asked him to cross-reference missing people in the county around that timeframe and see if he could attach a name and a face to the body that no longer had either. LaCroix wasn't much of a detective, but he could look through the records faster than they could.

“So,” Michael said, breaking the silence, “what do we know?”

Faith took a breath and said, “Well, we know our killer's been operating for a long time. At least eight months, possibly—probably—longer. Maybe more than a year. The first thirty feet of the well were sanded smooth other than the minor erosion over the last eight months, and there were visible handholds beyond that, so by the time this victim came around, he had already established his MO and was comfortable with it.”

“Not entirely comfortable,” Michael said.

Faith raised her eyebrow.

“This well was covered with plant material over the lid of a well that hasn't been used in over a hundred years,” Michael

explained. “Tamara and Jenna were found in wells that were publicly known and closed far more recently, and they were covered only with the lid. When he killed this victim, he was still afraid of being caught, so he chose an old well in a remote location and went to great lengths to hide it when he was done. I agree with you, this was probably not his first, probably not even his second or third, but I think we’re nearing the beginning. Tamara’s and Jenna’s murders were far less cautious. I think he was confident that he would keep getting away with it.”

That was good news. If they could work backwards far enough, they might be able to find some of the mistakes serial killers typically made in early murders that would allow them to identify their killer. Then again, “You think he’ll start being more cautious now, when he kills women?”

Michael sighed. “I’m hoping that we’ve scared him enough he’ll take a hiatus for now. Give us a little time to work before he strikes again.”

His tone betrayed his lack of confidence in that hope. Faith didn’t feel particularly confident about that either. “I don’t think we can count on that,” she said. “Killers like this don’t stop. They *can’t* stop. They are as addicted to killing as junkies are addicted to the needle. He will kill again, and soon. It’s been three weeks since Jenna died. Assuming a consistent timeframe, we’re due for another victim in a week, give or take.”

“Lovely,” Michael said bitterly. “Can’t wait.”

“Let’s not give in to despair, Michael,” Faith said. “Believe me, that’s a slippery fucking slope.”

Michael met her eyes and after a moment, nodded. “Right,” he said. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just sick of these freaks. The Donkey Killer, the Butcher of Manhattan, the Rocky Mountain Horror.” He chuckled disgustedly. “I wonder what the tabloids are gonna call this one. The Wellerman? The Demon of Morgan County? How about the Fucking Prick Asshole? I’ll go for that one.”

Faith let Michael rant. She shared all of the same emotions. There was a reason that so many law enforcement

professionals dealt with depression and PTSD and had difficulty maintaining personal relationships. When you spend forty-plus hours a week mired in the literal shit of humankind, it gets hard to see anything else.

When Michael remained silent for a while, she said, “Well, we can also assume he drives a four-wheel-drive truck. He wouldn’t be able to reach the locations he reaches without one.”

Michael scoffed. “Everyone and their fucking dog drives a four-by-four out here. I haven’t seen so many Jeeps since my academy buddy talked me into going to Moab for Independence Day.”

“We can also assume that our killer is physically powerful,” Faith said, ignoring Michael’s outburst. She didn’t blame him for being upset, but anger wouldn’t help them right now. “He would have to transport the unconscious victims to the wells. That means lifting them into and out of the vehicle and lowering them into the well without dropping them.”

“You wouldn’t have to be especially powerful to lower the victims into the well,” Michael countered. “Most men between twenty and fifty could manage to get a woman the size of Tamara or Jenna into and out of a vehicle, and they could use a hoist to lower them into the well.”

Faith’s eyes widened. “You might be onto something. Maybe we narrow it down to people who have some sort of hoist or pulley system mounted on a vehicle.”

“So every farmer who works their own land?” Michael said. He sighed. “Sorry, Faith. I forget you grew up in a city. Most farmers have some sort of winch or pulley on their trucks for removing logs or stumps. This is a rural area. Everyone has a winch. Hell, even the cops have winches.”

Faith tapped her finger on the cup. Turk chuffed irritably and crossed his front legs then lowered his head back onto his paws. Michael took a sip of his coffee and said, “If we could somehow find a connection between the victims, it would make everything that much easier.”

Faith’s eyes widened again. “That’s it!”

Michael jumped at Faith's sudden cry. "What's it?" he asked.

"There *is* a connection between the victims," Faith said. Now that she could see it, she grinned, her earlier melancholy vanished. "They were all killed in wells!"

"Okay," Michael said, "enlighten me, Mr. Wolfe."

"What?" Faith asked.

"It's from an old detective novel series," Michael said. "Tell me why where they were killed is important."

"Because," Faith said, "the killer has to be someone who knows the wells."

Michael's eyes widened as he realized Faith's point. "And very few people know about the old wells."

"Exactly," Faith said. "Hell, the cops don't even know about them. We had to have Abel dig up state records from St. Louis to even get a general map. If it was just Tamara and Jenna, you could say that he's only using commonly known wells, but finding an earlier victim in a well that hasn't been used for decades proves that he's familiar with the wells in the area, even the ones that aren't used anymore."

"So we dig up all the eggheads that have a special affinity for water sources and find one in good shape with a truck and a winch," Michael said.

He was smiling now, and Faith met his grin with one of her own. "Yep. We're back in business."

"Great," Michael said. "Now shut the fuck up and let me sleep. Tomorrow's gonna be a busy day."

Faith giggled. "Very well, my friend. Sweet dreams."

"You'll know they are when you hear me moan," he quipped.

Faith rolled her eyes. "Well, so much for *my* sweet dreams."

"It's okay," Michael said, downing the rest of his coffee and standing up. "I know what you sound like when you moan."

"And on that note," Faith said, rolling her eyes again before downing her own coffee, "good night."

Michael bowed and headed to the bathroom to change into some sweatpants. Faith chuckled when the door closed behind him. She was so pumped at their breakthrough that she briefly considered making both of them moan, but she dismissed it out of hand. They were having a good night. No need to ruin it by introducing unnecessary complications.

She changed into a nightshirt and settled down to sleep. Turk once more jumped into bed with her, but she was used to him now, so she was fast asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Michael sighed and pushed away from the desk, rubbing his eyes. “Christ, this is fucking tedious.”

The older woman with dangling earrings and thick-rimmed glasses who sat underneath a sign marked LIBRARY CARDS AND INFORMATION glared at him. He offered a half-hearted smile and quieted his voice when he said, “You find anything yet?”

“Not yet,” Faith said, “Patience, Kemosabe. We’ve only been here an hour.”

“An hour?” Michael said loudly.

Once more he suffered a glare from the librarian.

“You think you can keep your voice down?” Faith asked. “She’s already pissed enough that Turk’s in here.”

From underneath the desk, Turk lifted his head at the sound of his name. When he realized that no one had called him, he lowered it again and closed his eyes.

“Sorry,” Michael said, quietly again. “You know I’m terrible at busywork. This is why we have analysts.”

“Well, the analysts are busy elsewhere and Abel is still dealing with legal work for the robberies in St. Louis, so no outsourcing our detective work today.” She clicked on the next article, “A Study of Water Table Level Variations in Morgan County, Missouri, 1890–2010,” and began to skim through it.

“You don’t want to make one of the deputies do it?” Michael asked.

“No offense to our esteemed colleagues in the Morgan County Sheriff’s Department,” Faith said, “but I would trust Turk to find any evidence these articles might present before I trust them.” She read enough to satisfy herself that the article writers were likely to have knowledge of the abandoned wells in the area and scrolled to the top to locate the authors’ names.

“Fair enough,” Michael said.

He sat back down and began to read the next article on his list. Fortunately for Michael, he didn’t need to read for long. After a minute, Faith said, “Got one.”

“Who?” Michael said, pushing his chair closer to hers and looking over her shoulder.

“Benedict St. Pierre,” she said.

“Great name,” Michael commented.

“Sure is,” she said. “What’s even better is that Benny here was a senior researcher on this long-term analysis of the local water table. He was specifically responsible for researching the local *and historical* wells in the Morgan County area and personally mapped over a hundred such wells, including nearly all of the ones on the list Abel gave us, including especially the one where we dug up our latest victim.”

“That’s perfect,” Michael said.

“Here’s the best part,” Faith said.

She opened another tab, where a newspaper article from June 30, 2012, informed them that Benedict St. Pierre was forced to suspend his research into the local water table because he fell down one of the wells and broke his hip in three places. Another tab informed them that his injury was so severe that he was unable to work and eventually lost his job with the University of Missouri. A final article—a blurb from the following year—mentioned that he sued for his job back but the suit was dismissed.

“Well, well, well,” Michael said. “That’s not a motive, but it’s a correlation. That’s better than anything we have so far.

The only thing that throws a wrench into the theory is that he isn't physically in shape to handle those women."

"We don't know that," Faith said. "We know he wasn't physically in shape ten years ago. That's a long time. Even if he didn't fully recover, like you pointed out it doesn't take a lot of power for a grown man to get an unconscious woman into and out of a vehicle. As long as he can walk, bend over, and make a fist, chances are he could be the killer. Obviously we can't assume anything, but I think we have our next suspect."

"Wonderful," Michael said. "Here's hoping he's our killer. God, what a shitty thing to say, but it's true."

Faith smiled. "Here's hoping we are soon able to put an end to these killings."

"That's good." Michael said. "I like yours better."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They left the library fifteen minutes later. Once they had his name, it was short work finding an address for him near the north end of the county in Syracuse. The drive took a half hour, and now, just before lunchtime, they had pulled up to the residence of one Dr. Benedict St. Pierre, PhD.

Faith checked her handgun before getting out of the car. Turk followed her and she patted his neck. “Keep it cool, big dog,” she said.

Turk chuffed and the three of them started up to the house. The yard was overgrown. No, overgrown didn’t do it justice. It was a literal jungle. The grass was knee-high in places, at least where it wasn’t choked out with weeds. A single willow tree spread across the entire yard, sagging under the weight of branches that hadn’t been pruned in years. The house itself was crawling with vines that crept through nearly every crevice in the house’s façade.

“Keeps a tidy home,” Michael commented.

Faith noted that there was no vehicle parked in the driveway. That could mean St. Pierre wasn’t home or it could mean a four-by-four with a winch was parked in his garage. She reminded herself to be objective. Just because he fit a profile didn’t mean he was the killer.

Still, she had a good feeling about this.

They knocked on the door. There was no answer. Michael lifted his hand again, but stopped when they heard a low, shuffling sound coming from inside the house. They shared a glance and Faith’s hand crept to her shoulder holster.

The door opened a crack and Michael said, “Good morning. May we speak to Benedict St. Pierre, please?”

“Who are you?” a gravelly voice asked.

“I’m Special Agent Michael Prince and this is Special Agent Faith Bold,” Michael said. “Do you have a moment to

talk to us?”

“What’s this about?” he asked.

Faith decided to go with the truth. “We’re investigating the recent murders of Tamara McKenzie and Jenna Nilssen. We believe you may have some information that might assist us in our investigation.”

“What information?” the voice asked irritably. “I’m retired.”

“The victims were found in wells, Mr. St. Pierre,” Faith said. “We understand that you’re an expert on the wells in the Morgan County area.”

The door opened all the way, and St. Pierre stepped into the light. His face was drawn and haggard and appeared much older than the forty-eight years his bio said he was. He had a long, rough beard that hung in scraggles from his lined face. His eyes were tinged yellow from years of alcohol abuse, and the pupils trembled as he looked at the two agents.

He was hugely overweight. He was almost as wide around as he was tall, and a bit of flabby dough-colored skin peeked out from underneath his stained T-shirt. He smelled like he hadn’t bathed in weeks and the last time he did he didn’t quite manage to cover all of the ample square footage of his body.

He looked like the polar opposite of the trim, smiling, well-groomed man in the prime of his life that Faith found in the university’s archives online.

“I know where they were found,” he said, and Faith realized now that the gravel in his voice, like the tremors and yellow tinge in his eyes, was a result of years of alcohol abuse. “I watch the news.”

“Then you understand why we want to talk to you,” Michael said. “We believe you have valuable information that —”

“Yeah, yeah, valuable information,” St. Pierre said, waving his hand dismissively. “You said that already. What can I help you with? I know about the water table, but I’m not a forensics investigator.”

“We found a third victim,” Faith said. “In an abandoned well near Barnett. Evidence suggests the well had been abandoned for some time. Over a hundred years.”

She watched his face closely as she revealed that, but while understanding dawned in his face, there was no shock or fear. No sign that their recent discovery might put him in danger of being revealed as a killer.

“And you want to know where the other abandoned wells in the area are,” he said.

“Would you mind if we had this conversation inside?” Michael asked. He smiled disarmingly and said, “It’s a little chilly out today.”

Benedict sighed and stepped back from the door. Faith and Michael shared another glance, then followed him inside.

The smell inside the house was worse than the smell that Benedict himself gave off and Turk whined when he entered. Faith patted his neck, but she had to fight nausea to keep from grimacing.

The interior of the house was as disheveled as the exterior. The furnishings were good quality, but clearly hadn’t been cleaned or maintained in some time. Dishes piled both sides of the sink and lay scattered around the living room, which also featured a delightful array of food wrappers—some of them with bits of food still inside—and empty bottles and cans. A thick coating of dust lay on everything, including the wooden dining room chairs that Benedict gestured for them to sit on. The air was musty and stale. It was the house of someone who had given up long ago, not the house of a killer.

Faith felt her excitement wane, but they still needed to interrogate him. Appearances weren’t everything or Ted Bundy would have been the picture of sainthood.

Benedict lumbered to his fridge and withdrew a beer. He didn’t offer one to the agents, which was just as well, because Faith wouldn’t have eaten or drunk anything in this house if Jethro Trammell materialized out of nowhere and threatened to cut her nose off if she didn’t.

He lumbered back to the kitchen table and sat down. “You two gonna sit or what?” he asked.

“I’ll stand, thank you,” Michael said.

Faith didn’t say anything. She decided to let Michael handle this. She would watch Benedict’s face as she had with the Nilssens and see if she could pick up any sign of guilt or knowledge that he wasn’t sharing.

“Mr. St. Pierre—” Michael began.

“Doctor,” Benedict interrupted.

“I’m sorry?” Michael asked.

“It’s Dr. St. Pierre,” Benedict replied. “I spent seven fucking years in grad school and another five as a fucking errand boy for Brenda Fischer. I earned that goddamned title, and the least the world could do is give me that much.”

His tone was petulant, but not angry. Michael smiled tightly and said, “Dr. St. Pierre. It’s our understanding that you’re the leading expert on the water resources of Morgan County and the surrounding vicinity.”

Benedict laughed, a thick, wet sound that was as close to a choke as it was to a chuckle. Faith gave it even odds that he made it to his next birthday. “I think you’re looking for the Department of Water and Power,” he said. “I can give you the 800 number if you want. They’ve been harassing me for about a year now for nonpayment. I’m unemployed, you see.”

Once more there was bitterness, but no anger. He sounded defeated, as though he had fought and lost so many times that he now accepted loss as a way of life. Faith had heard that tone from Marines who had gone home missing limbs. It was a hollow sound, one that longed for the end but lacked the courage to embrace it.

He was looking less and less like a killer every moment.

“What we’re specifically hoping you can tell us,” Michael said, “is if you have any idea who besides yourself might know enough about the abandoned wells in the area to hide victims there.”

So Michael had given up on him being the killer too. Faith stifled a sigh of frustration. Every time she thought they were close to a breakthrough in the case, it fell through. Once more, they had a great-looking suspect and once more, he wasn't their guy. She clung to the hope that he might at least know of someone else who could be their killer, but his next words killed that hope.

"No one knows those wells like me," he said. "I was the guy. I was the expert. That article you read on the historical water table levels? I'm assuming you read the article and that's how you found me."

Faith nodded.

"Yeah, I was the guy who fed Fischer all that info. She just sat at a desk getting all the credit while I walked through those damn woods myself. Nearly killed myself doing it. Did you know I was down there for two days before they found me? By the time they pulled me out, half my goddamn hip was rotted with gangrene. I was in the hospital for eight weeks before they finally sent me home. Never been the same since. I thought they'd take me back as a department head or a research analyst, hell, a goddamn assistant professor, something, anything, but no, once my hip broke, I had no more use to the Almighty Cunt herself."

There was anger in his words now, but still not in his tone. The anger was almost delivered by rote, as though he was reciting thoughts that might have meant something to him before but were now just something to say.

"You didn't have an assistant?" Michael asked. "Even for one of the wells?"

"Nope," Benedict said. "Did it all myself."

Once more, there was a ghost of pride that sounded more like a feeling he used to have and not something he still felt.

"Can you tell us where you were the third week of April and the first week of June?" Michael asked.

St. Pierre laughed. "I was right here. No one was with me, but you can check my car, and if you can get it to start, then I guess I have used it sometime in the past eight months."

“That’s not gonna work for us,” Faith said. “Do you have any way of proving you were here on the dates in question?”

St. Pierre lifted his hands and let them drop. “I suppose you could check my security cam footage. I keep it running on a loop. The security company’s supposed to save the data. I don’t know if they do, but if you really think I’m in the kind of shape I need to be to drop women down wells, you can call them. You want the number?”

“Please,” Michael asked.

St. Pierre laboriously got to his feet and got the number. After he handed it to them, he said, “It’s been real, Agents, but if there’s nothing else, I’d like to get back to waiting to die.”

Faith turned to leave. The sooner she got out of this tomb, the better.

“Thank you for your time, Dr. St. Pierre,” Michael said, taking his cue to leave. “If we need anything else—”

“You won’t,” Benedict said. “No one needs an old researcher with a bad hip.”

Michael said nothing else as they left the house and walked back to the car. Faith sat heavily and stared out the window. Michael buckled his seatbelt and when Faith didn’t move to latch hers, he reached over and latched it himself, then started the engine and pulled away.

They would check the security footage, but Faith knew already they would confirm St. Pierre’s alibi. Once more, they had hit a dead end.

“Dammit,” Faith said.

“Yes,” Michael agreed. “Dammit.”

As the house receded in the background, Faith thought bitterly that they should get that word emblazoned on their jackets.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Carla woke slowly. Her head swam terribly. She groaned and lifted a shaking hand to her forehead. It felt wet, and she groaned again. Had she fallen and hit her head? She did that once in college when a night of too much partying left her far more drunk than she intended to be. She pulled her hand away and when she saw there was no blood, she sighed with relief.

How much *did* she drink last night? She rubbed her temples and tried to remember. She had gone to the bar and ordered a vodka margarita like she always did on Friday nights after a long week of pretending to give a shit about the personal lives of her clients. She had finished the drink and was debating a second one when the guy had showed up next to her and offered her another on his tab.

He was charming and handsome, not supermodel handsome, but then Carla was no supermodel herself. He was older, but not so much older that he seemed creepy. She had decided what the hell, Jeff was long gone anyway. Why not have a little fun?

She accepted the drink and they had talked about... what had they talked about? Everything was foggy after that.

She felt wetness in between her legs and sighed. If she was lucky, the wetness would just be the gift her paramour had left behind before leaving whatever motel she was in. If she wasn't, then she hadn't hit her head but had left copious amounts of another bodily fluid for the maids to clean up. She decided she would have to leave them a generous tip.

She rolled over, except she didn't roll over. She was standing, not lying down. Or rather, she was slumping against a wall.

And rather than rolling, she sloshed. She opened her eyes and blinked, then stared blankly ahead.

It took a moment for her brain to register where she was. When it did, she was seized with panic, but it took another

moment for her brain to believe what her eyes saw and accept the panic.

Still, she didn't react until she looked up and saw the little circle of light forty or fifty feet above her head.

Then she screamed.

She was in a well. She was in a goddamned well, just like that McKenzie girl from Stover. Just like that Nilssen kid the cops had found a few weeks ago in Versailles.

A horrible image came to Carla's mind of her own rotting corpse, bloated and stinking with gases, her skin slurring off into a fetid soup of bacteria and mold, her eyes floating outside of their sockets in a froth of dissolved brain matter.

She shrieked again and this time managed to form the word, "*HELP!*"

There was no response. She tried again. "*HELP! GOD, PLEASE! SOMEONE HELP ME!*"

Once more there was no response, and Carla began to understand that there never would be. She was lost. That man... that fuck that she thought *she* was going to fuck last night had drugged her and dragged her out to the wilderness to dump her into a fucking well and leave her to die just like he left those other three women. She was going to be a murder victim, a fucking anecdote on one of those true crime shows that she considered her guilty pleasure. Some other woman in her mid-thirties was going to curl up on her couch with a pint of ice cream and a glass of box wine and titillate herself to the story of Carla Veneti, thirty-four, an insurance agent from Gravois Mills, Missouri, found dead in a well bloated and covered in fungus along with the other victims of some fucking creep. Maybe they would make a movie about him. They would tap some up-and-coming C-lister to play her. Maybe whoever Hollywood's equivalent of Cillian Murphy was twenty years from now would play her killer and collect himself a Best Supporting Oscar for his fiendish smile and dangerous eyes.

She took a breath and steadied herself. Not today. Not her. That's *not* how her story ended! She wasn't Oprah, but for

God's sake, she deserved better than to sprout fucking mushrooms from her skin at the bottom of a fucking well!

She took another breath and looked around. There was nothing. No way out. She was stuck, goddammit, she was *fucking* stuck!

"HELP!" she shouted again. "Goddammit, someone help me!"

There was no answer. She sobbed and slumped back against the well. "Please," she whispered through her tears.

"Hello?" a voice called.

Carla started and looked up. "Yes!" she cried. "Help! I'm down here!"

A silhouette appeared, and Carla sobbed again with relief. "Oh God!" she cried. "Thank you! Thank you!"

"Hold on!" the silhouette called.

He disappeared and Carla waited, tears streaming down her cheeks. A minute passed, then another. Then another. Carla felt panic creep up her neck. He hadn't left her, had he? He couldn't have just left her. "Hello?" she cried out. "Are you there? Hello? Hello?"

When he reappeared, Carla's knees nearly buckled with relief. "Grab this!" he cried out. He dropped a rope down and Carla sobbed and said, "Thank you. Thank you. Oh God, thank you."

"Grab on!" the man said. "I'll pull you up!"

"Are you sure?" Carla asked. "I'm heavy."

If Carla wasn't too distracted by her impending death, she might have wondered why the mind would concern itself with such things in the face of mortal danger. She might have thought it equivalent to a man being led to a firing squad insisting that he be allowed to comb his hair before being shot. As it was, she was too frightened to think anything at all past her desperation to survive.

"I'm sure!" her rescuer called. "Grab on!"

Carla grabbed the rope and when she felt herself moving upward, she cried out in the pure joy that can only come when one realizes they're not actually going to die after all. "Thank you!" she cry-laughed as she felt herself pulled above the water. "Thank you!"

She was about six feet above the surface of the water when the rope broke. It snapped with an audible crack, and she cried out as she fell back into the well. The back of her head smacked against the stone wall of the well and when she cried out some of the water splashed into her mouth. It tasted like corpses and shit and combined with the wave of nausea she felt from hitting her head caused her to vomit forcibly into the well.

When she stopped vomiting, she shrieked in pain and frustration and fear.

"It's okay!" the voice called. "There are handholds! Look above you!"

Carla looked up, weeping and shaking, and then she saw the handholds. The first one was about a foot over her head and another was about a foot over that.

"Climb up the handholds!" the strange man called. "You can do it!"

"I can't!" Carla sobbed. "I'm... I'm too heavy."

For the first time in her life, Carla wished she were one of the "skinny bitches" her friends would make fun of occasionally. "Please!" she called up. "Help me!"

"There's no more rope!" the silhouette called. "You have to climb!"

Carla reached up with a trembling hand and tried to grip the handhold. It was slick and her hand slipped off. "Please!" she shrieked. "I can't!"

"You have to!" the silhouette called. "It's the only way!"

Carla—who hadn't seen the inside of a church since her grandmother died of kidney failure when she was fifteen—prayed silently that God would grant her strength.

She grabbed the handhold again and with a cry leapt and grabbed the other handhold. Her grip held and she once more laughed in relief. She grunted as she struggled to pull herself upright. Ninety-nine days out of a hundred, she would have been lucky to do a single pull-up, but the specter of death turned out to be a great motivator. She pulled herself up slowly, but surely, grabbing the series of handholds until she was climbing steadily upward.

She could see freedom. She could see the opening above her. She was going to make it! A rush of triumph filled her. Ha! Take that, fucker! She wouldn't die here. She wouldn't be the latest victim. She would be the survivor. She would identify that fucker. She didn't remember his name, but she knew his face. She would find him and she—

The handholds ended abruptly ten feet above the water. She looked around wildly for more, but the wall of the well was smooth from then on, like one of those polished rocks that gift shops sold kids for a buck ninety-nine at museums.

“Aww,” her killer's voice said. “Poor Carla. You've run out of handholds.”

“Please,” she whispered. “Please don't.”

“You did this to yourself,” he said.

He stepped away and a moment later, she saw a heavy wooden lid sliding over the well. The light streaming in narrowed to a crescent, then a sliver, then disappeared entirely.

Carla screamed again. Then she slipped. She released a final choking cry before she hit the bottom of the well. Her head smacked against the wall of the well and she slipped into darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I’m very sorry, Special Agent,” Brenda Fischer’s voice said over the phone. “I truly wish I could do more to help, but Mr. St. Pierre had the only copy of his research.”

Faith noted that she used *Mr.* instead of *Dr.*

“He refused to turn over the research to us when he departed the university, and when we sued to retrieve it, we got a flash drive full of corrupted data. I’ll send it to you if you want, but we’ve been unable to get anything off of it.”

“Thank you, Dr. Fischer,” Faith said. “Send it to us anyway. We’ll see what we can find.”

“Of course, Special Agent. If you need anything else—”

“We’ll call,” Faith interrupted.

She hung up and sighed, leaning back in the chair and rubbing her temples. Her knees ached more than normally today. She felt twenty years older and thirty years more tired than her age.

“Well, that’s a dead end,” Michael offered, completely unhelpfully.

“Not necessarily,” Faith said. “If we send it to the think tank at Quantico, they could hack into it within minutes and find something. We only have to wait thirty years for it to make its way through the backlog.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you,” Michael said.

“I’m not being sarcastic, I’m being pissed. Why does everything have to be a dead end?”

“Everything’s a dead end in an investigation until it isn’t,” Michael offered, once more unhelpfully.

“Thank you again, Dr. Prince,” Faith said. “It would be nice if maybe we could find the thing that isn’t a little sooner. You know, before someone else dies.”

“Yeah,” Michael agreed. “That would be nice.”

Faith sighed again, then said, “I’m going to call the sheriff. Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll have found something useful.”

She reached for her phone, but it started ringing before she could pick it up. When Faith saw the sheriff’s number, she felt a brief flash of hope. Well, at least she could still hope.

She answered, and within ten seconds, her hope disappeared.

“Agent Bold,” LaCroix said, his voice tight with anxiety, “he’s got someone else.”

“You found another body?” Faith asked.

Michael’s brow furrowed and Faith pressed the speaker button.

“No body,” LaCroix said. “Not yet.”

Michael and Faith shared a look. “Tell me what you found,” Faith said.

“We didn’t find anything,” LaCroix said, “But we got a missing persons report. Carla Veneti, thirty-four, insurance agent from Gravois Mills. It’s a little town near the south—”

“Gravois Mills, got it,” Faith said. “What about her?”

“Friends reported her missing. They called her this morning to confirm girls’ night tonight. Said she never called, and she always does if she can’t make it. They tried to call her, and she never answered.”

Michael pulled a pen and paper out of his pocket and began to take notes. “How long has she been missing?” Faith asked.

“Well, they called her at eight. It’s two o’clock now, so that’s six hours officially. Normally we need twenty-four before it’s a missing persons case, but I thought all things considered—”

“You thought right, Sheriff,” Faith said. “When was the last time Miss Veneti was seen?”

“Her friends said she always went to the bar in Gravois Mills after work on Friday nights. I haven’t checked it out yet, but—”

“Check it out now,” Faith said. “Go there and talk to everyone who’s there. Get as many details as you can. Did she show up last night? If so, what time did she show up? What time did she leave? Was she alone or with someone else, and if she was, I want to know what that individual looked like, what car they drove, everything.”

“You got it,” LaCroix said.

He hung up, and Faith looked at Michael. “You don’t want us to go interview at the bar?” he asked.

“No,” Faith said. “The sheriff can handle that. I want to figure out who the killer is before Carla Veneti dies.”

“You think she’s still alive?”

“Yes,” Faith said. “For now. If she was taken last night, then the killer probably just closed the well on her. We know from the previous three victims that he leaves them to die. He doesn’t kill them. She’ll last a little while before she dies. We need to find her before that happens.”

“So what do we do?” Michael said. “We can start checking wells, but that will be at least a week.”

“That’s too long,” Faith said. “We need to move faster than that.”

“So again,” Michael said. “What do we do?”

Faith had no clearer an answer to that question than Michael did, so she said, “Right now, we think. I’m going to take a walk. Whoever figures out an answer first calls the other.”

“Brainstorming, but separately,” Michael said. “I like it.”

Faith couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not and decided it didn’t matter. She stood up, ignoring the pops and groans in her legs, and walked outside with Turk following.

She walked a circuit around the motel, and when she completed that, she struck out along the road. Her mind raced, and she took deep, steady breaths to calm herself.

The most frustrating part of this investigation was the lack of a clear pattern. All serial killers had one. Jethro Trammell liked to lure people into his van and choke or bludgeon them

unconscious and then take them to his horror house. He targeted white people exclusively and preferred young, athletic targets who he claimed “bled better.” He was active solely in the daytime during business hours when prying eyes were occupied elsewhere. He selected his targets from rural communities around Philadelphia. He was eventually caught when Jack Preston figured out his preference for working during business hours and staked out his farm.

They had the beginnings of a pattern with this guy. They knew he liked dropping his victims in wells, and they knew he prepared his wells beforehand. Faith figured he had already prepared his wells, choosing ones that were no longer in use and sanding them down ahead of time. That wasn’t particularly helpful because they had found no wells prepared in that manner except for the ones the victims were found in.

It wasn’t helpful to know that he preferred single women either. They couldn’t surveil every single woman in the county.

There had to be something. There had to be *something* they couldn’t see. Carla’s life depended on it.

She replayed the cases one at a time in her head. Victim one, the unidentified victim in an abandoned well just west of Barnett. Victim two, Tamara McKenzie, found in another abandoned well two miles south of Stover. Victim three, Jenna Nilssen, found in an abandoned well a few miles north of Versailles.

She stopped walking. Turk looked up at her questioningly. She squatted down and stroked his fur. Her knees screamed at her, but she ignored them as she focused on the problem.

Three victims from three different locations with nothing in common with each other besides the fact that they were all single women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. Nothing to tie the locations together except—

A thought came to her suddenly. She fixated on it, kneading it until it coalesced into an image in her mind. Then it came to her.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

She stood and pulled her cell phone out of her pocket, then dialed Michael. He answered on the first ring. “What is it, Faith?” he asked. “Got something?”

“I think so,” Faith said. “Do you have the map?”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “What am I looking for?”

“I’m here,” Faith said. “I’ll show you.”

She hung up and sprinted the last few steps to the motel, Turk bounding right beside her. When she walked into the motel room, Michael had the map spread out on the table. Faith took a pen from her jacket pocket and marked the locations of the three wells. Then she drew a line between the first victim’s well outside of Barnett and Tamara’s well outside of Stover. She drew a second line from Jenna’s well north of Versailles and traced downward, intersecting the first line and coming to a stop right over Gravois Mills.

Michael’s eyes widened. “Holy shit,” he whispered.

The two lines formed a nearly perfect cross.

“Jesus,” Michael said. “He’s a zealot. He’s burying these women in wells and closing them like Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus and rolled the stone over his grave.”

“We can worry about the motive later,” Faith said. “The problem is that this map doesn’t list any wells in this area, so if there is a well there, it was built after 1908.”

“And who might know about wells built after 1908?” Michael said with a smile.

Faith returned his smile. “Let’s go talk to *Dr.* St. Pierre again.”

They reached Dr. St. Pierre’s house twenty minutes later. The SUV screeched to a halt and the two agents got out and sprinted to the door. Turk ran ahead, barking loudly. He stopped just before jumping on the porch and waited for the two agents.

Faith's knees and ankles throbbed, and she was sure she was reinjuring her damaged joints by exerting herself so much, but she didn't care. This could be it. This could be the break they needed. If they could find Carla before she died, they would not only save her life, but also possibly get her to identify the killer.

Faith pounded on the door and shouted. "Dr. St. Pierre! Benedict! It's Special Agent Bold!"

She wished to God she had thought to get his phone number when they were there last time. She was so certain that he didn't know anything helpful. If her mistake cost Carla her life, she would never forgive herself.

"Dr. St. Pierre!" she shouted.

"What do you want?" Benedict grouched.

The door opened a crack and Faith said, "Dr. St. Pierre, we need your help urgently. There's another victim. We think she's still alive, and we think we know where, but we need your help to know exactly where to look. Please open the door."

"Shit," Benedict said.

He shuffled backward, and a moment later, the door opened. He looked at the agents with wide eyes, and when Michael opened the map, his eyes widened further. "Hey, where did you get this?" he said. "This is wonderful! This perfectly corroborates my conclusion that—"

"When we're finished with the case, you can have it," Faith interrupted. She pointed at Gravois Mills and said, "The new victim is somewhere here, near where the bottom of this cross is. Are there *any* wells in this area?"

Benedict took the map and peered at it. He shuddered and quickly handed it back to Michael. "Yes, I know of a well there. It's the one that nearly killed me."

"Where is it?" Faith asked.

"It's—" Benedict began. He paused when Faith shoved a pen at him. He took the pen and with trembling fingers marked a spot about a mile east of Gravois Mills and a half mile south.

The spot he marked was within a few hundred yards of the bottom of Faith's cross.

"Thank you so much, Dr. St. Pierre!" Faith cried exuberantly. "I'll make sure everyone knows you're the one who helped us."

"Never mind me," Benedict said, his voice showing far more strength than Faith had heard in him before. "You go get that girl."

The three agents rushed back to the car. The canine agent reached the SUV first and barked impatiently at the two human agents.

"We're going, buddy, we're going," Faith said, grinning. She got into the SUV just as Michael got into the driver's seat. Turk leapt over her legs and quickly got settled in the second row.

Michael spun all four tires of the big truck as he turned around and pulled out onto the road. He turned the Christmas tree flashers on and accelerated quickly away from the house. It would take them approximately thirty minutes to reach the location marked on the map. Faith looked out the window at the slowly sinking sun and said, "Hold on, Carla. We're coming."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The SUV jerked and bounced as Michael gunned it over the terrain. They had left the road behind a few minutes before, and Faith was impressed that the heavy passenger hauler could navigate the rough landscape. She made a mental note to trade in her own car for one of the same make and model when she got back home.

They reached the location Benedict had marked and Michael pulled to a stop. The well was a few dozen yards ahead near the top of a small rise.

The three of them got out of the well and Turk sprinted ahead. He stopped near the well and began to bark loudly. Faith huffed and struggled to keep up with Michael, who leapt over rocks and bushes with ease, his excitement lending him strength.

When they reached the well, they could see that it was closed. They could also see that the lid was recently removed and replaced.

“Get that lid off,” Faith said to Michael.

“Gun,” Michael said softly.

“What?” Faith said.

She looked at Michael, but Michael was staring at something behind her. Then she heard the sound of a bolt sliding in a rifle. In a flash of movement, Michael reached for his gun, but a deep, gravelly voice shouted, “Draw that weapon and I blow your girlfriend’s pretty little head off!”

Michael froze, and the voice said, “Take your hands out of your jacket and raise them over your head.”

Michael took his hands from his jacket and held them upright.

“Higher,” the voice said. “Like you’re praisin’ Jesus!”

Turk growled low in his throat, and the voice said, “You want to tell the mutt to keep calm or should I shoot him?”

Faith bristled, but kept her voice even as she said, “Turk, stay calm.”

Turk’s eyes flickered between Faith and the attacker behind her. He growled again but didn’t move.

“Good. Now turn around for me, sweetheart, unless you want that pretty little head of hair of yours dyed red.”

Faith turned, keeping her hands held high “like you’re praisin’ Jesus.”

The man standing a few yards away could have been forty or seventy. He wore torn cutoff jean shorts and a white T-shirt that covered about half of an almost perfectly round potbelly. The rest of him was less rotund than his belly, leathery skin pulled over meager but taut musculature. Tufts of wiry gray hair sprouted from the top of his head and similar bristles stuck out over his eyes and surrounded his lips and chin in a frazzled mane.

He wore no shoes and his feet were caked with mud, but so was the rest of him, so that might not have anything to do with a lack of shoes. His eyes darted rapidly, but the hands that held the rifle were rock-steady and when Faith’s hand crept lower, he whirled the gun onto her and said in his incongruously deep voice, “You better pray to Christ that you’re faster than a bullet, pretty lady, or I’ll rearrange that face so bad the devil himself will kick you out of hell! Your boyfriend might get me, but I’ll get you, so help me God, I will.”

“Sir,” Faith said, “we’re FBI agents. Is there someone in this well?”

“That’s my well!” the man shouted. “Mine! I been using it the last eight years, I have.”

“Is there someone inside the well?” Faith asked. “Did you put someone inside this well?”

“I got rights!” the man shouted, eyes shifting. “This is my land! Ain’t nobody using it, so I claimed it and now it’s mine! The well too. I’m an American, dangit, and I got rights!”

Faith exchanged a look with Michael. “Sir,” Michael said, his tone conversational, “what’s your name?”

“Ain’t got to know my name!” the man shouted. “Puddin Tane and I’ll ask you the same!”

Michael ignored the man’s butchery of the children’s rhyme and said, “I’m Special Agent Michael Prince of the FBI. This is Special Agent Faith Bold. We’re investigating a potential attempted murder. Can we check your well for—”

“That’s my well!” the stranger said. “I got rights! I’m an American, dangit!”

“We’re FBI agents investigating an attempted homicide,” Faith tried again. “Can we please—”

“FBI my ass!” the man shouted. “You got no right! Get the hell off my land!”

Faith looked at Michael. He took a step toward the man and the rifle instantly swung to cover him. “You better stay still, boy, or I’ll open you an asshole on your chest!”

Faith took a step closer, and the rifle came back to cover her. “Please,” she said calmly. “We’ll be off your land in a moment. We just need to—”

“Get off my land!” he shouted. “This is my water! You can’t have it!”

Michael took a step closer, then another. The rifle swung back to cover him, then back to Faith, then back to Michael. The man’s eyes flickered rapidly between them. “Y’all stop moving closer, ya hear? I know what you’re trying to do. I ain’t crazy. I ain’t stupid no matter what them bitches at the shelter say. I’m an American and I got rights!”

Faith didn’t want to get drawn down a rabbit hole. “Sir,” she said, “we need to look at your well. You’re welcome to accompany us if you’d like. If you’ll just put the rifle down—”

A branch snapped behind Faith. The crazed man swung the rifle toward Turk and fired.

“*No!*” Faith shouted, launching herself at the man. He swung the rifle around, but Faith reached him first, knocking him to the ground and batting the rifle away. He fell with a cry and in seconds, Faith had him on his stomach with both hands cuffed behind his back.

She turned toward Turk, heart pounding, but he was already at her side, teeth bared and barking at Faith's prostrate prisoner. Faith could see a streak on one of the stones of the well where the rifle round had struck.

"Hey!" he shouted. "I'm an American! I got—"

"Yeah, we know," Faith said. "You got rights. Get the fuck up."

She hauled him to a sitting position. Michael took the rifle and emptied it.

"Check the well," Faith said. Her knees ached, but the adrenaline kept the pain at a dull roar. For now, at least.

Michael nodded and walked to the well. The prisoner struggled to stand, and Faith shoved him back down. He cried out and adopted a pout that reminded Faith sickeningly of Vincent Crowley's. He sniffled and said, "Can't believe what's happened to this country. Two thieves can just take a man's water without so much as a by-your-leave. I got rights!"

"Yeah, well, we asked nicely," Faith said.

She watched anxiously as Michael lifted the lid off of the well. He shone his light downward and shouted, "Fuck!"

Faith's heart sank. They were too late. Carla was there, but she was already dead. They were too late, and the killer had once more claimed an innocent victim.

"She's not here," Michael said.

Faith's heart remained in her feet but for an entirely different reason now. "What?"

"She's not fucking here!" Michael shouted. "Dammit!"

Faith left the prisoner in Turk's care, stomping over to the well. She flashed her own light downward and found a clear pool of water. Good water. Drinking water. Not a sign of contamination anywhere, and definitely not a human, alive or otherwise.

She lifted her hands and planted them on top of her head. Behind her, Michael was calling the sheriff telling him that they were bringing a suspect in for questioning. Faith seriously doubted this crazy old man was the killer. She had taken him

down far too easily. Sure she had training, but she had the knees of an eighty-year-old at the moment. This was not the man who could overpower healthy young women in their prime.

Still, he might know of someone snooping around his wells and violating his rights. Maybe they would learn something useful.

But Faith didn't think so.

She sighed and though she didn't say the word out loud, she thought that getting it emblazoned on a jacket was looking more and more like a good idea.

Faith and Michael stood behind the two-way mirror and watched while LaCroix and another deputy questioned the man they had brought into custody. It wasn't going well. After an hour of questioning, they had learned that the man's name was Lester McCready, that that was his well, that he was an American, and that he had rights, dangit.

"Let me tell you something," LaCroix said, leaning over the table and staring into the man's eyes. "I couldn't give two shits about your rights at the moment. The only right you have is to tell me what I want to know before I decide to infringe on your rights. You understand me?"

"That's my goddamned well!" Lester insisted. "Damn bitch trespassing on my land!"

"Carla trespassed on your land?" LaCroix asked.

"Sure did!" Lester said. "Her and her boyfriend and their dog. Said they was FBI!"

LaCroix slumped slightly. "You're saying Special Agent Bold trespassed on your land?"

His voice betrayed his frustration and Faith didn't blame him. This was going nowhere.

She walked to the door and opened it, then motioned for LaCroix to come out.

LaCroix nodded, then turned to Lester and leveled his finger at him. "I'm gonna leave you with Chalmers here. If I were you, I'd be real nice and tell him all about those girls you killed. Chalmers isn't as kindly as I am."

Lester spit at LaCroix and the sheriff jumped back just in time to avoid a hunk of brown phlegm the size of a grape. "I'm an American!" Lester shouted. "I got rights!"

LaCroix looked like he was about good and ready to infringe on some of those rights, but he kept himself under control as he followed Faith from the room.

As soon as the door closed behind them, LaCroix said, "He did it. The bastard's lying."

"I don't think the bastard is aware of anything he's doing," Faith said. "I think he's gone from this world."

"He fired that rifle well enough," LaCroix said.

"He missed a motionless dog from thirty feet," Michael said. "He's not exactly Wild Bill."

"Well, he clearly doesn't mind killing people who trespass on his land," LaCroix said.

"None of the previous victims were found near his land," Faith said.

"He doesn't actually *have* land," LaCroix said, as though explaining something that should be perfectly obvious. "He's a drifter. He could have been in the same areas as the other women when they were killed."

"So he just randomly decides that wherever he wakes up on a given day is his land and it's his right as an American to drop women down a well and leave them there to die?"

"It's actually quite plausible," Michael said. "The part about assuming that wherever he is belongs to him."

"Exactly!" LaCroix said. "So he sees someone trespassing, sees red, knocks them out, and tosses them in a well. You just happened to come across him before he could do it this time."

“So the crazy guy keeps fentanyl on him and uses it to render people unconscious when he catches them on his ‘property,’ then carefully lowers them down the well after sanding it down so that he can watch them think they’re going to escape only to realize he’s going to leave them to die,” Faith said.

LaCroix blinked, then slumped, defeated.

“I know how badly you want to put an end to this, Sheriff,” Faith said gently. “Believe me, I do too, but making a square peg fit into a round hole won’t stop anything. He’s not the guy.”

“No,” Michael agreed, “but he might have seen them.”

LaCroix brightened a little. “Yes, he could have seen the real killer. It’s a long shot, but if he noticed anyone suspicious, we might at least get something we didn’t have before.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Michael said. “I have a knack for getting suspects to calm down. Maybe I can make him talk to me without spouting nonsense.”

Faith doubted very much that they would learn anything useful, but it wasn’t like there was anything else they could do. It just didn’t make sense! Or rather, it made perfect sense! The killer’s fixation on single women, the way he entombed his victims in the wells, it all pointed to a pseudo-religious motive. Like he was punishing them for their sins. The cross pattern fit so perfectly!

She realized that she was making the same mistake LaCroix was by allowing herself to cling so tightly to the cross pattern, but she couldn’t help it. There *had* to be something she missed!

And time was running out. It would be dark in a couple of hours. Carla survived one night already. It wasn’t likely she would survive another.

Well, LaCroix was still following up with his lead. She could follow up with hers.

“All right,” she said. “You keep talking to him. I’m going to go back to the well. We must have missed something there.”

“You sure about that?” Michael asked.

“I’m not sure of anything, Michael,” Faith said, “but as long as we’re beating our heads against a wall, we might as well beat our heads against another.”

Michael chuckled, a little bitterly. “Most sensible thing anyone’s said so far. All right. Let’s go back.”

“No,” Faith said, “you keep talking to him. You have a way with people. See if you can find anything useful—a description, anything.”

“Not a chance,” Michael said. “I’m not letting you go out by yourself.”

“Thank you, Michael,” Faith said. “But I’ll be fine. I’ll take Turk with me.”

Michael hesitated and Faith said, “If I smell a rat, I’ll call you, okay? I’ll be fine.”

Michael didn’t seem happy about it, but he finally relented. “All right,” he said. “You see anything, you call me.”

“I will,” she promised. “Turk, come.”

Turk jumped up and followed Faith back to the SUV. They covered the distance from the station to the site of the well in fifteen minutes, and Faith climbed out of the SUV. Her overworked joints shouted at her, but she stretched briefly, clenched her jaw, and kept going.

She led Turk to the well they had checked earlier. Maybe the killer had seen them coming and moved the body. It was also possible that they had moved too early. The killer normally took twelve hours to deposit his victims. It had been quite a bit longer than that when they reached the well, but they could have the timeline wrong. Maybe...

But no. When she reached the well and lifted the lid, straining from the weight, there was no one down there. The water was as clear and pristine as before.

Faith slumped. She sank to the ground with her back to the well and stared ahead at the lowering sun. She thought the word that she and Michael had said every time one of their

leads came up empty, but she didn't say it. She was all at once very, very tired.

She ran her hands through her hair, and when Turk put his nose to the ground next to the well and began to sniff, she said, "Turk? Did you find something, boy?"

Turk lifted his head and stared straight ahead into the forest. He put his nose to the ground and trotted that direction. His tail was swishing back and forth like a cat stalking its prey.

Faith frowned and got slowly to her feet. "What is it, Turk?" she called. "What do you smell?"

Turk lifted his head again, staring into the forest once more. He put his nose down again, then barked and sprinted ahead.

"Turk!" Faith cried.

She ran after the dog, forcing her legs to work again. "Turk!" she called.

Turk stopped and looked at her. He barked and ran back to her, then grabbed her sleeve and began pulling her in his excitement. She stumbled a moment, then pulled her arm free and said, "I'll follow. Go!"

Turk leapt ahead, stopping every thirty feet or so to wait for Faith to catch up. He barked and whined in excitement and frustration every few seconds, and Faith's heart began to pound in her chest.

Come on, she thought. Come on, Turk. Find her.

Turk continued to run, and Faith's excitement helped mitigate the pain in her legs so she was able to keep a faster pace. They ran maybe a mile deeper into the forest, and then Turk stopped so suddenly that Faith nearly tripped over him.

Turk barked and leapt excitedly, stopping and staring at a mound of brush directly in front of them. Faith recalled the well they found the first victim in—the third one to be discovered. Her eyes widened and she got on her hands and knees and began to dig at the earth and leaves that covered the hole. When she uncovered a wooden plank, she cried out in excitement.

"Yes! Good boy, Turk!"

Turk barked and danced excitedly around the well—for well it was—wagging his tail like a puppy.

Faith lifted the lid, crying out with effort. She got the lid halfway off the hole when she heard the woman's voice.

“Hello? Is someone there?”

A gust of wind blew through the forest, chilling Faith, but a blizzard couldn't have chilled the warmth that spread through her like sunshine.

“Carla?” she called down the hole. “Carla Veneti?”

“Oh my God!” the voice cried. “Yes! Can you help me, please?”

With a cry, Faith shoved the lid the rest of the way off, revealing a very dirty, somewhat bloody and very frightened but very much alive Carla Veneti.

Carla wept with joy, and in her relief, Faith wept too. “It's okay,” she said through her tears. “We're going to get you out of here.”

She heard a branch snap, then a moment later, Turk barked in alarm. Faith stood just in time to see a fist sailing toward her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Eric Malvern stood stock-still, sheltered from view by the branches of two young maple trees whose branches intertwined. One young tree was taller and more robust than the other. Its trunk was sturdier and its leaves greener. It would outcompete the smaller tree, stealing water and nutrients until the smaller tree died, wasting away until it broke down into litter and bark which would be broken down by fungus and consumed by the larger tree.

Why had he come back? Why in God's name had he come back? Thirteen times he had completed the Lord's work, and the fourteenth time he had to come back? What was he thinking?

"You knew she was comin', boy, his father's voice spoke in his mind. The Spirit led you, and you came because you knew you needed to ensure the devil's agents didn't free this sinner from her punishment. Now you need to finish the job."

"Yes, Father," he whispered.

That was a mistake. The dog—the damned hellhound—lifted its ears and listened. Eric froze, slowing his breathing so that his inhaled and exhaled were softer than the breeze that blew through the forest.

"There you go again, his father's voice echoed in his mind. Screwing up like you always do. You're worthless, Eric. The devil got into you and it's too late to save you. The only thing I can do is punish you."

He watched as the FBI agent struggled to move the lid from the top of the well. The lid scraped and screeched as it slid over the top of the well. She cried out with the effort, muscles straining. Eric noticed the curve of her buttocks in her slacks and the tautness of her breasts as they pressed against her blouse. His body responded sinfully, and a tear came to his eyes.

Images flashed in Eric's mind. His father, walking in on him as he fornicated himself, the dirty, sinful magazine opened so the whore's body was laid bare to slake his lust. He heard himself scream as his father dragged him to the well. He saw the fire of judgment in his father's eyes. He heard his voice as he dragged Eric to the well.

“But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”

“No, dad! Please!” Eric screamed.

They reached the well and Josiah Malvern grabbed Eric's arm and pulled it so that his sinful hand stuck straight in the air. “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.”

He pulled his knife from its sheath and held it in front of Eric. “Will you cut your hand off, boy?”

“No!” Eric shouted. “Please!”

“Then be cast into hell.”

He lifted Eric and tied him to the crude wooden plank that hung over the well. Eric struggled, but when he saw the knife again, he stopped and wept, “Dad, please! I'll be good! I'll never do it again!”

Josiah tightened the knots so they dug into Eric's skin. His eyes blazed fire as he stared at his son. “And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I lay my vengeance upon them.”

Then he lowered Eric into the well. “Dad!” Eric screamed. “Please!”

His father said nothing else as he lowered his son into the well. Eric saw his father's silhouette for a moment. Then a crescent of black obscured the sun, growing until all light was extinguished and Eric was alone.

“I'm sorry, Father,” Eric said softly. He was praying to both God and Josiah. Lately, Eric thought of both of them as one

and the same. Josiah was a man of God, and Eric a poor sinner who failed him time and time again. As Tamara had failed Him. As Jenna had failed Him. As Mary Louise had failed Him. As Carla had failed Him.

As this woman, this FBI harlot, had failed Him.

Eric's tears dried. His jaw clenched. He would stop this woman, this idolater. He would stop her, and he would continue the work he had promised his Father he would complete in His name.

Josiah's last words to Eric, whispered on his deathbed as the instruments of man sought to override the will of God, were offered as a condemnation. *"You're worthless. Eric. You're nothing more than a common sinner. You'll burn with all the rest."*

Eric was crushed at first by the words, but as they lowered his father's body into the ground, he had an epiphany. There was still time. Time for him to be a soldier of God again. Time for him to execute God's wrath on those who defied His will and chose a life of pleasing the flesh.

He was a sinner, but when his father lowered him into the well and left him there for a day and a night, he was cleansed of his sin. Never again had he allowed the desires of his flesh to consume him. He had taken the Lord's name in vain once, a few months later, and another night in the well had cleansed him of that sin. He would cleanse these sinners of their transgressions and offer their souls a path to righteousness.

In three years, thirteen souls had been cleansed of their unrighteousness and been given a path to salvation. Thirteen women who flaunted their bodies like harlots and snared young men with their wiles were now in the arms of God, their black souls made white by the crimson blood of Christ.

He had helped them. He would help the FBI harlot as well.

He stepped forward and a branch snapped under his foot. The dog whirled toward him, and Eric lunged for the woman. He could not outfight the dog. He knew that. The dog would tear him to pieces, and he knew that too, but his last act on this

Earth would be to rescue one final sinner from the grasp of darkness.

He threw his fist and when it connected with the harlot in a satisfying crunch, he smiled to himself.

Then the dog hit him.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Faith turned her head and ducked so the blow only glanced off of her instead of crashing into her full force. Still, the impact was strong enough that she saw stars and stumbled before collapsing heavily to the ground. She tried to stand, but fell again, head swimming. She could hear screaming from the well.

Carla.

She shook off the blow and stood. Her jaw throbbed where the killer's fist had connected. She saw Turk wrestling with a silver-haired man who looked younger than his gray head indicated, though he was not young. He yelled as Turk sunk his fangs into his arm, his eyes dark with fury.

Faith watched in amazement. She had never seen Turk like this before. Even with Crowley, he had seemed almost emotionless. He was just doing his job and doing it well.

This was more than a job to him. As Faith's vision cleared, she realized that Turk was once more watching his handler in mortal peril. The fierceness in his gaze and the pressure he exerted on her assailant's arm made it clear that this time he would not allow his partner to die.

The killer gritted his teeth and cried out in rage. He raised his arm, lifting Turk completely off of the ground, and shook hard. Turk's fangs twisted and sliced into his arm, but he shook the shepherd off as though impervious to the pain. Turk tumbled to the ground and landed in a heap.

Faith cried out and reached inside her jacket for her gun. The killer sprinted toward her, moving impossibly fast. He reached her just as she freed the gun from her jacket, catching her wrist and knocking her to the ground.

Faith struggled mightily, but her attacker was far stronger than her. He pinned her to the ground and shrieked as he pounded her wrist against the edge of the well. Faith could hear bones crunch in her hand, and she shrieked, dropping the

gun. It clattered down the well, and Carla cried out as it splashed into the water next to her.

“You cannot escape God’s wrath, *sinner!*” the man hissed at her.

He stood, heaving Faith to her feet as though she weighed nothing. Her eyes widened in shock. He was going to push her into the well!

He leaned into her, but before he could shove, Turk hit him again. The killer cried out as his feet left the ground. He landed with a crash and rolled down a small hill, crashing with a wheeze against the trunk of a gigantic elm.

Turk leapt after him and would have sunk his teeth into the killer’s neck if the man hadn’t brought up his uninjured arm to protect himself. Instead, Turk bit the arm, and the killer cried out again in pain.

Faith staggered, clutching her broken wrist. She watched as the man one more stood, lifting Turk off the ground. The dog gnawed at his arm, but the man—crazed by adrenaline and zealotry, ignored the pain and threw the dog off of him.

Turk yelped, flying through the air. He landed in a heap and lay still.

Faith saw red. The pain in her wrist forgotten, she screamed and rushed for the attacker, diving into him and tackling him to the ground. She wrapped her legs around his waist in a jiu-jitsu hold and drove her elbow downward onto the man’s nose. The bones shattered, and the killer screamed in a high-pitched, atonal cry.

Faith drove the heel of her palm into the pulpy mess of the killer’s nose, grinding her heel viciously into the ruined flesh, her teeth bared in anger. The killer shrieked again and flailed underneath her, but she planted her weight onto his chest and didn’t allow him to get up.

He opened his eyes, bloodshot and weepy with pain, but ablaze with hate. “Die, harlot!” he cried.

Something struck the side of Faith’s skull and the world turned gray. She was dimly aware of falling to the ground, but she could barely register the impact. Her ears hummed. Her

vision swam, red and white and yellow pulsing across her eyes in rapid strobes. She gasped, but her lungs didn't seem to work. She tried to stand, but fell again, dizziness overcoming her.

She felt a fist as strong as iron grab her and lift her high. Then another fist crashed into her temple, and she went limp.

She fought the blackness with every fiber of her being. Images flashed in her mind, of Turk leaping to save her when she slipped in the hospital, Michael telling her he didn't need to sleep with her to care about her, Benedict St. Pierre telling her not to worry about him but to go find the missing girl, Jethro Trammell grinning at her and wondering how well she would bleed, Turk leaping to save her again, this time from a crazed killer who dumped sinners in wells, then coming again to her rescue.

She opened her eyes and gazed down at Carla's terrified face. The killer shoved her downward, but she spread out her arms and legs and caught the edges of the well. A lightning bolt of pain shot through her arm where her wrist had broken, and a fresh stab of pain from her left ankle told her that too was broken now, but she fought, she fought like she had never fought before, and though the killer struggled with the feverish strength that only the insane could muster, she didn't fall.

"Harlot!" the man shrieked, his voice cracking. "Sinner! Accept God's judgment!"

"Fuck you!" Faith shouted.

She twisted and kicked backward with her good heel. Her foot landed squarely on the man's windpipe, and with a choking gasp he released her and stumbled backward. Faith fell into the well but managed to grab the edge of it and stop herself before falling all the way down.

Her wrist screamed in pain again, and she sobbed but held tightly to the stone ring that lined the well. She pulled herself up and wrapped her good arm around the stone, sobbing again when she braced herself with her good left arm and her good right leg, relieving the pressure on her right wrist.

The killer was clawing at his throat, his eyes wide with shock as he tried to remove whatever weight was keeping him from breathing. He coughed and choked and stumbled and Faith whispered, “Die. Die. Die.”

The killer gasped and choked one more time, then drew a ragged breath. He sank back against a tree and stared at Faith, chest heaving.

Faith sobbed again when she realized he would recover from the damage to his throat. She pulled herself out of the well, crying out each time she was forced to use her injured limbs. She managed to get out of the well and stagger to her feet just as the killer pushed away from the tree.

His eyes narrowed, and he lifted a trembling arm soaked in blood and croaked, “You’re going to hell.”

“You first,” she spat.

He yelled, a horrible nasal rasp through his swollen voicebox and shattered nose. Then he rushed her.

Faith angled off and threw a left hook that would have made Tyson proud. It connected solidly with the killer’s jaw, and he staggered. She followed it up with a right knee that buried itself in his solar plexus. He doubled over, wheezing, and Faith lifted her left elbow and dropped down onto the back of his head with all of her body weight. They fell to the ground together.

Faith tried to scramble to her feet, but she didn’t make it. Somehow, the killer got to his feet first, and Faith made it only to a knee before an uppercut lifted her off of the ground to fall heavily back down.

“Sinner!” the man rasped.

He took a staggering step toward her. Then he stumbled backward before twisting around and collapsing to the ground, rolling head over heels as he tumbled down the hill again.

Stars danced and swirled in front of Faith’s vision, but she saw Turk standing at the top of the hill barking and growling at the man who now got to his feet again.

“Turk,” she whispered.

Turk turned toward her, and that gave the killer time to rush up the hill again.

“Turk!” Faith cried.

The dog turned to the killer and narrowly avoided the kick the man sent his way. He snapped at the man’s heel in a lightning-fast strike. The man cried out as his Achilles tendon was severed. He stepped toward Turk, but his leg wouldn’t work anymore, and he hopped around like a clown on a pogo stick, struggling to remain upright.

Turk growled low in his throat and launched himself at the killer. He planted all four of his paws on the man’s chest and pushed off, landing easily a few yards away.

The killer wasn’t so lucky. He staggered backward, tripping over the well. He flailed his arms, crying out in fear and pain.

Faith heard Carla shout, “Hey! Agent!”

Then she saw the gun fly out of the well and land a few feet beyond the well. The killer cried and leapt for the gun, but Faith moved faster. Ignoring the pain that rippled through her, she launched herself at the weapon and in one fluid motion, brought it up and fired. A spray of blood leapt from the killer’s mouth. His eyes widened and he stared directly at Faith. He opened his mouth, but instead of words, more blood bubbled from his mouth, trickling down his chin and neck. He staggered forward and fell heavily onto his face.

Faith struggled slowly to her feet. She swayed a moment, then walked toward the prone suspect.

The man stirred. Faith’s eyes widened as he pushed himself to his elbows and rolled onto his back. he tried to lift his head, and Faith saw that he was grinning. Then his eyes lost their focus. He released a final choking breath. Then he stilled.

Faith sank to her knees, exhaustion and pain finally overwhelming her. She heard crashing in the bushes behind her and a moment later, Michael’s voice called her name. LaCroix and two other uniforms rushed past her, guns drawn and trained on the prostrate killer.

“Faith!” Michael said, dropping to his knees next to Faith and cupping his hands over her face. “Faith! Are you all

right?”

“Sure,” she mumbled. “Right as rain.”

She giggled softly, then passed out.

She wasn't sure how long she was out, but it couldn't have been long because it was still light when she opened her eyes. She was on her back a few yards from the well. Michael and Turk were right next to her, Turk standing protectively over her, his expression fierce.

She groaned and sat up. Her head swam and Michael caught her. “Take it easy,” he said. “You need to rest.”

He tried to lower her back down, but she shook her head. “No, help me stand.”

“Faith...”

“Help me stand, dammit!” she said.

He looked like he was going to ignore her again, but then he helped her slowly to her feet. Her injured ankle gave way, and he caught her once more. “At least let me help you stand,” he said, wrapping an arm under her shoulders and lifting her.

“My hero,” she said.

“Fuck you,” he replied affectionately.

Faith looked toward the well. Carla sat a few yards beyond it while paramedics tended to her. She met Faith's eyes and offered a weak smile. Faith returned one of her own.

“Tough kid,” Michael said.

“Me or Carla?” Faith asked.

“Turk,” Michael said. “Did you see him? He looks like he just went five rounds with a polar bear, but he's still on his feet ready to knock someone out again if they try to hurt you.”

Turk barked, and Faith didn't need to speak dog to understand what he said. *You're damn right.*

She reached down and Michael helped her lower herself so she could scratch Turk behind his ears.

Michael shifted his feet and said, “Christ, you’re a handful. I can’t believe I used to enjoy holding you.”

Faith turned to him and kissed him on the lips. The kiss was brief, but very thorough, and when she pulled away, Michael was bright red. “Now why’d you have to go and do that?” he asked.

She smiled. “I don’t know. I guess nearly dying twice in three months made me realize what truly matters.”

“Yeah, well, keep in mind you’ve been hit in the head a few times tonight,” he said.

Faith chuckled and kissed him again, this time a chaste peck on the tip of his nose. “True,” she said. “Lucky for you.”

“Yeah,” he groused. “Lucky me.”

Faith chuckled again, then turned to the prostrate body of the killer. His face was covered by a sheet now, but Faith could still see his crazed eyes denouncing her as a sinner and condemning her to judgment. She shivered and Michael rubbed her shoulders. “You did good, kid,” he said.

“Me or Turk?” she asked.

“You,” he said. “That time, I meant you.”

The paramedics walked over and took Faith from Michael. One of them, a severe-looking woman of forty, frowned at Michael. “I told you she needed rest,” she said.

“You try to stop her then,” Michael said. “I don’t need that kind of stress in my life.”

“It’s okay,” Faith said to the EMT. “I’ll go quietly.”

And she meant it. Five minutes later, she was fast asleep. She wouldn’t wake again until the next morning in Room A529 of the Morgan County General Hospital in Versailles.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Faith sat next to Michael across from Sheriff LaCroix. Turk sat next to her, head held high. If he was in pain still from the bruises and cracked ribs he suffered two days ago, he showed no sign.

Faith hoped she looked at least half as good as he did. God knows she felt like she had been run over by a train. This wasn't as bad as Jethro, but it wasn't good.

LaCroix sighed and said, "Well, we have an ID on the killer."

"That so?" Michael said.

LaCroix nodded. "Eric Malvern, forty-six. General contractor out of Syracuse. His father, Josiah Malvern, was a small-time revivalist. Used to run the Pentecostal church in Syracuse. Rumor has it he was a real son of a bitch. Neighbors said they used to hear Eric screaming for hours. Said he sounded as though he was screaming from the root cellar."

"Or the bottom of a well," Faith said.

"Yep," LaCroix said. "You hit the nail on the head. We went out to his property and found an old well. It's been dried up for years, but we found scratch marks at the bottom right about the height you'd expect from a boy between the ages of six to about fifteen trying to climb out."

"Jesus," Michael breathed.

"In the worst possible way," LaCroix confirmed. "The going theory is that Daddy Josiah used to punish Eric by putting him in the well for a while. Best guess is Eric developed a bit of a psychosis over it and ended up taking up his father's mantle as the judgment of God when Josiah died."

"Poor kid," Michael said.

"Yeah, well," LaCroix said, "I can't say I feel sorry for him. I don't like that he was hurt, but his father never killed him the way he killed those women."

“Yes he did,” Faith said.

It was true. Eric Malvern died at the bottom of his father’s well. What came out was a broken shell and when Josiah died, the hate and rage and hurt that prompted Josiah’s actions inhabited that shell and drove the man that used to be Eric to commit unspeakable acts in the name of God. He was only the latest in a long line of people to murder other people on God’s behalf.

They fell silent a moment. Then Michael asked the question that burned in Faith’s mind as well. “How many others?”

LaCroix sighed again. “We’re not sure. Eric never kept a list. It’s safe to say that these four weren’t the only ones. We’re looking through the wells now, and we’ll probably find more, but...”

He didn’t finish.

“So what’s next for you?” Michael asked. “You’ll probably experience a nice bump in approval rating after all of this.”

LaCroix smiled wanly and didn’t answer. Faith thought he never looked so old.

There was another moment of silence, then LaCroix said, “On behalf of the people of Morgan County, I want to thank you for helping us catch this killer before he could hurt anyone else. We’re forever in your debt. I’m forever in your debt.”

Faith smiled. “No need to thank us for doing our jobs, Sheriff.”

LaCroix met her eyes. “That’s where you’re wrong, Special Agent. You put your life at risk for people you don’t know and will likely never see again. Not everyone can do that. So thank you. Both of you.”

Turk barked and the sheriff smiled at him. “All three of you.”

Turk barked again and the three of them laughed. It would be a stretch to say they left the office happy, but they left satisfied. Faith decided that was good enough.

Abel lifted his glass and said, “To a happy ending.”

Michael and Faith lifted their own glasses and echoed the toast, then sipped their wine. Michael grimaced as the whiskey burned his throat. “You know toasts are supposed to be made with champagne, right?”

Abel chuckled. “Did you trade your balls in for a pair of tits?” He glanced at Faith. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Faith said. “He knows mine are bigger.”

Turk barked agreement and Michael rolled his eyes.

They sat at a table in the Palace of Versailles, which, like the Traveler’s Palace Motel, was more of a dive than a palace, but served tri-tip, mashed potatoes, creamed corn, and a double shot of Kentucky straight for seventeen-fifty. Not that the three agents needed to pay for their food. The owner was happy to reimburse the county’s heroes the cost of their meal.

Michael gestured to the TV, and the other two agents turned to see a news anchor offering updates on the Angel of Death—the disgustingly cheesy name the press had chosen to give Malvern.

“Eric Malvern—the serial killer known to residents in Morgan County as the Angel of Death—was laid to rest this morning at an undisclosed location to avoid the risk of desecration by grieving residents. The deranged murderer would stalk his victims—innocent women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five—and render them unconscious with fentanyl before burying them alive in abandoned wells. Reports indicate the madman would prepare the wells beforehand, cutting handholds for the first fifteen feet of the well and sanding the rest of the wall smooth to offer his victims a false hope of escape before crushing that hope and leaving them to die. Police have found seven bodies so far including those of Tamara McKenzie and Jenna Nilssen. Malvern is now believed to have been killing women for as long as five years and is estimated to have murdered anywhere from ten to thirty women.”

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” Abel said. “Why the torture? Why offer them false hope? If the point was to punish them for their sins, why would he feel a need to distract from that by making the focus be on how much of a prick he was?”

Michael shrugged. “At the end of the day, the real motive is always power. People dress it up in different robes—call it religion or justice or retribution or whatever—but when it all comes down to it, people like Malvern are what they are because they enjoy having power over others. I think Eric hated that his father could take away his power, so he took it from others. I think he tortured them psychologically because he liked the way it made him feel when his victims grasped at hope only for it to disappear.”

“I almost feel bad for him,” Abel said. “To suffer like that at the hands of your own father.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“I don’t feel bad,” Michael said. “Lots of people get abused and don’t turn into psychotic murderers.”

“Still,” Abel said, “I feel like Josiah’s the real prick here.”

Faith didn’t say anything. She didn’t feel sympathy for Malvern, but she didn’t feel any triumph at his death either. He was dead, but there would always be another one—another crazed killer intent on taking their self-hatred out on others, like Malvern, or acting out their twisted fantasies, like Jethro Trammell.

Turk nudged her, and she turned to see him staring at her. His gaze was strong and purposeful, and as she met his eyes, she felt a renewed sense of strength. She stroked him behind his ears and nodded.

There would always be another killer. And when that killer arrived, they would be waiting.

The next day, back in Pennsylvania, Faith sipped her coffee and decided Michael was right. The coffee was better in Philly.

Michael sipped his own coffee and tapped the edge of the cup pensively. "So I heard Abel's getting a promotion."

"Commendation," Faith corrected. "They offered him ASAC, but he turned it down. I guess he likes field work too much."

Michael laughed. "Well, he's young. He'll learn."

Faith smiled. "He's my age, Michael."

"You're young," Michael said.

"I'm five years younger than you," Faith said. "I'm hardly a child, and neither is Abel. If he wants to be in the field, let him be in the field. Not everyone's cut out to drive a desk."

"Drive a desk?" Michael asked.

Faith waved her hand dismissively. "It's what we said in the Corps when someone was reassigned to an office job. Well, in Armored, at least."

"Gotcha," Michael said. "Did you hear about LaCroix?"

"I did," Faith said.

LaCroix had retired as soon as he filed the appropriate paperwork for the Malvern case. The new sheriff was a former captain from New Orleans with a twenty-year background in major crimes, a much better fit to run a department, in Faith's opinion.

"Well," Michael said, "kindest thing for him, I guess."

"It is," Faith said.

They lapsed into silence and Michael tapped his cup again pensively. Faith sipped her coffee, then set her cup on the table and looked squarely at him. "You didn't ask me here to shoot the breeze, Michael."

"I didn't," Michael admitted. "I..." His voice trailed off a moment. Finally, he took a deep breath and met Faith's gaze. "I love you, Faith," he said. "That will always be true."

"I love you too," Faith replied and meant it.

“I know,” Michael said, “but...” He took another deep breath and said, “I think we should stay friends. I will always cherish the memory of our time together, but I think we’re better off without romance as a component of our relationship. It just complicates things between us when we have to balance intimacy with work with friendship with everything else.” He chuckled and turned away, reddening slightly. “Christ, I feel like an idiot. It’s just... I realize it’s been a while since we’ve been like that, but I thought maybe we—both of us—maybe felt something in Missouri, and I...” He shook his head and looked away.

Faith smiled. “It’s okay, Michael.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said, “you’re wonderful. There’s nothing wrong with you at all. I just... I think we’re better off not sleeping together. Not that you’re not good in bed. I just mean—”

Faith supposed it was a little cruel to let him stammer around like that, but after everything she’d been through over the past several months, she thought she deserved a little entertainment. Finally, she reached forward and laid her hand over his. “It’s okay, Michael,” she said. “I think you’re right.”

“You do?” he said, genuinely surprised.

“I do,” she confirmed. “I don’t regret the time we shared as more than friends, but I think if we’re both honest with ourselves—and it sounds like we are—we’re not soulmates. Partners, yes, but not soulmates.”

“No,” Michael agreed. “Not soulmates.”

They fell silent again. After a moment, Michael looked up and said, “So we’re good?”

Faith smiled and said, “Yes, Michael. We’re good.”

“Then stop holding my hand,” Michael said, flipping Faith’s hand off of his own. “What are you, my therapist?”

Faith rolled her eyes, but inwardly she was glad at his reaction. She realized she had been worried their past would get in the way of their chances at friendship. She was glad to see her worries were unfounded.

They spent the rest of the meal laughing and joking about nothing in particular. When they separated, Faith gave him a hug, and Michael returned it, holding on for just long enough to communicate his gratitude without saying the words aloud.

Faith headed back to her apartment, and when she arrived, her other partner leapt into her arms and licked her exuberantly. She laughed and turned away in a futile attempt to protect her face. When she finally managed to push the big German shepherd off of her, she said, “We’re going to need to work on boundaries, Turk.”

She headed to the kitchen to grab a beer—a nice, old-fashioned American lager—and walked to the couch. Turk sat and stared calmly at her, and she sighed. “Boundaries, Turk.”

Turk stared at her, unmoving, and Faith rolled her eyes and plopped down next to him. “Fine,” she said. “You can sit on the couch, but I’m picking what we watch.”

Turk barked, and Faith said, “Yeah, yeah, I like you too. Hope you’re okay with cooking shows.”

Turk didn’t reply, but he didn’t leave when the screen changed to an image of an unusually angry British man shouting at a group of blank-faced cooks staring dumbly at a plate of burnt scallops.

“We like Sophia,” Faith said. “Got it?”

Turk barked and Faith chuckled, then reached over and scratched him behind the ears. “Good dog,” she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Turk whined nervously and cast a plaintive look up at Faith. Faith smiled and ruffled his fur on top of his head. “You’ll be fine,” she said. “Vets are friends.”

Turk looked dubiously at the picture on the wall—a cutaway of a dog revealing its musculoskeletal system with the different muscle groups and bones labeled.

“Yeah, that’s not the best picture to have hanging in a vet’s office,” Faith conceded. “I’ll talk to Dr. Friedman about it when he gets here.”

As though on cue, the door opened, and Dr. David Friedman walked into the room. He smiled at Faith and Faith forgot all about the picture on the wall.

It was the smile, she decided. That’s what attracted her to him so much. It was kind and boyish almost to the point of being goofy, with a hint of mischievousness and an almost apologetic air, as though he knew the effect it would have on her, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Yes, it was the smile.

Not that the rest of him wasn’t equally attractive. He had a face that a Hollywood producer would kill for, chiseled and manly, but carrying a hint of the same boyish earnestness that made his smile to die for.

And his body—well, let’s just say that not all of him was boyish.

His smile turned to Turk, and he said, “Hey there. You must be Special Agent Turk.”

Turk looked between Faith and Dr. Friedman and then back at Faith as though to ask, “Seriously? Is this guy for real?”

“Don’t worry, Special Agent,” Dr. Friedman said, still talking to Turk. “I know you guys hate physicals. I’ll make this as quick and painless as possible.”

Only after saying this did he turn to Faith. “And you must be his partner.”

Faith smiled and extended her hand. “Faith Bold, but you can call me Faith.”

“David,” Dr. Friedman said.

His voice was soft and rich at the same time, and when he grasped her hand, it felt as though a bolt of electricity ran through Faith. She actually had to stifle a giggle as she said, “It’s nice to meet you, David.”

“Likewise,” he said.

He took his hand back and turned to Turk. “With your permission, Special Agent?”

Turk decided that if Faith trusted Dr. Friedman, then he could trust him as well. He barked once, then allowed David to begin examining him.

As David prodded gently at Turk’s abdomen, he talked as a doctor might talk to a human patient. “So Turk—can I call you Turk?”

Turk chuffed in acquiescence, and David continued. “Your friend Michael told me that you’ve just completed your first mission since returning to duty.”

“You talked to Michael?” Faith asked.

“I did,” David confirmed, moving his hands up so he could examine Turk’s teeth. “This morning. He wanted to make sure I took extra care with Turk. Waxed rather eloquent about how this dog was a hero and worthy of extra attention.”

Faith smiled, imagining Michael ranting about how important Turk was to their team and how critical it was that Dr. Friedman not think of him as just another patient. “Yes, he saved my life.”

“Did he now,” David said. He turned his smile to Faith and said, “Well then, he most definitely deserves the utmost in veterinary care.”

Faith felt a thrill run through her. She hoped the flush she felt come to her cheeks wasn’t as obvious as she thought it was. She couldn’t believe how instantly attracted to David she

was. She hadn't felt this way since Aaron Theriault asked her to senior prom.

He held his smile a moment longer than was necessary and there was a slight flush on his cheeks when he turned his attention back to Turk, so Faith decided her attraction to him was more noticeable than she'd hoped. Oh well. At least it didn't seem to be unwelcome.

David checked Turk's eyes and ears, then asked for one paw at a time so he could check for any cysts or blisters on Turk's paws. Turk for his part seemed just as enamored as Faith was, staring in wonder at the doctor and glancing at Faith every few seconds as though to ask, "Is this guy *really* a vet?"

David spoke to Turk as though Turk were a human and not a dog. Faith liked that. She stifled a chuckle at herself. She used to despise when people talked to dogs as though they were people. She guessed that working with Turk had changed her perspective a little.

"So what's next for you two after this?" David said to Faith.

"Well, assuming all goes well with the physical," Faith said, "we have a test to take for my handler's license. Normally that happens before the special agent is partnered with the K9 unit, but since these were special circumstances, it was deferred until the case was completed. That won't cause any issues as long as we both pass. My boss has some pull with senior leadership so he was able to move some things around for us." God, why was she talking so much?

If David picked up on her awkwardness, he didn't mention it. "Well, I have no doubt that both of you will pass with flying colors. What do you think, Turk?"

Turk barked confidently and seemed to stand taller and prouder. David nodded seriously and said, "I agree."

Faith stifled a chuckle and David winked at her. Another thrill ran through her, and she decided she would need a cold shower after this appointment.

"So what do you do for fun?" David asked her. "I mean, when you're not saving the world and bringing killers to

justice.”

“Oh,” Faith said.

She reddened slightly. What did she do for fun? She realized that it had been years since she’d done anything other than work and hang out at home. Even when she and Michael were together, work took up so much of both of their lives that when work was done, they mostly just stayed home. She thought that might have something to do with why their time together was so short-lived.

Well, she couldn’t exactly tell David that she watched cooking shows and drank cheap beer for fun. So she only said, “Oh well, the job keeps me pretty busy. I guess I don’t think much about fun when I’m not working.”

“Well, that’s no good,” David said as he gently lifted Turk to a standing position and checked his rear paws. “You can’t spend all your time working. It has a profound negative effect on concentration and reduces your effectiveness in the field. The same goes for you, Turk. You need to get out and chase things other than bad guys every once in a while.”

Turk chuffed in agreement, and David put his stethoscope in his ears and began checking Turk’s breathing. Faith looked at David and imagined all the fun the two of them could have.

After a moment, David nodded and said, “Well, Special Agent Turk, you are in excellent condition. My only concern is the lack of fun your partner here has admitted to. I’m going to prescribe two or three hours of relaxation and enjoyment, say, this Saturday afternoon?”

Turk turned to Faith expectantly. Faith stared back blankly for a moment, then noticed David’s stare as well. “Oh,” she said, blushing again, “oh, um. Sure. Yes, that would... that would be fun.”

“Excellent,” David said with another one of his breathtaking smiles. “A walk on the beach and some ice cream would be just the ticket for a pair of overworked special agents. I have your number from your file, Faith, but maybe I can give you mine as well?”

“Of course,” Faith said, blushing more deeply at the bubblyness in her voice. She took David’s number, and at least managed to remain professional enough to give David a handshake and not a lingering embrace when she left the office.

When she got into her car, she sat still a moment. “Wow,” she said. “What a treat.”

Turk barked and Faith said, “I know, right? Who would have thought a doctor could actually be fun? Although it’s too soon to tell, isn’t it? We need to see how the good doctor performs on Saturday.”

Why in God’s name did she say *performs*? She decided the fluttering in her heart wasn’t going to stop anytime soon and started the car. Just before she could shift into gear, her phone rang. She saw it was Michael and answered.

“Faith, you still at the vet’s office?”

“Just about to leave,” she said. “What’s up?”

“Boss called,” Michael said. *“Needs to see us in his office again.”*

She frowned. “Everything okay?”

“Is it ever okay?” Michael asked.

“No, I suppose not,” Faith said with a sigh. “I’m on my way.”

She hung up and sighed, then looked wistfully back at the office. Turk whined and she turned to him and smiled sadly. “Guess fun’s gonna have to wait, buddy.”

Turk whined again and Faith said, “Yeah, I know. Me too.”

She shifted into gear and accelerated away from the vet, hoping that the Boss’s news wouldn’t force her to cancel her date with David but knowing it almost certainly would.

Faith stared at Michael in shock, the hot vet momentarily forgotten. “That’s impossible,” she said, “Jethro’s dead. I saw

him die.”

“It can’t be Jethro Trammell,” Michael agreed, “But the MO is precisely the same. Young white male, fit, out for a jog, stopped to help someone on the side of the road, found two days later dumped in a river with the tendons in his ankles, knees and elbows severed and shallow cuts all over his body.”

Faith felt a touch of pain behind her knees and rubbed them absently as she thought of Jethro’s knife sliding across her breasts. *Let’s see how you bleed.* “A copycat?” she asked.

“That’s my guess,” Michael said, “Unless...”

“Unless Trammell was the copycat,” Faith finished for him.

“It’s possible,” Michael said, “We were only able to establish a link between Trammell and three of the eleven Donkey Killer victims. The other eight were assumed to be his as well, but with this recent killing we’re starting to wonder.”

“So do we get to investigate?” Faith said.

“No,” Michael said. “The Boss is putting Clark and Desrouleaux on the case.”

“That’s bullshit!” Faith shouted.

Michael didn’t respond. He looked down at his coffee cup and pursed his lips.

“You don’t agree,” Faith said. It wasn’t a question.

Michael sighed. “Faith, I understand that this is important to you, but I have to agree with the Boss on this. You suffered a serious trauma—physical and psychological. I think you’re ready to get back to work. Hell, you did a fine job with the Malvern case, so I *know* you’re ready to get back to work, but this is too close to you. Clark and Desrouleaux are good agents. They can stop this guy.”

“That’s bullshit, Michael,” Faith insisted. “We were the ones who closed the Donkey Killer case. We should be the ones to find this copycat or original or whoever he is. Clark and Desrouleaux are good agents, but we *know* this case. We’re the ones most likely to solve it before more bodies turn up.”

“I get that, Faith,” Michael said, “But that’s only true if...”

His voice trailed off. Faith's jaw tightened. "Go ahead," she said evenly. "Say it."

Michael sighed. "Faith, you know I care about you, and you know that I trust you. I'm not lying when I say you're the finest agent I've ever worked with. That's why I think the Boss is right. I think you need to stay away. This case is too close to you, and I don't want..." He paused again, then finished. "I don't want to watch you lose yourself again. When I saw you in that hospital bed, Faith, it was... You weren't the agent I knew. You weren't the woman I knew. It wasn't even the physical injuries that bugged me, Faith, it was the mental injuries. The psychological damage."

Faith sighed and looked away as Michael continued. "I just don't want to see you lose hope again. Every agent has that one thing. There's a reason *I* don't do organized crime anymore."

Michael's first case with the Bureau had involved taking down a ring of traffickers. The FBI believed at first that they were only smuggling drugs. Michael and his then-partner had discovered that they were in fact trafficking underage girls. When he learned this, he snapped. After the fallout, no one could conclusively prove anything, but there were half a dozen dead gangsters and Michael was reassigned.

"I understand," Faith said. "I just..."

She let her words trail off.

"I do too," Michael said softly. "Believe me, I do."

Faith was silent for a while. When she spoke again, she said, "Why did you tell me this if you weren't going to help me get back on the case?"

Michael sighed. "I thought you should know, and I wanted you to hear it from me and not scuttlebutt around the office. And... Well, who knows? Maybe the Boss will see things differently in time. Maybe a few more months of showing him that you're ready and he'll let you have the case. Just don't push too hard, Faith. He's impressed with what you did in Morgan County—we all are—but the way things went down with you getting hurt again and having to kill Malvern leaves a

big question mark above your name. It shouldn't—you and I are in total agreement about that—but it does. Give it time."

Faith didn't say anything for a long time. "I can't promise I'll stay completely away, Michael," she said, "But I won't throw away my career over this. If things get too heavy, I'll back off. Good enough?"

"Good enough," Michael said.

Turk barked agreement and Faith turned to him and smiled. "And three carries the motion."

Turk barked again and Faith laughed. She scratched him behind the ear and said, "Good dog."

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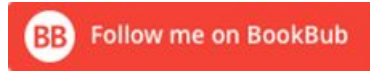
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