



Killer Knows Best

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Category: Crime And Mafia, Suspense, Mystery

Description: In a world where every shadow hides a predator, trust is the most dangerous game.

In the glitzy world of high society and the dark streets of the wrong side of the tracks, a predator lurks—striking fear into the hearts of women from all walks of life.

FBI Special Agents Fallon Baxter and Jack Stone are back, facing their most chilling case yet. A ruthless serial killer is targeting women in Denver, from glamorous socialites and college sorority girls to vulnerable prostitutes. The killer is ruthless, leaving a trail of terror in their wake.

Clean language and heart-stopping twists that keep you glued to the edge of your seat until the very last page.

A brand new FBI Mystery Series by New York Times, USA TODAY, and Wall Street Journal bestseller Addison Moore.

Addison's work has been featured in Cosmopolitan Magazine.

When the bodies of two young women are discovered in a ritzy hotel room, Fallon and Jack are plunged into a network of corruption and deadly secrets. The investigation takes them from the luxurious ballrooms of the city's elite to the dark alleyways where desperation and danger intersect.

As the body count rises, Fallon and Jack find themselves racing against time to stop the killer before they claim another victim. The stakes become personal when Fallon discovers a chilling connection to her own past, leading her down a path she never expected. And in a shocking twist, Jack's past comes back to haunt him and brings all of his demons along for the ride.

Killer Knows Best is a heart-pounding thriller that explores the dark corners of society, where ambition, lust, and power collide with lethal consequences. With a relentless pace and a twisting plot that keeps you guessing until the very end, this is a must-read for fans of suspense and crime fiction.

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DELANEY RIGGS

Victim

“This is fun,” Gwen insists, nudging me with her elbow.

Fun isn’t exactly how I’d categorize what the terrors this night promises to hold.

I knew this was a bad idea from the start. But as fate would have it, I’m not exactly immune to bad ideas. Some might say I specialize in them.

It’s a cold and windy night. That storm they’ve been promising is about to deliver. Crimson autumn leaves tumble around us, curled and dry like necrotic confetti as if they’re paying homage to Colorado itself.

I love everything about the dying season the world knows as fall. They say flowers give their best fragrance once they begin to die, and leaves show off their brightest colors. That is nature in its very best irony. And I can’t help but feel the irony of what I’m about to do as well. But I have a feeling my actions tonight will cling to me like a stench for the rest of my life, and if I’m very unlucky, which I am, it might even follow me into the afterlife, too.

As soon as we step into the Grand Meadows Hotel, I’m hit with the scent of money. Not literally, obviously, but that kind of clean, polished, expensive air you can only find in places where a single night’s stay costs more than my entire month’s rent.

Everything around me sparkles, from the chandeliers hanging like diamonds overhead to the marble floors gleaming under the hotel guests' designer shoes.

I might be in my junior year at Winston Grand University, an elite private school no less, but I grew up with not enough food, parental guidance, or rules to abide by.

I used to pride myself in keeping on the straight and narrow despite the fact. While my friends put in an honest effort to overdose on drugs and alcohol, I somehow managed to steer clear of any chemical reprieves and chose books as my drug of choice, my escape from the armpit of a neighborhood my mother had sunk us in.

This place looks like a fantasyland for the rich and infamous. I don't belong here. I'm certainly not rich. However, it seems I'm shooting for infamous tonight.

I tug at the hem of my dress, feeling more out of place than ever.

Gwen, on the other hand, strides through the lobby like she owns the joint, flashing a smile at the bellhop as if she's an A-lister and not a college student about to turn a trick.

Gwen is a senior at Winston Grand. We met in abnormal psych while exchanging thoughts on our far-too-hot professor.

How I wish that would have been the end of it. But Gwen glommed onto me, and to be fair, I sort of glommed onto her as well. And now it's safe to say Gwen could talk me into just about anything. Case in point.

"Let loose a little, would you?" She loses that toothy grin of hers long enough to frown at me. Gwen is a beauty with shoulder-length blonde curls that turn dark at the roots and a pretty face outside of the fact she's caked on inches of makeup that ages her twenty years. And those pink glittery eyelashes she's glued on aren't exactly

helping the effort either.

I kept my look natural tonight. Combed my dark hair straight, nude lips and nude blush to match the fact the rest of me will be nude soon enough.

Actually, none of that was on purpose. I wanted to look plain, unappetizing, but the first thing Gwen said when she saw me this evening was that she loved the ingénue thing I had going on. It made my stomach sink like a stone. The last thing I wanted was to offer myself up as some fantasy.

“Try to actually enjoy yourself,” Gwen whispers as we pass a beautiful woman in a long black dress. She looks as if she belongs here—as if she’s not earning her stay on her knees tonight. “Hey, remember back in high school when you had to sneak out to have fun? This is like that, only you’re not going to get in trouble with your parents.”

I give her a side-eye. I could count on one hand how many times I’ve seen my father in my life. And as for my mother, she chided me for not getting in enough trouble like she did back in the day. The way she recounted those horror stories from her checkered past, you would think they were accolades on par with winning the Nobel prize. A stint in juvie at twelve, pregnant at fifteen, an abusive relationship that led to six different broken bones by the time she was twenty—no thanks. And yet here I am, looking for trouble, wondering what bones I’ll have broken thanks to the effort.

“If we get in trouble tonight, it’s going to be with the police,” I hiss, scanning the lobby for any sign of authority. Or worse—someone I might actually know.

Gwen rolls her eyes, unfazed by the only shred of truth shared between us tonight. “Anyway, I didn’t have to sneak out to see the guys when I was in high school. I snuck the guys into see me,” she says, biting down on a mischievous smile like it’s something to be proud of. “My mom was obsessed with Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy,” she continues with the backstory I didn’t ask for. “I had guys

sneak over all the time. And you can bet when the front gate started to squeak, it was me who hit it with a shot of canola oil. Between seven and eight, I could get away with anything—and I did.”

I nod along, half-listening because, honestly, I don’t need to know the mechanics of Gwen’s teenage love life. What I do need to know is how the heck I ended up here. Not that this is my first rodeo when it comes to men. Although the guys I was with were barely out of the awkward teenage stage, more like boys who thought a Netflix password was the key to my heart. Now I’m about to meet someone’s grandpa, for all I know.

As we approach the elevators, I catch my reflection in the shiny gold doors. I look different. The sort of different that makes me want to crawl right out of my skin.

The white dress I’m wearing—Gwen’s idea, of course—is tighter than anything I’d normally wear and it’s hugging curves I didn’t know I had. My face looks foreign with fear, and my hair, usually tied up in a messy bun, is now slicked down, making me look like someone else entirely. And with the white dress, I’m giving off strong bride-on-the-run vibes. If I were truly smart, I’d do exactly that,run.

Gwen looks like the call girl she is in that shiny hot pink pleather dress and crystal clear platform heels. I might actually be mistaken for someone who belongs here, in this world of polished marble and crystal chandeliers.

But I know better.

We’re not here to sip martinis and people-watch. We’re herebecause a man—whose name I don’t even know—has cash, and we desperately need it.

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The elevator dings, and we step inside. My stomach twists in knots as the doors close, sealing us off from the world outside. I force myself to breathe. Deep breaths, in and out.

Gwen stands next to me, tapping away on her phone like she's about to order room service and not walk into a situation that could go south in about a hundred different ways. Although at this point, she's basically a seasoned pro. She let me know she's been doing this as a side gig for the last three years and that she'll be graduating debt-free, with a brand new Dodge Charger she bought in cash, not to mention the shopping sprees I've witnessed.

Gwen has been living the good life and she's earned it all lying on her back.

Heaven knows I can use a couple of nickels to rub together. I don't make nearly enough to survive with my job down at the local library. I could pick up a few more hours, but then I wouldn't have enough time to study or write the endless stream of papers that are constantly piling up. Not to mention my nonexistent social life because of those two outstanding factors. That's actually what got this nefarious ball rolling, my nonexistent social life.

A sweet woman down at the library was constantly encouraging me to go out and have some fun with people my age. She said meeting decent men, once I graduated, would be like finding a needle in a haystack. She said to go for the cream of the crop, choose someone with strong values, someone who treats me like a queen. She leaned in close and told me that the secret to a great relationship was to find a man who fell hard and fell first. Don't chase after anyone. Make sure you're the only star in his universe.

It seemed like sage advice at the time, a good idea in general. But then again, I seem to magnetize toward bad ideas, and that's exactly why I pressed my feet into six-inch stilettos this evening.

"You really need to chill," Gwen says, her voice cutting through my thoughts. "This isn't a big deal. It's just one night. It's easy money."

I shoot her a look.

Easy money?

Maybe for her. But for me, every alarm in my brain is screaming for me to find the exit.

But I can't. Not now.

I've already agreed, and the cash is too good to turn down. Tuition is looming, rent is due on a loop, and my options are limited.

"Yeah, sure," I mutter, more to myself than to her. "Just one night."

The elevator stops, and my heart leaps into my throat.

Twelfth floor.

This is it.

2

DELANEY RIGGS

Victim

Gwen and I step out into the hallway on the twelfth floor of the Grand Meadows Hotel, where everything is eerily quiet, a luxurious silence only an exorbitant tax bracket can buy. I feel the quiet hush of money with every step I take.

The click of Gwen's heels enlivens the silence as we trek along the plush carpet, my own footsteps muffled as if I'm trying not to leave a trace.

A man stands in a doorway. He's older—gray hair, glasses, the whole bit. He's wearing a suit, but there's something off about it. It's like he's trying too hard by playing a role that doesn't quite fit him. His eyes sweep over us, lingering on Gwen a little too long before settling on me. I feel a shiver run down my spine, but I force myself to stay still, to smile.

This might be him. And horror upon horror if it is.

"Ladies." He tips his head our way, but Gwen just grabs me by the arm as we pass him by and a flood of relief hits me. He's too old. Not attractive. He had a greasy feel about him in general.

Gwen has already let me know that just about anyone can be good-looking in the dark, especially when your eyes are closed. And believe me, I plan on shutting them tight until this entire nightmare is over.

"This is the one," Gwen says, stopping in front of a dark mahogany door. She lets us in with the keycard and flashes that same fearless grin she's been wearing all night. "They won't be here for another twenty minutes at least. But whatever you do, don't freeze up. Just follow my lead."

I take a deep breath and step inside. The room is just as opulent as the lobby—plush

furniture, dim lighting, the faint smell of cologne lingering in the air. My hands tremble as I clasp them in front of me, trying to steady myself.

This is fine. Everything is fine. It's just one night.

But I know—deep down, I know—that nothing about this is fine.

What would my mother think if she knew? Honestly, this might stoke a hint of pride in her. She's always had a soft spot for creative ingenuity when it comes to utilizing our feminine wiles to our best efforts. And this definitely fits in that category.

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I think of Jeremy Winters and what he might think. He's the only boy I ever loved. We were together for our junior year in high school before his family moved to Germany. His father was in the Army, and Jeremy said he was going into the service as soon as he graduated as well. We exchanged text messages profusely at first when he left the country, but that died down after about six months. I still think of him, so kindhearted, so devastatingly handsome, so very devoted to me, albeit for the briefest period of time.

For that magical year we were together, I was the only star in his universe.

I think I'll try to contact him tomorrow. A sprig of hope enlivens in me for a better life.

Yes, I think what happens tonight will be a one-off.

This isn't for me. I can already tell.

I'll make the money I earn tonight stretch. I'll go without. I'll skip meals. Heck, I'll forage in dumpsters. I don't need to derogate myself like this forever.

This might be Gwen's easy out, but it's not mine.

I wonder if Jeremy still has feelings for me like I do for him? They say true love never dies, and that's exactly what I had with him. Still have. It's true and it will never die.

The door handle jiggles and both Gwen and I straighten.

A figure dressed in black from head to toe steps in—we're talking ski mask with slits for eyes, no mouth, dark gloves, dark boots.

I shoot a look to Gwen. I knew this was going to be weird, but I had no idea how weird this was going to get. If they pull out handcuffs, I'm leaving.

Suddenly, silver bracelets are my hard line. It's nice to know I still have boundaries lurking in me somewhere.

They speed our way and pull something silver from a sheath on their back. It's silver, all right, but it's not handcuffs—it's the blade of a knife.

My adrenaline hits its zenith and they swoop upon us and my entire body lights up with pain.

The blade slices through the air like a violent dance, and before we know what's hit us, both Gwen and I are bleeding from our throats. We stagger on our heels, gurgling in an attempt to scream, but the blade keeps coming. I hold up my arms to deflect and my hands explode with blood.

The blade flashes like lightning in the dim light as my body locks up.

Time slows down as my mind struggles to catch up with my new reality. A thousand thoughts race through my head—too fast, too jumbled to make sense. My legs want to move, to run, but they won't. I'm frozen, completely paralyzed by fear.

Gwen gives a garbled scream, but it sounds distant, muffled, as if I'm underwater.

My chest tightens and my heart slams against my ribcage, beating so hard I think it might explode. I hope it will.

My breath comes in shallow gasps.

This can't be happening. Not like this.

I try to shout, to fight back, but the words die in my throat.

The blade comes at me again—cold steel slicing through my chest and a pain so deep it takes my breath away.

It's a searing heat that detonates in my side, spreading like wildfire. I try to scream, but no sound comes out.

The world around me fades as my legs buckle, and I hit the ground hard, the impact knocking the air out of my lungs.

Can't move. My arms feel heavy and numb, like they're not even attached to my body anymore. I try to lift my hand to stop the bleeding, but it's useless. All I can do is lie here, helpless.

Is this it? Is this how it ends?

My vision blurs, the edges going dark. Every breath feels like I'm drowning. I can taste blood, metallic and bitter as it mixes with the bile rising in my throat. I'm fading, slipping into a darkness that I can't pull myself out of.

One very bad idea and I've ruined everything.

The last thing I see is the blade, slick with my blood, before everything goes black.

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3

EVIL

They never make it easy, do they?

I slip out of the hotel and the cool night air hits me like a slap. The bare branches from the army of maples surrounding this place rattle like skeletons as the wind picks up steam.

We're knee-deep in fall. My favorite season. Nature is one of the only things that brings me joy as of late. People can be so disappointing.

It's over now.

It's all done.

One less—twoless public nuisances traipsing around the planet.

I did what I had to do with expert efficiency. They say practice makes perfect and I've had plenty of that. Although this method was particularly messy, I must say it's one I prefer. So quick, so to the point, so very final. I'm not here to make anyone suffer. That's not what this is about.

My heart races wildly, thumping against my chest like a drumbeat that won't quit.

I expected one. Just one. But when I opened that door and saw two of them standing

there, well—plans changed. It's not like I had much of a choice.

Two girls selling themselves. Their desperation was practically oozing out of them.

Those trashy dresses, those sky-high heels—they were begging for trouble.

It disgusts me.

They were so young, so full of potential, and yet they were bartering their worth away like cheap goods. They had no idea how wrong it is—how much damage they do, to themselves, to everyone around them. And they were college students no less. At least I know for a fact one of them was. You would think they would be brighter than this. In the least that they could be teachable. How I wish someone out there would have taught them a lesson before I was forced to step in.

A thought occurs to me. Could I have been the person? Not like this, not tonight. Maybe there's another woman out there I could help, but not those two. For them it is far too late.

This was a favor. For them, for the world. I know that. Deep down, I'd like to think they knew that, too. It was destiny that our paths would cross. I'm sure they would thank me if they could.

It's always hard in the moment—harder than anyone would guess—but it is just and it is right.

What I did was necessary. It's a mercy, really. If I didn't stop them, who would? They would've just gone on, getting worse, falling deeper into their own filth.

I glance down at my hands, still trembling from the adrenaline.

The things I've done... They haunt me. Not because I regret it—no, never that—but because no one understands the burden I carry.

It's a thankless task, but someone has to do it.

Someone has to be willing to do what others can't. And that someone is me.

After all, this is my cross to bear.

I take a breath and do my best to rein in the adrenaline. My heartbeat slows as I glance around the parking lot. No one is watching. No one even notices me. I blend in, invisible like always.

I know how to hide. I've done this enough times now. I know how to disappear. I'm practically a seasoned pro at not existing. Ironical when you think about it. I'm also a seasoned pro at making sure others cease to exist.

No, I'm not the Almighty. But even he has his minions. I'd like to think I'm on the cleanup committee. And with so much filth covering the earth, there is a lot of cleaning up to do. There's enough to keep me busy until I am swept off the planet.

The countless, nameless, faceless victims race through my mind like a haunted parade of whores.

The first one was the hardest. Always is. It took me days to come down from it. But each one after that, well, it gets easier. Not the killing itself—that's never easy—but the knowing. The knowing that it's for the best. That I'm saving them from themselves. And I've saved a lot of them now. They'll never understand that, but I don't need them to. They dissolved their own relevance once they decided to give their sacred body away in exchange for cold, hard cash.

I did them a favor. All of them. Those two silly girls, the others. None of them should have been selling their bodies. It's lewd, wicked—an insult to women everywhere.

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They were born for more than this. But they couldn't see it, could they? No, they chose this. And so, they had to be stopped. They were like wild horses trampling through town, destroying everything in their wake, so in turn, they themselves had to be destroyed.

My chest tightens as I walk, while my legs do their best to carry me farther away from the hotel, deeper into the night. With each step I feel lighter, freer.

They're gone now. I did what had to be done.

I think of the others once again—the women who came before. They were all so lost, so blinded by their choices. Just like these two. It's always the same story. It never changes. But I'm the constant. I'm the one who cleans up the mess.

The chosen one.

I stop at my car, my hands still shaking as I reach for the door handle. I left my mark, my signature at the scene. I always do. Signed, sealed, and delivered to the afterlife with love. It's my way of letting them know I care. It's my way of shouldering responsibility, and shirking it at the very same time.

No one is going to miss them. They couldn't have been appreciated in this life in order to behave that way. That's part of the problem. Then they became a problem.

That's why they had to go.

It's a difficult task, but that's why it's mine. To bring balance, to restore what has

been broken.

And I did.

I always do.

I will again.

4

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

SAC Hale: Two college girls found dead at the Grand Meadows Hotel. The bodies had markings on them that resembled the same markings a couple of prostitutes had on them when they were killed last month. We got the official invite to the case.

Jack sighs as we put away our phones. “Guess we’re not getting in that hot tub tonight.”

“Nope,” I say, already marshalling my yellow lab, Buddy, for our next adventure. “Another night, another murder.”

No sooner do Jack and I get the message than we hit the ground running. The chill of the Colorado night cuts through the cab of my truck as we barrel down the highway, headlights slicing through the darkness like twin blades. Buddy sits in the back with his tail thumping against the seat, oblivious to the fact that we’re about to walk into another nightmare.

Hale’s text flits through my mind. Two girls dead at the Grand Meadows Hotel.

“He said the markings on the bodies are similar to those from the prostitutes last

month,” I say out loud and Jack nods.

“That takes us right into serial killer territory,” he says as he shoots a dark look out the window.

The drive to Grand Meadows Hotel doesn’t take long. Fall in Colorado is one of those picture-perfect experiences, where the golds and reds of the trees shimmer under the moonlight, but tonight, it all feels darker and so much more sinister as we sink into another nightmare.

We pull up to the hotel, and it’s already crawling with local sheriffs and FBI agents. The Grand Meadows Hotel is lit up like a Christmas tree, but the festive glow ends there. Sheriff’s vehicles are scattered like confetti around the entrance, red and blue lights flashing in the cold, crisp air. And the wind is biting and cutting through the calm of the night.

A line of yellow tape flutters in the breeze, cordoning off the main entrance and barricading curious onlookers from what we’re about to step into.

It feels as if every cop in the county has shown up for this affair, and I get the sinking feeling we’ll need every one of them. “Looks like a party,” Jack mutters as we converge onto the cobbled walkway that leads to the luxury hotel before us.

“Too bad they started without us,” I say as I pick up Buddy’s leash. He stretches, sniffing the ground as if he owns the place. “You ready to work, boy?” His tail wags in response.

“Of course, he’s ready.” Jack gives him a quick pat on the back. “Buddy has a better work ethic than half the people who showed up tonight.”

“I wouldn’t say that too loud if I were you. Ninety percent of the people are packing

heat.”

Our partner from down at the field office, Special Agent Nikki Knight, pulls up in her red sedan, looking like she stepped out of a magazine ad for Badass Redheads R Us. She strides over with her green eyes sharp and alert, looking pert and pretty with a ponytail that glows like a flame. “What do we have?” she asks, nodding toward the hotel, but she already knows.

“College girls,” Jack says. “Markings match a couple of others.”

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“Great.” Nikki runs a hand through her hair. “Let me guess, Hale plucked you out of the hot tub?”

Jack grunts at the thought. “We never got that far.”

I nod up at the building. “And something tells me that we won’t for a while.”

“My money is on midnight.” Nikki gives a little wink as she sidles up next to me and the three of us ready to storm the building.

“Somehow I doubt that,” I say, and we all chuckle. But the moment we step into the hotel, the humor vanishes like smoke.

Inside, the air is thick with the smell of bleach and cleaning products, mingling with the faint trace of something far worse. The lobby is eerily quiet with only the muffled voices of agents working in the background.

Hale greets us at the elevator, and he’s already frowning our way.

“Well, if it isn’t the Dream Team,” he says as he meets us halfway. His balding head shines from the chandelier overhead, and his belly strains against his shirt, but his eyes are bright as they take in every detail. “And you brought the dog. Do we need to get him a badge?”

“Buddy is already more useful than half your agents, and you know it,” Jack says, giving Buddy’s ear a quick scratch.

“No arguments from me there.” Hale tips his head as he turns to me. “You know the drill, Baxter. Leave the four-legged agent out here. We don’t need him getting fur on the evidence.”

“Yeah, he’s not exactly CSI material,” I say, handing the leash to one of the junior agents standing nearby, who’s looking far too excited to be on dog-sitting duty. “Keep an eye on him. And don’t let him get into too much trouble,” I warn.

Buddy wags his tail as he looks from me to him, most likely because he probably thinks this is all some elaborate game.

The agent nods, and I follow Jack, Nikki, and Hale deeper into the lobby, where the air is thick with the smell of cheap cologne, cigarette smoke, and something sour that clings to the back of my throat.

The place is way too bright and shiny for what went down inside. Polished marble floors, chandeliers seemingly floating overhead, and there’s soft piano music playing from hidden speakers. It’s as if we’ve just walked into the most luxurious funeral parlor in town.

We head into the elevator, and the low hum of the machinery fills the silence. There’s something unsettling about hotels at night. Too many locked doors, too many secrets hiding behind them, and we know for a fact at least two of those secrets are dead.

Hale presses the button for the twelfth floor, and we ride up in silence, each of us anticipating what comes next.

The doors open with a ding, and we step out into chaos. The hallway is crawling with agents and forensic techs with flashlights bouncing off the walls as if this was a light show. I catch a whiff of bleach and the coppery tang of blood as we approach the room.

Buddy would have hated this place, and yet every last part of me wishes he was here. In the short time I've had him, he's become my unofficial emotional support pooch. The one I reach for at night, the way I do my gun.

The carpet is a busy mix of blues and greens, and the walls are covered in teal and gold paper—it's as cloying as it is opulent.

We come upon the room with its door opened wide, the entry teeming with people heading in and out, each one of them wearing a navy jacket with either CSI or FBI emblazoned across it in thick yellow letters.

Hale takes us to the entry and pauses. "Two girls. College students. Discovered by housekeeping because the door was ajar. They've got markings on their bodies—same as those hookers."

Jack nods. "But unlike those last girls, these girls aren't in some back alley. They're in a nice hotel."

"Right," Nikki says. "What happened to killing people in the woods or the back of a van like a normal psycho?"

I shoot her a look and she huffs.

"What?" She swallows a laugh. "Too soon?"

Hale sighs. "Maybe this psycho likes room service." We step inside and the scene hits me.

Blood-soaked carpet sits at our feet with the scent of iron heavy in the air. Two girls, barely in their twenties, lay sprawled across the floor, their bodies twisted in unnatural angles and their eyes wide open, frozen in terror.

The victim to my right is a brunette, pretty with a stunned look on her face. The dress she's wearing is strapless and hardly covers her rear. I can tell it was supposed to be white, but a majority of it is covered in crimson.

The victim to the right is a brassy blonde. Her hot pink dress looks as if it was made of cellophane, which leaves blood trickling down her sides because it can't penetrate the fabric.

They're young. Heck, they look like teenagers.

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“This is a massacre,” I mutter, taking a deep breath as I try to steady myself.

“Geez,” Nikki whispers as she takes it all in. “It’s worse than I thought. And I have a pretty wild imagination.”

It’s cold. The AC is blasting, probably to slow down the decomposition, but the room still reeks of death. The bed is a mess of red and white, the sheets soaked through. And in the center of it all are the girls. Their faces are pale, almost peaceful, if not for the gruesome gashes across their bodies.

Hale grunts, “There’s a phone near each of them, and they both have purses brimming with IDs. As soon as we finish up with the photo shoot, CSI will take their possessions to the lab. Nikki, you can have the phones come morning.” Hale shines his flashlight over the blonde’s face. “Left cheek.”

“What is it?” Nikki juts her head as she leans in to inspect it.

“An infinity symbol,” Jack says. “That’s what the other two had.”

“Yes.” Hale nods. “We’ll go over the other victims in the morning.” His light sweeps across to the brunette and lands on her right arm where the same symbol decorates her flesh, bigger and deeper this time as if the killer took twice as long to drive their point home.

Jack glances out the window at the parking lot below. “Someone took their time plotting this.”

Hale nods down at the bodies. “And they took their time making sure those marks were clean.”

“Clean?” I raise a brow as I inspect the elongated symbol on the brunette’s arm. “That’s one way to put it.”

I crouch down next to Nikki, examining the lazy figure eights. Each one is deliberate, precise, and almost surgical in their placement.

There doesn’t look to be any hesitation with these slashes. And despite the chaotic frenzy that occurred, it’s clear this was methodical and planned.

“CSI found blood in the sink,” Hale says. “We’ll know whose soon enough. Looks as if they washed up before they left.”

“The killer stopped to wash their hands?” I muse. “Looks as if we’ve got a hygienic killer on the loose.”

Jack glances at the doorway. “Someone had to see something. The security cameras?—”

“We’re pulling all the footage,” Hale says, crossing his arms. “We should have it within minutes. They can’t be invisible.”

We move through the room, taking in every detail. The overturned lamp on the nightstand. The empty glasses on the table. The door to the bathroom slightly ajar, water on the sink as if someone had been there just moments before. And they had.

“I’m going to need one long shower after this,” Nikki says, standing up and brushing off her pants.

“Good luck with that,” Jack says. “We’ve got another twelve hours of paperwork ahead of us.”

Hale grunts, “And that’s if we’re lucky.”

I glance back at the bodies as my mind races through the possibilities. The markings are the key. They’re the killer’s signature. It could be a message or a ritual. Probably both.

Why these girls?

Jack catches my eye. “What do you think?”

I shake my head. “I think we’re just getting started.”

5

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

I rub my eyes and stretch my arms, feeling the weight of the night—or wee hours of the morning—bear down on me. This feels like a new level of exhaustion, one that coffee can’t touch, but we’re not leaving until we have something more concrete than a shadow in a ski mask.

On our way back to the field office, Jack stopped off and picked up a stack of pizzas, a few of which he dropped off to the guys in CSI, the rest were for us, and one each for Jack and Buddy. For as much as I take care of Buddy, he sure abandons his post by my side in a hurry once Jack shows up. But then, Jack rarely shows up without something delicious to tempt Buddy with.

I’ll admit, that Pavlovian response works with me, too. Despite the grim

circumstances surrounding our newest case, the pizza is delicious.

Nikki sits across from me and Jack is to my left, with our Special Agent in Charge, Hale, taking the helm.

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The situation room is spacious but far too clinical with its white walls, long glossy white table, backbreaking steel chairs with very little give, and a series of large screens that cover the wall behind the SAC. But the lack of décor and clutter does demand we focus, even if it's on the food at hand.

“One more time,” Hale says, nodding up at the big screen as he flips through the footage again, showing us a grainy figure clad in black with their face covered, hardly creating a ripple in the lobby's sea of polished marble and well-dressed clientele. The ski mask covers everything but the eyes—slits, nothing else. Pale skin, maybe. Could be anyone.

“Could be a woman,” Nikki says before taking an aggressive bite out of her pizza—pepperoni with olives. Jack ordered about six different versions, all pepperoni with something. I preferred the mushrooms.

“Could be a man,” I counter and Buddy whimpers as if I somehow offended males across the species. “They look bulked up with those clothes on, as if they're hiding their frame.”

“Could be Casper the Friendly Ghost under there for all we know,” Jack says and his eyes never leave the screen as he leans forward in his chair. He's half-joking, half-ticked off, and I get it. We've spent the last two hours combing through footage, only to have a faceless figure as our prime lead.

Hale lets out a huge breath. “Yeah, Casper with a killing streak. Whoever they are, they're careful. They know where every camera is.”

“That means they’ve been there before.” I nod, studying the screen for a hint of a clue. The building is high-end and it certainly has cameras everywhere, yet this shadow seems to know how to slip between the surveillance blind spots. They’re too careful. Too calculated. And that alone lets me know that this isn’t their first rodeo.

“All right,” Hale says as he flicks off the security footage and the screen goes black. “Let me introduce you to our previous vics, the two women who share the same markings.” The screen lights up again. “Meet Sharon Oaks.”

6

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

A pale face flashes on the screen, here in the situation room, before Hale zooms out and we see a body lying in disorganized angles at the base of a stairwell.

The woman is wearing a short dress, similar to those we saw tonight, and the hem is pulled up over her bottom revealing a purple G-string. Her eyes are wide open, yet vacant, and that grimace of hers is frozen in time.

Hale points at the screen. “Sharon Oak’s body was found bruised and broken in an abandoned warehouse staged to look like an accident. There’s an infinity symbol carved into her neck. She was likely strangled. She was twenty-six. Her family says they lost touch with her for a while. There was enough cocaine in her system to fuel a school bus across the country.”

The image of Sharon is quickly replaced by a brunette floating lifeless in a river, waterlogged and pale, with the same infinity mark carved just above her ankle. This woman, too, is wearing a short skirt, along with a top that sits above her mid-drift, and one of her high heels is missing from her foot.

“Found in the river,” Hale begins. “Staged as a drowning, but we know better, thanks to the coroner’s report. Same marking.”

A pulse of icy dread trickles down my spine. “Whoever this is, they’re making sure their work stands out with that twisted signature.”

Jack grunts, “Why go through the trouble?”

“They want to get caught.” Nikki shrugs.

“No.” Jack shakes his head as he considers it. “They want credit. That’s ego. Ego never wants to get caught; it wants praise.”

“Nevertheless,” Hale says. “She’s still our Jane Doe. Sharon had a prior and was able to be ID’d through her fingerprints. Janie here had yet to be arrested, so we aren’t that lucky in the identification department.”

“Looks like she missed out on what could have been a lucky moment for her.” Nikki sheds a momentary grin before reaching for another slice and Buddy whimpers again until she breaks off a piece and tosses it his way.

He clearly understands the rules of manipulation.

“So, we don’t have any missing brunettes in the vicinity?” I ask while jotting down a few notes.

“Not one that fits this bill,” Hale sighs again. “Heroin was her drug of choice. By the time the body was discovered, the coroner thinks she was in the water for seventy-two hours at least. No water in her lungs, she was snuffed and dunked, just south at Old Bend.”

“Behind the railroad tracks,” Jack says while clicking away at the keyboard of his laptop. “That river goes on for miles. The southern part is no man’s land, all dirt and rocks. Makes me wonder if the body was moved. No offense, but she wasn’t exactly wearing the shoes for that part of town.”

“She was definitely moved,” I say. “And now we have two more bodies to add to our collection. A double homicide at a hotel with enough security cameras to outfit the Super Bowl. Our killer just took a step in a very bold, very dangerous direction.”

The screen goes black before Hale puts up two more images side by side, our most recent tragedy.

“Delaney Riggs and Gwen Alderson,” he says. “CSI released the IDs. Delaney is the brunette on the left. Gwen is the blonde. They both had student IDs on them from Winston Grand University. Delaney was a junior; Gwen was a senior. Don’t ask me what they majored in. That’s for you to find out. Two bright college girls who should be cramming for midterms, not lying in a morgue.”

“I’m already on it,” Nikki mutters as her fingers fly across her keyboard.

Nikki worked in cybersecurity before she hit the FBI three years ago.

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Jack was a detective before he dove into federal waters, and I left my job as a criminal analyst at a security firm to head to Quantico in hopes of one day tracking down my missing sister, Erin. She's been as easy to find as a ghost. And the real kicker is, she doesn't want to be found. But I push all thoughts of my feral little sister out of my mind for now.

"So what's the connection?" Jack asks, leaning into his laptop so hard he's practically kissing it. "Sharon and Jane were self-medicating, dressed to impress for a night on the town. I'm guessing they need a cash infusion to sponsor their bad habits. Delaney and Gwen were dressed to impress in a high-end hotel room no less, waiting for someone." He ticks his head to the side. "They were most likely hookers."

"You think?" Nikki says, deadpan. "I guess you cracked the code."

"It does take a genius." Jack winks her way.

"Are you calling yourself a genius?" I tease.

He chuckles. "I just call 'em like I see 'em." He winks my way as well and I avert my eyes. "Sorry to say it, but prostitution is one hell of a dangerous profession."

Nikki chokes. "You're saying they asked for it?"

"I'm saying they stepped into the deep end." He nods to the screen where Delaney and Gwen lie splayed out before us. "Prostitutes are eighteen times more likely to be murdered than women in other professions."

“Eighteen times?” Nikki looks oddly delighted by the fact as she holds back a laugh. “That’s an awfully specific number.”

“Statistics, honey,” Jack says, tapping away at his laptop. “You should look them up some time.”

Both Nikki and I explode with laughter. I’m not sure why but we needed the levity. And seeing that Jack decided to bring it, we weren’t about to refuse the offer.

“The families have been notified,” Hale says, scrolling through pictures from the crime scene taken from every angle. “The room was rented out to a man by the name of Rush Simmons. He’s the manager of a local metal band called Social Disorder. He’s already spoken to detectives and admitted to leasing the room for the night for a few of the band members. He did so by phone, never set foot on the property. He says he doesn’t know how the girls got a key or got in there. I have a feeling his story is about to change.”

“I’d like to be there when it does,” I say. “I’ll take that one.”

“I’ll take it with you,” Jack says. “I’m always up to watch someone squirm.”

Nikki nods. “I’ll have a full report on our college girls, majors, minors, boyfriends, friends, frenemies, and any extracurricular activities we might find exciting, right along with their schedules.”

Jack ticks his head to the side. “I have a feeling we know what those exciting extracurricular activities were.”

I nod. “And it confirms my theory. Extracurricular activities never end well.” I shrug over at him and Nikki. “I was never big on any scholastic bells and whistles.” She shrugs. “Okay, so I may have rung a few bells.”

“And on that note—” Hale taps at his laptop until the screens go blank behind him. “Sounds like you three have a full day ahead of you. Your job is to get as much info on the girls as you can. Dig in every direction. I want whoever did this in handcuffs before they even think of touching another woman. I do not want this body count to rise, you got it?” he growls as if we were personally responsible for the body count to begin with, and I suppose some would argue we are in some way.

“Got it,” we say in unison.

I glance at my watch. “It’s seven-thirty in the morning.” I shake my head at Jack. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

His dimples recess just a touch to give him that boyish appeal despite the dark scruff taking over his cheeks.

“It’s too early for justice.” He nods. “Let’s hit breakfast first.”

Pizza be darned. We take off to do just that.

And Buddy seems pretty happy about it, too.

7

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Bea’s Diner smells like home, most likely because my mother owns and runs the place.

The scent of sizzling bacon, freshly brewed coffee, and warm maple syrup greets Jack, Buddy, and me the second we walk through the door.

Fall has officially arrived, and my mother has gone all out with the decorations. Not that she needed an excuse. Overdecorating has been her MO long before I was born. Wreaths of colorful leaves hang from the windows, twinkle lights crisscross over the booths, and miniature pumpkins sit neatly on each table. It's cozy, inviting—and everything you would expect from a small-town diner.

I spot Riley in the back and wave.

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Riley is my older sister, and even though she runs a successful business of her own, she's been known to pinch-hit for my mother now and again by picking up the slack around this place. Not only is my mother down a few staff members, but she's on a self-imposed hiring freeze until business picks up. So Riley it is.

Riley moves quickly between customers with her usual perky, frenetic energy. Her honey blonde hair is pulled into a messy ponytail, her apron slightly askew as she juggles coffee pots and plates as if she's auditioning for the circus.

Mom, Bea Baxter herself, stands behind the counter, filling orders with a smile that I know hides a thousand worries. Her hair sits on top of her head like a gray thunder cloud, and her sharp features are highlighted with laugh lines and worries lines, both of which she earned via a life well lived. She's tough and always has been, especially after Dad died.

My mind skids to the past, to that cloying room—a flash of light, the Glock going off, and then my father dropping dead to the floor. The sound of the shot is swallowed by yelling. My sister, Erin, is red-faced, tears streaking her cheeks as she screams something that to this day I can't make out.

I blink the memory away, and I'm right back in the diner with Buddy sniffing out his next meal.

"Hey guys." Riley's voice snaps me back to the present as she leads us to a booth near the back.

"Always good to see you, Riley," Jack says, craning his neck past her. "Is my brother

running amok today?”

“Yup.” My sister skips as she says it. Jack’s brother seems to have that effect on her as of late. “And he’s looking fierce doing it, too.”

Jack sighs with a laugh. “Fallon, I think your sister needs to get her eyes checked.”

“Nobody is laughing but you.” Riley shakes her head as she lands us at a booth. “Rumor has it, you’ve been canoodling with this one.” She points that carafe in her hand my way. “Maybe it’s you who needs to get their eyes checked.”

“Very funny,” I mutter as Jack slips in across from me and Buddy sits obediently by my side, his nose twitching at the smell of bacon. And come to think of it, so is mine.

“You want the Pine Ridge Falls breakfast special?” she asks without missing a beat.

The special consists of a short stack of pancakes, eggs made to order, two breakfast sausages, and two slices of bacon. It’s always a hit, and always my breakfast order, and Jack’s come to think of it.

We both agree and Riley doesn’t bother jotting it down. She’s about to take off, but I tug at her apron and force her to take a step back.

“I know what you did.” I shoot her a cold look, not nearly the threat I wanted to dole out, but a night of no sleep has left me too weak to go to combat over anything.

As much as I’d like a huge confrontation about her recent actions concerning a mob family, I’m not up for orchestrating any drama.

I’ve been replaying the conversation with Marco Rossi in my head over and over since it happened, and every time it loops around, the pit in my stomach gets deeper.

Marco Rossi is a henchman for the Moretti crime family, and he is certainly not anyone Riley should be messing with.

However, he was also the last person seen with Erin. He was caught on the security camera of a grocery store handing her a wad of cash a few weeks back after she escaped a cult compound. He's been tight-lipped regarding Erin's whereabouts, but offered to speak if I put my badge on the line and helped out the Morettis with a favor or two. He gave me time to think on it.

I did, and was about to agree when I found out that Riley beat me to the punch. She's offered up her Pick-It-Clean junk removal services to the mob to do who knows what—most likely destroying the evidence of a homicide. It's my best guess, and it was Jack's, too, once I filled him in.

Neither Jack nor I are thrilled about it, and not just because the Morettis are dangerous, but because Riley by proxy is dragging her new beau and Jack's rehab allergic brother, Jet, into the equation.

Too much danger, too many family members, not enough FBI.

I sigh up at her. "Stay out of my business from now on."

The smile drops from her face as she leans in. "Erin is my business. If you can't bring her home, I will." She narrows her eyes on mine. "Buddy is getting extra bacon this morning," she snips as she takes off.

"She knows I hate it when she does that," I say as I look over at Jack. "It makes him thirsty."

"Sounds to me like she's thirsty for justice," he counters.

“She needs to get in line.”

“Baxter.” Jack’s brows dip low as he leans my way with a frown settling on his face just for me. I’ll admit, he looks decidedly handsome this way, but I’ll be the last to stroke his ego with that fact. “Maybe you’re the one who needs to get in line. Marco said he gave her all the intel she needs to land Erin at our feet. We need to play nice—with her and with my brother. Get Riley to tell you what Marco said. We’ll take it from there—before they do.” He hitches his head toward the kitchen. “No offense to your sister, but we can’t risk a couple of idiots who think they’re superheroes running headfirst into danger. They could get themselves and Erin killed. And who knows how many others as well.” He glances to the kitchen once again and does a double take. “Speaking of idiots, here comes my least favorite.”

8

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

“Jet,” I growl out my brother’s name as he offers up a goofy grin. “What the heck are you thinking?”

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Fallon lifts a finger his way. “Please excuse my partner,” she says, shooting me a cool look with a threat layered underneath. I’m guessing this isn’t the protocol she wanted to take when it came to the idiots in question. “You know”—she glances at the pooch to her right—“Buddy and I were wondering about something.”

“Do tell,” I mutter, sinking in my seat a notch because it’s all I can do not to throw my brother against a wall right now.

Fallon slices another lethal glance at me, but my gaze dips to her lips. I miss them already.

Fallon and I are new—hours new—too new to be cavorting with my brother, of all people.

“Buddy and I were wondering what the name of your cat is.” She flashes a seemingly unassuming smile at my brother, and I have no doubt he’ll step right into her honey trap.

“Mom’s cat?” Jet looks momentarily confused as he looks my way. “What’s his name?”

It’s true, I have full custody of my mother’s cranky feline while its cranky owner is doing her latest stint behind bars for knocking off liquor stores. To hear her say it, that’s her specialty, but she’s not any good at it, hence the orange jumpsuit.

“He isshe,” I grunt back at my brother. “And I don’t know its name,” I growl over at Fallon because apparently I’m not above spreading around my bad mood. No sleep

and being deprived of Fallon's lips for too long evidently have a negative effect on me all around.

"Her name," Fallon corrects while over-enunciating the words. "You don't knowhername." She shakes her head at me. "She must have a name. What did your mother call her?"

"Her Effing Cat," I say and my brows hike a notch in amusement. "I call her Cat for short."

A dry laugh lives and dies in Fallon's throat as she curls into her seat. "Well, no one will accuse anyone in your family of having an abundance of creativity. I'm not calling her any of the above. She needs a proper name."

"How about Smokey?" Jet offers it up spontaneously and I squint up at him. Jet is lanky, pale as the walking dead, and he isn't too picky when it comes to booze, chemical substances, and women. I'm hoping he doesn't break Riley's heart, because if he does, I'll have to break a few of his bones to even things out.

Fallon tips her head as she considers this. "She is a black and gray striped tabby. But I've seen her slink around the cabin with elegance. I'm thinking something more feminine. How about Misty?"

"Misty it is," I say, still not amused that Fallon has hijacked what could have been a highly effective shakedown. Odds are that if Riley knows where Erin is, thanks to her deal with the Morettis, then Jet may know by proxy.

"I vote Smokey," Jet says with a shrug as if he has a right, and that's all the motivation I need. I pop out of my seat and shuffle him out of the diner and into the icy morning air, driving him around to the side of the building and slamming him against the wall just the way I've been craving ever since he dared step foot in front

of us. “You don’t get a vote in anything until you tell me exactly what Marco told Riley. I swear, if you know something and you hold back, I’m going to find out, and then I’m going to put a bullet through you and call your new girlfriend to clean up the mess. You don’t get to put Riley in danger in any capacity because I actually care about her safety.”

“Bull.” He slams his hands against my chest, but I don’t lose my grip on him. “The only thing you care about is getting into her sister’s pants and we both know it.”

I growl his way.

I’m not going there with Jet. What Fallon and I have is off-limits to him. But I can’t fault him for reducing what I have to the most common denominator.

Our parents were hedonists of the highest order. Drugs, booze, and sex with anything that moved was not only permitted, but highly encouraged, and that was just between the two of them. Suffice it to say, we didn’t have the best role models when it came to just about anything. Which would also explain why we were left to our own devices after the two of them were sent to prison—my mother for her liquor store shtick and my father for possession of heroin.

My older sister was already living with friends at that point.

Thankfully, my brother and I ended up with Sandy and William Decker, who saw our plight as a way to store their own riches in heaven by way of feeding us hot meals, offering us a roof over our heads, and gifting us a brand-new sibling—a bonus brother about our age whose halo was far more tarnished than theirs.

Today, Mitch runs the family morgue out in Elmwood. That’s the same piece of crap town Jet and I hail from, a hotbed for sinners of every variety, but it seems to have a particular affection for hookers, junkies, and pimps.

“Let go and I’ll tell you.” Jet squirms until I do just that.

The rush of the falls in the distance fills the silence and I cast a glance their way. They alone are the reason I chose this dusty small town with a backdrop of lush mountainsides everywhere you look.

Pine Ridge Falls gets its name from those grand ribbons of rushing water that sit at the base of the ridge. It’s also home to Pine Ridge Lake, and that body of water is why I chose to live in the cluster of cabins known as Whispering Woods. It just so happens that Fallon and Buddy are my neighbors in Whispering Woods, which I happen to wholeheartedly approve of.

And it also just so happens that Jet is my unexpected roommate in Whispering Woods, due to the fact he can’t sit still in a rehab facility long enough to allow it to work its magic. But I think both Jet and I know there is no magic there—more like sleight of hand. Ninety percent of addicts return to their vomit, and both Jet and I are inches from doing just that. It’s a war, and one we’re determined to win, or at least I am. Although Jet is putting in a concerted effort, I’ll give him that.

“Spill it,” I say. “I’m getting hungry.”

“Marco says Erin is managing an operation for the Morettis. Something small.”

My eyes widen at the thought. No matter how small the Morettis or Marco Rossi thinks this operation is, it doesn’t change the fact it’s most likely illegal.

“She’s dispensable,” I say. “That’s why they chose her. That’s the only reason they choose anybody. What is she doing?”

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“I don’t know,” he says. “The guy told Riley that if she went looking, she’d spook her sister and that she’d probably never see her again.”

I shake my head. Marco told Fallon that Riley had all the info to land Erin at her feet.

I frown back at the falls and soak in the bionic rush of water, flanked with an overgrowth of oaks and pines. The oaks are a brilliant shade of ruby, easily winning out in the attention department.

Erin doesn’t want attention; neither do the Morettis.

“Anything else?” I give Jet another shove as I ask the question.

“Something about Elmwood.”

“Is she living there?” I can’t seem to keep the hint of alarm out of my voice.

“I don’t know. He said Elmwood was part of her hub.”

“Hub.” I squeeze my eyes shut a moment. “What else?”

“That’s it.” He raises his hands as if surrendering. “Don’t worry. I told Riley we needed to let the two of you handle things and she agreed.” His lips twitch at the corners and lets me know he’s lying.

“Okay,” I say, giving him a pat to the arm that could leave a bruise. “Get back to work.”

We head back inside and split ways. By the time I get to the booth, my breakfast is waiting for me, sans the sausages I ordered.

“Don’t look at me.” Fallon fights the smile tugging at her lips. “Buddy prefers sausage and we both know it.” Her expression darkens as she hitches her head in the direction my brother took off in and I quickly relay everything I gleaned.

There’s no point in keeping anything from her. I don’t see myself as her knight in shining armor—more like her partner in wiping out the filth that lives among us.

“Elmwood,” she practically mouths the word to herself as she says it. “Good to know.” She casts a dark look at her mother as she works the register. “Nikki called. She says she nailed down the location where we can find the dirtbag who rented out that room at the Grand Meadows Hotel.”

“Sounds like our day is taking shape.”

She nods. And judging by that faraway look in her eyes, she’s got more than one person she’d like to track down today. Too bad Erin Baxter is as elusive as a ghost.

But our first suspect in last night’s double homicide isn’t.

We wolf down our food and I drop a wad of cash on the table as we speed for the door.

Rush Simmons has a lot of explaining to do. Only this time he won’t get a chance to skirt around the truth like he did with the deputies last night.

If he wants to maintain his freedom, he’s going to have to sing just like that lousy band he manages.

Here's hoping there are enough clues in his lyrics to track down a killer.

9

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

We head back to Whispering Woods, drop off my truck, and do a quick change out of the clothes we've been wearing for far too long before jumping into Jack's SUV.

Buddy seems just as anxious as we are to get to the House of Rock in downtown Denver, a rusty brick building set between a bowling alley and an Italian restaurant.

The House of Rock is a large venue with far too little parking to accommodate the masses it attracts on a nightly basis. Inside, it's dimly lit, the air is as cold as it is outdoors, and the scent of booze and greasy fries lights up our senses.

Rock music blares through speakers as a smattering of customers are being serviced by a waitstaff who looks less than thrilled to be here. Since they serve a light menu during their shows, they're open for lunch as well, and seeing that it's coming up on noon, it seems we made it just in time.

But we're not here to eat, much to Buddy's dismay, and most likely Jack's. We're here to find a band manager whose clientele's hankering for prostitutes just left him in the deep end of a double homicide investigation.

I make sure with a staff member near the door that Buddy is allowed inside and they make a quip about him being better behaved than most of their patrons. I'd gather they're correct in that estimation.

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“Seven o’clock,” Jack says with a nod and I look in that direction.

There he is. Seated alone and sucking the foam off his beer is a large gentleman with dark hair that’s frosted at the tips.

Nikki shot us a picture of the guy along with last night’s interview from the sheriff’s department. He’s in his late fifties, he has a smarmy yet no-nonsense look about him, and judging by the fact he hasn’t hightailed it to Mexico, he doesn’t look like he has a lot to hide either. But I learned long ago that sometimes evil hides in plain sight.

Jack and I head over and land on a stool on either side of him, and Buddy pops up between the big guy and me.

“What do we got here?” Rush Simmons perks up at the sight of Buddy. I’ll admit, he’s been the best icebreaker for me both professionally and socially. “What’s cooking, buddy?” He gives the lab a friendly pat after inadvertently tagging him with his proper moniker.

“Fallon Baxter,” I say. “And you hit the nail on the head. His name is Buddy.”

“Well, howdy-do.” Rush pulls his shoulders back and I get a better look at him now that his ego is on full display. His lips are bloated, his cheeks and nose are lost in a sea of crimson veins, his forehead has a greasy sheen, and ashen gray chest hairs are poking out the top of his button-down shirt. “Rush Simmons at your service, doll. What’s cooking with you? If you’re looking for a good time, you came to the right place.” His demeanor downgrades, and he’s as serious as myocardial infarction when he says that last bit.

“She’s with me,” Jack grouses and Rush nearly flips right off the back of his stool while trying to get a better look at him.

“Oh?” Rush looks momentarily confused. “You two looking to book a band? Got a special occasion coming up? A daughter’s sweet sixteen? A twenty-year class reunion? A wedding, perhaps?”

I don’t know what to be offended at first. The fact he thinks I’m old enough to have a sixteen-year-old daughter, the fact he thinks I’ve got twenty years under my belt since I’ve graced the common halls of some run-down public high school—Jack qualifies for that, by the way—or the fact I’d defer to his wisdom when it came to selecting the music I’d play on one of the most special days of my life.

I look over at Jack and wonder if he’ll be taking part in that day before blinking back to the present.

“How many bands do you manage?” Jack asks, seemingly undeterred by our suspects greatest hits list.

“Six,” Rush says as his chest puffs with pride.

“Who do you call when you need to book them a gig?” Jack goes on.

“This place.” Rush rolls his eyes as if he wasn’t pleased with the menu options, or any other options there might be, when it came to booking anything.

A thin smile plays on Jack’s lips. “And who do you call when you want to wrangle up some ladies of the night for the boys in the band?”

Rush swivels his head in my direction as if trying to ascertain if I heard Jack get right to the point. Or at least one of the points. It’s a good one to start with, in my opinion.

I nod to the man next to me. “Inquiring minds want to know.”

Rush pushes himself away from the bar. “Look, I don’t know what the two of you are into, but you’re on your own when it comes to booking yourselves a good-time gig.”

“We’re not on our own,” I say, whipping out my badge. “Special Agent Fallon Baxter. We’re with the FBI.”

“Special Agent Jack Stone.” Jack flashes his badge as well, so fast it was more of an idea than a solid fact.

Rush blows out a breath. “Listen, I told that detective last night everything I know.” Beads of sweat line his forehead as if on command. “I don’t know who killed those girls, but it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t anyone in any of my bands. The guys I booked it for were right here on stage from eight to midnight, and those poor girls met up with someone else before my guys ever stepped out of this place. From what I understand, the bodies were already discovered by that time.”

“Who are the bandmates looking to have a good time?” I ask.

“Jerome Navarro and Ricki Page.” He grunts as he says it as if it pained him to do so. “They’re in a grunge band called Social Disorder. And in an effort to live up to their band’s name, they bring disorder to my brand on the regular.”

“Where were you?” Jack asks.

According to last night’s report, he was planted right where he is now.

“Front and center.” He points toward the darkened stage that I hadn’t noticed when we walked in. “And boy, am I ever glad I sat there like a statue until the night was through. The guy who runs this place has me on his security camera, too. I checked.

And I already asked him to forward a copy to the sheriff's department." He shakes his head, rife with animation. "I'm glad I didn't ditch out that night. No offense to the guys, but I'm not big on their music." He shrugs as he says it, and that's the only thing I'm prone to believe him about.

"You didn't get up to leave at any point?" I press on.

Rush glances to the exit. "I took a leak or two." He nods to his beer. "I'm a guy of a certain age. I can't go ten steps without having to look for a bathroom. I got up, but I always came back." He dots his finger to the counter as if proving his point.

"Who did you use to book the girls?" Jack insists.

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Rush closes his eyes a moment too long. “A woman named Kiki. I don’t know where you can find her. Everything we do stays here.” He wags his phone.

“Do you pay her the funds?” I ask. Because, let’s face it, at the end of the day, he was patronizing a business. A mobile one, and one most likely littered with women who feel trapped into it, but a business no less.

“Everything is done electronically. I have a slush fund where I take care of things like this. I don’t know where the money ends up or what Kiki has to do with it.”

“Where can we find Kiki?” I ask just as Buddy lets out a soft woof as if he wanted to know as well. He’s such a boy.

“I don’t know.” Rush jerks in his seat as if he were briefly electrocuted. “Look, all I have is her number. I’ve never met the woman. Some slimeball I met at a gig eons ago hooked me up with her.” He fiddles with his phone and flashes her number at us and Jack takes a picture of it.

“Well?” Rush barks as if we’ve bypassed our welcome.

Jack and I exchange a brief nod.

“Don’t think of leaving Colorado,” Jack says as we rise to our feet.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Rush eyes the exit with a forlorn look as if he were busy formulating other plans.

I reach into my purse and land my card on the counter. “If you remember anything else, give me a call.”

“You haven’t seen the last of us,” Jack says as we make our way to the door with Buddy bouncing by our side.

“Let’s head to the morgue,” I suggest. “I want to know exactly how many women had that infinity symbol carved into their flesh before they were kicked off the planet.”

“You know how to have a good time,” Jack says just as my phone goes off and so does his.

It’s a text from Nikki.

Get to the field office when you can. I’ve got all the intel on our two dead divas.

Change of plans.

10

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The FBI field office just outside of Denver holds all of the charm of a government correctional facility, and considering the nature of the beast, rightly so.

Jack, Buddy, and I fly up to the cyber analysis hub that sits one floor above the situation room and find Nikki looking as if she’s about to crash her head through the monitor in front of her.

The room is spacious, large enough to hold a tailgating party for the Denver Broncos. It’s relatively devoid of natural light and has enough computers and monitors to

satisfy a space launch. The screens not in use are set to a red screensaver with the department's logo over it and it gives this place a hellish appeal.

Nikki spins in her seat, revealing her countenance and clothes washed in the same crimson hue.

"Hey, baby," she says as Buddy all but tackles her. "Who's my little baby?" She lands a kiss on the tip of his nose before fishing out a handful of biscuits and dropping them to the floor. "Do I know how to take care of my men or what?"

"I've heard rumors," Jack says as we each drop into an office chair on casters and glide in Nikki's direction. The chairs provided are minimally padded with mesh backs, very little rocking action, and all of the above has always made me feel as if the department doesn't want its agents lingering in them for too long.

"Oh honey, reality outshines every one of those rumors," Nikki laughs as Buddy bounces her way once again and licks her face silly.

Thankfully, Nikki doesn't mind. And thankfully, Buddy doesn't make it a habit of licking just anyone silly. Personally, I prefer our nightly snuggling sessions to slobber.

"All right, you two," Jack grumbles as he pulls out his laptop and I do the same while getting settled at the stainless counter that lines the wall of monitors skirting around the room. "It's starting to feel like weeks since I've last been kissed like that." He flashes a short-lived grin my way, but those bedroom eyes of his prove impossible to lose.

"Kissing me is a privilege, not a right," I say, flashing my own short-lived grin, which I'm positive came out more of a frown at this point. I'm exhausted, and part of me meant to frown because of it.

“What?” Nikki gasps and bucks as if she’s just been shot. “Are you kidding me?” Her eyes do a frenetic dance between the two of us. “Oh my word! When did this happen?” she squawks and looks alarmingly happy about it, too.

“Last night. It’s new,” Jack says nonchalantly while scrolling through something on his screen. “What did you get on the victims?”

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“Oh no, you don’t.” Nikki gives a throaty laugh as Buddy continues to jump-bark around her as if he, too, were giddy at the prospect. “This train isn’t moving forward until I get some down and dirty details.”

I cut her off with a flat hand. “Nope. You’re not getting the details, Knight. Focus.” I glance at Jack, who’s smirking in the way that’s infuriating and... okay, a little attractive. “It’s bad enough I have to work with him. Now I’ve got to deal with the fallout of a workplace romance rumor mill.”

Nikki cocks her head my way and I can tell she’s not getting back on track until I’ve given her something titillating to think about.

“Fine. We kissed, the end. What have you got on Delaney and Gwen?” I ask with as much enthusiasm as Jack just emitted. I’m not sure what that says about us in general.

“No way!” Nikki laughs so loud that three different agents poke their heads in the room just to make sure there’s not a situation brewing. “You kissed him?” Her mouth falls open as she gawks at me in this whole new light. “I want to see you do it.”

“What?” I inch back. “No way.”

“That’s right,” Jack says, nodding at me. “When we’re good and ready, we’ll be selling tickets to the main event.”

“I’ll grab my popcorn.” She laughs again. “And I’m not above paying a premium to see this either.”

“You’ll have to,” I say. “Our dead divas aren’t the only ones who know how to turn a profit while having a good time.”

“You think Jack will be a good time?” She hikes a brow as if genuinely amused.

“Am I shooting too high?”

“Hey”—Jack looks up from his screen—“I’m sitting right here.”

Nikki scoffs, “Not our fault if you’re eavesdropping on a little girl talk.” She winks my way. “I’ll fill you in on what I’ve heard later.”

Jack perks up again. “What did you hear?”

“A lot about our victims.” She barrels right into business.

And I couldn’t be more relieved.

11

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Buddy’s tail thumps against the cold concrete floor of the cyber analysis hub as if he, too, were anxious to hear what Nikki has to say.

“And by the way, you two are the worst-kept secret in Denver,” Nikki goes on. It’s clear she’s not letting go of the little tidbit she just gleaned regarding Jack and me. “But once I manage to snap a candid pic of the two of you locking lips, I’ll win fifty bucks in the office pool.”

Jack straightens. “There’s an office pool?”

“I want in on it,” I tell her. “I’ll split the money with you in exchange for the photo op.”

Jack inches back. “What? You’re not giving People the exclusive?” he teases with a stern look on his face that lets me know he’s not thrilled in general.

“I’m dealing with the FBI,” I retort. “I can’t help it if they’ve sussed out the info before we could give it to them. It’s what they specialize in.”

“What we specialize in,” Nikki corrects as she pulls up a page on her screen. She clicks her mouse, and several screens light up with photos and data. “Like I said, we’ve got the scoop on Delaney Riggs and Gwen Alderson,” she starts, pointing to the two profile shots displayed on the monitor.

Delaney is the brunette with the kind of wide-eyed innocence that makes you feel as if the world is still a decent place. That is, until you realize she ended up dead in a ritzy yet blood-splattered hotel room.

“Delaney was a student at Winston Grand University,” Nikki continues, scrolling along. “Majored in English, minored in theater. Your classic bookish type. I’ll shoot you both her class schedule. She was working at the local library over in Blue Creek. Had herself a partial academic scholarship, but apparently, she wasn’t as financially stable as it seemed. I bet that’s how she got pulled into the ring.”

My chest tightens as I look at Delaney’s smiling face on the screen. You can tell from the photo that she was bright and hopeful. I’d bet she was the type of girl who had a five-year plan that didn’t involve anything that was going to happen and that did happen in that hotel room last night.

“What about Gwen?” Jack asks with his eyes glued to the second profile picture.

Gwen has a more street-smart look about her. You can tell she's a bit tougher and rougher around the edges. If I'm being honest, she looks like trouble. A girl that I would have recommended Delaney stay far, far away from.

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“Gwen Alderson”—Nikki pulls up a second document—“also from Winston Grand. Majoring in sociology. No job on record, but she was probably helping support her family. Came from a single mom and had two younger siblings. No official employment, but according to some student forums, she was known to be resourceful when it came to making ends meet.”

I grimace. “Resourceful. That’s code for in over her head.”

“Yeah,” Nikki says with her voice a little softer now. “It looks like both of them got mixed up in this because they thought it was a way to get ahead. Fast cash, no strings attached—except in reality, it comes with all the wrong strings.”

Jack nods. “And a lifetime of nightmares and maybe chlamydia.”

He’s not wrong.

Buddy lets out a low whine from under the table as if even he can sense the grave desperation hanging in the air. I reach down and give his head a quick pat.

“They had potential,” I say just above a whisper. “They could have done anything else that night. But here they ended up at the morgue.”

Jack nods and his expression hardens. “They didn’t deserve this. Let’s make sure the person who did this gets what’s coming to them.”

“Right.” Nikki straightens up in her chair. “And speaking of getting what’s coming to them... I’m still working on that surveillance footage from the Grand Meadows

Hotel.” She taps her keyboard and brings up the video feed.

Soon, we watch as a dark figure moves across the screen. They’re wearing a long coat with a ski mask—no mouth—just eerie slits for eyes. It’s impossible to tell their gender, but the skin peeking out from under the mask looks pale. Creepy as hell, but not much to go on.

“I’m going to piece this together,” she says, studying the image frame by frame. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“And I have a feeling time is not on our side.” Jack leans back in his chair with his arms crossed. “How the hell did someone dressed that way manage to slip past the public without anyone noticing.”

“Eh,” Nikki grunts. “Nobody sees anything anymore. Everyone is too busy staring at their phones. It really bodes well for serial killers these days.”

I shake my head. “Maybe they’re a ghost.”

Jack studies the screen. “We’re not dealing with a ghost. We’re dealing with a living, breathing monster.”

“Speaking of monsters.” I point to Jack’s phone and he cues up that screenshot of the number Rush gave us. I quickly give Nikki a rundown of how the meet and greet went with our newfound band manager.

“Kiki,” Nikki says, inputting the number and the name into the database and the screen goes dark before it lights up again with hopefully just the information we’re looking for.

“Did you crack it?” Jack asks, pinning his eyes to the screen.

Nikki twists in her chair, one hand still resting on Buddy's head, the other hovering over her mouse. "Oh honey, you know I always crack it." She flashes us a grin and then taps the keyboard again, with that phone number that we just got for Kiki lighting up the screen like a beacon. "Here it is, boys and girls... that number is not tied to some mystery woman named Kiki. It's linked to a woman named Karen Holt. I bet Kiki is her stage name."

"Please no more strip joints," I lament just as Buddy gives a soft bark—most likely in protest—and the three of us laugh.

Thanks to the depravity of my last few cases, Buddy has been in his fair share of strip joints.

"He does like to be entertained," Jack says, giving him a hearty scratch. "Let's track down Karen and see what she can tell us."

"If she's some kind of madame, I doubt she'll be offering up too much info to a couple of feds," I say.

"We'll go undercover," Jack says, scrolling through his notes. "Nikki, why don't you dig up all you can on our girl Karen while Fallon and I head to the library."

"Why? Is it story time?" Nikki teases as she types Karen's name into another database.

"It's time to learn a little about Delaney from some of her coworkers," he says. "It saves us from having to run clearance with school administrators before we hit the campus."

"I'm all for a trip to the library," I say. "I might even pick up a spicy book or two." I rise from my seat and head for the door with Buddy on my heels.

“Hey, you don’t need a spicy book,” Jack calls out. “That’s what you’ve got me for.”

“Remember”—Nikki calls after him—“she’s a privilege, not a right. And I’m buying tickets to the main event!”

Jack, Buddy, and I hop back into the truck and head for literary pastures.

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Someone out there knows something. But I have a feeling they're not going to have their nose pressed between the pages of a book.

12

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

The Blue Creek Public Library isn't what I expected. No musty bookshelves or cranky librarians who shush you the second you step through the door. It's clean, modern—and perhaps a touch too much of both.

The air smells like fresh coffee from the café tucked away in the corner. And the soft hiss of the espresso machine and quiet hum of patrons as they shuffle about fill the silence. Rows of pristine bookshelves stretch out like paper soldiers on parade, each one lined with miles of titles that would take me two lifetimes to read.

Fallon strides beside me, and every now and again I catch the warm scent of her perfume, something sweet with musk layered underneath. Feminine yet strong, just like her. And, of course, Buddy trots happily at our side as if he's right at home here.

The librarian at the front desk melts on cue when she sees him and quickly tells us it's fine to bring him in. Libraries love dogs, apparently. She even offers him a treat, which he accepts without hesitation because he's smart and typically hungry.

"Don't get too comfortable, Bud," Fallon says as she gives him a scratch behind his ears. "We're not here for story time."

Buddy glances up at her with an expression that suggests otherwise.

“I think he’d beg to differ,” I say. “Story Time with Jack and Fallon.” I tick my head at the thought. “I bet we could pen a bestseller.”

She arches a dark brow, and it takes everything in me not to steal a kiss right here.

“An FBI thriller with a side of steam?” she teases.

“I’m in,” I say, trying to resist the grin tugging at my lips. “Think of all the research we’ll have to do. I hear a hot tub is a good place to start.”

“What is this obsession you have with my hot tub?” she says, stepping in close and I catch her gently by the waist and close the distance between us. She doesn’t object, and it only makes the smile I’m holding back fight twice as hard to break through. She smirks my way. “I’m starting to think I’m a means to an end when it comes to hot water.”

“And I have a feeling if I engage in this conversation, I’ll find myself in exactly that, hot water.”

She cocks her head at Buddy. “He’s perceptive.” She strides back to the librarian, a shorter woman with a shock of dark hair and a stocky build with a beige cardigan covering most of her body. Fallon flashes her badge. “I’m here to ask about Delaney Riggs. I understand she worked here.”

The woman gasps, any trace of pleasantries is quickly replaced with horror. “I heard what happened. We all did. I didn’t know her too well. She worked in the conference room and helped run the discussion circuit. In fact, two of the women she worked with closely are there now, Phillis and Brenda. They just finished up with a book signing.”

We thank her and head through the lobby, past the rows of bookshelves until we hit the back of the facility where the conference rooms are located. We reach the glass-walled conference room where the smell of fresh wood polish hits us, as a large mahogany table sits to the right. There's a mock stage near the front with a podium, and to the left of that are tables set out with stacks of books on them. Just in front of that are rows and rows of folding chairs, an ample amount to house a large audience, and the north wall is lined with tables that have empty platters and a corner that caters to coffee and tea.

Two women sit at the long table, heads bent together over a stack of pamphlets and some books.

The first is a tall redhead whose locks are bright and look freshly dyed. Her lipstick is matching, and it offers her a cartoon appeal that I'm sure she wasn't going for.

The other woman is boxier and her dark hair is streaked with silver. She has more of an easy-going, put-together vibe. They both look up as we approach.

"Hello, ladies," I say as we step on it. "I hope you don't mind, but we're here to ask you a few questions about Delaney Riggs." I flash my badge and Fallon does the same. "Special Agent Stone."

"Special Agent Baxter," Fallon says. "And this is honorary agent, Buddy." She gives him a pat and both ladies loosen up with a nervous laugh. Can't say I blame them. There's not a person on the planet who's thrilled to have a badge thrown in their face, but somehow Buddy does his best to calm their nerves.

The redhead stands. "I'm Phillis Hazelwood." She offers a tight-lipped smile. "Of course, you can ask us whatever you need. If there's anything we can do to help, we won't hesitate." She offers a sideways glance to the brunette by her side.

“I’m Brenda Billings.” The brunette offers an easy smile, but the edges of her lips are quivering. Also not an anomaly when we speak to the general population. I don’t hold nerves against anyone whom we come to question. It’s human nature. Definitely not an admission of guilt. If anything, it’s to the contrary. “Please take a seat. The news about the poor girl spread like wildfire this morning. We’re both in such shock. She was one of the librarians who helped facilitate the discussion circuit.”

“So we’ve heard,” Fallon says as we take a seat across from them. Buddy plops down at Fallon’s feet, already making himself at home and both women offer him a forlorn smile.

“I love dogs,” Phillis is quick to say. “We had a golden retriever ages ago.” She glances at Brenda. “It was Maddie’s. She had him since he was a puppy.” Her features harden as she looks our way. “Maddie was my daughter. She passed a few years back.”

“We’re sorry to hear that,” I say and Fallon offers a solemn nod in agreement.

“Thank you,” the redhead says quietly. “Maddie was the inspiration for this.” She taps a stack of hardcover books sitting next to her. The cover depicts a sky brimming with clouds and the words *Into the Ether with Love* written in raised silver foil. “But that’s not what you came for.” She pulls her lips back as if initiating a smile that doesn’t quite take. “You have questions about Delaney.”

“So, you knew her?” Fallon asks, pulling out her phone and poised her fingers to take notes if need be.

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The redhead, Phillis, nods. “Yes, but not well. She was only here for a couple of months, helping facilitate the discussion panels. A sweet girl, always on time, always professional. It’s just so—tragic.” Her voice has that rehearsed quality, the kind you hear at funerals when people don’t really know the deceased.

“What was she helping with, specifically?” I ask. My tone is steady, but my eyes are taking in every little detail about these women.

Phillis’ gaze shifts ever so slightly with a flicker of hesitation.

Brenda, on the other hand, looks ready to jump right in.

“Phillis is an author,” she says, gesturing proudly to her friend. “She’s the one who wrote *Into the Ether with Love* on the back of the tragedy that befell her family, as she mentioned. I encouraged her to do it. We met at Pathways to Peace, a grief recovery group that meets right here in this very room each Thursday evening. Here—” She hands us both a copy to inspect. “It’s a book about grief, about accepting loss and moving forward. I guess you could say that Phillis specializes in death.”

13

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

“Delaney helped organize our signings and discussions,” Brenda Billings goes on here in the conference room behind the library in Blue Creek.

“Grief.” I blow out a breath. “I’ve felt it before, heavy and thick.” It was when my

parents both disappeared into the abyss of a governmental correctional facility, but it may as well have been their deaths I was dealing with.

Phillis shakes her head. “I realize it doesn’t sound uplifting. But grief is a part of life. Ignoring it doesn’t make it go away. And it certainly doesn’t help the process. We both suffered greatly at its hands.” She lifts her chin at Brenda and her friend clasps their hands together.

“I lost my husband not long after she lost her daughter.” That silver streak in her hair shines like lightning as she bobs her head. “Prior to the group, we hadn’t known one another existed. But now we’re closer than sisters.” She lifts their conjoined hands as if to prove her point.

“That’s right,” Phillis says. “I like to say that Brenda is the gift the universe knew I needed. I’m a firm believer that the Almighty brings people into our lives at just the right time.”

My stomach grows hot as I cast a quick glance at Fallon. For some reason, it feels as if Fallon showed up right on time. I feel that with everything in me, and yet I’m not sure why.

“But again, you’re not here to learn about us,” Phillis says coolly. “Delaney’s death is tragic, and we’re happy to assist in any way we can.”

“Yes, for sure.” Brenda’s voice is softer now. “We’re all shaken by what happened. Delaney was so young. It’s hard to believe.”

“We understand.” Fallon’s voice softens to meet them where they are. “It’s not easy losing someone, especially when they’re so full of potential. We’re here to learn all you can tell us about her.”

Fallon understands loss as well. Her father passed away and her sister is MIA, and the latter seems to be voluntary at this point. I get Fallon's desire to track her down, though. It's her little sister. Fallon feels a familial responsibility to take care of her. I'd do the same. Irony since my own sister is out there somewhere. But in my defense, we last spoke about two years ago. Which reminds me, I should probably give her a call.

"I'm not sure how much help we can be." Phillis sighs, her orange lips twitching as if they didn't know which direction to go in. "Like I said, Delaney was lovely, but she didn't talk much about her personal life."

"Did she mention any financial troubles? Relationships?" Fallon asks, leaning in just enough to seem concerned, but not overbearing.

Body language is her specialty. And half the time I like what her body is saying to mine. The other half I'm fearing for my safety. Lucky for me, I can appreciate a woman who keeps me on my toes.

Phillis shakes her head. "She didn't divulge any of that to me. But young women often keep those kinds of things to themselves. Especially if they're struggling."

I watch Brenda carefully as she listens. It looks as if she's trying hard to look sad, concerned, maybe even empathetic. But she looks stiff, guarded, and it makes me wonder what she's trying to hide.

Brenda shakes her head at Phillis. "You knew Delaney a little better than me. The two of you were always having private little chats. Surely, she must have said something to you."

Phillis offers her friend a cold, somewhat vacant stare.

“She mentioned she was from a very poor family.” Phillis shrugs our way. “She heard me speak about my own humble beginnings.” Her lips press together until they glow white. “She did mention the pressure at school to perform well was mounting. Midterms were around the corner; there were many papers to write.”

Brenda sighs hard. “Delaney’s mother is an addict. She confided that to me. There’s a sibling somewhere in foster care. Different fathers. Delaney said she didn’t know hers. She just mentioned that to us the other night.”

“That’s right.” Brenda snaps her fingers. “We were closing out the room after a book signing. The library has been so very kind to me. My book came out a few weeks ago, and they’ve let me host as many signings as I wish. We just finished up with one this afternoon. Delaney was so very helpful these past few weeks, and she was just starting to open up. I hardly knew her, but I’m going to miss her.” She thumps her finger to her chin. “You know, Phillis is giving a talk at Pathways to Paradise, right here in just a couple of nights. You’re both welcome to attend. You might even amend with some of the unresolved grief you might be facing. Perhaps you’ll find it insightful.”

Fallon tips her head as if she were suddenly interested. “I’m sure we would.”

“Thank you for the invite,” I tell them. “It sounds like something everyone can use.”

Brenda nods enthusiastically. “It’s really something. Phillis has a way of connecting with people. You’ll leave feeling well, lighter.”

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The shadows of my past settle over me like a dark cloud and I feel about a million pounds.

“That would be nice,” I say. But what I meant to say was that would be a miracle.

Phillis glances at her watch, signaling the end of our little chat. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, Agents.”

The four of us stand at once and both women give Buddy a proper rubdown.

That dog gets more action with more women than I have in the last six months.

Fallon and I take off with Buddy looking back longingly as if he was already missing the spontaneous massages. Can’t say I blame him.

“What do you think?” I ask as we head out into the frigid night air.

“You first,” she says.

“It’s a start. But I’m thinking we need to deep-dive into everyone that Delaney and Gwen spent time with.”

“Agree,” she says and Buddy lets out a sharp bark. “I think Buddy agrees, too.”

“That sounded more like we might need Mexican food to get the job done.”

Fallon shakes her head. “If a burrito helps solve this case, so be it.”

“I think that hot tub might help, too.”

“Don’t press your luck.” She bites down on a smile and her eyes never leave mine.

I do believe I will be pressing my luck tonight.

I just hope I remember that she’s packing heat.

Our phones go off and it’s Hale.

We’ve just got clearance to search the apartment Delaney and Gwen shared off-campus.

Looks as if that burrito will have to wait.

14

EVIL

The city lights of downtown Denver blur past me, streaking across the windshield like bloodstains smeared over glass. I tighten my grip on the wheel, feeling the weight of what I’ve done—a necessary weight. One that I carry for all the others who can’t or won’t.

I glance around at the throngs of girls barreling down the streets as if they were cattle.

Short skirts, thigh-high boots, arms linked with one another as they laugh into the night. I don’t know what they find so funny. They’re putting themselves in mortal danger.

The high heels, the makeup applied like spackle, the cheap jewelry adorning them

like tinsel on a Christmas tree.

They cheapen themselves, these women. Every one of them is selling pieces of their souls, and for what? A few crumpled bills? A fleeting sense of power, the illusion that they're in control?

Some of them are young, so young they're practically children. But it's a crime regardless of their age.

It makes me sick to think about how far these women have fallen. Like Lucifer falling from Heaven. Such a great height, and yet they have no idea what they've truly lost.

And it's not just the money that's the trouble here. It's their very innocence that they barter with—like it's nothing. Like it has no value. Like they have no value. They drag the men down with them, too, ruining families, shredding marriages, and leaving children fatherless.

And for what? You can't tell me those women derive any pleasure from what they do. It's strictly a monetary exchange.

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The men, however, their so-called johns—for them, there's just a moment of pleasure that fades before the sheets even cool. They risk far too much to be there, too. They should know better, but they're far too animalistic. I know all too well about those animal instincts.

I roll down the window a notch and let the icy wind knife its way inside. The city smells like gasoline and sour trash as I pass through downtown, the same foul stench these women carry on them. No amount of perfume can cover it. Their desperation clings to them like a fog. I can still smell it on my hands, once I'm through with them. No matter how much I wash, the stench never goes away.

I glance at the passenger seat, where today's newspaper lies folded neatly.

Another headline.

Another story that won't tell the truth, not really.

They make it seem like these girls were just lost souls, victims of circumstance. But they weren't. They had choices. They chose this. They opened the door to destruction, and I had no choice but to close it for them. One by one.

My pulse quickens at the memory of it—their wide eyes, the confusion turning to fear, the brief flicker of understanding right before I sent them away—away to a place where they can't do any more harm. A better place. Clean and purified. I'm doing what needs to be done. I'm saving them from themselves, and I'm saving the men from their own weaknesses.

Those weak, pathetic creatures. They think with their bodies, not their minds. They throw away everything for a taste of something forbidden. They're just as guilty as the women in this scenario. If it weren't for them, for their sick desires, maybe the women wouldn't be in such peril, there would be no commodity found in their bodies. Maybe they wouldn't fall so far.

But they have fallen. All of them. And once they've fallen, there's no going back. That's why I have to do what I do. That's why I can't stop.

The weight of it presses down on me, but it's a burden I'm willing to carry. I've seen what they become. I've seen what they leave in their wake. The lies, the broken vows, the shattered lives.

This world needs me.

It needs someone who's not afraid to do what's necessary, someone who understands that mercy isn't always about letting people live. Sometimes, mercy is about stopping them before they can ruin anyone else.

I take a deep breath, feeling the cool night air seep in through the crack of my window.

The city is quiet now.

They don't know, not yet. But soon. Soon, they'll understand.

There's no turning back. Not for me. Not for them.

And I'm just getting started.

SHERRY KENT

The city lights glitter as my heels click against the pavement and the air bites just enough to remind me that it's fall. Denver can really be a show-off at night.

My stomach quivers, then followed by the rest of me, but it's not the icy weather that has me shaking. I'll admit, it's a bad case of anxiety. Although a few shots of whiskey back at the house have done wonders. It was just enough to dull the nerves but keep me sharp.

I'm not making the same mistake as last time—shaky hands, dry throat, and that horrible headache afterward. No thanks. This time I'm ready.

Of course, my husband would lose his mind if he knew what I was up to. But who the heck cares? It's his own fault because he stopped caring a long time ago.

I pause outside the hotel entrance, admiring my reflection in the amber glass doors. The gown I've donned is designer, naturally—emerald green, hugging my hips just right, showing off my best assets. The fishnets are cheap, but they're well hidden under the fabric, a little surprise for my European businessman when the moment comes. It's all part of the game. They love the illusion, the idea that I'm high-class, untouchable.

But underneath? Oh, I'm more than willing to play. I just play smarter. At least tonight I do.

I'll admit, the first two times things were a little rocky on my end. Although judging by the generous tips, you'd never know. Maybe I wasn't so bad. Maybe it was beginner's luck. Nevertheless, I'm ready to impress tonight. It turns out a better performance and sure as heck yields a bigger tip.

The doorman offers to open the entrance for me and I shake my head his way. I'm not ready yet, but I can practically feel the warmth of the lobby. I know for a fact there's a gala taking place in the ballroom tonight. It's the perfect cover.

The scent of expensive cologne seeps out, filling the night air, and my ears are filled with the soft notes of piano music that drift from inside. I take in the creamy marble floors, the chandeliers that seem to float below the ceiling—this place screams luxury. It's exactly the kind of environment where men with too much money and too little sense come to play.

My businessman is already waiting upstairs. All I have to do is wine, dine, stroke the ego a bit, and then cash in. Easy enough. I think it's something I can get used to. Although, honestly, I have no plans to draw this out into a decades-long career. But it works for now, and that's what's important. Taking care of me, of my needs—my financial needs, that is. And I've had financial needs for the entire last year.

Thankfully, I've been funneled into the right circles as of late. A chance encounter at a party led to a gentleman friend—though the term friend is generous—who boasted about his experience with high-end escorts. One well-placed question later, and boom. I had the number.

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

You wouldn't believe how many women are out there taking advantage of the men who think they're the ones doing the taking.

Turnabout is fair play, right? And I do love to play.

I've never been a prude, and I've always been short on cash. It was a match made in a hellish sort of heaven.

I glance at my watch, and I'm a touch late. But the party doesn't start until I get there.

A laugh bubbles from me as I look at my reflection in the window and adjust a strand of hair that's fallen loose.

My husband, Paul, would be seething if he knew how well I was pulling this off. Scratch that. He would be seething if he knew I was pulling it off at all. But he forced my hand. He not only cut me off at the knees financially, but I'm well aware of the fact he's spent years cheating on me.

I've turned a blind eye because the alternatives weren't all that appetizing. I have no desire to pull a nine to five, and so I relegated Paul to a piggy bank all those years ago. But this new version of the man I married, themiser, I'm not at all amused.

And now he gets to wonder where the extra money is coming from. I just need to do this a few more times, and with my hidden savings, it'll be enough to disappear for good.

Divorce?

Who needs it when you can just ghost the guy entirely?

And that's exactly what I intend to do. One day you see me, the next day you don't. Speaking of seeing me, I have a very enthusiastic client twiddling his thumbs.

My feet start in that direction once again then I pause.

Maybe I should hit the coffee shop across the street first? My buzz is starting to wear off and I can really use the caffeine infusion.

Without putting too much thought into it, I traipse across the street and narrowly miss a sedan looking to clip me at the knees. Doesn't matter, I survived, I always do. Besides, I can smell the coffee from here, and I'm craving it twice as much now.

I continue in that direction as my mind runs through tonight's plan. My guy is expecting someone confident, charming, and willing to stroke his ego like a poodle. I'm practically a professional at that by now.

It's amazing how predictable men can be.

Flash a smile, tilt your head, and say the right thing— and surprise, surprise, they're putty in your hands. And predictably, I'm about to leave him poorer than when he arrived.

I catch my reflection again, this time on the window of a dry cleaners just a few doors down from my intended destination.

The quiet confidence on my face is perfection. This is easy money.

Just as I'm about to head for the coffee shop again, a voice calls out. "Cold out, isn't it?"

I turn as a figure steps in close. A tall person, face obscured by the shadows. Something about them makes my skin prickle. Maybe it's the frozen night air or the way they just sidled up a little too close, but I shake it off. It's probably the whiskey.

They're dressed decent.

"Are you here for the gala?" I ask, flashing a smile. Just keep it light. "Looks like we're both ready for a good time."

The figure doesn't respond. They just stand there, too still, too quiet.

Something twists in my gut.

They hook their arm through mine and we take a few steps past the dry cleaners, and into an alleyway before I can protest. My heels dig in and I try to bolt, but I can't free my arm.

"What are you doing?" I shout just as a car honks in the distance. A hand clamps over my mouth and a sharp sting of pain slices deep across my throat.

I glance up at the stars as if they could somehow help me, and in that moment, everything goes black.

I don't even have time to fight.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Nikki beats Jack and me to the off-campus apartment by a hair.

The apartment complex looms ahead like a bad decision someone made in the '70s and never bothered to remedy. It's a squatty-looking, beige building with the charm of a used tire, sitting a few miles off-campus, far enough from Winston Grand to scream low rent. It's the type of establishment where you don't leave your bike unlocked unless you're looking to offload it.

Buddy gives a little whine as I look to hand him off to the deputy outside. Neither Buddy nor the deputy looks too thrilled about being sidelined, but someone's got to keep the locals from sneaking a peek.

"Would you mind keeping an eye on him?" I ask the younger deputy on hand, and Buddy offers a half-hearted wag of his tail as if he's trying to charm his way into the man's good graces.

The deputy is more than happy to take on the challenge as Jack, Nikki, and I make our way into the building. If I were to personify the place, I'd say it was a seventy-year-old woman with her hair in rollers and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth, desperately in need of a nap and booze—not necessarily in that order.

Nikki steps in ahead of me, her boots scuffing against the cracked concrete. Jack holds the door, motioning me inside with that typical mock chivalry of his. Okay, so maybe it's genuine. I'll admit, I'm not used to his kind behavior toward me. But I want to be. I'll take time and work on my part. My walls don't come down willingly.

“There goes Stone,” Nikki says, gliding past him. “Always trying to score points.”

“If anyone’s keeping score, I’m winning,” he says with a flash of a grin.

A dull laugh rumbles in my chest. “You’re about to win an all-access pass to?—”

“Say my pants,” Nikki calls out as she heads down the hall ahead of us.

“Nice to know I’m surrounded by mature adults.” I flex a short-lived smile at Jack. “I was going to say a predecessor to a crime scene.”

“I like Nikki’s version better,” he grunts as we head to the door on the left with a deputy stationed outside of it. Hale arranged for the sheriff’s department to provide a few buffers between us and the rest of the student body who might try to storm the scene.

We step into a rather small and cloistered apartment with dull lighting, dingy walls, not a lot of anything in it.

The place smells as if it’s been sealed off from fresh air for too long. Stale with a hint of something I can’t quite put my finger on. Desperation, maybe. There’s something sad about it in general, and that’s a scent you can’t scrub out no matter how much perfume you throw at it.

The living room is about as lived-in as it gets. There’s a gray threadbare sofa with one armrest sloping as if someone has been using it as a pillow for the past three years. The sofa sits angled toward a TV that looks like it’s trying to survive freshman year itself.

There’s a pile of mismatched blankets on the floor, a half-full glass of water on the coffee table, and a couple of mugs with lipstick stains drying in rings. It’s a one-

bedroom, one-bath, and I poke my head into the bedroom for a moment.

The room is spliced in half as far as décor goes. Two twin mattresses are butted against opposing walls, and there's a giant gold D over one and a matching G over the other.

Delaney's side is neat, girly, and frilly as can be. Pink pillows, a floral throw, and some candles that smell like vanilla are set on a beat-up dresser that looks as if they pulled it out of a dumpster.

Gwen's side is the total opposite. Navy sheets and a matching comforter are all rolled into a jumble, pillows on the floor, the mattress peeking out from one corner. The bed looks like it hasn't been made in weeks.

I head back to the living room and spot Jack making a beeline to the kitchen. And because Jack is often led by his stomach, he opens the fridge.

"It's like you've never been in a crime scene before," I say, following him.

"What? Sometimes the fridge says a lot about a person. And technically, this isn't a crime scene. As you so aptly worded it earlier, it's a predecessor to a crime scene."

"Which is just as important," Nikki points out, rifling through the sofa cushions.

Jack swings wide the door to the tiny white fridge with a swath of rust near the bottom before squinting into the cold light.

I peer over his shoulder. There's hardly anything inside—just a couple bottles of water, some sad-looking yogurt cups, and a clear takeout container of what used to be salad, now reduced to swamp water at the bottom. He pokes at it with a grimace.

“I think it’s evolving,” he mutters.

“Right into the trash can,” I say, giving him a playful nudge. “You looking for clues or lunch?”

“Both,” he says, shutting the fridge door with a sigh. “But now I am definitely not hungry.”

Nikki wanders in and begins to open up the cabinets. “I have to say, their snack game isn’t half bad. Pretzels, Oreos, something called Moon Cheese. And they’ve got three full jars of peanut butter. Classic college staples.”

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“Maybe they were prepping for the apocalypse,” I offer.

“They were definitely prepping for something,” Jack adds.

“Speaking of prepping”—Nikki gives her crimson locks a tousle as she shuts the cabinet and opens another—“I still haven’t nailed down Kiki’s address, but according to phone records, she’s in contact with a man by the name of Gunther.”

“You have access to her phone records?” I ask, impressed.

“In a roundabout way.” She nods through each word. “Anyway, I’m starting a database of every number she’s called and Gwen was on the roster just hours before she was killed.”

“And now we know who our madame is.” Jack ticks his head as he pulls open drawers and shuts them. “At least Rush was telling the truth about something.”

“What about Gunther?” I ask.

“He’s a pimp,” she says, heading back to the living room and looking behind the TV. “He runs most of Elmwood from what I gather. Old friend of yours, Jack?”

“You’re hilarious,” he says, hardly looking up to acknowledge the slight.

“My guess is that he’s her connection to the low-rent girls, no hate.” Nikki winces. “Half her text messages look encrypted, but she seems to have access to high-end clientele as well. We can go over my findings once we’re through here. Not much to

see, but at the same time, it's everything."

"Gunther the pimp, huh?" I shake my head. "His mother must be so proud."

We divide in an effort to conquer, and I'm hoping we'll conquer a few clues along the way.

Nikki takes the living room, poking through shelves and flipping through a pile of partially opened mail. Jack moves toward the far side of the room, pulling at a stack of notebooks on the tiny desk, while I head toward the bedroom. The whole place is cramped. Too small for two people, really, but that's most likely what put it in their price range.

The bedroom smells like perfume and old laundry. Gwen's side is a mess of clothes—some clean, some not so much—and Delaney's side is a bit overly tidy. Bed made to perfection, everything tucked into place. The contrast is jarring like two worlds smashed together in too small of a box.

I open a drawer on Delaney's side and start sifting through T-shirts, tank tops, and leggings. It's all so normal. Like she wasn't hiding anything. Like she was just a regular girl living a regular life. And I have a feeling she was right up until she stepped into that hotel room.

Jack steps in and pulls a book off Delaney's nightstand. He flips it open and raises a brow. "Well, look at that."

I turn to see what he's holding, and it's a copy of *Into the Ether with Love*, that grief book written by Phillis Hazelwood, only on the cover she has it down as *Phillipa Hazelwood*. Regardless, it's the same woman Delaney had been working with.

“Autographed,” Jack says, turning a blank page with flowery writing toward me. “Remember to live your truth. Each day is a gift,” he reads before wagging the book my way.

“I’ll try to remember that.” Although with Erin missing, and four dead women riding on my shoulders, each day is starting to feel like a curse.

Nikki looks at the book from over Jack’s shoulder. “Nice sentiment. Too bad she didn’t get many of those gifts.”

Jack gives her a half-smirk, half-something else. “You know, you’re really not one for uplifting speeches.”

“I’m just here to keep it real,” she says, rifling through the closet now and I join her.

Sweaters, a couple of jackets, nothing out of the ordinary. I head back to Delaney’s bed and start pulling back the comforter, the blankets, the sheets.

My hand runs under the lip of the mattress and I feel something tucked underneath. I pull it out and there it is—a small leather journal covered in stickers with her school’s name and logo in every iteration. I open it up and read Delaney Riggs, junior year.

Jackpot.

17

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

“I’ve got her journal,” I say, hoisting it in the air momentarily.

We skip right to the good part, a few days before Delaney’s untimely death.

I flip to a random section, about halfway through the journal, and the handwriting shifts from looking neat to rushed, as if Delaney was racing against her thoughts.

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

Nikki and Jack huddle close as their eyes scan the pages along with me. We settle in on an entry just a few days before everything went sideways.

October 1st

I don't know how much longer I can keep covering for Gwen. She's in deep, and every time she promises she's done, something else pops up. More money owed. More calls at all hours. I don't know how she can even sleep. I don't know how I can sleep. I hardly have enough for rent, and food is basically a luxury at this point.

Gwen mentioned someone today. She said this woman could help us out—get her out of the hole she's in and me, too. Someone named K (I've been sworn to secrecy). I can't even breathe the woman's name or I might get myself killed. She's "connected." Whatever that means. Sounds shady, but Gwen swears she's one of the good guys. I told her I don't want to get involved, but honestly I don't think I can afford not to.

Gwen is already knee-deep in this mess. She just won't admit it. And now it looks as if so am I.

~D

October 3rd

I'm getting desperate. I just need to get ahead and I swear I will never even look at my credit card again. Gwen promised that even one night can take care of my problems. I'll admit, it's not easy seeing Gwen swimming in cash every time K hooks

her up. If I had half the money Gwen earns, I'd be on Easy Street. Too bad she blows it all up her nose. She's never going to get ahead that way if she doesn't end up dead first. I keep asking her to quit, to get help, but she brushes me off. She always does this. She acts like everything is fine and she's got it under control. But I can see it—she's cracking.

XOXO D

October 4th

I'm in. I told Gwen I'd do it. Just once, and then if I can stomach it, or survive, I'll do it a few more times until I can get my head above water. She says K specializes in top-notch clientele, that we'll be well taken care of. Gross. Anyway, Gwen sent a text around two in the morning saying we got the green light for tonight. I'm freaking out. What if I'm in danger? What if I wake up tomorrow and hate myself for the rest of my life?

What if I never wake up.

~ D

"And she didn't," I whisper.

The room feels smaller suddenly, and quieter. Holding this journal makes it feel as if whatever happened to these girls is right there with us, hovering just out of reach. But now maybe we're one step closer to getting to the truth.

"Come on," Jack says, pulling me in. "Let's finish up and then we'll pore over every last inch of that journal."

We finish up and take off into the frozen Colorado night.

Delaney was in danger. Deep down, she knew what she was doing was wrong. But she was desperate.

I hate that about this world.

I hate that desperation drives people, drives women in particular, to do the most outrageous things.

And right now, I'm desperate, too. I'm desperate to track down Kiki, Karen, K, or whatever she's going by these days and get some answers from her. I have an entire litany of questions.

And something tells me she's not going to answer any of them.

18

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The next day rolls into evening and I'm mid-page in Delaney's journal for the fiftieth time with my fingers tracing the edges of her hurried handwriting when my phone buzzes.

It's Hale.

Gunther is active in Elmwood. Get down there.

I swear under my breath. Buddy's eyes are glued to the Animal Channel, and he doesn't even spare me a glance as I slip on my jacket.

"Don't get too comfortable," I mutter, though he's more focused on a segment about lions chasing a gazelle than he is in listening to me. Typical. "Let's go, Buddy. Duty

calls.”

Within seconds, Jack’s horn blares outside with three solid beeps. He’s not known for patience. But I do appreciate his punctuality.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

I grab my gear and both buddy and I head out as the cool fall air bites at my face. The leaves crunch underfoot as we jog to Jack's truck, and as soon as we jump in, he flashes a lopsided grin.

"Took you long enough," he says, revving the engine.

"Sorry, I was solving world peace. That and the fact I had to pry Buddy from the TV. It's hard to compete with Mother Nature."

The truck roars down the road, and we weave through traffic as if we were auditioning for NASCAR. Jack's knuckles grip the wheel tighter when Hale sends over the location details—Elmwood.

I know for a fact that Elmwood haunts Jack for many reasons. The place reeks of bad decisions and depravity, so it seems fitting that's where the pimp in question would be.

We leave Buddy snoozing in the truck and meet Nikki at the corner of Jackson and Rosewood, right outside a liquor store that looks as if it's seen better days.

"Here's the host of the party," she says, flashing her phone at us and we take a moment to inspect the mugshot of the man of the hour.

Gunther looks like your typical street thug who somehow managed to dodge death long enough to age—white hair, mean eyes, pocked skin, rough around the edges in general. He's the type of guy you cross the street to avoid because he looks as if he'd stick a knife in your belly for kicks.

Supposedly, we're in his territory. Seeing his mugshot is one thing, but seeing him in the flesh might make me rethink every choice I've ever made leading up to this point. Good thing I'm packing. I touch my elbow to my gun just to affirm this.

"You ladies ready?" Jack asks, adjusting his holster.

"I don't see any ladies," I say. "But I'm ready."

Nikki nods. "I'd like to think of myself as a bad-ass broad. And I'm always ready for a good time."

"Okay"—Jack sighs— "let me rephrase that. Are you two broads ready for Elmwood?"

I give him a flat look. "I don't know if I'm ever ready for Elmwood."

"We're ready for Elmwood," Nikki says sternly. "The question should be, is Elmwood ready for us?"

"Touché," I tell her. "Let's hope this night doesn't go sideways."

The three of us walk shoulder-to-shoulder down the street as the chill in the air increases. It smells like cigarettes and fried food, with just a hint of something rotten. Probably Gunther himself.

The traffic isn't so bad at this hour, and the people on the streets are in one of four categories: they're either lost, hit rough times, are looking for trouble, or they are trouble. I'd say we fit nicely in the last two.

Sure enough, Hale's intel is on point and we spot the man we're looking for down the street leaning against a building with a couple of women gathered around him, just

shooting the breeze. Or diving up the night shift.

Gunther stands with confidence decorated in enough gold chains to give a pharaoh a run for their money. He's not even trying to blend in. A beat-up sedan pulls up and he nods at them before walking over. He gives a casual glance in this direction before doing a double take as we fast approach him. The man's eyes widen, and just like that, he bolts down the street. The girls scatter like pigeons, but the car in question pulls away coolly.

The chase is on as we bullet down the street and eventually follow him into a dilapidated building—a motel no less.

“Cover me,” Jack pants as the three of us hug the wall with our backs as we speed up to the second story of the run-down motel. Our guns are drawn, our adrenaline hitting its zenith.

The thing with Elmwood is that every nook and cranny qualifies as the crappy downtown corridor, and this no-tell roach motel is no exception.

“Where do you think he went?” Nikki says, nearly out of breath.

Our sprint through three city blocks while chasing our suspect has made us well aware we should lay off the donuts for a while. Will we? Probably not. But lessons like this usually need to be learned the hard way.

The lights flicker as we make it to the second floor and are met with three orange doors, each sealed shut. Shouting comes from the far end and Jack hitches his head in that direction as the sounds of women's voices rise into the night, and they sound wildly agitated.

Jack steps toward the door before glancing back at us.

Both Nikki and I nod his way.

We're ready.

My heart riots in my chest so hard, my skull vibrates from the effort.

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

This is it. We could kill or be killed.

Who knows what we'll find behind that door. It could be our perp. And I can guarantee you it could very well be Erin. My sister. My totally insane genius of a sister who I have half a mind to run her head through a wall.

How I would give anything to see her again.

And now in just moments, I could do just that.

The impossible finally possible.

Jack turns, and in one swift motion, bursts the door open with his foot before jumping inside.

"FBI, everybody freeze," he thunders.

Nikki and I jump in, flanking him on either side. But we don't see our suspect. Instead, we see an older woman with a shag of white hair, pale, and thin as a skeleton with about seven teeth in total staring back at us with her mouth agape.

The thin tan girl next to her looks equally surprised—dark hair, black eyes, pocked skin, about mid-thirties in age. Her arms rise to the air, but the skeleton with hair continues to gasp in our direction.

The room is small, the kitchenette is loaded with old fast-food bags, and the smell of something sour and cigarettes lingers in the air.

I move past the peanut gallery and make a beeline for the door to the right and find an empty bathroom the size of a thimble, and the sink is molded with orange slime.

“All clear,” I say with my weapon still poised as I move to the opened window to the left of the sofa. “That’s where he went.”

“Everybody out,” Jack growls, and the woman with pocked skin runs past us and out the door as if she were an apparition. “I said everybody out,” he growls once again and Nikki and I exchange puzzled looks.

“Is he talking to us?” Nikki asks, sounding about as confused as I’m feeling.

“Get out.” He cuts the air with his angst as he continues to glare at the skeletal woman, the barrel of his gun starting to lose its trajectory in her direction.

“I think he is talking to us,” I say, stymied. “Bad news, Stone. I’m not going anywhere.”

His eyes cut to mine, and there’s a glint of something in them—fear, frenzy, fury, all of the above, and I don’t get it.

“Out,” he roars right at me. “Out,” Jack says again, but this time his voice cracks with something else. Something raw. His eyes lock onto mine, and I see it. Fear. And it’s not for him. It’s for me.

“Like I said, Stone,” I say with my voice unwavering. “I’m staying.”

But he doesn’t back down, and that fear in his eyes flares like a warning.

This isn’t about Gunther. This is about something else entirely.

And whatever it is, we're about to face it head-on right this minute.

The woman sighs hard and I squint her way. Something about her feels familiar. Those eyes, those crystal blue eyes.

A breath hitches in my throat as I connect the dots.

"No," I whisper mostly to myself as I cast a quick glance at Jack.

But he's too focused and fuming to notice.

This night officially just went sideways.

19

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

Fallon stares at me for a moment too long, waiting for me to say something that'll make this moment make sense. But I've got nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

“Please go,” I manage and somehow my voice sounds far steadier than I feel.

She doesn’t argue—and I’m thankful for that. Fallon gives me one last look as if she’s waiting for me to change my mind, but I can’t. I won’t. She heads for the door without another word, and I can hear the soft sound of her boots fading down the hall.

Now, it’s just she and I. Alone with our thoughts and the past swirling around us like a hurricane.

I take a breath and slowly lower my gun, but I’ll admit, there’s a part of me begging to use it. I’ve never had a well-timed misfire, but I’m considering it.

My pulse thuds in my temples like someone has taken a hammer to my skull. She takes a step away from the ratty old couch behind her, and it’s only then I notice the lit cigarette in her hand. Her eyes are lined with crimson, glossy as the day is long, which tells me everything I need to know about how clean she might be. And there’s a glint in them as well, like a cat that just got caught with its paw in the fishbowl.

“Hell.” I sigh as I contemplate on what to do next.

She belts out a sharp cackle and the sound claws at me like broken glass across my very last nerve. “Is that any way to greet your mother?”

Yes. My mother.

Her words hang in the air, thick and rancid just like the stench of the fast food that’s been left too long in this rathole of a room. My grip on the gun tightens before I slide

it back into its holster.

My heart is still racing, but now it's from something worse than adrenaline. Anger. It's the worst kind of anger, because it's sticking to my soul and festering like wildfire. I'm more than familiar with this brand of anger. I know for a fact it never really goes away, and not even a bullet can take care of.

"What are you doing here?" My words come out harsh. I'm not even trying to hide the edge to it. I don't need to hide anything from my mother. She knows exactly how I feel about the things both her and my father put us through. We don't need to go through that pathetic song and dance once again, but it seems the music never stops regardless.

"Nice to see you, too, Jackie." She takes a drag from her cigarette and flicks the ash onto the filthy carpet as if she runs the place. And I pray that's not true.

There's an air of confidence about her, a superiority she's trying to maintain as if she were standing in some luxury suite instead of a glorified brothel. The scent of stale smoke and sweat now takes on a different meaning, and it's all I can do not to bury my nose in my sleeve. This hellhole is an ode to bad decisions. And ironically, my mother most likely believes this is a very good and prudent decision. After all, this is how she provided for her family while her husband was shooting up black tar heroin.

"What's it look like I'm doing?" She waves her hand around like she's presenting some kind of prize. "I'm surviving."

Another surge of anger coils in me. "Surviving? In a place like this?" I gesture to the peeling wallpaper and the cracked windows. "You're not surviving. You're?—"

"I'm what, Jack?" She leans forward, her grin sharp and her eyes a little too glassy. "Go ahead. Say it. You always were the judgmental one. You're the only one that's

any good in this world and the rest of us are garbage. You've always been ashamed of our family."

"Give me something not to be ashamed of," I riot back. "Change my mind." My voice drops to something colder. "You're turning tricks again. It's not even a question. I know the answers to all of the questions when it comes to you."

"Don't flatter yourself," she hisses, flicking the cigarette butt across the room and it lands with a soft hiss on an old takeout carton. "I got out of prison a month ago. Haven't had time to catch up with my darling boy. You don't know the new me."

"Bull." I take a step toward her. "The new you is a perfect representation of the old you. And a month is plenty of time to reach out. The prison kept my number for you. You could have called me. You didn't. You didn't want to. This"—I wave a hand around at the dump—"this is what you wanted."

She doesn't answer. She simply smirks as if I'm a little kid throwing a tantrum that she doesn't have the patience for. Her eyes flick over my body and size me up.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" She blows out an aggressive breath at the thought. "You're always jumping to conclusions. Maybe I'm just living my life here. Did you ever think of that?"

"No." I somehow manage the word without laughing. "You're using again. That's the only conclusion I can draw." I shake my head with disgust. "You're sick. You always have been. And if you keep this up, you always will be. So what is it this time? Coke? Meth? Who knows what you've gotten your hands on."

She grins and folds her arms across her chest like we're having a friendly chat. "Jet and Candy still hanging around? I bet they miss their mama, and their mama sure misses them, too."

I flinch at the mention of my siblings. My mother has always been poison to them. They may not agree with my assessment, but that is certainly the case whether they want to argue it or not.

“Jet is still kicking, I take it? And Candy—sweet, sweet Candy—how is my baby girl? It’s been a few years. I know a lot can change even in a little bit of time.”

A heavy sigh escapes me. I can feel my defenses starting to crumble. They always do.

“Candence is doing her best to rebuild her life. It’s been a while since I spoke to her last. I’m giving her some breathing room. I suggest you do the same.”

My mother should breathe in an entirely different galaxy than my sister or my brother, and count me in on that equation, too. It’s for our own safety even at this age.

Her eyebrows lift in mock surprise. “Really? Candy is doing better? You don’t say. She got herself a job? A real one?”

“She’s working the front desk at a hotel north of Denver,” I say, regretting every single word. The last thing I should be doing is giving my mother the ammo she needs to go off half-cocked and knocking my sister’s world down like dominos. It’s what she does best. “She has roommates. An on-again, off-again boyfriend that I’m not crazy about.” But then, I’ve never been able to deny my mother a single thing.

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She snorts. “Sounds like she’s doing great. Following in the family footsteps.”

It’s nice to know she’s still rife with delusions. Had my sister followed in the family footsteps, she’d be dead or in prison.

I take another step closer until I’m practically looming over her. My hands shake as I look at her—really look at her—and what she’s become. The deep lines in her face, the faded tattoos on her wrists. Her once-dark hair now a ragged, graying mess. So thin. So much thinner than I remember. Skin over bone. She’s a shell of a person, and yet, somehow, she’s the same at her twisted core.

I wonder what Fallon will think. She knows the history. But knowing something and seeing it face-to-face, well, that’s a whole different beast. This reality will slap you in the face and leave a mark.

“Get your things,” I tell her.

“Why?” She raises a brow my way, her head inching back with what looks like a hint of fear. My guess is she senses another arrest on the horizon, this time at the hands of her son.

I meet her gaze, cold and unwavering. “Because you’re coming with me.”

The drive back to Pine Ridge Falls is mercifully quiet. Fallon, thankfully, has decided to eschew the idea of making any small talk with my mother.

Not that it would go anywhere useful. My mother is the type who takes any attempt at conversation and wrings the life out of it, just to leave you with a headache and a deep desire for something strong to drink. So, I'm more than grateful that Fallon opted to focus on the road, and Buddy, even though he's conked out in the back, oblivious to the drama riding shotgun.

Fallon knows the whole cry me a river story of my rotten family.

I filled her in on that fractured fairy tale soon after we met. I let her know that my mother had a stable marriage to a good man, a tax attorney who worked with the IRS. They had two kids and a nice house. They had the whole white picket fence dream going for them.

Then my father, her husband's younger brother, showed up. The "bad boy" version, if you could even call him that. He was younger, dumber, and into every vice you could think of—booze, coke, girls. My mother fell for him hard. Left her husband, took the kids, and ran off to dicey pastures with this dicey version of her husband. Added one more to the family, me. The IRS guy filed for divorce, disappeared, and the rest of the family cut her off.

It's not a pretty story, but it's mine.

Growing up with a drug addict for a father and a mother who turned tricks to keep both food and lines on the table wasn't exactly a Norman Rockwell upbringing. Then things spiraled. Dad found heroin, Mom found friends with criminal tendencies, and those friends got caught up robbing liquor stores. That's when the cops got involved, and then my whole life shifted gears overnight.

By the time I was fourteen, I was working just to keep the lights on. Mom went to prison, Dad followed, and my brother Jet and I ended up with the Deckers in lieu of foster care since Jet had already aged out. The last straw for my sister Candy came before my parents were hauled off by the time that happened; she had already run off to save herself. Probably the smartest move any of us ever made.

Now, here we are, full circle. My mother, fresh out of prison again, humming along to the radio, sitting next to me like it's just another day in our twisted family saga.

No sooner do we hit Pine Ridge Falls than we pass the enormous falls that glow lavender on this moonless fall night.

I lift my eyes to the rearview mirror and catch Fallon's gaze. "You want to go home?"

"Don't even think about it, Stone." She sheds a half-smile that quickly morphs into a frown. And a part of me is relieved that she'll be heading to my place with me. That part of me is terrified.

We head straight for the Whispering Woods' compound, and soon we pull into my driveway.

The cabin is lit up like a jack-o'-lantern. Jet is home, and the second we walk through the door, he lights up.

He spots Mom, lets out a howl, and runs toward her like a kid.

"Mom!" He scoops her up, spins her around, and she squeals like it's Christmas morning.

Buddy, ever the opportunist, spots the ball of fluff sitting on the back of my sofa and

he takes this chance to chase her right under the couch.

Fallon and I exchange a morose smile.

“Thanks for—well, for putting up with all of this,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. It’s been a heck of a night.

“All this?” Fallon teases, nudging me lightly. “Stone, this is nothing. I’ve survived worse.” She gives me that grin of hers. It’s rare, but it’s beautiful and it always seems to have the power to knock the wind out of me. She places her hand on my shoulder and it warms me to my feet. “I’m here.” She pulls me in a notch. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The knot in my chest loosens just a bit. I don’t know what I did to deserve Fallon in my life, but I’m not about to question it either.

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“You ready for a formal meet and greet?” I ask and she nods without hesitation. Seeing that the ride home was rife with silence, and I certainly wasn’t in the mood to make nice or make formal introductions, I think it’s time to turn things around. I clear my throat as we head their way. “Mom, this is Special Agent Fallon Baxter. Fallon, this is my mother, Sandy Stone.”

“Well, well.” Mom gives us a once-over, her gaze lingering on our clasped hands, and I can already see her gears turning. “Looks like someone’s getting cozy at the field office.” She lifts a brow and smirks. “I’m guessing she’s not in on all of your dirty laundry just yet.”

“She knows the full story,” I say flatly. “Nothing to hide here.”

“Nice to meet you,” Fallon says, holding out her hand, only to meet with empty air.

“Yeah, right,” my mother mutters. “Likewise,” she finally pushes the words through her remaining teeth. At last check, I counted five. “Any friend of Jackie’s is a friend of mine. But then, you two look like you’re more than friends. When you knock boots, do you keep the guns strapped on or?—”

“Enough,” I say, more bored than exasperated. “You’re not going to scare her away. She’s seen it all. We’re nothing new.”

“Oh hon, I’m not trying to scare you away.” She grabs Fallon’s hand and shakes it despite the fact she picked it up from her side. “Jackie has always been a storyteller. I’m just glad that he’s got someone to warm his bed at night. You know what they say, everyone needs someone—even you gun-toting lunatics that run the

government.”

I nod because if Fallon didn’t get a full flavor of what my mother was capable of, she’s just been fed a spoonful the hard way.

Jet is still grinning like an idiot, oblivious to the tension. He claps his hands and rubs them together as if he’s relishing the moment.

“Let’s order some food.” He whoops as if to punctuate his enthusiasm and most likely his hunger. “Jack, you got your card on you?” Jet pulls out his phone, already eyeing the menu for the local diner.

“Yeah, sure. Go nuts,” I say, handing it over.

My mother’s eyes light up. “Oh, we’re living high on the hog now, huh?” She gives a loud whoop herself before snatching the cat off the floor and giving it a little celebratory shake—only to get a set of claws across her wrist. “Hey! That hurt,” she yelps, dropping it like a brick. “Someone shoot the darn thing, would you?”

“Misty is harmless,” Fallon says with a little laugh.

Ten bucks says she’s cheering the cat on internally.

“Misty?” My mother looks at Jet. “Was that the cat’s name? I thought her name was Pepper?”

“It’s Misty,” I say firmly, cementing the moniker that Fallon chose. Jet calls in the order and I grab a water bottle for my mother and offer one to Fallon as well, but she refuses. My mother and Jet settle on the sofa and my mother gets right to regaling him with terrifying tales from prison. “I think I’ll head to the back,” I say before turning to Fallon. “Care to join me?”

She nods, and we make our way to the back porch. It's quiet out here, so quiet that it settles in my bones. The moon has finally decided to make an appearance, hanging low and casting a silver glow over the lake, and the air smells like pine and damp earth.

I grab a few logs and get the fire pit going. The flames crackle to life and their warmth fights off the chill almost instantly.

Fallon settles onto the cushioned sofa and I drop down next to her, watching the fire as I poke at it with a stick. For a while, neither of us says anything.

The night is still as death, save for the occasional splash from the lake. The water shimmers and glitters and it adds an enchanted appeal to what has already amounted to a haunted night.

"I don't know what comes next," I admit, finally breaking the silence. "With her out now..." I sigh at the thought. "It's like waiting for the other shoe to drop. It won't be long before she finds her way back in. If anything, she's cyclical."

Fallon leans in and rests her hand on my arm. "You don't have to figure it all out tonight, Jack. We'll deal with it one step at a time. Together."

"Together?" I shoot her a lopsided grin as I wrap an arm around her and pull her close.

"That's what I said." She doesn't hesitate to double down.

"I'll give you some time to rethink your offer. Jet is one thing, but my mother is a whole other bag of tricks."

"Nothing can scare me away, Stone. She can give it her best shot. And something

tells me, she will. But I'm not going anywhere."

I let her words sink in, the warmth from the fire mixing with the warmth in my chest. Maybe, for once, I'm not completely alone in this mess.

But I can't shake the feeling that trouble is already on the horizon. I know for a fact it's sitting in my living room.

Fallon's lips tug at the corners as if she's holding back a smile.

"We don't get to choose our families," she says. "And even if we did, I have a feeling we wouldn't make any changes."

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I close my eyes a moment and nod because she's right.

"I guess we'll just have to roll with the punches," I say as our eyes lock onto one another.

"I guess we will," she says with a smile.

I edge toward her and her head inches toward mine. It looks as if this night is about to take a turn for the better.

Our phones chirp and we both groan in unison.

It's nice to know she shares the sentiment.

We check it out and it's Hale.

Another body has been found. Report to the morgue in the morning. Get a good night's rest. The dead can wait. But I want that killer caught asap. The next prospective victims out there are running out of time.

"He does have a way with words," Fallon says, flopping her phone onto the table next to her.

"I guess we have a date at the morgue."

"I could think of a few less romantic places." She casts a glance toward my cabin, and I'd have to agree that any room with my mother in it would fit the bill.

“Do you have romance on your mind?” My lips curl at the thought as I pull her closer still.

“It beats death.”

“That might be the only thing that can.” I bring my mouth to hers and she doesn’t protest.

We don’t talk about death, serial killers, or my mother.

In fact, we don’t talk at all.

21

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

After a quick breakfast at my mother’s diner, Jack, Buddy, and I head to the coroner’s office in Denver, to the morgue attached that houses the latest victim of our rather prolific serial killer.

The morgue smells of industrial-grade cleanser mixed with the faint, lingering scent of something far worse. The air feels heavy and a little too cold because, let’s face it, it’s designed to slow everything down, maybe even your heartbeat. The hum of the refrigeration unit is the only sound we hear, constant and grating, but I’ve gotten used to it over the years. Doesn’t mean I like it.

Jack pulls the final door open, and Buddy trots in with his tail wagging as if this is just another stop on his walk. We don’t usually bring Buddy to this place, but we figured it’s probably time to introduce him to the bleak side of our careers.

Miller Thompson, the coroner, sheds a wide grin when he sees us, or maybe it’s just

for Buddy. You never know with Miller—he could find the silver lining at a funeral.

“Morning, Miller,” I say, stepping in after Jack. The walls are all steel, and the lighting is fluorescent—harsh and sterile, with no mercy for the bags under your eyes. And it feels as if I’ve got some serious luggage.

We make our way past doors marked Autopsy Room and Cold Storage. It’s a testament to the fact that even the signs here feel clinical. Everything is stripped down to the bare essentials, just enough to make you feel like a number instead of a person.

“Morning, Agents.” Miller gives a nod and crouches down to give Buddy a good scratch behind the ears. “And morning to this big guy. I see you brought the chief,” he teases before lifting Buddy’s face toward him. “Been keeping these two out of trouble?”

“Not even close,” I say with a dull laugh.

“You have no idea.” Jack steps over to metal tables lined with bodies covered with sheets and his mouth curls at the corners.

Miller belts out a rumble of a laugh. “I’d ask what happened, but I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know.”

“Good call,” I say, leaning against one of the cool steel counters. “What’ve you got for us?”

“Sherry Kent.” Miller moves to one of the tables and pulls back the sheet with a quick flick of his wrist as if he were a magician. And if he were a magician, he’d be a lousy one. It looks as if his assistant just bit the big one. “Her throat has a nice clean slice across it, no signs of struggle,” he muses. “Someone knew what they were doing.”

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The body on the table looks as peaceful as it can in a place like this. The woman is naked. Her body is on the thin side, her skin is on the blue side, but heck, it's been cold out, and it probably doesn't help to have death on your side. There's a deep gash across the poor woman's throat, and that part doesn't look quite as peaceful. The infinity scar on her chest doesn't either.

"That's starting to look familiar," Jack says as he leans toward the symbol.

It's identical to the ones we've seen before, but upon closer inspection, it looks as if it's been etched into her skin with some kind of tool. It's so very neat and precise.

"Looks familiar, indeed," I mutter, my mind going back to the previous victims. Delaney, Gwen, and those two women who turned up in Elmwood—Sharon Oaks and Jane Doe. "One odd thing, though. It looks nearly the same size as the others." I shoot a look at Jack and he nods.

"I thought so, too. Uniform and exact."

"Funny how it lines up so perfectly," Miller says, tilting his head with his eyes narrowing in on it. "It's almost as if whoever's doing this has got themselves a little device for it."

"Something like a brand," Jack says, his voice low. "Or something close."

"A nefarious cookie cutter," I offer and Jack nods my way.

"Exactly that," he says. "One with razor-sharp intentions."

“Well, it’s obvious our killer loves the attention,” I add as that familiar knot of frustration twists in my gut. “It’s nothing but a little game of cat and mouse to them. Like they want us to catch them, or better yet, prove that we can’t.”

“I’m guessing it’s the latter,” Jack says as he shakes his head at the woman. “But we’ll catch them. We always do.”

It’s almost sweet he said those words straight to her as if he were making the corpse a promise. It’s one I intend to keep with her, too.

Miller crosses his arms and gives a slow nod. “They’ve done this before and they’re just getting started.”

Right on cue, Nikki walks in, looking like she hardly survived a warzone. Her hair is every which way and her clothes are askew.

“Late night?” I tease, although taking a better look at her I may not be.

“You have no idea,” Nikki groans. “Let’s just say I didn’t get much sleep, and I wasn’t alone.”

“Exciting as ever.” Jack glances at Miller. “It’s not her first rodeo.”

Miller chuckles, shaking his head. “Do I want to know?”

“No,” the three of us say in unison.

He shrugs. “How about we get back to business? I’d like to introduce you to Mrs. Sherry Kent.”

“Socialite,” Nikki says. “She was a homemaker up in Garter, a high-end zip code.

Her husband is some big shot in the financial sector. No kids. He wasn't in the state when she died. Hale says the alibi checks out, so he's not our killer, but that doesn't mean we're ruling him out."

"Clean hands don't mean much these days," I add.

"That's how I'd off my spouse," Nikki says, straightening her jacket and wrangling her hair into a messy bun. "Murder for hire. Not only would I keep my hands clean, but I'd try to peg it on one of my enemies. Two birds, one stone."

"I'm glad you're on our side," Jack flatlines.

"Anyway, I dug around a bit." She leans in toward the woman and gives her a good inspection. "She was into charity work, lots of it. She could have made some enemies there, but nothing screams motive."

"Up until now, it seemed as if our killer had a type," I say, my eyes still pinned on the infinity scar. "Or at least a pattern. What was she wearing? Where was she going?"

"Heels, fancy gown," Miller says, pointing to a table with the woman's things spread over it, waiting to be itemized.

Nikki, Jack, and I exchange a look.

"She was found across the street from the Drummond Hotel." Nikki tips her head as if to allude to what we're suspecting.

"Do you think Mrs. Kent was a high-end escort?" I shake my head, hoping it's not so.

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Jack takes a breath. “I’m thinking we need to find out if a hotel room went unused last night.”

“If her john was there, we may not know,” I say.

Nikki measures the infinity symbol with her fingers. “I’ll do a deep dive and talk to the hotel. CSI has her phone and they said they’d release it to me this afternoon. If she contacted Kiki, then we’ve got another connection.” She looks up at Miller. “How many people have come through here with this symbol engraved into their skin? It’s identical to the ones those girls had carved into them last week.”

Miller heads over to his monitor and pulls up images from the previous cases.

“Here’s what I have on Delaney and Gwen,” he says, clicking through the files. “Same scar, same size.”

He keeps clicking, pulling up images of Sharon Oaks and Jane Doe. The same twisted infinity symbol was carved into their chests.

Nikki leans in. “It’s a signature, all right.”

“A signature, a brand, a message,” Jack says, voice tight. “Whatever it is, it’s the same across the board.”

Miller runs a quick search through his database, and three more files pop up on the screen. “Found these. All within the last year, all with the same symbol. Their deaths were deemed domestic accidents.”

“Looks like we’ve got more victims to add to the roster,” Jack mutters.

I tap the monitor. “He’s using something to mark them—clean, fast. It looks almost surgical. This is deliberate but of a different nature.”

Miller nods. “And well practiced.”

Before I can respond, Nikki raises a hand. “Oh, I almost forgot. Before my night took an unexpected turn, I found our girl. Karen Holt.”

Jack and I exchange a look. “Where is she?”

Nikki’s smile turns smug. “I know exactly where we can find her.”

Looks as if we’ve got our next move.

22

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The moon hangs low over Crimson Heights like a silver eye, casting a cold glow on the ritzy mansions all lined up, each one more opulent than the next, as if they’ve got something to prove. And with their stately frames, and the arrogant air about them, they’re not looking to prove anything to anyone. They’ve already accomplished that feat.

Fall has settled in deep as the ground fog rolls across the manicured lawns, and the air has a sharp icy bite to it, razor-sharp enough to remind you it’s only going to get colder.

A few of the homes in the area are decked out for the season with pumpkins

festooning doorsteps, wreaths of orange leaves hanging on the double door entries, and twinkle lights that somehow manage to make even the wealthiest estates look cozy.

It's just Jack and I on the mission to speak with our next suspect. Nikki says she'll meet up with us in a bit. I'm not sure what she has going on that's important enough to miss this, but I'm betting it has to do with a man and a very compromising position.

The landscape slows as Jack takes his foot off the gas and we take in the sheer opulence of these behemoths that look as if they were carved from a single piece of marble.

"Why do I suddenly feel as if we're walking onto a movie set?" I mutter to Jack as we pull up to a sprawling mansion with too many cars crammed into the drive. The place practically screams old money, with its towering columns and an iron gate that looks more decorative than functional.

"That's because there's something that feels plastic about all of this." He nods to the throngs of people pouring into the oversized house just ahead.

I can't help but note the cars are expensive, and the people streaming out of them look twice as expensive.

Women in glittering dresses, both stylish and short enough to be fun and flirty, paired with expensive red-bottom heels. The men look dapper and yet more than happy to be here as they all seem to race into the glitzy estate.

No offense to the males in the vicinity, but I've found that when they need to get dressed for an occasion, they're never too thrilled with the destination at hand. Most of them would rather be home watching a game or scrolling the internet with a hand

down their pants, maybe both. Come to think of it, I'd prefer that scenario to this myself.

“Who dresses like this in the middle of the week?” I ask, mostly to myself.

Jack cuts the engine. “It could be worse. It could be a costume party.”

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“If you don’t think this is a costume party, you’re missing the obvious.”

“In that case, let’s do our proverbial masks.” He gives me a sideways glance, lips twitching into something close to a grin. “Are you ready for this?”

I nod, though my stomach twists with an odd mix of anticipation and dread.

We’re here to speak with Kiki, aka Karen Holt, a woman whose internet trail is more chaotic than a toddler after a dozen cupcakes.

Nikki somehow dug up the fact that Kiki has a standing date here with her husband and half the posh couples of Crimson Heights. The fact that it’s a Wednesday night makes me wonder just what kind of standing date this might be. My guess is it isn’t a book club or a Bible study.

Jack and I step out of the car and the cold air wraps around us like an unwelcome hug as we make our way up the drive. The gravel crunches under our boots and we inch to the front door, and the closer we get, the more I feel like we’re walking straight into a bear trap. Or a party. I’ve always felt they were one and the same. That’s because I always feel the need to gnaw off a limb to set myself free from the situation.

Ahead of us a figure bounces up the driveway. Her sparkling red dress is so skimpy it seems to defy the laws of physics as the wind engorges it around her hips like a flower.

There she is. Karen Holt is basically a pixie with fine bird-like features and the frenetic energy to match. Her short brown hair bounces as she walks, and if I’m not

mistaken, she's humming. How I detest happy people who hum.

She looks like she should be shivering out here in this fall chill, but somehow, she's powering through the Arctic blast in a dress that looks more appropriate for a summer beach party than a brisk autumn night just north of Denver.

My limbs feel frozen just looking at her, and I'm fairly certain hers will freeze solid and snap off at some point in the evening. At least hypothermia acts as an analgesic, so she'll have that working for her.

"Karen Holt?" Jack calls out, and she stops cold, turning around with a bright smile that could light up all of the Western Hemisphere.

She squints our way before her eyes widen the size of dinner dishes.

"Oh my goodness," she squeals, and the sound is so high-pitched I swear dogs in two counties over can hear it. I'm sure Buddy is pressing his nose against the front window by now. "Geez," she says with an enthusiastic growl. "You're both gorgeous!" Her eyes float to Jack and remain there. She doesn't even blink before grabbing his hand and clutching it like they're long-lost friends. "Are you guests of Teagan's?" She doesn't give us a second to answer before she starts pulling him toward the mansion. "I'm Kiki. Teagan said there would be new people here tonight. Youhaveto sit in my pod."

Pod?

I shoot Jack a look as if to say, Invasion of the Body Snatchers?

He gives a slight nod as he glances down at her death grip on his hand and both of us are more amused than we are alarmed.

“Your pod?” I ask, trying to keep up. I’m not ready to let this sci-fi bit of info go.

Karen beams over at me and her glossy red lips catch the moonlight. “It’s how we section off the room. We always rotate so no one feels left out.” She licks her lips as she inspects Jack’s features.

There’s no doubt she likes what she sees. Most women do.

I happen to be one of them.

But what’s with the rotation? This must be some sort of networking event.

“Let me guess—” Karen bites down on the naughty smile trying to take over her face. “It’s your first time?”

“Something like that,” I say, while shooting Jack a look that says, what the heck have we gotten into, and he simply shrugs, looking far too entertained by all this to busy himself with thoughts of this event having a dark side.

That’s Jack in a nutshell.

“Don’t worry.” Karen gives a reassuring pat to his arm—still holding his hand like he’s her new best friend, or new best boyfriend. Frankly, I think it’s the latter. “It’s going to be a blast, I promise. We’ll be out of here by ten. Some of us still have bedtimes.” She rolls her eyes and laughs. “Like me. I’m guilty.”

“Hard to believe,” Jack says, his voice dry as desert air.

I believe it. Or at least that she’s guilty of something. Human trafficking comes to mind.

We approach the house as it glows with warm light and laughter spilling out from behind its grand doors. The other guests look polished, elegant, and dressed to the nines as they step out of luxury cars and saunter their way inside.

I glance down at my more practical black pantsuit and Jack's standard FBI-issue blazer over jeans. We are definitely not blending in. Or at least I'm not. About a dozen women have already leered at Jack's face and I sincerely doubt they noticed he was even wearing clothes.

We near the entrance and Karen skips ahead with Jack in tow. The sound of soothing jazz music grows in volume, but the sharp bites of laughter and ceaseless chatter of conversation eclipses it. The swarm of bodies, the sea of cologne and expensive perfume, the slotted lids all casting stolen glances in our direction—I can't help but wonder what kind of circus we're walking into.

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We step inside, and before I can process a thing, I stop dead in my tracks when I see what's happening.

I certainly wasn't prepared for this.

23

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The moment Jack and I step inside the haunted mansion, it's like we've crossed into another dimension.

The entire place is draped in enough marble, glass, and mirrors to make it feel like a high-end funhouse—except instead of distorted reflections, I'm seeing every inch of everyone's perfectly polished bodies at odd and compromising angles.

Crystal chandeliers hang from the vaulted ceiling and cast a dim, intimate light that's amplified by the flicker of what must be enough candles to burn down the Rocky Mountains. The air smells of expensive cologne, roses, and something else—something a little too sweet and perhaps even dangerous. The jazz music grows in volume and does its best to strangle out the laughter.

But it's not pricey scents or even pricier décor that catches my attention.

It's the people.

Gorgeous men and women, all draped around each other like living art pieces, hands

tangled in hair, fingers tracing curves with a vigorous hunger. And as if that wasn't enough, there's a smattering of silver bowls scattered around the room brimming with fluffy feathers, silk blindfolds, soft restraints, and, well, other things that don't belong in your typical centerpiece in a suburban home, but would fit right in at a brothel.

"Is this a fever dream?" I hiss at Jack, not even sure how to frame that sentence. Although high-end sex club might be more accurate.

He lifts a brow my way as if he shares the sentiment.

Kiki, or Karen, hardly notices my confusion. She's too busy pointing to a tall man in a perfectly tailored suit who's currently halfway through a very enthusiastic make-out session with a handsy redhead. The woman has her arm up his shirt, and he's got one of his own tangled in her hair.

"That's my husband," Karen says casually, like she's pointing out a banal hors d'oeuvre. "And, of course, you know Teagan." She nods at the redhead, who now has her leg wrapped around the guy like an anaconda. "I swear, she just invites us to these things because she's got the hots for Mark." She giggles as if she's sharing a juicy bit of gossip. And she just might be. "Don't worry," she turns to me with a stern look, "we know our limits."

My eyebrows shoot up at the thought. Because clearly, there are no limits here.

Before I can say a word, her phone buzzes and she frowns at the screen.

"I have to take this," she grunts. "Our pod is in the right-hand quadrant of the living room." She points across the sea of writhing bodies. "I'll meet you there. Be right back." She taps Jack's arm. "And don't forget—you're mine."

She scurries off, and I look to Jack with an expression that could melt iron. "What the

heck is going on, Stone? I don't think we have enough bullets between the two of us to fix this mess."

"My guess?" He sighs, and I can't help but note the amusement in his eyes. "Soft swingers."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"It means exactly what she said." His lips twitch as he holds back a smile, or a laugh. Most likely both. "They know their limits. And it also means that someone is going to have a very good time."

I shoot him a look for even implying the fact.

"Not me," he adds quickly, holding his hands up in surrender. "I'm not going to have a good time."

I cast a quick glance at the room and frown. "Maybe I will."

Before he can fire back, Karen returns, bouncing on her toes as if they had morphed into springs. She doesn't hesitate pulling Jack close, and suddenly I feel like a third wheel. I don't like feeling like a third wheel. Feeling like a third wheel makes my trigger finger twitch, and that's never a good thing for anyone.

The vibe in the room shifts and intensifies as couples seem to melt together. Voices drop to low murmurs and hands roam freely. The heat kicks up several notches, and I'm more than a little aware of the eyes flitting in our direction—the newcomers, the outsiders. Although, judging by the way Karen is massaging Jack's shoulders, he fits in just fine.

Out of nowhere a man slides up next to me. He's tall, built like a football player, and

holds the scent of some overpriced cologne that's trying way too hard. Reminds me of a bad boyfriend I once had in high school. That didn't end well and neither will this. Although back then I wasn't eager to flash my Glock the way I am now.

He's handsome but in a cheesy way. His hair is slicked back, and there's a devilish gleam in his eye that sends up every red flag I have.

He leans in, a little too close for comfort, and his breath warms against my neck.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" he purrs as his gaze does a slow crawl from my face down to places it doesn't belong.

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I stiffen, contemplating how much time I might do for an “accidental misfire” that nicks him in the heart, but before I can act, Jack’s growl rumbles from across the room.

My eyes flit to him with Karen draped on his arm, and as another woman tries to paw at his shoulder and nibble on his ear, but his eyes are locked on me and the man circling my body like a shark.

Jealousy is alive and well in his hostile stare, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy it. I take a moment to memorize this version of Jack Stone, the untouchable FBI agent, shooting daggers at a man for daring to get too close to me.

Still, the man next to me hasn’t gotten the memo. His hands snake toward my waist, and his lips inch closer to mine. The booze on his breath lets me know he can fuel a rocket to Mars, and it’s all I can do not to fracture a few of his ribs.

But judging by the fury growing on Jack’s face, I won’t have to.

In a blink, Jack is next to us, and before I can fully register the movement, his fist connects with the guy’s jaw with a deafening crack. The man staggers back, crashing to the floor as he clutches his face.

A series of gasps erupt as Jack whips out his badge and thunders, “Everybody freeze! FBI!”

And just like that, the mansion descends into chaos.

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Karen Holt's high heels hardly touch the ground before I spot her making a run for it. Panic flares in her eyes, and it makes my blood pressure spike.

The mission was simple: don't spook her too much. We still need to provide enough solid evidence to lock her up. But here we are. She's spooked and I'm ticked.

"You're not going anywhere," I bark, lunging for her. I all but tackle the woman to the ground, before grabbing the back of her skimpy dress and dragging her outside by the arm. She flails like a cat in a bathtub, but I've got her in a vise grip. She's not going anywhere.

Jack follows close behind with his footsteps heavy and deliberate.

Cars peel away from the driveway as the area quickly evolves into the world's ritziest getaway scene. All that remains is the sharp screech of tires and the faint trail of exhaust curling into the icy night air.

Before long, it's just Jack, Karen, and I alone in the shadow of a glorious stone fountain that rises at least fifteen feet into the sky. The moon reflects off the water, casting anotherworldly glow over our faces. It's easy to see that the fountain in question is the centerpiece of the sprawling front lawn. The massive marble structure has a statue of a woman standing at the top with her arms stretched wide, the opposite of Jesus the Redeemer—more like Karen the Madame.

Although it seems too perfect to be any such thing, too smooth, like everything in Crimson Heights. The water dances in arcs around her, splashing down with a gentle roar and creates a soothing backdrop to the tension buzzing in the air.

“Karen—” I start as Jack and I all but cage the woman between us. She could run, but she wouldn’t get far.

“Kiki,” she kisses my way.

“Fine,” Jack says, stepping in and towering over the woman, his face set in that stoic yet angry expression he’s mastered. “We’ve got a few questions for you, Kiki.”

Her breathing grows shallow. Her chest heaves under her tight dress, but her eyes dart between us, calculating how far she’d have to run to get away from us, and how fast. She’s not accounting for the bullets, of course. People rarely do.

Just as Jack opens his mouth again, we hear footsteps trotting in this direction. Nikki shows up laughing while dressed in a black sparkling frock as if she’s walking into a cocktail party instead of a takedown.

“Youknew,” I say, narrowing my eyes on the woman designated to have my back. There’s no question in my voice. Nikki knew this circus was waiting for us. And now I know exactly why she opted to show up late. She knew she’d be right on time for the important part. And, if we’re honest, she may have gotten too carried away with the unimportant part that took place inside.

Nikki isn’t about teasing or being teased. She’s a touchdown kind of a girl, a running all the bases on opening night kind of a girl, and a girl who always finishes what she starts. Sort of like me, but just on that last point.

“You knew they were swingers,” Jack says with a laugh buried in his throat. I’m glad someone is amused.

“What?” She winks my way as she shoves her hands into her pockets. “You think I’d miss the fun? Never.”

Jack shoots her a look, a silent demand to get serious, but Nikki just shrugs and looks over at Karen, Kiki, who's shaking off the initial shock. She smooths out her dress and rolls her eyes.

"Can we get this over with? What's this about?" Karen's voice wavers, and for a second, a very real fear flickers in her gaze. She knows exactly what she's done and for how long she can be prosecuted for it.

"We want to know if you knew Delaney Riggs or Gwen Alderson," Jack says, leaning in just enough to make it clear we're not here for a casual chat or a round two of whatever it is she was offering him. All I know is that it was about to commence with a lap dance and she was going to enjoy the heck out of it.

"Delaney and Gwen? Oh, that." She lets out a sigh of relief as if she thought we'd ask about something far worse. She's naïve if she thinks we're stopping there, but I'll let her believe it. A content suspect beats one that squirms and thereby worms their way out of the truth.

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“We’re speaking to everyone who may have had contact with them,” I say, watching her carefully. “The guy who rented the hotel room they were killed in said he spoke to you.”

Karen’s eyes dart to the side, and her entire body shifts every which way. I can tell she’s trying to think on her feet. “They were just looking for a date,” she says, casually tossing her hair back. She’s quick, I’ll give her that. And ballsy. “And I have a keen eye for that kind of thing. I know who pairs well with whom.” She pauses long enough to bat her lashes at Jack. “It’s sort of my gift. I also know who’s going to have a good time with whom.” Her good grammar might go undetected, but the flirtation is as subtle as a sledgehammer.

Jack tenses next to me, but he doesn’t take the bait.

“So, you’re a matchmaker,” I say dryly. “Is that your line of work?”

“Sort of. I mostly sell journals, but the matchmaking—that’s just something I’m naturally good at. I didn’t hurt those girls. I swear, they were just there for fun. I blame Rush. He’s the fun one. He’s the one with the dark side, too—or at least his boys are entrenched in it.”

Rush Simmons, music manager extraordinaire, looks about as fun as a colonoscopy and all the aftereffects that come along with the prep work. I’m guessing the boys in the band have a little more life to them.

Jack crosses his arms and sighs. “What dark side are we talking about?”

Karen shrugs. “You know, the usual. They’ve always had a taste for the dangerous stuff. And Gwen, well, she was up for anything. But Delaney? That girl was your classic nerd. Practically had her nose in a library book the entire time I met her.” She laughs, a little too loud, her eyes skittering away with more than a hint of guilt. “I went to the library once to get a feel for her, and one of the witches she worked with practically chewed my head off for getting anywhere near her.”

“Oh?” I lean in. “What exactly did the witch say?”

Karen’s brow furrows as she struggles to recall. “Something about how people like me are ruining lives—playing with the devil’s fire.” She scoffs. “Dramatic, right? Whatever. They didn’t like me poking around.”

Jack exchanges a look with me. Playing with the devil’s fire. Now that’s a line we’ll remember.

And whoever said it knew more than they were letting on.

“All right, we’re wrapping this up,” Nikki says, stepping forward and flashing her badge. “Let me see your phone, Kiki. I’ll give you our number.”

Kiki hesitates, but she hands it over without much of a fight. Maybe because she called her Kiki instead of Karen or maybe because Nikki is so inherently likable.

Nikki taps a few buttons and offers a smile.

“Now you have our info,” Nikki says as she hands it back. “You call us if anything else comes to mind.”

We take off and I catch a glimpse of Karen bolting back into the house as if she were running for cover.

A breathy laugh escapes from Nikki. “We’ll know all there is to know about Kiki and her little empire soon enough. I just mirrored her phone.”

The corner of my mouth lifts as we walk away.

This just got interesting.

25

JEFFRA RIZOLLI

The alley stinks of urine and rotting trash.

It’s not the first night I’ve treaded this dark and dingy path, and it’s not the first night that this putrid smell will cling to my clothes no matter how hard I try to get it out.

The cold bites harder tonight than usual and it forces me to hug my thin jacket tighter around my body. Not that it does any good.

Denver has a way of reminding you it’s bigger than you, and far colder than your heart could ever hope to be. Although, as of late, my heart is giving it a good run for its money.

I rub my arms, trying to get heat in my bones that have long since forgotten what warmth feels like.

Another night. Another dollar. That’s all it ever is.

I take a moment to lean against the brick wall while I scan the street, waiting for the next guy who will take his turn. Maybe he’ll be quick. Maybe he’ll have something more than a few crumpled bills. Maybe tonight I’ll finally make enough to get what I

need. To get rid of the shaking and quiet the beast clawing inside me.

The monster.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

That's what they call addiction and they're right. There is a living, breathing monster inside my veins that screams for more. It demands it. And this monster always gets what it wants.

It wasn't always like this. Once, I had a home. A family. Or at least, something that pretended to be a family.

Daddy left when I was six. I was named after him—Jeffra to his Jeffery. A permanent reminder of the pain he caused. Took his belt to my brother and me any time we so much as breathed in the wrong direction. My mom never stepped in. Heck, she took more beatings than we did. But when Daddy finally took off, it wasn't the relief we thought it'd be.

The next guy, Luke, well, he was a different kind of monster. He came along when I was thirteen. He kept his hands to himself when it came to Mom and my brother, but when she was at work, his hands were all over me.

I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't listen. She said I was trying to make trouble. She accused me of wanting to ruin what they had.

So I ran.

I was fourteen and just dumb enough to think I could make it.

That's when I met Travis. He was sweet, at first. He actually made me feel like I wasn't broken. Like I wasn't the trash I'd always been told I was. But that didn't last long. He was into meth. And it didn't take long before I was, too.

Soon thereafter he started hitting me, calling it love, saying I deserved it. And you know what? I believed him. I figured it was the only kind of love I'd ever get.

I miss feeling something, anything.

Travis OD'd two years ago. Right in front of me. One minute he's yelling about some dealer, the next he was twitching and turning blue.

I didn't call anyone.

I just sat there and watched him go. In truth, I was too tired to care. By then, the monster had me, and for the first time homelessness was a very real possibility.

I tried to live with my brother after that. He got out of that mess my mother embroiled us in. He made something of himself. He has a house up north and has a beautiful family of his own now. But when I showed up at his door, looking for a way out, he told me I couldn't stay. Not unless I got clean. And we both know that's not happening.

I need it. The monster in me.

I'm just like them now—Daddy, Luke, Travis. They turned me into this. They turned me into one of them.

A chill runs down my spine, colder than the air wrapping around me. I can feel the hunger gnawing inside. It never stops; it never lets up. If I don't feed it soon, it'll eat me alive.

I pull out the cash I've got left, wrinkled bills from last night, and count them again. It's nowhere near enough to satisfy this incurable itch.

The street is quiet except for the occasional hum of a car passing by. And that's when I hear them. Footsteps behind me, slow and steady, like someone's taking their time. My next john, most likely.

I don't bother turning around. The guys that come down this alley, they're all the same with their empty eyes and filthy hands.

I'm just something to use and throw away, like the rest of the garbage piling up around us.

But something feels off. Something isn't quite right. I've always had a good sense about these things. I still believe myself even though my mother didn't.

The footsteps are too close, too quick. And then?—

Wham!

Something hard slams into the back of my head. Pain explodes, sharp and hot, then everything fades. The last thing I feel is the cold concrete as I hit the ground.

Darkness closes in.

Another monster has found me.

And something tells me this will be the last.

26

EVIL

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

The streetlights hardly reach into this alley. Shadows cling to every corner like gossamer, and the air is thick with the stench of decay. It's quiet here—too quiet for Denver, but that's why I chose this place.

These grimy passageways are like veins in a dying body, pulsing with filth, addicts, and broken souls. A perfect breeding ground for destruction.

That back alley hooker wasn't hard to take down. She's just another in a long line of throwaways. She's the type that no one misses, and if they do, they don't search long.

I don't know her name—I don't need to. She was simply a stepping stone in the right direction. She won't be mourned, and that's the way it should be. Of course, had she lived and gotten away, she wouldn't be able to pick me out of a lineup. I've altered my appearance with a few easy moves, donned a wig, and shrouded my identity to the point I hardly resemble myself. It wasn't hard to do and perhaps not all that necessary. It's so very dark out.

But the back alley whore did not get away. At present she is meeting her maker, and now, I need to find someone else. Someone different.

Tonight wasn't supposed to end in blood. That whore's death was just an annoyance, but a necessity as well. Her pathetic existence had no place in my plan, not tonight.

No, tonight is for something far more important. It's a transfer assignment. Something I've been working toward, crafting, for months now. It's the crescendo to this demonic dream.

The basement is finally ready. I've been working on it for so long, preparing for the right moment, for the right subject. It's time to turn up the heat in my wicked scheme. I've waited long enough to do it and the time is now.

It was good to eliminate those silly college girls. They served their purpose. The feds came sniffing around, just as I expected. But then, I've been expecting them for a good long while now. It's about time they showed up.

But they're not digging deep enough. They're not working hard enough. They're not doing my dirty work the way I had planned.

Maybe I gave them too much credit. Clearly, I assumed they valued the dead more than they do. Apparently, I was wrong.

If they won't chase the ghosts of any of those women, then it's time to go after the living.

I considered taking the alley whore tonight. She was certainly an option. But users are a waste. Addicts without their poison do nothing but shake and scream throughout withdrawals.

I don't have the time or patience for that. I did her a favor by putting her out of her misery. Quick and dirty. No need for theatrics.

But now I need someone different. Someone I can nurture. Someone who I can make see the light. Make them understand exactly how filthy they are. I need to help cleanse them of theirsins. I need to offer more than an absolution that an alleyway or a drug could ever give them.

I'm not a fool. I'm not deluded enough to think I can actually convert anyone to see the light. Women like her are addicted to their own nonexistent self-worth. She

wouldn't have changed her mind or her evil ways. You know what they say—a dog returns to its vomit.

People do, too. They always return. Always. I learned that the hard way.

As much as I'd like to believe I can turn them around, that's not the point here. No, I need to turn up the heat. I need to get this show moving. I need to pluck these women of ill repute off the streets, one by one, until someone does something about the true root of my troubles.

They think I'm just some random madman, but they have no idea how deep this goes. How far reaching my intentions are or where they truly come from.

In the meantime, these women—these creatures—will understand exactly where I'm coming from. They will feel my disapproval. They will reap the consequences of their actions. And I will not be kind.

Spare the rod, spoil the child.

That's what she did, and that's why I'm in this mess. That's why she will pay a price far greater than death.

This is my destiny.

My revenge.

And I won't stop until justice is served.

Now where is this woman I'm about to save from herself...

She made her sickening choice to sell her body. And now she won't have a choice.

She's coming with me.

27

MARSHA WARREN

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

The night feels colder than usual, but I'm used to that now.

Denver always has a mean bite to it once fall rolls in. But tonight it feels as if I fell in a lake and am forced to walk through frozen tundra. My skin feels numb, my bones feel brittle as candy canes as if they'll snap off in a moment's notice.

Although cold is nothing new. Not for me. I've been out on the streets before.

But when people hear my name these days they don't think of someone who is hard-pressed. They think of someone well off, so well off they're living as a true-blue one percenter.

In truth, I'm a high-end escort.

That's right.

If you want to be with me, you'd better pony up a giant wad of cash. I'm top dollar.

You wouldn't know it to look at me, though. Most of Denver's elite think I'm one of them—a polished socialite with money to burn, attending ritzy charity galas, sipping pricey champagne, all for the sake of looking the part. They think I'm old money, that I was born into it.

If only they knew.

But I know and that's where the fun is. And speaking of fun, I've got the city's power players wrapped around my little finger, and they're none the wiser.

These men—CEOs, politicians, the kind that own entire blocks of the city—they think I’m just another pretty face in the crowd. A face they can trust, someone who could never understand their secrets, someone who would never dare to expose them.

Ironically, they think I’m a philanthropist, donating my time and money to good causes. They think I’m someone they can show off, maybe even brag about later at their country clubs.

If they only knew how far I’ve come to sit at their table, how far I’ve dragged myself up from the gutter.

But I wasn’t always Marsha Warren. They say my name as if it’s a prize, but if only they knew it started as a curse.

No, once upon a time, I was just another nameless secretary in a high-rise office downtown, one of a hundred girls working for men who promised the world and left you with the bill. I was that girl—the one they swore they’d leave their wives for. They told me I was different, special.

Yeah, right. All I ever got were empty words and broken promises.

Every single one of them, they all played the same game.

“I’ll leave her for you,” they’d say with a sincere nod like they meant it. “You’re the only one who makes me feel alive.” And I’d believe them because I was desperate to.

I was desperate for something real. But it was all lies. In the end, they went back to their wives, their perfect lives, and I was left wondering what the heck I was doing with mine.

I didn’t realize how much power I was giving them—letting them use me. Letting

them think they could have everything without giving anything back. That's when something snapped. I wasn't going to be their plaything anymore. I wasn't going to be anyone's fool.

I started playing the game by my own rules. If I was going to be used, I'd make damn sure I got something out of it. That's when I met Kiki. She found me in some dive bar downtown, nursing a drink after another day of being invisible. She took one look at me, saw through the whole act, and offered me a way out. Showed me how to take control and more importantly how to stop letting men like them call the shots.

It was like flipping a switch.

One minute I was just another office girl, and the next, I was in charge. Kiki introduced me to her world—the world of high-end clients who'd pay top dollar for someone like me. I was someone who knew how to play the part, someone who knew how to make them feel like they had all the power when really, they had none. All they had was my power on borrowed time and I made sure it cost them a mint.

I was finally in control. I had men crawling over each other for a chance to be with me, men who'd do anything just to spend an hour in my company. And it wasn't just the money, though I made plenty of that. It was the power. The feeling that I was the one calling the shots. I wasn't the victim anymore. I'm in the power position. I've even garnered an assistant to help me with all the social nonsense someone in my position demands. My, my, how the tables have turned.

Now, I have more money than I know what to do with, and the people of Denver think I'm priceless. They think I'm just another rich witch with too much time on her hands, throwing charity galas and hosting fundraisers.

They think I'm untouchable.

And maybe for once they're right.

Tonight, I'm on my way to meet one of the richest men in the state. A billionaire, married, of course, but what else is new? They're all married. It doesn't stop them from calling me. It doesn't stop them from sliding into my bed like they've earned the right. But that's fine. I don't care. They all come to me in the end, and that's what's important.

Tonight's event is private and very exclusive. He's throwing some sort of party, and I know exactly why I'm invited. I'm not there to sip champagne or make small talk with his guests. He and I both know what's going to happen. He's been calling me for weeks, begging me to come, begging to have me. And according to the offer he made, he thinks I'm worth it.

Kiki will get a cut. She always does. There's no middleman between us like with a lot of her other clients. We're just two women working the system to our advantage. But I'm building my list. I have my regulars. And word is getting out to all the right people. I won't be needing Kiki for long. I feel safe enough to go on my own. It's not like I'm meeting up with psychopaths. I might be on the road to hell, but I've yet to meet up with a devil.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

The heels of my shoes click against the sidewalk, echoing through the quiet street. The fancy restaurants in this part of town are enormous, bathed in soft, amber light from streetlamps, and some are already decorated for fall—pumpkins on doorsteps, wreaths filled with autumn leaves hanging from massive front entries.

A thin layer of ground fog swirls across the pavement, giving this evening an eerie glow. It's beautiful, really, in a cold, detached kind of way.

It's more or less perfect here in this ritzy downtown area, but let's face it, the parking situation leaves much to be desired.

I'm still a full city block away from my destination. No valet and parking in the rear of the restaurant is filled to capacity, which left me feeling lucky to find a spot next to a liquor store down the street.

I'll have to tell Kiki no more parties. I want to cut to the chase next time. I don't like mixing business with pleasure these days.

I reach into my bag to check my lipstick in my compact mirror, but instead, I see headlights approaching from behind me.

The car rolls up slowly with the engine hardly making a sound.

I'm not stupid. I've been in this business long enough to know when something's off. But I don't let on. I keep walking despite the fact the car is keeping pace beside me until finally the window rolls down.

I can't see who's inside, but I hear a voice. It's soft and almost too polite.

"Need directions?" they ask and something in their tone calms me.

But I don't stop. "Nope. I know where I'm going."

There's a pause. "Well, can I give you a lift?"

I pause for a second before glancing their way and considering the offer. My feet are already killing me. They look nice enough even though I'm already prickly about tonight.

I've had a bad feeling ever since I woke up this morning. It's that same feeling I get right before something goes sideways. It almost feels as if the whole world is holding its breath.

But again, my feet are so very tired, and to be honest so am I. Walking another ten minutes in this frozen night air is the last thing I want to do.

A smile curls on my lips as I walk toward the car. "You know what? Sure. Why not? I'm just headed down the street. But this will help out a lot."

I walk around to the passenger's side and slide in as the leather seat sends another icy shiver through me. The car pulls away smoothly, and soon the city lights are blurring past the window.

I know I should feel relaxed, but I don't. There's something off about this. I glance at the driver once again. My instincts scream at me to run, but I ignore them.

I'm just being silly. Aren't I?

I take a breath and lean back against the seat, trying to shake the unease. Maybe this is the night I finally take that trip to hell. A little sooner than I intended.

“You can drop me off here.” I point to the white boxy building. “That’s the place I’m headed.” But the car speeds up. “Excuse me, that was my stop,” I say. “I probably shouldn’t have accepted the ride seeing that I was so close. But you’ll have to stop the car now.”

The car speeds up instead and we take an insane hairpin left turn.

“What the heck is going on?” My hand fumbles for the door handle, but I can’t get it to open. The lock won’t budge either.

I glance over to the driver as they speed up with a glazed look in their eyes as they bring a hammer between mine.

Next stop, hell.

28

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The drive back to Pine Ridge Falls is a much-needed respite after the so-called interrogation with Karen Holt.

None of it went well from start to finish. But then, we weren’t really shaking her down as hard as we would have liked to. But that, too, shall come, rather than pass.

The crisp, cool fall night greets Jack and me as the two of us pass the sign marking the town’s border.

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The leaves are a stunning amber and gold and they pop against the fading twilight. Ahead, the majestic falls that give this place its name spill down the cliffside and the moonlight illuminates them and makes me feel as if I'm living in a sci-fi movie. They stretch into the night sky like silver ribbons, surrounded by mist and the scent of pine and wet earth. It's a stunning view, but I'm too wired to fully appreciate it or snap a quick picture for posterity.

My mother's diner appears like an apparition and I frown once I see that Nikki beat us here by a fraction of a second.

Jack pulls the truck into the diner parking lot, and I hop out and stretch my legs along with Nikki just as Buddy bolts out of the restaurant and leaps toward us.

The cute pooch's nails click against the pavement as he bounds over and his tail is wagging like he's been waiting all night for us.

"Look who's happy to see us," I say, hugging him briefly as he leaps in and out of my partial embrace.

Nikki drops to one knee and gives him a good scratch behind the ears. "Well, would you look at that? My hot date has arrived," she says, grinning. And she means it, too.

"Careful"—Jack says, stepping around his truck—"you're going to give him an ego."

"Is that what happened to you?" I tease as I blink a smile at him.

"Too late," Nikki practically sings to Buddy. "He knows he's a heartbreaker."

“Just like you.” I nod to Jack as we head for the diner.

“I’m not looking to break anyone’s heart,” he says as he opens the door. “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

“You keep believing that.” Nikki laughs before turning my way. “Just tell me when it’s time to go after him with a bullet. I know how to make it look like an accident.”

“Hey,” Jack says as we pass him by. “You do realize I’m within earshot.”

“Consider it a warning,” Nikki shoots back.

The second we step inside my mother’s diner, the scent of pancakes and syrup battles it out with a freshly broiled steak. That’s a perfect example of what menu items rule the roost at this late hour in the evening.

Mom gives a friendly wave from a few tables over. “Find a seat, and don’t make a mess,” she says, pointing us toward the back.

My sister Riley pops up just as we land in the booth and hands us each a menu.

“Thanks,” Jack tells her with a frown. “How’s your investigation going, Detective Baxter? You hear any news about your sister?”

I’m glad Jack asked the question. Had I done it, the episode would have evolved into hair-pulling, fist-throwing chaos. I’m so angry that Riley feels bold enough to trek out on her own, but I get it. She wants to track down Erin as badly as we do.

“Thank you for acknowledging me like a real person,” she says to Jack with a click of her tongue before turning my way. “Some people don’t think I have the finesse for this line of work.”

“I never said you didn’t have the finesse,” I tell her. “The facts are that you don’t have nine lives. You don’t even have two, and if you start messing around in Elmwood, you soon won’t have one. What did you find out?”

Riley wrinkles her nose and suddenly looks like the spitting image of our mother’s younger years, a blonde ambition version.

“Nothing,” she says. “Apparently, no one on the streets wants to talk to me about her or the weather. They all think I’m a narc or a cop or one of you.” She hitches her head toward the kitchen. “You want coffee and pie?”

We all agree and she takes off.

The residents of Elmwood might think Riley is one of us, but she’s down one badge and more importantly down one Glock. I’ll need to have a private word with her and make it clear that she absolutely needs to stay away. Erin is my assignment. Maybe not an official one, but she’s my problem just the same.

Buddy bolts from Jack’s side of the table to the one with Nikki and me before sidling up between us.

“Looks like your hot date is getting comfortable,” Jack says to Nikki with that signature grin of his tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Let him,” she says. “He’s the best date I’ve had in a while. He doesn’t talk back, doesn’t argue, and he’s loyal. What more could a girl want?”

“A guy who knows his way around a kitchen,” I tell her without missing a beat.

“Hey”—Jack offers a playful frown my way and looks decidedly sexy while doing so—“I know my way around a delivery menu.”

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“And that is what attracts me to you most,” I say with a wink.

Riley comes back with three piping hot slices of apple pie along with a fat scoop of vanilla ice cream melting on each one. She doles out the coffee before heading off to help with the rest of the tables. It’s a busy one tonight. All of Pine Ridge Falls looks as if they’ve shown up for a midnight snack.

“Speaking of loyal...” Nikki says as I’m about to dig into my apple pie when she narrows her eyes on Jack with a sly smile. “I bet you weren’t too happy when that guy back at the party was all over Fallon.”

I filled her in on what led to the spontaneous combustion that sent everyone at the party running for cover.

I tweak my brows over at him in amusement and he all but bristles.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He cocks his head. “I was a little too occupied to notice a thing.”

“Oh, come on, Stone.” Nikki belts out a laugh. “Rumor has it, the second that guy got too close to your honey pot, you were ready to rip his head off. Don’t worry. I happen to think jealousy suits you.”

As much as I want to play it cool, I can feel the warmth rising to my cheeks. Jack throws a look my way, his brow furrowed as if he’s waiting to see how I react. He has that unreadable expression, the one that says he’s pretending he doesn’t care, but he does. I know it’s true.

“It’s not jealousy,” Jack says, feigning indifference. “I just don’t like seeing people pawing at my—” He cuts himself off but glances my way, and it’s impossible to miss the way his jaw tightens.

Nikki laughs, tapping the table. “Better get used to it, Stone. Fallon is gorgeous. You’ve got a lifetime ahead of other guys wanting your woman.”

The word *lifetime* lingers in the air like an unidentifiable scent, and my mind twitches trying to figure out if it’s sweet or something foul that I should run from.

A flash of an image pops into my head—Jack and me years from now, still bantering, still fighting crime together, maybe more than just partners.

It’s a dangerous thought and one I don’t let myself linger on for long, but it’s there all the same.

“All right, enough of that. Let’s talk shop,” Jack says, steering the conversation back to safer and perhaps saner territory. “Nikki, how exactly did you mirror Karen’s phone?”

“Simple enough.” Nikki sits up a little straighter, clearly proud of her latest technical feat. “When she handed me her phone, it took me less than three seconds to install the spyware the men and women in the cyber division dreamed up. There are other apps like it out there for the general pop, but this is ours. It’s virtually untraceable. I’ll give you both a tutorial at some point. Now, anything Karen Holt does, we see. I’ll send you screenshots the second something comes through.”

“Good move,” Jack says, taking a sip of his coffee. “Sounds too good to be true, but I want updates as soon as you hear anything.”

I’m about to nod in agreement when the door swings open, and in walks a gray-

headed skeleton with dark circles under hereyes. Her clothes are limp and look as if they're perilously close to sliding right off her frail frame. Her pants do just that, but she catches them before they get to her thighs. Good grief, she's essentially the stripper that none of us asked for.

Here comes trouble and yet trouble has nothing on Jack's mother.

29

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Sandy Stone, the woman who gave Jack life, looks as if she's been dragged through a meth lab and back—and didn't fare well in the process.

She stumbles her way through my mother's diner with her eyes wild, her clothes disheveled, and muttering to herself in such a violent manner it makes me wonder if we can add a psychosis to her laundry list of mental misgivings.

More than a few customers in the diner look her way, and judging by their worried, outright frightened expressions, she's clearly made them uncomfortable.

"For the love of—" Jack mutters under his breath as he tenses and I note the muscles in his neck going rigid.

Sandy eventually stumbles her way over to our booth, knocking over a couple of chairs as she goes, which stops any and all conversations in the place, leaving the eighties music bleating from the speakers sound like less of an intrusion than she is.

"What in the fresh hell—" My mother looks ready to blow a gasket from behind the counter, but it's clear she's biting her tongue—for now.

“Jackie,” Sandy slurs and her voice carries through the diner. “Why didn’t you tell me you were here? Are you trying to avoid your own mama? Slide on over, son. I’m so hungry I’m going to start gnawing on the table.”

“You’re not gnawing on anything,” he tells her sternly. “Because you’re not staying.”

Sandy scoffs at the thought and in doing so sends a wave of fumes to this end of the table, causing both Nikki and me to wince.

Buddy dives under the table because he’s smart. And to be honest, I’m considering it as an option myself.

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Sweat beads on Sandy's brows despite the icy weather, most likely an effect of whatever drug she's flying high on.

She eyes the rest of us before turning her attention back to Jack. "Look at you, all high and mighty, sitting here with your friends like you're better than me. Well, you're not, Jackie Boy." Her voice hits a crescendo with those last few words and causes the windows to rattle. "You crawled out of the same putrid trash can as the rest of us and don't you ever forget it!"

"That's it," my mother shouts—thankfully before Jack could react. I can tell by that wild look in his eyes, his reaction isn't going to be amicable. But then, neither is my mother's.

Mom storms out from behind the counter with her hands on her hips. "I don't care whose mama she is, she's not spending another second in my restaurant. I want her out, and I want her outnow."

Sandy glares at my mother as if she were the problem. "Good luck getting me out of this seat, honey. I'm not going anywhere."

Jack grabs her firmly by the arm and jostles her right out of the booth. "You've had enough fun for one night. Let's go."

Sandy pulls against him, screaming and clawing at his arm like a wild animal, like a woman gone feral, and she is.

"Get your hands off me!" she screeches. "I'll scream! I'll cause a scene!"

“Oh honey”—Mom shouts her way—“you’re already doing a fine job of that.”

Within seconds, Jack hustles her right out the door and Nikki, Buddy, and I follow along.

Nikki and I aren’t all too thrilled about abandoning our pies, but Buddy looks darn right pissed. Riley always gives him a slice as well. And she doesn’t skimp on the ice cream.

Jack does his best to command his mother into his truck, but she screams and rants her way in a circle, making very little sense, with the exception she’s made it clear she doesn’t want to go anywhere with him at present.

They continue for a few minutes and their voices grow louder by the second.

“Should we intervene?” I ask Nikki.

“Not if we want to go home with our heads intact.”

“Good point,” I say just as Buddy runs right up to the mele and barks at Sandy as if he’s about to chew her face off.

I’ll have to give him an extra treat tonight before bed because of it.

His howls rise, and he growls and bares his teeth as he squeezes his way between Jack and his mother, ready to defend Jack at a moment’s notice.

“Shoo,” Sandy howls at him. “Get this mangy beast away from me, or I’ll end his filthy life tonight!”

I take a moment to gape at Jack. “So help me, Stone, she had better be talking about

you.”

Jack closes his eyes as a look of defeat washes over his face.

So much for doing a postmortem on our latest shakedown. Instead, this night continues to unravel right before our eyes. And now, it’s time to clean up yet another mess.

I watch as Jack shoves his mother into the back seat of his truck and Buddy jumps in beside her.

I have a feeling that whatever comes next, it won’t be easy.

Not for any of us—Buddy included.

30

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

Once we hit Whispering Woods, I practically shove my mother into my cabin after Fallon and Buddy step inside, with the door slamming shut behind us.

She drags her boots against the floor, and for a second, I think she’s going to collapse, but she pulls herself up with a mean wobble.

Jet is on the couch, his full attention glued to the TV screen in front of him, and for a moment he appears pleasantly oblivious to the mess that just walked through the door.

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He doesn't even turn his head until she slurs, "Hey, baby boy! Look who's here!"

Jet's face lights up like it's the greatest surprise of his life.

"Hey, Mom. Where were you all day?" He nods her way, and that tells me everything I need to know. She's been out, which only means one thing—she's been using.

I should really consider padlocks to keep her contained.

Within seconds, my mother falls onto him, yelling something incoherent about him being her favorite—most likely true. And soon she's singing a song about meth, molly, weed—and even throws in black tar heroin for good measure. Yet despite her dicey lyrics, Jet welcomes her back as if she were a long-lost hero, not the wreck of a human she is now.

I can see why she likes him best.

My sister might as well be a ghost and I'm an unappetizing dose of the truth. And the truth is an antivenom to any street drug available.

The hug-fest continues as my mother slurs both adorations and threats in a single breath while I stand here watching my life unravel like a fraying sweater.

My jaw clenches. The anger boils in my gut and the bile rises to the back of my throat. I don't know who to be more furious with—her, Jet, or myself for egging her on.

“Jet, back off,” I growl. “She’s high as a kite. This isn’t some warm and fuzzy family reunion.”

Jet pulls away and has the nerve to growl at me in the process. “Calm down, Jack. Don’t make a big deal out of this. This isn’t a thing.”

“A thing? She’s stoned out of her mind,” I say, my voice rising. “You think this is a normal way to act? Never mind, don’t answer that.”

Within seconds, my mother is on her feet and howling an expletive-riddled tirade at me, and I’ve had about as much as I can take. Jet butts his nose to mine as if he’s gunning for a fistfight, and before I can oblige him, Buddy bullets around the room chasing after the cat.

The whole cabin is suddenly too small, too loud, and unsafe. All I want to do is throw my mother and brother outside and lock the door, but instead, I show myself to the exit.

“Care to join me?” I say to Fallon with a nod toward the back porch. “Let’s get out of here before I lose my mind and you’re witness to a double homicide.”

The frozen air slams into us like a wall once we step outside, but it’s a welcome change from the hated madness inside.

The stars are bright, but there’s no warmth in their light. The trees stand tall and black against the night with their shadows stretching across the frozen ground. The silence out here feels like a shock to my system, compared to the carnage and insanity inside. A welcome shock at that.

We make our way to the back porch where the lake glitters like onyx stars in the background and I offer to make a fire, but Fallon shakes her head.

“Your anger is enough to keep us heated.”

She’s not wrong.

We fall into the overstuffed seats, and it’s all I can do to stare out at the dark as the rage inside me simmers. I can feel it coiling tight around my heart like the venomous snake it is.

“I wish I could go back in time.” My voice is low as I say it. “I’d change things for my family. I’d kick the junk out of my father for being a user, for dragging my mother and the rest of us down to hell with him. Then I’d track down his dealer and kick him senseless before I sent him into the afterlife.”

Fallon sits quiet for a moment as her breath forms a fog in the icy air.

“You’d need to go so much farther back than that,” she says softly. “Much farther back than the dealer. What about his supplier? What about them? There are so many moving parts when it comes to why people use and what life experiences influenced them to do so. You’d have to annihilate the entire human race to really get to the root of the problem.”

She says it like she’s stating a fact, and for some reason, that hits harder than I expect.

I nod while doing my best to swallow down the anger.

“In that case, maybe I’d just go back in time to find you.” The idea of a smile forms and dissolves on my lips. “Maybe I wouldn’t have used and abused. I laced my past with drugs and alcohol, and yet now I’ll spend the rest of my life fighting those demons. I know the statistics, Fallon. The future’s not looking so bright.”

Maybe the only reason I’m really upset is that my mother didn’t invite me to the

party.

I give her hand a squeeze, and she doesn't pull away. Instead, she falls into my lap, and the weight of her body is a comfort against the cold. Buddy darts from around the corner, and soon he's curling up next to us like he's part of the conversation.

"You are a balm," I whisper as I gently brush the hair from her face. "You don't realize how powerful you've been in my life. I would go back in a heartbeat and track you?—"

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Fallon places a finger to my lips before I can finish. “I’m sorry to put a pin in your balloon, Stone. But if we were together back then, I would’ve used right along with you. We would both be struggling with addictions to this day—had we survived. And I’m guessing we’d have had a few kids along the way, most likely born in our teens. They would have been taken away by social services, of course. Sure, we’d see them now and again, maybe even get them back for the five minutes we managed to stay clean. But you’d be strung out on something to take the edge off of the chaos, and I’d have mommy guilt on top of that. With no marketable skills, no real schooling, and zero hope, I’d turn tricks in the alley to keep my addiction going—first and foremost. You and the kids would be an afterthought.” She gives me a knowing look. “Hope you enjoy a family dumpster dive for dinner.”

I chuckle, even though there’s nothing funny about it. “Wouldn’t be my first time.”

We fall silent again, the weight of our imaginary mess of a life hanging between us.

“The story never changes,” she says. “It always stays the same. Addiction is a curse straight from the pit of hell. And it just gets passed down, one generation after another.”

“You are a ball of sunshine,” I say with my gaze fixed on the silver horizon of the lake.

“So I’ve been told.”

The sound of the door creaking open steals our attention, and soon my mother stumbles our way with her arms wrapped around herself as she falls into the seat

across from us.

Fallon dips her lips next to my ear. “Maybe I should try talking to her,” she whispers, and her hot breath sends shivers rippling through me.

“Good luck,” I mutter.

“Sandy”—Fallon starts with a curt yet friendly tone—“can I ask you something? Do you know a man down in Elmwood by the name of Gunther?”

I’m almost amused she chose to frame it as a question. I think we both know my mother either knows of him or utilizes his so-called protective services. Although the definition of the word protection in this scenario is debatable.

My mother’s eyes flicker with recognition, but her body twitches, jerking with small movements, tweaking from whatever drug cocktail she’s high on.

“Yeah, I know him.” She lifts her chin with a hint of pride, and that singular motion terrifies me. It humiliates me. Makes me want to strangle the life out of every man in Elmwood who may have even looked at my mother sideways.

“He takes care of me,” she slurs while clawing at her arm. “And there’s this woman... she helps with the placements sometimes.”

“Is her name Kiki?” I ask, suddenly interested in what my mother might have to say.

I feel as if I was just hit on the head with a two-by-four. How could I have not thought to quiz my mother on the dirty dealings of Elmwood when that dirty town just so happens to sit square in the nexus of this case? Most likely because I hate that my mother sits squarely in the nexus of it. She could have been killed. It could be her body we were viewing at the morgue.

“Kiki?” Mom’s eyes narrow and she shakes her head a little too fast, a little too erratically. “No, no, it’s not. I think I know who you’re talking about, but it’s not her.”

I don’t believe her for a second. My mother loves attention as much as she loves a good high. She’s not that different from me in that respect.

Jet appears to our right, glowing like the tall, pale, and haunted ghost he is. “Mom, come back in. It’s freezing out here,” he says with a note of frustration in his voice. “Jack, you know she gets pneumonia easy. What are you thinking?” He wraps an arm around her shoulder and hoists her out of her seat. “Come on, Mom. Let’s get you inside.”

No sooner do they disappear than Fallon wraps her arms around me and lands a lingering kiss on my lips.

“I’d better go, too,” she says, pulling back with a mournful smile. “We’ve got a full day ahead of us. Nikki said something about meeting us at the lab before she left. We’ll even let you bring pizza.”

“You are generous,” I say, giving her ribs a tweak and she jumps slightly in my arms. “Thank you,” I say it solemnly and I mean it. “For putting up with all this.”

“For you, any day.”

We indulge in another kiss, a little deeper with more body parts wanting to get involved before she and Buddy head back to their place.

I head for the door and try my best not to let the weight of the night pull me down.

But I don’t get two steps into my cabin when I see it.

Jet and my mother are knocking back beers while laughing at something on television.

And I am livid. But not surprised.

I don't see why I should be. This is my life.

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SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The next day the wind rips through, violent and terrifying, like an angry ex breaking a restraining order.

Jack, Nikki, and I send a flurry of texts throughout the afternoon as we gather intel while in the comfort of our own homes. Buddy and I are snuggled under a quilt when I get a text from Hale that all but threatens our jobs if we don't materialize before him within seconds.

Within twenty minutes, Jack and I step into the situation room with Buddy trotting beside us, his tail swishing contentedly against my leg. Jack and I jumped into his truck and rode in together. And I'll admit, Jack looks no worse for wear considering how colorful the previous evening was. He's back to his usual calm demeanor, hiding whatever thoughts are churning well under the surface.

The late afternoon light filters through the narrow windows and casts shadows across the sleek white conference table.

SAC Hale stands at the head, already waiting for us with his arms crossed, looking more than a little perturbed.

Jack gives him a quick nod as we file in with Nikki right behind us, twirling a pen like it's a baton.

Hale doesn't waste time. "We've got a rash of bad news, most of which, if not all, is connected to the case." He clicks the remote, and an image pops onto the screen.

It's a body in an alley, and by the looks of it, it's both filthy and crumpled. It's a young woman with her clothes torn open, who looks as if she's staring at the sky. She could theoretically be alive, but the infinity symbol carved into her abdomen says otherwise.

"Another body was found downtown. ID says her name is Jeffra Rizzoli, once a teenage runaway who's spent years using and abusing herself on the streets. Looks like it finally caught up with her."

"Finally?" Jack murmurs under his breath. "The girl has had a rough ride long before the killer showed up."

Hale zooms into the infinity symbol outlined in crimson, the sharp lines of the carving stark against the girl's pale skin. My stomach tightens as I stare at it and a chill crawls up my spine.

Buddy sniffs my way before hopping into the seat next to me, and I give him a grateful pat.

"A shopkeeper found her this morning. As if that wasn't enough excitement..." Hale continues. "A missing person's report was filed this morning as well for another woman by the name of Marsha Warren—a local socialite who was headed to dinner last night and hasn't been heard from since."

"Just last night?" Nikki scoffs at the thought. "Give it a minute. She's still sleeping off her hangover."

Hale doesn't blink. "Her assistant says it's uncharacteristic. Apparently, they had some deal where Marsha would text once she got home from her events. If she didn't, they were to contact the police."

Jack and I exchange a look.

“Do you think she was a hooker?” I ask, getting right down to brass street-walking tacks. I don’t see why not. We’re all thinking it.

Nikki lets out a snort. “When a person of stature is involved in the profession, they prefer to be called escorts.”

“High-end escorts,” Jack chimes in without missing a beat and Nikki howls out a laugh because of it.

“Leave it to Stone to know the lingo.” She winks his way. “No dig at you,” she adds, glancing at me. “But he had a reputation with all sorts of ladies before you came into the picture.”

I knew that.

“Picture?” Hale’s voice takes on a hard edge, and he looks visibly ticked. “What picture? Are the two of you canoodling? Don’t tell me I have to separate you.”

Jack tilts his chin up defiantly. “Try it, and we might have an accidental misfire right here in the office.”

“Duly noted,” Hale says sternly, but his expression is laced with exasperation. “The two of you had better behave when you’re on the clock.”

“And we’re always on the clock,” Nikki quips, twirling her pen again. “So get creative, would you?”

I tick my head to the side. “You know what they say—romance and homicide go hand in hand.”

“Nobody says that,” Hale growls, looking rather unamused.

“She said it.” Jack shrugs his way and Hale finally cracks a smile, albeit one that looks mildly psychotic.

“All right, enough small talk,” Hale barks. “And yes, Stone, that was a dig at your man parts.”

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“Hey.” Jack sits up, sounding more than a little offended. “She’s never seen my man parts,” he’s quick to spread the word. “And small isn’t something that comes to mind when thinking of any part attached to myself.”

“Maybe you need glasses,” Hale says without missing a beat and my mouth falls open in lieu of a laugh. A laugh would be exceptionally cruel.

Nikki nods to Hale with a grin. “I finally broke into Sherry Kent’s phone.”

This gets my attention.

“Did you?” I ask. And I’m more than relieved to change the subject.

I’m not a size matters girl. Am I?

“Yup.” Nikki flips open her laptop. “There were messages to Kiki along with another person she never addressed by name but had them listed as ‘sluts-r-us’. Charming, right? But it definitely looks as if our friend Kiki was shoveling business in Sherry’s direction.”

Jack gives both Nikki and me a look that says, now we’re getting somewhere.

Nikki clicks away at her keyboard as she continues. “I’m going to compile everything for us into a single dossier of the messages I’ve collected from Sherry Kent, Karen Holt, Delaney Riggs, and Gwen Alderson. That should be enough to put Karen away for human trafficking and racketeering.”

“Racketeering?” I raise a brow. “That’s a bold move. Do you suspect the mob?” I’m only half-teasing.

“Knight always suspects organized crime.” Hale nods her way. “I’m starting to think that’s your love language.”

She points right at him. “Iknewyou were a romantic.”

“I’ve got three divorces under my belt that say I’m not,” he counters.

“Karen Holt might just have the power to change your mind—or at least she might have a stable full of girls ready and willing for the right price. Trust me”—Nikki says emphatically—“she’s in deep. And we’ve got her.”

Hale nods, satisfied. “Good. Keep me updated. I want that dossier on my desk by tomorrow.”

“Screenshots, please,” I say and she gives a thumbs-up without diverting from her task at hand.

“Okay.” Hale clasps his hands. “Knight will dig deep. Stone, Baxter, I hear you’ve got a date at the library tonight.”

Jack’s chest expands. “A date with death.”

Nikki looks up.

“Phillis Hazelwood, the author of *Into the Ether with Love*, is giving a talk,” I say. “She and her friend Brenda Billings worked closely with Delaney Riggs. You should come.”

“Maybe.” She shrugs. “But I’d have to squeeze it in with my actual date. I’ve got a bad boy on the line and I can’t risk losing him. He’s young, hot, and he has access to a key player in the case. Arealbad boy.”

Jack and I let out a spontaneous groan at the thought.

“In the meantime”—Nikki makes a face at Jack then me—“I’ll be going over the security footage that law enforcement obtained from the businesses around the vicinity of that restaurant Marsha Warren was headed to last night but never arrived at. Her car was found a few blocks down. Parking is tight and apparently lethal.”

“She could very well be alive and we’re treating it that way,” Hale says sternly. He goes to turn then pauses as he looks at Jack and me. “Try not to groan like that again in my presence. And Knight, steer clear of bad boys, would you?”

“It’s the lead singer of Social Disorder,” she’s quick to spill the disorderly beans. “I’ve been hanging out at the venue where they play, hoping to get ahold of Rush Simmons’ phone.” She shrugs my way as if that made it any better. “Anyway, the lead singer caught my eye and I liked what I saw. Tonight at ten. Feel free to join me.”

“Bring your weapons,” Hale mutters. “Now get lost.”

Jack and I rise, but before we leave, I shoot a glance at Nikki. “Keep us in the loop as soon as you hear anything.”

“Already on it,” Nikki says with a wink.

Jack and I head out the door and the weight of the day settles over me as we jump into his truck. I glance at Jack as we pull out of the lot and the early evening sun dips behind the mountains, casting menacing shadows over our world.

“Another day, another body,” I say as Buddy pokes his head between us. “And a potential kidnapping,” I add. “We’re in the deep end.”

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Buddy whimpers at the thought and Jack nods.

“We’ve always been in the deep end.” Jack sighs. “The killer is ratcheting it up. They want something. They want notoriety.”

“Or they want to get caught,” I say. “After all, it’s just a game of cat and mouse.”

Buddy belts out a bark.

“Don’t forgetdog,” Jack says. “And let’s not forget the FBI. We might be down, but we are far from out.”

32

EVIL

She stirs on the cold concrete, and for a brief moment, I can see the confusion flicker across her face as if she can’t figure out if this is real or just another nightmare.

It’s real, sweetheart. Every cursed second of it.

The basement is damp, smelling of rot and forgotten things. The only light comes from a single bulb swaying from the hall and it creates long, wicked shadows across the walls.

It’s cold down here, so cold your fingers can freeze solid and snap right off. It’s as if the chill is reaching for your soul. I’ve spent hours getting this place ready, making

sure it's perfect. This has to be perfect. I need it to be perfect.

I stare at her as she shifts again. Her breathing is ragged as she starts to come to. She's just like all the others—pretty, polished, like a doll someone left behind in the dirt. Only this one has been playing the game a little too long. This one thinks she's untouchable.

She thinks she's high-end? Right. Everyone has got a price.

I know that better than anyone.

She moves and moans, causing something to stir inside me—anger mostly, excitement, maybe even a twisted kind of satisfaction.

It's always like this before it starts. This feeling, this unwavering anticipation.

They never know what's coming. They never understand until it's too late. Just the way it was with me when I played the part of the victim.

My hand tightens around the handle of the shears, and for a moment, I wonder why it's always the same. Why it always feels as if I'm the one chasing something I can never catch. I thought this time would be different, but looking at her like this, bound and vulnerable, it's starting to feel familiar again.

She groans softly as her eyes flutter open and the sound of those chains clinking against the floor snaps me back to the present. Her hands are bound behind her back, her ankles tethered together. She's small but she seems fit. And I certainly don't need any physical altercations.

Her name is Marsha Warren. I gathered just enough intel about her from her ID, but I already knew who she was long before she got into the car.

Marsha stirs, her body jerking in staccato motions as she comes to. The rattle of her chains echo through the dank basement, and I step back, flexing my fingers around the handle of the scissors once again.

She was heavier than I thought, nothing but dead weight that I had to drag all the way down here, but it doesn't matter now. She's here. Helpless and at my mercy.

I tug the werewolf mask down over my face and watch as she struggles against the restraints. The disguise I used in the car worked well with the shadows of the night, but I can't risk her focusing in on me here, now that she knows the peril she's in.

The scent of mildew and wet stone fills the air, thick enough to choke on, but I'm used to it. It's comforting in a way, like a blanket of filth wrapping around me that I need to claw my way out of.

Marsha's eyes snap open, and once she gets a look at me she belts out a shrill, piercing scream. A sound that grates against my skull like nails on a chalkboard. I slam the shears down on the table that she's tethered to, hard enough to make her chains rattle.

"Shut up," I snarl, my voice muffled through the mask and instantly her scream dies down to a whimper. The confusion behind her fear grows prominent. Understandably. She doesn't know whether I'm a man or a woman.

Good. Let her sit with that uncertainty. Let it crawl under her skin like worms. Because right now, I'm neither. I'm her worst nightmare and I'm her savior all in one.

I pick up the shears again, and the metal gleams in the weak light of the bulb overhead. It flickers occasionally, like it's about to die, just like my soul, just like her.

I can smell her perfume mixing with sweat and fear, a nauseating blend that makes my stomach churn. She's terrified, but she deserves this. She deserves worse.

“Do you think this is unfair?” I taunt, circling her slowly. “You think this is some kind of mistake, don't you?” I lean in close, the heat of my breath fogging the inside of the mask. “It's women like you—selfish, manipulative witches, parading around like queens while the rest of the people suffer—that have forced my hand.”

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Marsha writhes and whimpers as she tugs on her chains, her eyes wide and frantic. The metal clinks with each movement, and I see the bruises starting to form around her wrists where she's been pulling too hard. She hasn't even tried to speak yet. She hasn't found the words.

But I don't need her words. I need her fear.

I snap the shears in front of her face, and she flinches. The power of that moment sends a shiver down my spine.

"You need to pay," I seethe. "All of you need to pay for your sins." My voice sharpens as I start snipping at her clothes. She thrashes under my hands, but I keep cutting, the fabric peeling away in jagged strips. "It's because of women like you that I have to do this. Do you know how many people would thank me if they knew what I was doing?"

A low sob escapes her lips and I feel my stomach twist—not with guilt but with the intoxicating blend of control and righteousness.

"I'm doing the world a favor. I'm doing you a favor," I hiss.

My hand jerks as I slice through the last piece of fabric and—darn it—the shears slip, cutting her skin instead. A thin line of blood wells up, dark and glistening in this dim light.

Marsha begins to curse me, with her voice hoarse and raw. The words sting like lashes, cutting through my moment of control, but I don't let them sink in. I raise the

scissors, my hand trembling with anger now. And I cut and I cut until she's naked as the day she was born—the last day of her innocence.

Why can't they just be quiet and accept it? Why can't they see that I'm right?

“Shut up,” I say, louder this time, trading my shears for a hammer before bringing it down over her.

A sickening thud emits as it connects with her skull, and she goes limp again, her body goes slack against the chains.

I step back, panting, the hammer still clutched in my hand. The room feels as if it's too small with the walls closing in—as if they were doing their best to suffocate me. I drop the hammer and stumble to the corner, my breath coming in ragged gasps.

This isn't how it was supposed to go. Why isn't anything working the way it should? I planned this. I was careful. I was thorough. So why does it all feel wrong?

“What more must I do?” I whisper in the silence and my voice shakes. I stare at her motionless form, the blood trickling down her forehead. “What more must I do to make this right? To make her pay?”

My chest heaves as I look at the mess I've made.

This is it.

No more waiting.

No more second chances.

This ends tonight.

I turn back to her, the shears gleaming in the dark, and I know what has to come next.

I hope I didn't kill her. She still needs to escape.

Then I loosen the bindings at her wrists and ankles so she can do just that.

33

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

I flip through the battered pages of Delaney Riggs' journal, the paper worn from countless turns of the page, tear stains—hers, not mine—and some crumbs of indiscernible food items. I'm hoping those are hers, although Buddy and I have been on a snacking spree.

Delaney's handwriting slants across the page, delicate but rushed, as if she had so much to say and not enough time to get it all out. The words pull me in once again, offering another glimpse into her chaotic, tender, and oh-so heartbreaking life.

I skip around one last time, particularly to the parts that pertain to the library since that's my destination tonight.

August 14th

I never thought I'd find peace in a place full of books. But here I am, spending my afternoons at the library, lost in fictional worlds that I never lived in but somehow understand. Phillis says I have a gift for research. Brenda just laughs and calls me "her little bookworm". They're more like mothers to me than my own mother has ever been. Some days, I wonder what it would have been like to have a mother who didn't forget my birthday. Or didn't choose a bottle of booze over me. Phillis gives me that. Brenda, too, in her own way. I don't feel so invisible when I'm with them. Maybe

that's why I like it here. I'm not just disappearing between the shelves. I'm in a real world—one I'm hoping to one day understand.

September 5th

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

Back at the library. There's something about this place. The quiet, the order of it all. It's not like home—where everything feels like it could come apart any minute. I can breathe here. Phillis has been amazing, letting me organize the new shipments. Brenda, too, though she's been distracted lately. Something is going on with her. She seems totally stressed. I don't know what it is, but it's like she's holding her breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe it's just the grief she's still carrying. Sometimes I catch her staring at that picture of her husband she keeps on her desk, and I swear she's talking to him. Not in a crazy way, more like she's just keeping him close. I get that. We all need someone.

September 22nd

You know, I think I get it. I'm starting to understand why Phillis writes about death. She says it's just another chapter in the story. But then again, I don't know. She seems so sure about what comes after, like there's some grand plan and we're all just walking in that direction. Brenda nods along, but I think she's just trying to believe it, too. I guess when you've lost so much, you have to hold onto something. Phillis lost her kid and Brenda lost her husband. I think those are two very different losses. But maybe not. I really wouldn't know. They both seem really sad at times. Phillis says you can't stay angry forever. You need to let the past go because we can't bring all that negative energy into eternity where our real homes are. She says we'll live in love and light forever once we cross over and enjoy days that know no end. We are infinite beings that never truly die. I like the sound of that. I like the sound of living forever in a place far better than this one.

I sigh as I inspect her loopy handwriting one more time.

Infinite beings.

Infinite.

Infinity?

I close the journal and think about how special Delaney's time at the library felt to her. She certainly conveyed enough to convince me that it was a reprieve from her campus life. But it wasn't books she was finding respite in. By the sound of this journal, it was people.

Soon, I'm in Jack's truck and we're on the road to the Blue Creek Public Library.

Jack's hands are on the wheel while Buddy is curled up in the back seat, happily oblivious to what we might be diving into.

"You ready for this, Baxter?" Jack casts a quick glance my way.

"Does anyone ever feel ready for a seminar on grief?" I raise a brow his way as if daring him to say yes.

Wisely, he opts to chuckle under his breath. "Point taken. But hey, at least Buddy will lighten the mood. Everyone loves a dog."

"Everyone but your mother," I tease and we share a quiet laugh on Sandy's behalf.

Far too soon the Blue Creek Library comes into view.

Blue Creek itself looks resplendent tonight with fall leaves swirling in the icy breeze and the streetlamps coating our world in an orange glow. A thin layer of frost clings to the windows of the cars lining the street, and I pull my jacket tighter around me as

we step out of the truck.

The library's conference room is already buzzing once we arrive.

It's a modest gathering—maybe fifty people scattered across folding chairs, chatting, and sipping on steaming cups of coffee. The scent of fresh-brewed caffeine mingles with the sweetness of a few desserts laid out on a small table in the back. Mostly brownies, and a couple dozen cookies in the mix.

I take another look around at the room and it feels warm and cozy. Although far too warm and cozy for what we're here to investigate.

There's a large cardboard sign that sits at the entry that reads Welcome to Pathways of Peace. Tonight's special guest speaker is author Phillipa Hazelwood.

A small crowd quickly amasses around Buddy, and soon he's wagging his tail and sitting tall as hands from every direction try to get in on the action.

"Looks like Buddy is already a hit," I whisper to Jack as a few attendees smile and wave at the furry guest of honor.

"Good thing," he says, scanning the crowd. "We might need him to get people talking."

I nod. "He's basically a dog-shaped icebreaker."

The space is simple—cream-colored walls, dim lighting, and a podium set up at the front. There's a small table next to the podium with a framed picture of a young girl on it and there's something haunting about her smile.

The air smells faintly of old books and a sterile scent that gives the impression that

someone wiped down every surface with bleach an hour ago.

It's calm and it feels so very normal in here—I'm actually starting to look forward to an uneventful night. But I know better than to trust appearances.

We're all urged to take our seats and Jack and I find a spot up front and next to the desserts. Judging by the stack of cookies in Jack's hand, it seems our seating choice was intentional.

Brenda Billings is first up at bat as she steps up to the podium. Her eyes are somber as she looks out over the room. She's dressed in a plain dark dress and her dark hair is pulled back tight.

"Thank you all for coming tonight," Brenda begins with an affable smile, and yet her voice is already thick with emotion.

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Most likely grief. She did lose her husband. In fact, everyone in this room has lost someone or they wouldn't be on the proverbial pathway to peace—sans Jack and me. But I guess Jack lost his father in a way since he rarely talks about him. I'm guessing he's just out of the picture, dead or alive. And my own father has passed, violently so. And then, there's the case of the missing sister.

I sigh hard at the thought of Erin and her unwillingness to let us know she's still breathing. It's selfish. But maybe she's okay with the fact she needs to be a little selfish right now to survive. My father made sure we all paid a rather selfish price before he hit the ground after that bullet hit him.

I know that Erin needs to heal. But does she need to wound the rest of us while doing so?

"I met Phillis shortly after my husband passed away," Brenda continues. "It was a dark time, and I thought I might never climb out of it. But Phillis, well, she showed me a new way of seeing things. A new way of understanding death." She sniffs over at her friend. "Phillis' own daughter passed away not long before I lost my husband."

Brenda gestures to the photo of a beautiful young woman, a redhead with a winning smile. She looks about thirty. I stare at it for a beat longer than I should, surprised by how much older Phillis' daughter looks than I thought. Somehow, I had imagined someone younger, a child maybe. I guess it makes sense. Phillis herself is an older woman.

"Phillis helped me see the light, so to speak," Brenda goes on. "Most people believe in an afterlife. The good Lord Himself says He placed eternity in the hearts of men. If

anyone can make you believe in seeing your loved ones again, it's Phillis Hazelwood." She pauses, glancing at Jack and me. "Eternity"—she repeats softly—"and all of its symbols have been explored in great depth in Phillis' wonderful and thoughtful book. Let's give a warm round of applause for best-selling author Phillipa Hazelwood."

The room breaks out in polite applause as Phillis takes the stage. Her red hair is neatly combed and curled under her neck. She's donned a maroon pantsuit with a shiny gold brooch of a heart that looks as if it's split in two. Her expression is calm but distant as if she's already halfway in another world. She's an older woman, but she carries herself like someone who's already faced the worst life has to offer.

Death will do that to a person. Just ask the roster of women who were taken off this planet by a cold-hearted killer.

But then again, someone has made sure we can't ask them anything ever again.

34

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

"Hello and welcome to one and all." Phillis Hazelwood nods at equal portions of the crowd here in the conference room behind the Blue Creek Public Library.

Her voice is measured and gentle, but there's something layered beneath it—something darker, maybe even dangerous.

I frown at the woman. I've never been a fan of dwelling on what comes next after this world, but Phillis seems to have mastered it.

"Life and death"—Phillis begins as her eyes scan the room—"two sides of the same

coin. What we do here, in this life, it matters. It carries with us into the next chapter. We cannot escape it.” She pauses, letting the weight of her words settle. “Everything we carry, every choice, every mistake—it all follows us like a blessing or a curse.”

I glance at Jack as a feeling of unease builds in my gut, and it’s a feeling I can’t quite shake. Phillis speaks like she knows something—as if she’s already seen what’s on the other side. And whatever it is, it doesn’t sound good.

My father comes to mind again and I try my best to shove him right back out.

“What we leave behind,” Phillis continues with her voice soft but insistent, “our actions, our sins—they mark us. And some of us will be held accountable for those marks sooner than we think.”

The room is silent, save for the fact Buddy just gave a big sigh and it evokes a moment of levity as a loose round of chuckles circles the crowd. But Phillis’ words still hang in the air, heavy and ominous. And for the first time tonight, I wonder if she’s speaking to us or perhaps to herself.

All I know for sure is, this just got a whole lot darker.

Phillis continues speaking and her voice is a slow, steady pulse that penetrates the room like a somber lullaby. She definitely has the sort of voice that makes you sit at attention, but not because you’re interested—because there’s something in the tone that unsettles you—like you might miss the warning if you don’t pay close attention.

I glance at Jack and he nods my way. He’s not missing the warning either.

“Grief is a strange thing,” she says, folding her hands over the podium and the microphone picks up the slight crackle of her knuckles. “It follows you, even when you think you’ve outrun it. You wake up one day, years later, and it’s still there,

waiting. And for some, that weight becomes unbearable. It's a constant ocean of sorrow that rolls over you in waves and slams you to the ground when you least expect it. It's raw at first, so very powerful you're convinced it will take you under. But time, and I'm talking a lot of time—years even—it does help to ease the pain. But those waves still come when you least expect them. And I'm sorry to say, they will never really stop. But one day your body will give way and you, therealyou, will escape this world once and for all. And that is where your real life begins.”

A couple of people shift uncomfortably in their seats. Brenda nods solemnly from the side, as if Phillis is simply reiterating the Gospel.

Buddy sits with his head resting on my knee, and his eyes are wide open as if he, too, is catching onto the grave tension.

I glance at Jack and his eyes haven't left Phillis. His jaw is set tight, and he has that look he gets when something is clicking into place. But I'm betting he's not sure if it's a piece of the puzzle or a whole new game board we're dealing with.

Death and grief aren't my favorite subjects, and I'm guessing they're not Jack's either.

“And in death”—Phillis continues as her gaze sweeps the room—“we find out the truth of who we are—of what we've carried, what we've left behind. It stays with us. Death doesn't cleanse us. It reveals us.”

A quiet hush takes over the room, thickening the air until it feels as if you could slice right through it. Even the smell of the coffee and those sweet treats seem to have faded, leaving only the cold, crisp scent of a fall night creeping in through the door behind us. The glow of the lights overhead feels sterile and far too bright for the subject matter at hand.

Phillis gestures toward the photo of her daughter. “We don’t get to choose when we go or how we’re remembered. My daughter, Maddie—she was taken from me in the prime of her life. And it was grief that shaped me after that. Grief that led me to this.” She pauses, settling her gaze on the crowd. “But grief is also what made me realize there are things you can’t escape. Things you carry with you into eternity.”

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I'm not sure whether she's talking about her daughter anymore.

Jack shifts in his seat and shoots me a look that says, this woman gives me the creeps. Or at least that's what I'm thinking.

But there is something about Phillis that feels performative. Like this whole speech has been rehearsed for an audience, and yet maybe not the one sitting here tonight.

"Grief isn't just about loss," Phillis says as her voice lowers to a whisper. "It's about regret. It's about punishment. The choices we make in this life..." She glances at Jack and me and her eyes lock onto ours for a second too long. "They follow us. They shape our fate."

Talk about driving home a point.

Buddy lets out a small whimper as if he, too, feels the shift in the room. I glance down, scratching behind his ears, but my focus is still on Phillis.

"Most people think death is an ending," she continues. "But I've come to understand that it's simply a transition. A crossing over. And what waits for us on the other side isn't the release we hope for." Her eyes sweep across the room again, her voice dropping to a whisper. "It's the reckoning."

The word hangs in the air like a storm cloud ready to burst.

Reckoning?

She drones on for another twenty minutes before stepping back from the podium with a serene expression, and I'm left wondering if she was talking about grief or something else entirely.

A smattering of polite applause circles the room, but it's subdued as if no one's quite sure what they just heard. Phillis steps back up, beaming as if the talk has gone perfectly, as if her life's work has just been validated.

"Thank you all so much for coming out this evening. I'll be signing books at the table if you're interested." She gestures to the coffee and dessert table to the left before inviting everyone to mingle.

But I'm not in the mood for mingling. Phillis evoked a few genuine emotions in me and not in a way that brings me comfort.

"What do you think?" I whisper to Jack as the room comes to life with conversation all at once.

He frowns to his left. "I think I want to try one of those brownies."

Buddy lifts his head with a hopeful look on his face and I shake my head.

"No way, Buddy. No chocolate for you, remember? We've already had a long talk about this." I lift my chin to Jack. "And don't you let his big puppy dog eyes manipulate you into giving him one either. You know they can be lethal to him."

He shakes his head at Buddy. "Isn't that just like a woman," he teases. "Everything fun is lethal. Come on, I see a sugar cookie with your name on it." He gets up and Buddy rises to all fours. "Manipulator." He chuckles as they head for the dessert table.

I rise to my feet and nearly bump right into Brenda.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, tucking my elbow to the Glock at my waist. It’s a reflex at this point when people get a little too close. Not that she can see it under my wool blazer.

“No, it’s my fault.” She laughs as she pats me on the hand and I note a fresh scratch running down the inside of her arm. I quickly meet her eyes and pretend I didn’t see it. By nature, anything we do as federal agents makes people squirm, and heaven forbid we notice a nick or a scratch. People immediately feel the need to make amends for them as if they need an alibi for breathing in my vicinity.

But Brenda doesn’t. She simply gives a little laugh and gestures to the book table.

“I’ve arranged for complimentary copies for the two of you. Please head over. Phillis is just as excited to get them into your hands.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Jack and I make our way over and stand at the back of the line. Soon enough, it’s our turn and Phillis generously signs a couple of copies of her books and gifts one to each of us.

The night quickly wraps up, and before we know it, we’re one of the last to walk out the door along with Brenda and Phillis.

Both women have their arms laden with a banker’s box filled with books, so I get the door for them and Jack promptly takes the boxes from them and offers to help them to their car.

“No, please,” Phillis says, taking the box precariously balancing on top from him. “I’ve done this a thousand times. But I’ll admit, they’re heavy.”

“That’s right.” Brenda laughs. “We’ve amassed quite the muscles as of late doing just this.”

The night air bites as we tread into the near-empty lot and Phillis steers us to a blue sedan where we drop off the goods right into her trunk before thanking them for a lovely night.

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“Thank you both for coming out,” Phillis says with a breathy laugh. “Especially you, Buddy. Everyone should have a buddy like you in their lives.” She offers him a hearty pat and a hug as she says it.

“Yes, thank you both,” Brenda adds as she presses a hand to her chest. “I hope you catch whoever is out there hurting women. It’s not a good feeling to know there’s a predator out and about hunting women like prey. It’s not right.”

“No, it’s not,” I tell her. “But don’t worry. They won’t be out there for long.”

“So you’re making progress in the case?” Phillis looks winded as she slams the trunk closed.

“You can say that.” Jack shrugs because he’s not so sure himself.

Brenda pants as if she were breathless at the thought. “Oh, and I hope you catch them soon. I haven’t been able to sleep ever since I found out what happened to that poor girl, and herfriend, of course. It takes a certain monster to do something like that.”

“Yes, it does,” I say. “The irony being that the monster usually doesn’t feel like a monster at all. Sometimes it’s quite the opposite.”

“A slaying savior.” Brenda gives a little laugh. “Now that’s morbid. Although with the women they’re going after, they might be onto something.” She winces. “Sorry. Talk about morbid. My humor leaves much to be desired. Please call or stop by if you need us. We’re both local. I’m just past the university, and Phillis has acreage about fifteen minutes from here.”

Phillis nods. “I moved into the carriage house after my husband and I divorced. Losing a child can destroy a marriage just as good as anything else, and I never could get used to rolling around in that big old house all by myself. Maybe once the dust settles from the book tour, I’ll consider selling it. If either of you is on the lookout for a fifteen-stall horse ranch with a fountain large enough to swim in, just let me know.”

We share a polite laugh before saying one last goodnight and parting ways.

“Where to now?” I ask as soon as we’re settled back in the truck and I give Buddy a few of those doggie biscuits I actually approve of.

They’re so good, Jack has snacked on a few himself. And he wonders why I’m not doling out the kisses.

“Where else? Barhopping in Denver,” he says as we head onto the main road. “It’s time to end the night with a little Social Disorder.”

35

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

The House of Rock is alive with loud banging and thumping; some might even call it music.

The walls pulsate with the heavy bass and it’s a rhythmic throb that makes the floor vibrate underfoot.

Social Disorder is on stage and their lead singer is howling into the mic as groupies throw their bodies around as if they’re possessed.

It smells like booze, sickly sweet perfume, and enough sweat to make any boys’

locker room proud.

We step inside as Buddy trots beside us, wagging his tail in sync with the music. The moment we walk in, women swarm over to him—and, by proxy, toward me. But Buddy soaks it up with his tongue lolling out like he's the star of the show.

A tall brunette drapes herself over me in an effort to pet him, and Fallon shoots me a look.

“You're popular tonight.” She sheds a quick smile. Not the I'm so happy kind of a smile, but the you're going to be in trouble later kind of smirk.

“Must be the cologne,” I say dryly, though it's clearly Buddy who's the crowd favorite. But I'll admit, I seem to be garnering my fair share of sexual attention whether or not I like it.

I used to love it. It was what I lived for. But with Fallon in my life, it feels wrong, as if I'm tempting fate, or fate is tempting me in an effort to see if it can shake me loose from her.

Fat chance.

I'm not straying.

Never have, never will. Not from Fallon. I'd have to be insane to do so.

Deeper in the room reeks of stale beer with an undercurrent of smoke that hangs in the air like a bad memory. We weave through the crowd with the strobe lights flashing overhead, turning everyone into jerky figures as they thrash to the music.

“Over there.” Fallon points toward the bar and I see Nikki sitting next to Rush

Simmons, the questionable manager of the band currently tearing up the room.

The guy looks like he's exactly where he wants to be—holding court with a drink in one hand and a greasy grin on his face. We head over, and as soon as Buddy arrives, a whole new set of groupies gather around him.

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“Nice of you to join us,” Nikki says, raising her glass at us. Her hair is teased every which way and her red dress matches her tresses. “And look at you two, bringing the real star of the show.”

“Buddy is always the headliner,” I agree, giving his head a pat as the girls continue to swarm him.

Rush glances down at Buddy, then at me. “Good-looking dog. You’ve gotta love a loyal companion, right?”

“Sure,” Fallon says. “Unless they shed all over your black jeans.”

“And that he does,” I say, shooting her with my fingers. But Buddy is oblivious to the dig as he continues to lap up the attention.

“Hey.” Fallon nudges me, and I follow her line of sight to Karen Holt, rocking out near the front of the stage. She’s wearing a tight pink dress, her hair is wild, and she’s dancing like she hasn’t got a care in the world. “Look at that,” Fallon says to Rush. “There’s your girl, Karen Holt.”

Rush snorts before draining his shot glass. “She’s a regular. And she might wear a wedding ring, but you know what they say, sometimes it’s just bling.” He flashes a knowing grin.

“Is that so?” I exchange a look with Fallon, already suspecting that Karen’s not just another rich wife looking to blow off some steam. She’s trouble in every arena in her life and the lives of others.

We settle in next to Nikki, never taking our eyes off of the woman of the hour. The lights above shift from blue to red as the song hits its climax, and for a second, it feels like the room is on fire.

Karen is lost in the music, swaying her hips as if she's doing her best to cast a spell on the crowd. And judging by the looks the lead singer is giving her, her dark magic is working.

"What do you think she's up to?" Nikki asks the man. "You think she's trolling for customers tonight? Or for girls to feed the machine?"

"Feed the machine?" Rush clears his throat. "I don't get it." His face turns blotchy before he jumps off his stool. "Look, I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got to head up to the office. Band stuff, you know how it is. I'll be back."

"Do what you need," Fallon says flatly. As soon as he walks away, she leans in. "He sure left quickly as soon as we turned up the heat. I'm not sure we should buy his alibi."

"I don't know," I say, settling on the stool next to her. "They've got him on security footage sitting here at the exact time of the killings. That's pretty airtight."

"Is it, now?" Nikki is already pulling up the footage on herphone, and the three of us huddle over the screen as the grainy video plays. Sure enough, Rush is at the bar, the same spot we're at now. He leaves a few times, heading to the restroom, but during one of his many exits, he's gone for over twenty minutes.

"What do you think?" Nikki hikes a shoulder my way. "That's a long time if you know exactly where you want to go and why—and I'm not talking about the bathroom."

“I guess we have a little math to do.” I rub the back of my neck as I consider it.

Fallon shakes her head. “Is twenty minutes enough time to slip out, kill two women, and come back looking no worse for wear?”

“Think of the blood,” Nikki says.

“There was no blood trail in the killer’s wake,” I point out.

“There was blood in the sink,” Fallon points out. “They cleaned up before they left, at least themselves.”

I glance in the direction he took off in. “He doesn’t strike me as the neat and tidy type. Especially when it comes to himself.”

“What about her?” Nikki tilts her head toward Karen, who is still gyrating near the stage, blissfully unaware of the scrutiny she’s under. “She’s a real character. Why couldn’t she be the killer?”

“She could definitely be the killer,” Fallon says, eyeing her. “Regardless, she’s going away for a very long time.”

Nikki lifts a glass our way of what looks like ginger ale, but it’s more than likely something stronger. “So how was the meet and greet with death?”

“It was a downer. But we got a free book.” Fallon pulls the blue hardback out of her purse. “Into the Ether with Love,” she says and Nikki snatches it from her and proceeds to flip the book open, thumbing through the pages quickly as if it’s a dirty novel she can’t get enough of.

“Sounds like a bunch of sad malarkey.” Nikki tosses it onto the counter and the front

cover bounces open, revealing something that makes all three of us lean in hard.

“What the hell is that?” Fallon says, landing her finger right over the incriminating mark.

That’s exactly what I want to know, too.

SPECIAL AGENT JACK STONE

The second Fallon's finger lands on that infinity symbol, my stomach drops. It's a mirror image of what we've seen carved into each of the victims. The darn thing is staring at us so blatantly it feels as if it's taunting us.

How could we have missed this?

"That's the same mark," Fallon says it low but still cutting through the noise.

Nikki leans in to inspect it better. "Looks like we've got some grief counseling with a homicidal calling card on the side. That's as good as a murder symbol at this point."

"It's not a murder symbol and you know it," Fallon corrects.

"It is now," Nikki says, pulling her purse strap higher onto her shoulder. "This is no coincidence." She picks the book up and squints at it. "It's sitting under her name as if it's her logo." She flips the book over and, sure enough, the same logo sits under the author's name on the back, this time bigger to match the large bold font.

My pulse picks up as the sound of the band fades into the background. In less than ten seconds, my mind runs through everything we know about Phillis Hazelwood and her so-called book of grief.

"I have no doubt the woman's pain is real," I say. "But grief can make you do some crazy things."

“Like murder?” Fallon says, still staring down at the infinity symbol in front of us as if she were in a trance.

Phillis Hazelwood. I shake my head as her name circles my mind like vultures over a corpse.

“This is a smoking gun,” I say. “We need to speak to her again.”

“Good thinking,” Nikki says, taking another sip of her drink. “I’ll go with you. We can stop off at the diner for lunch first.” She looks at Fallon. “I think your mom could use a hug after that debacle with Sandy.”

“My mother is fine,” she says dryly. Fallon isn’t a hugger. Bea, I’m not too sure about.

“I’m not thinking about tomorrow,” I tell them sternly. “I’m thinking about tonight. We need to talk to Phillis again. ASAP,” I say, not even bothering to hide the urgency in my voice.

Fallon nods my way. “Phillis’ entire speech was cryptic tonight. Like she was speaking in some weird code. I didn’t get a good feeling about it.” She looks at Nikki. “Let’s just say a self-help guru she is not. The woman was darn right creepy.”

Nikki taps her phone, pulling up her notes. “Have you guys looked deeper into her past? Her daughter died, right?”

“Yes,” Fallon says. “And her friend, Brenda? Her husband passed away, too. That’s how they met. In fact, I went over some passages in Delaney’s journal this afternoon and honed in on the stuff she wrote about her work at the library. She said she looked up to both of those women as if they were her mother.”

“Interesting,” I say as something comes back to me. “When we first met them, they made it sound as if they hardly knew Delaney. Why would she write that stuff in her journal if it wasn’t true?”

“She wouldn’t,” Nikki says. “A journal is a girl’s one safe place. I speak from experience.” She keeps tapping at her phone. “Baxter, if you’re ever in the mood for a juicy read, I keep my journal under my mattress, too.”

“I might be interested,” I say.

“You’re not invited,” she counters, still staring intently at her phone. “Here it is,” she says, pausing for a beat. “Madeline Hazelwood, Phillis’ daughter, died in what was ruled an accident. She was hiking in the Rockies, slipped on some loose gravel, and fell. It was a twenty-foot drop. Apparently, there was no one else with her, so they took Phillis’ word that it was just a tragic accident.”

“You think Phillis did this?” Fallon sounds slightly affronted. “What kind of mother would kill her own kid?”

“Mine,” I offer without hesitation. “I lock up my gun at night.”

“Good move,” Fallon says, shooting me a warning look as if I’d better do something about that woman. She’s not wrong.

Fallon turns and stares at the bottles lined up on the wall in front of us. “You know, I read something in Delaney’s journal tonight that struck me as odd. She wrote that Phillis said we’ll live in love and light forever and ever in days that know no end. That we are infinite beings that never truly die. Delaney said she liked the sound of that. That she liked the sound of living forever in a place far better than this one. But it was the word *infinite* that kept spinning in my mind. That symbol is definitely Phillis’ calling card.” Fallon shakes her head. “But why kill hookers? Is this

connected to her daughter somehow? Was she a hooker?"

Nikki shrugs, her eyes still glued to her screen. "She died at twenty-nine. She could have been anything. We don't have the details yet of her life leading up to the accident. But we'll get them. According to this picture, she looks pretty clean-cut."

"High-end escort?" I offer and we wince at the screen as if trying to picture it. She still doesn't look the part, but you never know.

Fallon's eyes narrow as she leans in close. "It doesn't sit right. If Madeline was so clean-cut, why would Phillis turn her grief toward killing sex workers? What's the connection?"

"I don't have the answer." I glance back at the infinity symbol stamped on the cover of the book. It's not just about grief. This is broader with something darker lying underneath. Something that might just be masked by an infinity symbol.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

Before we can say another word, our phones buzz in tandem.

“It’s a text from Hale,” Nikki says, as we look down at our screen. “Suspicious vehicle caught on camera at the coffee shop across the street where Marsha Warren was last seen walking, the night she disappeared.”

The image on the screen is grainy and it looks to be a night shot pulled from the surveillance camera. It’s the front end of the car, and just above the headlight Marsha Warren is clearly visible in the frame, looking in the direction of the vehicle with interest. And then I see it.

Fallon and I look up at one another at the very same time.

It’s a blue sedan.

37

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Three sharp knocks echo through the night air as Jack barks, “FBI, open up.”

I shoot him a look. “Subtle.”

“Subtlety isn’t my specialty.” He gives another three brisk knocks as Buddy sits dutifully beside him with his tail wagging and eyes locked on the door.

It took Nikki less than three minutes to track down Phillis Hazelwood’s address, and

based on the info Phillis gave us earlier, we knew to head straight for the carriage house. Unlike the looming mansion to the right, which looks about as deserted as a ghost town, the carriage house is lit up like a jack-o'-lantern on one side.

“Coming,” a woman’s voice floats from inside, followed by soft footsteps.

Phillis opens the door, looking like she’s just stepped out of a skincare commercial. Her face is glossy with moisturizer, her lips are pale without her swath of orange lipstick, and she’s wearing a cotton floor-length nightgown that’s tattered near the hemline.

“We need to talk about your daughter,” Jack says with a touch of aggression surging in his voice.

I’ve already established he’s not subtle, and now I know he doesn’t waste time either. That must be what sucked me in. That and his hair. He’s got great hair.

And just like that, my fingers are twitching to run through it.

“My daughter?” Phillis blinks, clearly taken aback. “I don’t understand...”

The words hardly slip out before Jack launches into a volley of questions. “The accident, what do you know? Did you suspect anything?”

“As in foul play?” Phillis gasps while taking a step back. “My goodness, no!” She seems genuinely shocked. Her hand is pressed to her chest as if we’ve just insulted her entire family lineage. “Do you know something?”

“Nothing more than what we’ve read,” I tell her. “Is there something that you know other than that?”

“I’m sorry.” She shakes her head. “I don’t have anything in that regard. Of course, when Maddie passed, it was all a blur. What’s sponsoring this?”

“The talk this evening,” I tell her. “We were curious, so we did some digging. Your daughter was alone when she slipped and fell, so we thought we’d probe.”

“It’s our job,” Nikki says before taking a step forward. “Phillis, can you tell us a little about the infinity symbol that’s under your name on your book?”

Phillis gives a weak shrug as her eyes dart between us. “It represents eternity, I guess. I’m not good at all that logos and brands thing. Brenda helped me come up with it.”

“But you’re the one who ran with it,” Nikki presses. “Do you have any experience with welding?”

For goodness’ sake. I shoot her a look.

Remind me to never let her come along on a shakedown after she gets a little booze in her system.

Phillis blinks back. Her surprise is so raw it strikes me as innocent—and my gut translates that as she might be innocent of what we’re insinuating as well. My stomach tightens in a knot at the thought of it. If Phillis is innocent, that means we’ve hit another dead end. And if we’ve hit another dead end, that means another dead body will most likely show up.

“Did you say welding?” She gapes at Nikki before glancing at each of us as if inspecting our sanity. I’m starting to do the same. “And why in the world would I need to know welding?”

Nikki sighs hard. “The infinity symbol. I’m betting you’ve got one around here

somewhere, and we're not leaving until we find it."

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“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Phillis waves us in, clearly exasperated. “Come on in. I’ve got them all over the place. Brenda orders them in every size and shape. Heck, I’ve even got dozens of cookie cutters in the shape of that thing. You can take one if you like.”

Brenda.

I glance at Jack. He’s already looking at me, and I can feel the same thought passing between us. Buddy gives a soft woof as if he’s thinking it, too. He’s intuitive that way.

“What do we know about Brenda again?” Nikki asks as her voice rises a notch.

“Her husband died of a heart attack,” I answer, quickly rifling through the mental file we’ve been building.

Phillis shudders. “It was so shocking, too. The man was fit as a fiddle. My daughter worked as his secretary before he passed. He sold commercial property. I hate to say this, but the stories my daughter told me...well, the man was a philanderer.”

Jack shoots Nikki and me a look before leaning in. “I thought you said you met Brenda after her husband died?”

Phillis offers a mournful smile. “I did.” She flicks her wrist at the thought. “Small world, right?”

Small world is up there with the word coincidence, and I don’t believe in either.

I spot a large framed photo of Madeline Hazelwood smiling at us from above the fireplace. She's stunning, youthful, and very much the picture of life. Looking at her, one thing is clear.

"She was no high-end escort," I say.

Nikki nods. "They were having an affair."

Phillis gasps as her eyes grow wide with horror. "Are you accusing my dead daughter of something?"

"We need to leave," Jack says and the three of us dart for the truck.

We're about to jump in when Buddy takes off toward the big house and barks up a storm as if he's about to catch a killer himself.

"What the heck is he doing?" I ask in disbelief as we watch Buddy run circles around the porch.

"Squirrel," Nikki says as she scrolls through some social feed and a photo of Madeline Hazelwood's face flashes across the screen.

Jack shakes his head as we watch Buddy sniffing and barking around the periphery of the entry. "That's no squirrel." He tips his head toward the overgrown hovel and its dark death stare into the night. "There's something in that house."

38

MARSHA WARREN

A hard groan evicts from my lungs. My throat feels raw and burns like fire.

My head throbs rhythmically as if someone has been jackhammering inside my skull all night. Everything feels off—my body, my mind, the air, the surface under me. I pat my hands to the floor under my skin and it's hard and cold as concrete.

A faint light spills from somewhere beyond the room and it manages to cut a line through the darkness. My eyes strain to focus, but everything is fuzzy and just out of reach. I blink, trying to bring the room into focus, and then I look down.

I'm naked.

A surge of panic rushes through me. I quickly inspect myself. Sure enough, my body is bare, with the exception of a long scrape that glides down my stomach. My fingers rise to meet it and it stings as if it's still fresh.

What the hell is happening?

Was I roofied?

My mouth tastes like metal, and my tongue is thick like I've been drugged—and this powerful headache. I tug at my wrists, and there's the cold clink of metal, but when I lift my hands, the chains slip right off.

"Oh, thank you," I whisper as I quickly rub at my sore wrists. "I'm free."

A surge of adrenaline explodes through my veins and I'm ready to bolt until I spot the manacles clasped over my ankles and somehow I manage to wrangle those open and soon I'm untethered.

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Whoever did this didn't bother securing me properly.

Idiots.

They've clearly underestimated me.

I sit up, and the world tilts for a second. My head wobbles and my dizziness threatens to pull me back down, but I grit my teeth and power through it.

My breathing is shallow, my heart hammers against my ribcage as if it, too, is trying to escape its captives.

I glance around, and in the dim light, I see my shredded clothes in a pile on the floor. The memory flashes back—someone cutting away at my dress with shears.

A breath hitches in my throat.

That ridiculous monster. The bad werewolf mask—their exasperated grunts.

Anger replaces every inch of fear in my gut.

They don't know who they're messing with. They might think I'm some uppity socialite, but I came from the streets. I learned to survive long before I could afford to buy myself out of danger.

When I get my hands on the idiot who saw fit to do this to me, they'll wish they were dead. And I'll make sure their last wish comes true.

I crawl on all fours toward the door and every muscle in my body feels tense yet ready for what lies beyond the border of this room. The floor feels gritty beneath my palms and the smell of dampness clings to the air like mildew.

This place reeks of horror movie material. And if I hang around for another minute, this just might morph into one. But there's no way in hell I'll be much longer.

I spot a stairwell and waste no time to stagger up it, one step at a time as my heart pounds in my ears like a war drum. The walls are narrow and claustrophobic, but I stay quiet, pressing my weight against each step to dampen the sound.

A dark kitchen greets me at the top of the stairs, cluttered with shadows. The air smells like dust and something metallic. With my luck, it's probably blood. Whoever did this to me is a maniac, and I have no doubt they're after my blood, too.

I push the thought away and move faster.

Have to get out.

The moonlight pours through the windows of a lavish living room, illuminating a clear path to the front door. I reach for the bolt and my fingers move quickly.

"Come on," I mutter as I struggle to get a grip on the lock.

A river of curses streams from my lips in a heated whisper as I finally manage to twist it free. Every last inch of me is alive with fear. And seeing that my back is unprotected, I'm half-afraid someone is about to plunge an ax between my shoulder blades. But I don't have a second to waste.

The door opens in a burst and I push it wide as the cold air hits me like a brick.

It feels fresh, sharp, and alive.

I feel alive.

“I’m free,” I cry as I take off running onto the porch when something hits me square in the chest and I nearly topple over.

“A dog.” I nearly laugh as it bounces over me again. “It’s just a dog,” I say with relief, and it comes at me one more time and sends me stumbling backward.

It gives a few loud barks and its teeth gleam in the pale moonlight as it dances by my side. But it doesn’t come for me again. It just barks and runs beside me as if it’s leading the way.

I don’t stop to think as I take off and my bare feet slap against the dewy grass. I’m so numb with shock I hardly feel the frozen air trying to penetrate down to my bones.

I don’t care about the cold.

I don’t care about the dog.

I just run.

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The dog races beside me, barking with its breath creating a fog. My legs pump harder, and then I spot something up ahead—a small crowd.

People.

“Help,” I scream, my voice hoarse and wild. “Help me! I’ve been kidnapped!”

I wave my arms up over my head just as a pair of headlights race onto the scene.

39

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The second we hear the woman’s screams cut through the cold night air, Jack, Nikki, and I bolt in her direction.

A pair of headlights arrive on the scene, and I’m hoping it’s the backup we called for when we left the bar. But it’s not. It’s an older maroon sedan careening this way as it screeches to a halt with gravel crunching under the tires. The door swings open, and Brenda Billings stumbles out, her dark hair wild in the dim light.

“What’s happening?” she shouts, wide-eyed, as she sprints toward Phillis. “I came as soon as you called!”

“Who the hell are you people?” the naked woman screams from behind.

“FBI,” Nikki shouts as she quickly approaches while waving her badge at the woman.

“You’re safe.”

Jack takes off his coat and wraps it around the woman, and she begins to shudder and sob.

“Who are you and who did this to you?” he asks just a hair away from shouting at her.

“I’m Marsha,” she sniffs hard. “I’m Marsha Warren.”

“Call it in and stay with her,” I shout to Nikki, who flashes her badge as I hitch my head toward the women standing just behind us—Phillis and Brenda—and both Jack and Buddy fall in beside me as we make our way over.

Brenda’s eyes flick from Marsha to us, then back to Phillis. She looks confused and more than slightly terrified, and yet the tip of her lips look to be struggling from curving into a smile.

“What do you know about the death of Madeline Hazelwood?” I ask, cutting through the tension and straight to the point.

Brenda’s startled gaze lands on me.

“What? Are you talking about Maddie?” She glances at Phillis. “I don’t—what’s going on?” she stammers. “What do you think has happened here?”

I step closer and narrow my eyes in on her. “There’s been a rash of homicides in the area. Prostitutes have been targeted. Do you know anything about that?”

Her hands fidget as her eyes widen, flitting from me to Phillis and back.

“Homicides? Prostitutes?” She shakes her head, her expression flipping between confusion and fear. “Oh, Phillis... I knew you weren’t well after you lost Maddie, but this?” She turns, wild-eyed, toward her friend. “Phillis, what have you done?”

Phillis recoils and her face glows white in the night. “I haven’t done anything. I swear I’m innocent!” Her voice cracks, teetering on the edge of hysteria.

“Calm down.” Brenda grabs her by the shoulders and Buddy jumps forward and barks at the woman. “I knew we should have sought professional help when you told me about the dreams.” She takes a moment to brush the hair from Phillis’ eyes.

“What dreams?” Phillis snaps. “What are you talking about?”

Brenda sighs as she looks from Jack to me. “She’s been having nightmares. PTSD from the trauma of losing her daughter. She told me—” She shakes her head. “Oh, I can’t say it.”

“Spill it,” Jack growls and Buddy growls right along with him.

“She said she dreams that she pushed her daughter off that trail herself.” Brenda’s voice drops to a whisper as she glances back at Phillis. “I’m so sorry.”

Phillis’ face twists into shock and fury. “I’ve never said such a thing! What the heck are you talking about? Who are you? And what have you done with my friend?”

“She’s no friend,” I say, stepping closer. “Brenda, your husband was a known philanderer. You were aware of that, weren’t you?”

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She lifts her chin as if she had just been struck.

I don't let up. "You suspected he was having an affair with his secretary at the time—Madeline Hazelwood."

"What?" Phillis shrieks. "Maddie was an angel." Her voice hits a panicked pitch. "She would never stoop so low!"

"She was no angel," Brenda seethes at the woman and her voice drips with venom. "She stooped so low. Hell, she bent over. She got down on her knees."

Phillis offers Brenda an open-handed slap and the sound echoes through the night like a gunshot. Brenda barely flinches, and instead rubs her cheek in its wake.

"Liar," Phillis rages at the woman. "Get off of my property! You're a bald-faced liar! All of you off! I want you all to leave right now!"

Brenda's eyes flash with a cold fury as she leans in close to the redhead. "You're the only liar here, Phillis. And you're the worst kind because you believe your own lies. You raised a common street whore." Her voice drops to a growl. "I have video footage of your precious little angel doing all sorts of demonic things with my husband! It's women like you who are the real problem. You're the one who made me do it." Jack and I exchange a glance as she presses a finger to the woman's chest. "If you had known how to raise your daughter right, and keep her from turning into a tramp, I wouldn't have had to confront her that day. We argued and she tried to push me away, so I pushed back. That's when she fell. Don't you see? You made me do that. You, in fact, killed your own child because it was you who refused to train her in

the way she should go.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Phillis doles out another hearty slap and Brenda grabs ahold of the woman’s wrist.

“You made me do it. I had to kill Maddie just like I had to kill the rest of the whores Thomas was cavorting with.” She tosses Phillis’ hand back at her as if it were poison. “I still have his phone. I have the intel of who he was seeing and how he found those filthy beings. I met up with his madame. I should have done away with her first. But she’s only a small blip on the screen when it comes to the problem. I’ve been tracking the whores that people like her parade through the streets and have been picking them off one by one.”

Jack steps forward. “I’m guessing you used the stainless cookie cutters to mark your victims? If it’s the right alloy, stainless can be sharpened to a blade if needed.”

Brenda lifts her chin again and presses her lips tight.

She’s been caught again.

“You did this to frame Phillis,” I say without hesitation. “I bet you borrowed her car recently.”

“She did,” Phillis says as her eyes widen with a whole new fright.

I nod at Brenda. “Phillis was your target just as much as those other women were.”

“She deserved it,” Brenda cries. “She should spend the rest of her life behind bars for what she did to my marriage.” She shoots a scathing look at the woman. “I had to do it. You forced my hand. It’s my duty. I’m saving families. I was chosen for this and it’s a good thing.” She looks over at Jack and me. “I was chosen for this honor. So

you see, there's nothing more for you to do here. All is right with the world."

"That's her," Marsha's voice cuts through the night as she stumbles forward and Buddy gives a soft bark. "That's the voice I heard! I'd remember it anywhere!"

I quickly wrangle Brenda's arms behind her back and cuff her.

"Brenda Billings, you're under arrest." No sooner do I get the words out than the backup we called for arrives in droves.

The darkness ignites with a seizure of blue and red lights as Nikki hustles Brenda to a waiting vehicle.

"I need to sit down," Phillis says as she stumbles over to a bench near the carriage house, and Buddy takes off after her and curls up beside her.

A swarm of deputies head this way and Jack takes a few steps out.

"I want every last inch of the grounds searched for any more potential victims," he shouts to them. "Search that house from top to bottom."

"We did it," I say, holding out a hand and Jack clasps onto it before pulling me into a tight embrace.

"We always do." His phone chirps and he pulls it out and glances at the screen. A heavy sigh escapes him. "It's Jet. There's something wrong with my mother."

The engine roars as I floor the gas, hurtling us through the winding roads back to Pine Ridge Falls.

Buddy is panting in the back seat with his paws braced on the console while Fallon grips the door handle and her eyes flicker between the road and me.

Neither of us speaks. There's nothing left to say—not until we know what's happening with my mother. And I think deep down we both think the worst.

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The tires screech as I pull up to Whispering Woods, barely killing the engine before we jump out of the truck. The cabin looms in front of us, lit up yet ominous and shrouded in thick silence.

Riley whips open the door from inside with a panicked expression. “She’s in here.”

I barrel past her with Fallon and Buddy close on my heels. We find Jet hovering over my mother, who happens to be sprawled out on the couch, shaking like a leaf for no good reason. Her skin looks waxy and pale and she looks sickly in general. She’s drenched in sweat with her hair plastered to her forehead, and my chest tightens at the sight.

“What’s happening?” The words shoot from me like bullets.

“Bad meth,” Jet says without a lot of feeling behind it as if he expected this on some level.

I know I did.

Riley nods. “I guess she was smoking it.” She motions to the table where the paraphernalia is scattered like a crime scene.

“Geez.” I drop to a knee in front of her and my hands shake as I reach for her face. “Look at me,” I demand sharply. Her pupils are blown wide and she’s sluggish to react. Her breathing is shallow yet erratic, and every muscle in her body looks as if it’s about to seize up. “Riley, call for an ambulance.”

“No,” my mother riots as she struggles to rise but falls back onto the sofa because her limbs are too heavy to cooperate.

“Yes,” I bark back. “My house, my rules.”

She grunts as she rolls her eyes at Jet. “When did he get so demanding?”

“Hey”—Jet lifts his arms as if he were absolving himself of the mess—“you raised him.”

“Sandy”—Fallon sits on the coffee table in front of my mother and leans in—“you’re going to be okay,” she says it firmly, more like a command than a fact. “I need to ask you something. The other day, you mentioned you knew of a madame who sometimes worked with Gunther. Do you think if I showed you a picture of her, you could identify her?”

I inch back slightly and shoot Fallon a look.

Now? Really?

But then again, this could be just the diversion we need to keep my mother calm until help arrives.

Fallon shrugs at me before refocusing on the task at hand, which just so happens to be my mother.

“Yeah, sure.” My mother’s teeth chatter, or at least what’s left of them, and her fingers twitch in her lap like she’s trying to grip onto something that’s not there.

Fallon pulls out her phone and scrolls for a second before flashing an image of Karen Holt at my mother.

“No,” Mom says, shaking her head weakly. “That’s not her. She looked different. Dark hair. And younger, I think.”

A siren wails in the distance and both Buddy and Misty are at the window, sitting up at full attention.

“No, no, no,” my mother moans, reaching out for Jet, her fingers clawing at the air. “Don’t let them take me. I don’t want to go!”

“You’re going,” I tell her. “And once they’re through with you, you’re heading to rehab.”

A scream evicts from her like the primal sound from an injured animal, and it envelops all of her rage and desperation. She sobs, howls, and curses up a storm.

The EMTs make their way in, and soon they’ve strapped her to a gurney.

She fights them, weakly, but she’s no match for their steady hands.

“I hate you, Jack,” she shouts as she gives me the finger. “Don’t do this to me, Jackie! I love you! You know that I do!”

We follow them out and watch as they load her into the open maw of the waiting ambulance.

My mother snaps her fingers and struggles to sit up. “Her name was Erin!”

Fallon gasps and she looks right at me. “We’re headed to Elmwood.”

41

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

Jack floors it, racing us toward Elmwood with his jaw clenched and eyes set dead ahead.

We both know there's no guarantee of how this night will end. The silence is thick, only broken by the hum of the engine and the soft panting of Buddy in the back seat. He jumped into the truck before we could stop him with his tail wagging like this was just another late-night adventure. If only it were that simple.

Thankfully, Riley didn't hear Sandy call out our sister's name. Riley and Jet think we're off to take care of paperwork. There's no point in endangering Riley. And I know for a fact if she knew where I was going that she'd be in the truck faster than Buddy and ten times as hard to evict.

I steal a glance at Jack as his hands grip the wheel tighter than usual. Knuckles white, jaw clenched.

My mind races, trying to process what his mother just let slip.

Erin. My little sister. She's not just tangled up with the Moretti crime family, but she's running girls for them.

A madame.

My stomach twists.

Erin, the girl who was supposed to be the brilliant one, the one who had it all together, had finally lost every single one of her marbles. She's fractured. Broken. And now it's up to me to put her back together again.

The roads are dark, slick with a shower that just drifted by, and the lights from the city flicker as we get closer to Elmwood. The streets here are no stranger to grime and wickedness.

Jack pulls up to the last known location where Gunther, the greasy pimp who controls most of the girls in this area, was spotted.

He parks the truck and kills the engine abruptly. We leap out, and Buddy bounds out right beside us. The cold air stings my face, but I hardly feel it. There's no time to waste.

We hit the streets hard, and flash a picture of Gunther and Erin at anyone and everyone who will give us the time—at anyone who dares make eye contact with us, but so far no one will admit that they know either of them.

We comb through alleyways, darkened storefronts, under bridges, anywhere those without hope might hide. But no one is willing to give us anything.

“We're getting nowhere. It was a good try,” Jack mutters under his breath. His hand finds the small of my back as he warms me and pulls me in. “Let's head home. We'll start fresh tomorrow.”

I'm about to nod when something catches my eye—a stocky figure down the street, and his bleached hair stands out like a neon light.

Gunther.

But it's not him that sends a jolt of adrenaline surging through my veins. It's the brunette standing next to him.

"Erin," I whisper, and my heart begins to pound as I bolt toward her. My feet slap the pavement as my body moves faster than my mind can catch up. She turns, just as our eyes meet, and suddenly it's as if time slows down.

I throw my arms around her, pulling her tight against me with no intention of ever letting go. Her body is rigid at first, but slowly, so painfully slowly, she gives in.

Her arms wrap around me, and we both break.

Tears blur my vision as I hold her, my little sister, the one who I thought was lost to me forever.

I pull back just enough to get a good look at her. She's different, harder, and by the looks of it, life has sanded down all her rough edges.

"A part of me wants to kill you," I say, my voice breaking between a sob and a laugh. "What were you thinking?"

She shrugs and her lips twist in that old familiar way. She looks so much like my father—like a perfect combination of both my mother and my father—it makes me want to cry.

"I wasn't thinking," she says. "I'm sorry. I couldn't take it. Watching Dad die like that... I couldn't handle it." She nods, her eyes locking on mine because we both know the truth regarding what happened that night.

We know that it was my gun that went off.

That I killed him.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

“I made you do it. It’s my fault,” she whispers as her voice cracks. “It’s my fault he’s dead and my fault you had to pull the trigger.”

“Fallon?” Jack says my name low like a warning. But in truth, it almost sounded as if he was saying it to himself, for his ears only.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, pulling my sister in again, holding her as tightly as I can. “You don’t have to run anymore. But just know, you put our family through hell.”

“I do know that.” She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and smears tears down her cheeks. “I needed to find myself. I wanted to get out and see the world.”

“Through the eyes of a cult?” I muse, but my frustration is simmering. I know for a fact eventually she landed in one until it disbanded. “And now you’re working for the mob? That’s not exactly an upgrade.”

Her face hardens. “You have no right to question my choices.”

“I do when they’re stupid, and they’re putting your life at risk.”

“My life. My choices.” Her eyes narrow as she takes a step back. “I’m not Fallon Baxter, FBI Barbie. I’m not Riley with the perfect life and a great boyfriend.”

“Riley’s boyfriend was a loser; they broke up. And I’m no Barbie,” I shoot back with a fire igniting in my gut. “I’m the real deal, Erin. And your words aren’t going to hurt me.”

A moment of silence slices by as her gaze sharpens over mine.

“I want them to,” she whispers.

“I know you do.” I can feel the weight of her anger pressing down on us, like the sky before a storm.

“So”—her shoulders bounce in that cute schoolgirl way they used to—“are you going to haul me back to Pine Ridge Falls, kicking and screaming?”

“No.” I lock my eyes on hers as my resolve hardens like granite. “I’m going to arrest you.”

42

SPECIAL AGENT FALLON BAXTER

The next evening the wind howls outside, rattling the windows like a thief trying to break in, but I’m safe here with Buddy curled up next to me in front of a fire. His soft snores mix with the crackling of the flames, and for a moment, everything feels still. It’s the quiet after the storm—the storm laden with chaos and killers that had overtaken our lives. But it’s over now. All of it.

I glance at my watch. Ten after seven.

Karen Holt’s arrest this morning feels like a lifetime ago. She received both human trafficking and racketeering charges. Nikki was ecstatic.

Jack and I made a pit stop on the way home and apologized to Phillis Hazelwood for the chaos we’d dragged her into. She didn’t hold it against us, though. In fact, she seemed relieved and more than thankful that we’d put away a killer—especially one

who'd taken her daughter away from her.

Erin flashes through my mind, the way she looked last night, standing there like a stranger and yet still very much my sister.

And as for Erin, I let her sit in a jail cell for several hours. I made sure they did a psych eval on her, too. I'd like to say it was menial and somewhat petty payback for all she put my mother, Riley, and me through these last few years, but alas, it was the law.

She made bail and is happily staying at my mother's place. We're all having breakfast in the morning, a twisted family reunion of sorts. We'll wade through the legal consequences of her arrest together.

My phone pings, and I pick it up, half-expecting it to be Hale, but it's not. It's Erin via my mother's phone.

It's me. Just wanted to say thank you—for everything. I'm going to make this up to you. To all of you.

I stare at the message for a second before texting back.

How about we start fresh?

The response comes almost immediately.

I'd like that.

"I would, too," I say aloud as I wrap an arm around Buddy's warm body. "Thanks for sticking with me, boy. Couldn't have done it without you." He snorts softly, already half asleep, but I know for a fact he understands.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

A knock at the door cuts through the silence, and I hop up to check the peephole.

It's Jack.

I swing the door open to find him standing there, windswept with a pizza in one hand and a very unimpressed cat in the other as leaves fly around him like crimson confetti.

"Well, well," I tease. "If it isn't someone I've been dying to see. Come here, Misty," I say, taking the cute kitty from him. "Stone, you can come in, too." I wink his way and he offers a lopsided grin.

"Extra pepperoni, extra cheese?" he says, hoisting up the box.

"I'd kick you out if it wasn't," I say as I shut the door behind him.

I let Misty down, and Buddy immediately chases her throughout the cabin.

"I wasn't expecting the cat," I say as he hands me the pizza, and I set it down on the coffee table before wrapping my arms around his neck. His hands find my waist and he pulls me closer.

Jack Stone holds the scent of a fresh shower, fresher cologne, and all of the pheromones my body requires to sit up at attention. The fire only adds to my smitten mood.

"I figured, like me, Misty needed to get out of the house," he says, his voice low, and

I take a moment to take him in. That dark scruff on his face, dark tousled hair, those neon eyes of his filled with dark intent. I can work with this.

“How is your mom?” I wrinkle my nose as I ask because I’m almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Feisty as ever.” He takes a deep breath. “Jet is with her, keeping her company. I figure they’re safe enough in the hospital, away from the ills of drugs and alcohol.”

“You do realize that place is a walking pharmacy.”

He closes his eyes for a second. “Let’s hope they lock up the meds like they’re supposed to.” His hands warm my back as his gaze pins onto mine.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

His lips twitch. “I’m thinking, kissing you is a privilege, not a right.” He ticks his head to the side as if to ask the question.

I nod, biting down a smile. “You’ve earned it.” I take him by the hand. “In fact, if you don’t mind, I’m awfully tired. I wouldn’t mind kissing you while lying down. Say—in the bedroom?” I lift a brow and inspect him.

Jack’s mouth falls open and he glances around as if waiting for a different reality to set in.

“Really?” He tips his head, a devilish smile curving on his lips.

“Really.” I shrug. “I guess it’s my lucky night.”

“You mean it’s my lucky night.”

I shake my head as I lead him deeper into my cabin. “I meant mine.”

“You think we can hit the hot tub afterward?”

“Only if you’re good.”

“Oh honey”—he pulls me close before picking me up off the floor with one swoop of his arms—“I will be very,verygood.”

And he is.

Tenforty-five

Text from Hale

Incident in progress. 12th and Kensington. Multiple casualties. I need all three of you down there now.

Jack and I groan in unison at the sight.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 2:02 am

“So much for the hot tub,” Jack says, pulling me close.

“The night is still young,” I say. “Let’s go catch a killer or two.”

“You’re right,” he says, landing a kiss to my lips. “We’ve got the rest of our lives to continue this party.”

“The rest of our lives?” I take a breath. “I like the sound of that.”

“That or forever,” he says, giving my ribs a tweak.

Our phones go off again, and this time we hit the ground running.

There’s a killer on the loose—forever will have to wait.