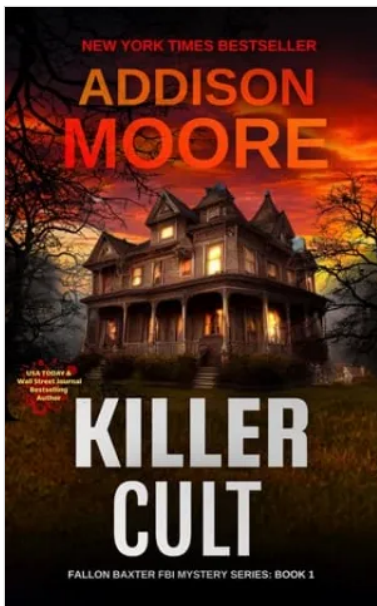




Killer Cult

Author: *Addison Moore*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: In the hunt for justice, FBI Agent Fallon Baxter unravels the deadliest mysteries.

Killer Cult: Believe. Obey. Survive.

Welcome to Paradise where faith meets fear, and salvation is written in blood.

When FBI Agent Fallon Baxter returns to her hometown of Pine Ridge Falls to join the local field office, she expects a fresh start and a chance to mend her broken past. Instead, she's thrust into the heart of darkness when a string of brutal murders shakes the quiet community.

The victims, found brutally murdered and linked only by their ties to the secretive Paradise Cult, draw Fallon into an investigation that spirals into the depths of danger and deceit.

Led by the charismatic and ruthless Supreme Leader, the cult preaches a doctrine of salvation through sacrifice and hiding evil motives beneath a veneer of spiritual enlightenment.

As Fallon digs deeper, she unearths chilling connections between the cult and her own troubled history. With the disappearance of her sister complicating matters, Fallon navigates a complex web of loyalty and betrayal.

As the body count rises, and the cult's deadly agenda becomes clear, Fallon faces a race against time to unravel the mystery. Every clue drags her closer to a shocking revelation that will challenge everything she knows about evil, heroism, and the thin line in between.

Total Pages (Source): 28

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

Emily Gannon

Panic grips me like an icy claw that squeezes my chest as I sprint through the dense underbrush that leads outside the compound.

The sky is black, not even a sliver of moonlight to illuminate my path or give me away. For that small mercy, I'm thankful.

I need to get out of here.

I need to get home, the home I closed my mind and my heart to all those years ago. Sarah and Lindsay flit through my mind. My living dolls, my little sisters who I abandoned. My rambunctious brother, Nate, who was forever teasing me yet loved me like no one else.

Tears sear my vision as my feet move faster.

The sound of my labored breathing enlivens the night, and the frantic beating of my heart echoes in my ears as dry leaves crush beneath my feet.

The air is warm against my skin despite the late hour. It's been hellishly hot during the day, the night no better, but it beats a Colorado winter by a mile. That's exactly why I had to wait for this time of year to begin with.

The heavy scent of pine stings my nostrils as my feet pound the dampness of the forest floor. It's quiet as death out here, a stark contrast to the adrenaline surging through my veins.

I never imagined the serene wilderness with its towering aspens, the distant hoot of an owl, would play a part in my nightmare.

I dart past the silhouettes of trees, fleeing from shadows that seem to loom at every turn despite the blinding darkness.

I remember the day I heard about Paradise. It had been a rough week—the kind that makes you question every decision you’ve ever made. I was wandering through Denver feeling more lost than usual when I stumbled upon a couple of girls. They were so charming, so fun, so full of everything I thought I wanted to be. They promised a community that offered what I had been seeking for so long, a sense of belonging, understanding, a true family.

My own family was never close-knit. My mother held her social clubs in higher esteem than her children. My father held his revolving door of mistresses even closer than that. I craved a connection that I never felt at home.

Stepping into Paradise was like stepping into a dream. People from all walks of life came together, united by a shared vision of living in harmony away from the chaos of the outside world. We cut ties with our past, which I did without a second thought. They said we were building our own Garden of Eden, a self-sufficient haven where love and community were all that mattered—despite the dark undercurrents, the dark things they made me do, and the darker things they did to me. I believed it, and wholeheartedly a part of me still does.

The days blended into one another, each filled with communal tasks, meditation, the devilish things done under the cover of darkness, and teachings from our leaders, whom we revered. They spoke of higher purposes, of souls intertwined, of a destiny far greater than any we could imagine alone.

It was everything I wanted to hear, to believe, and to have.

But there were discrepancies in what we were told versus what I saw. Once I became aware of them, they were ever-present. I couldn't deny them and neither could they.

But now it's all spiraled into this hellish sprint through the woods, fleeing from the very people I once considered my saviors. I came in seeking a family, and instead stumbled into a den of wolves. Now, here I am, running for my life, with the truth twisting in my chest like a knife.

I'm going home to Sarah, Lindsay, and Nate. My siblings whom I never should have left to begin with. I thought they'd be fine without me, but I've grieved for them deeply and I find it hard to believe they haven't grieved for me, too.

I'll get help as soon as I can. I need to get Grady out of that hellhole and our sweet baby girl Evelyn, too. I should have seen the signs when they started taking away pieces of myself—when they were taking pieces of others away, too.

In Paradise, every child is your child, a concept I was more than thrilled with right up until I had my own. Bonding was verboten. I was so on board with that before I had Evelyn. I still remember the way the mothers begged for their children and I gleefully kept them apart. They were in my arms, in my care for the first year of their life.

A one-year cleansing was to help bond the children to the rest of my so-called sisters. But people were forever sneaking children back to their mothers, something I disapproved of until one day someone put Evelyn right back in my arms.

And Grady, how much I love him. I never thought in a million years I'd meet the man who would steal my heart in the middle of the hell I've just escaped.

In Paradise, there is no perfect partner. All men are our husbands; all husbands are our perfect partners. Everyone is so very happy with that. Everyone but me. It killed Grady to see me with other men. It killed me even more.

Those dirty blue tents come back to mind and I quickly push them right back out.

Instead, my thoughts reel to my brother. He would kill everyone here if he knew what had happened to me. My precious Nate. We had our love of art in common. I would give anything to listen to him talk about politics for hours on end. But then, time has marched on, years slipping under the bridge as easy as water. My siblings are older now. Sarah is probably in grad school. Lindsay might be, too. Nate is probably looking forward to hunting in the fall.

I'll go back to school. I wish I never dropped out. If they don't let me back in, I'll apply to an art school. Heck, I'll eschew my scholastic dreams altogether and lose myself in my paintings. I hope my mother didn't throw any of my old work away.

The barn was my oasis where I could lose myself for hours in a world of oils and acrylics.

My father will welcome me home with open arms.

My mother will be harder to win back, but I don't care. I'm not above groveling at this point. I'm not above sleeping on the front porch if that's what it comes down to. I need them now more than ever before.

I need the freedom I had that I was too blind to see.

Freedom.

My panting increases as I struggle to catch my breath.

I can almost taste the freedom.

Freedom to do as I wish, when I wish, with whom I wish.

A dull laugh stifles in my throat.

Those were the exact reasons I gave when I chose to embrace the lifestyle in Paradise.

So many lies.

So many bad bad things they made me do, that they did to me.

I hate them.

I hope they rot in Hell.

My foot catches on a root, and I stumble, nearly falling. Panic surges in me anew. I can't slow down, not even for a second.

I think of my parents out there somewhere, possibly still searching for me.

Do they know what I've gotten myself into? Maybe they think I died all those years ago.

The guilt gnaws at me, but right now it's overshadowed by the primal urge to survive.

The chilling sound of a branch snapping echoes from behind.

"They know," I pant.

Too close.

I push myself harder, faster, and choose to ignore my burning lungs and legs screaming in protest.

The quiet solace of the night is something I once found comforting, and yet now it seems menacing, each rustle and whisper igniting the fear within me.

My foot catches on a branch this time.

A hand grasps my shoulder, yanking me back with horrifying strength, and I spin around to see my nightmare come to life, that red hood covering his features.

My breath catches in my throat.

“You can’t outrun your destiny,” he says, his words slicing through the night air like a knife.

My heart sinks because right now there are no truer words.

He grips his hands around my neck, and try as I might to fight him, I’m helpless to evict him. His grip is unrelenting.

Whoever the hell he is, I hate him.

My fingers claw at his arms, his hands, his neck.

Can’t breathe.

Lungs burn.

So much pain.

I glance to the stars for one final plea of mercy.

The world fades in and out like a fever dream.

The last few years of my life run through my memory in jags.

Each moment was a fatal mistake.

I clamp my hand over the top of his head and pluck the hood right off of him.

And then I see him for who he is.

His grip momentarily loosens as his eyes widen with surprise.

“It’s you.” I gasp just before he clamps over my neck with twice as much strength.

This time the world fades to black forever.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

They say there's no place like home, but what they don't tell you is that sometimes, home is where your darkest nightmares are waiting to come to life.

In the case of my hometown, they already have.

I could have made the drive from Reno to Pine Ridge Falls blindfolded if I had to. I have a feeling no matter where I was in this great nation, my internal compass would always be set to home, and I would always be able to make my way there.

After all, I know the way to Hell. I'm headed there now.

As I steer my car around another winding curve, the familiar rugged peaks of the Rocky Mountains welcome me like a pair of open arms—like the old friends they are. It's been two long years since I last drove these roads, two years since the chaos of my life made me swear off Pine Ridge Falls for good. Yet, here I am, heading back, drawn by both duty and desperation.

The little dusty gem of a town pops up abruptly, as it always does, tucked away in a valley that's lush with evergreens in the shadow of the towering mountains.

My heart thumps unnaturally at the sight of the waterfall that stands at the helm of Pine Ridge Falls. Its water cascades down with a force that seems to shake the entire planet. It always does.

I roll down the window of my 4Runner and let in the fresh, misty air that carries the

unmistakable scent of pine and wildflowers. It might be early summer, but there's still snow on the ground in patches and the frozen breeze does its best to steal the warmth from my truck. Despite the fact, I take in a deep breath and the scent of Pine Ridge Falls brings back a flood of memories, some good, most painful.

The rolling hills, the sharp crags of the mountain, I can't seem to drink them in fast enough as I navigate along the cobbled streets where most of the businesses are lined up like poorly performing fiscal soldiers.

I wouldn't say time left Pine Ridge Falls behind. It has its fair share of technology, usually by way of a glowing screen tucked into the palm of every hand, but something about this place screams mid-twentieth-century time capsule.

I navigate the familiar streets, noting how little has changed. The same old wooden sign that reads Welcome to Pine Ridge Falls stands proudly at the town's entrance. There's a carving of a bear cub hinged over the top of it, looking just as adorable as I remember. The sign looks a bit more weathered but just as welcoming. The old grocery store zips by, and the bakery flashes by as well with its windows glowing warmly against the backdrop of the mountains. It's comforting to see that some things remain constant.

A fancy new coffee shop greets me, then the laundromat, a bookstore, a candy shop—a real draw for tourists, but we don't get many. And lastly, I see exactly what I came for.

My destination is just ahead—Bea's Diner.

Bea as in Beatrice Baxter, my mother.

The sight of it squeezes my heart.

Mom's diner is quaint with a slightly faded sign. The red checkered curtains in the window give it a homey appeal. There's a smaller sign next to the door, promising of the best blueberry pancakes this side of the Rockies.

I press my lips together as I blink back tears. It looks exactly as I remember. Exactly how I remembered it that night.

I park in a spot out front and sit for a moment to gather my thoughts.

Returning here wasn't an easy decision.

My sister Erin blinks through my mind. My sister Riley does as well. Next, it's my father's turn, but with him I just see the blood splatter. Then lastly, my mother with my Glock in her hand.

"Wonderful," I mutter as I force myself out of the truck before I change my mind and head straight back to Nevada.

No sooner do my feet land on the ground than the sound of the distant falls embraces me like an old friend. It's late morning, but the fog is still hugging the ground and I can feel the mist brushing against my skin, a cold reminder of the mysteries that lie hidden in this town.

I pull my jacket tighter around me, steeling myself as I head for the entrance. It's not just the warmth of the diner or my mother's embrace I'm here for—it's the search for truth in a place that, for all its beauty, harbors a very dark secret beneath its surface.

As much as I'd like to brag that I know each and every one of them, I have a feeling I know just enough to be dangerous.

The sign reading Bea's Diner flickers above the entry. Like a lot of things in Pine

Ridge Falls, it's holding on to its charm by a thread. The windows are streaked with the muddy trails of countless storms and a part of me wonders if it's a harbinger for things to come.

Inside, it's light and bright, a touch too warm with the scent of freshly grilled burgers and fries alerting me to the fact it's just about lunchtime.

Eighties music plays softly from the speakers, and just above that is the chatter of happy customers. A few families sit scattered about, a handful of couples, and just about as many singles are hunched over their meals and coffee.

The interior, much like the exterior, wears its age with a certain dignity quickly overshadowed by a cry for renovations. Red Naugahyde seats pepper the place with color, their surfaces cracked and peeling just like the walls. The black and white checkered floor, once pristine, now shows signs of wear. The ample counter up front is chipped and faded and yet stands proud like a true testament to years of service. The last three of those years has been in the hands of my mother.

She was the head waitress here just before that, ever since she graduated from high school. It's safe to say I've grown up here, but that was when it was called the Corner Café.

In elementary school, I'd help my mother wait tables, in junior high, I hid behind a stack of menus from the embarrassment of being seen at my mother's place of employment, and in high school, I sat in the alley out back with the stoners hoping the cute boys would notice me. That last bit didn't happen until much later and not in Colorado. It turns out, the boys in Virginia found me much more their type, especially the boys in Quantico.

I half-expected to see my mother behind the counter as soon as I set foot in this place. She knows I'm coming, so that's the reception I rehearsed in my mind. Her presence

is as much a part of this place as the diner itself.

Instead, my eyes fall on another face, one that feels just as much like family, and I make a beeline his way.

“Well, well,” I say with a laugh trapped in my throat. “I knew I was in Hell, but I didn’t think I’d get to see the devil himself.”

His lips curl at the tips because he knows I’m right.

Page 3

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Fallon Baxter? Is that really you?” he says with a laugh, and soon I’m ensconced in a rocking embrace by the first boy who pushed me out of a treehouse when we were twelve. Okay, so the only boy who attempted to send me to an early grave.

“Robby Reed.” I pull back and examine him, same stark blue eyes, dimpled smile, and nefarious intent written on his face, albeit with more gray peppered in his hair and beard. He’s clad in a navy uniform—not a surprise. I knew he was a deputy, but I spot that shiny badge on his chest and gasp. “Sheriff? Look at you go, Robby!”

“That’s right,” he says. “And it’s just Rob now, and as far as this badge goes, you’d better watch your back.”

“I guess I’ll have to. Nice to know you’ve been moving up in the world since I’ve been away, Rob.”

“You know me. I always have a plan B.”

Something soft rubs up against my shin and I glance down with a start, half-ready to reach for my gun when I spot a fully grown, fully adorable yellow lab.

“Hey there, cutie. What are you doing here?” I ask, offering up a quick pat to his back.

“That’s my buddy,” Rob says. “Whose name just so happens to be Buddy.”

“I see.” I laugh as I give the powder-white cutie a scratch between the ears.
“Creative,” I tease.

Robby has always been the kind of friend that I can say anything to. He had his friends, and I had mine, but our social Venn diagrams crossed often enough for us to feel as if we ran in the same circles.

“What can I say? I needed a friend.”

“You? Lonely?” I shake my head as we settle across from one another at the booth.
“If memory serves correct, you always had a girl or two on your arms—scratch that, more like six. And if I really stretch my memory, I recall you liked them young—as in barely legal.”

“Watch it,” he says, pushing his pancakes my way and I pinch off a piece and pop it into my mouth.

“Oh man, these are as good as I remember.” I glance to the counter where a few waitresses load up on plates brimming with breakfast offerings, but still no sign of my mother.

“So what brings you to town?” he asks, gripping his coffee and I’m suddenly wishing I could do the same. “What’s it been, sixteen years?”

“Two,” I say, kicking him from under the table. “And I’m here because Nevada got a little too hot for me.” I’m not getting into the specifics right now. Maybe not ever.
“Besides, my mother needs me.”

“She’s got Riley.” He shrugs at the mention of my older, questionably wiser sister.
“How’s she doing, anyway?”

“Riley and her boyfriend own their own hauling business—Pick-It-Clean. Apparently, they’re making enough to keep a roof over their heads, and right now that’s plenty. I want everyone I care about to be warm, fed, and housed, including me.”

“How was Quantico?” he asks as his demeanor sobers up. His eyes slide down my sweater before tracking up to meet my gaze once again.

“It was about as intense as I thought it’d be. You should have come when I threw out the invite.”

“Still not interested. So they sent you to Nevada? I would have rather been buried alive.”

“And had that happened, you might have ended up on my radar,” I say with a laugh as Buddy hops up and sits right next to me. “Here you go,” I say, pinching off another edge of the pancake and the hungry pooch eats it right out of my hand. “Don’t worry,” I say to Rob. “There weren’t any blueberries in that bite. So what’s happening with you now that you’re the big man around here? I bet you have to fight them off with your nightstick. And I bet you enjoy it, too.”

“Can’t deny it.” He waggles his brows and looks as cunning as he did as a kid. But we’re not kids anymore. We’ve crested thirty without our permission, and here we are, two law enforcement officers vying over the affection of the world’s cutest dog. It’s sort of where I had envisioned us all along.

“So you’re back for good?” he asks. “I thought you moved up north because they needed assistance.”

“Two years’ worth of assistance. What can I say? Turns out, I like to gamble. My gambling had much more to do with men than it did money, but it was an equally

losing proposition. Not to mention that I helped to take down six serial killers, helped shut down a human trafficking ring, and participated in my very first drug bust.”

“Sounds like someone is keeping score. I approve.” His head bobs at the thought. “It means you’re good, you’re dedicated. Are you keeping score in any other department?” He glances down at my chest once again.

“You are still the same dirty dog I left behind, aren’t you? And no, I am most certainly not keeping score in that department.” Mostly because it would be abysmal, but I keep that part to myself.

“Well, when the scoreboard lights up again, give me a chance to get on the roster, would you? How long do I have to wait to get in on that action?”

“How about we revisit the idea of you being buried alive?” I laugh right at him. “What’s your scoreboard, and I’m not talking about women.”

“A few felonies, mostly small-time stuff. Busted the mob and confiscated enough cyanide to kill the entire state. How’s that for bragging rights?”

“Perfectly lethal,” I say with a laugh. “Got any hot cases you can use a federal agent’s assistance with?”

“No can do. I don’t need the feds sniffing around, no matter how pretty they are.” He shoots me with his fingers. “There’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Well, that’s just a bald-faced lie if ever there was one,” a familiar sweet female voice resonates from behind and I jump to my feet because it’s one I know all too well.

“Mom.” I pull her into a tight embrace and inhale her lilac scent as if it were the exact

medicine I needed to cure what ails me. Heck, it most likely is. I pull back and examine her. We share the same dark hair, or we did. Hers is curled near her ears and well on its way to being completely gray and mine glides past my shoulders. Same pale gray eyes, same propensity to eat one cupcake too many, and our hips are quick to brag about the fact. “Oh, I’ve missed you.”

“Now that’s a lie straight from the pit,” she says, giving my ribs a tweak. “If you missed me, you would have come back two years ago.” She pulls back and gives Buddy a quick scratch. “Now let me get my apron on. I just stepped out to run to the bank.”

“Ooh, the bank?” I say. “I’m glad to hear things are going well.”

“They’re going well enough.” She nods to Rob. “Now you tell her the truth about the things that have been happening around here before another dead body all but falls from the ceiling.” She hugs me once more. “It’s been raining corpses around here.” She takes off for the cash register and I fall back into my seat.

“Raining corpses?” I offer Rob a stern look. “Speak now, Reed, or I’ll be forced to raid your case files.”

“Four homicides in a year’s time is hardly a need to invite the feds to the party. This is my party. My case, my rules. Besides, I’ve got a team on it.”

“You’ve always been a touch too proud for your own good.” I sigh as I stare him down. “You want to share the details? Or do I have to turn to the internet to fill in the blanks.”

“I’ll fill in the blanks if you fill in a few first,” he says, leaning in. “What was the real reason you stayed in Nevada for so long?” He glares at me as if he took it as a personal slight. “You love your family too much to abandon them like that, especially

with everything going on.”

A lump forms in my throat and I swallow it down. “There was a sighting of Erin there while I was in Quantico, so I asked to be stationed up there. I thought I’d hang around and see if I could find her myself. I didn’t.”

Erin is my younger sister, younger by a year, and yet just as questionably intelligent as my older sister. Erin was a child prodigy when it came to academia. My parents always said she was too smart for her britches, and about three years ago I started to believe them. She’s been missing for about that long. No foul play detected; she just wandered off and gave us the finger more or less—or at least the technological equivalent, a dear John letter to the family via text stating she needed some space. She wished us all a nice life.

Rob grunts as he considers it, “She’s not in Nevada.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Someone spotted her at a liquor store out near Ironwood Springs about three months ago.”

“What?” I hiss so loud, Buddy sits up straight. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now. Besides, I wanted to be sure it was her. And after some digital analysis of the security footage, I’m pretty sure it was.”

My heart thumps wildly. “Did you tell my mother?”

“I’m saving that for you.”

My phone pings before I can pick up a menu, but with that news about Erin, I’m too

amped up to eat anyway.

I glance at the screen and shake my head.

“It looks as if we won’t need you to call the feds regarding those bodies you’re racking up,” I tell him. “My shiny new SAC just let me know they found a head up in Cheyenne—the rest of the body was located in a creek somewhere outside of Denver. I just got my own invite to the party.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

I'll admit, the revelation about Erin twisted my guts with equal parts hope and dread that I can't quite swallow down.

But I do my best to push that out of my mind for now as I follow Rob down to Denver and straight to the FBI Field Office.

As much as I want to place all of my focus on my missing sister, as soon as I got the message to hightail it to headquarters, Rob offered to not only come along, but lead the way. I didn't object. My head is spinning and I can get turned around on the unfamiliar roads just as good as anybody.

The last thing I want is to leave a bad impression on my new SAC, the Special Agent in Charge.

Erin might still be haunting my mind, but duty calls, and right now that duty is slicing like a scalpel through any personal turmoil I might be feeling.

The news about the body, or rather parts of it, scattered between Cheyenne and Denver, jars me back to reality. This is what I'm here for, and yet in the back of my mind, there's a sense of dread every time I'm called to look at a body. I'm half-afraid that's how I'll finally be reunited with Erin, in a cold coroner's office—worse yet, as a silent yet violent picture that my SAC shows off while rattling on about the latest Jane Doe.

The drive to headquarters is a blur, but I do my best to recalibrate and refocus on the

Rocky Mountains looming straight ahead, those silent watchers of so much chaos.

We pull in, park, and jog up to the building, a fortress of glass and metal.

Rob, Buddy, and I make our way through the security checkpoints that are set to a heightened alert before dashing down a series of sterile, fluorescent-lit corridors that lead to the situation room. A dark-haired man and a redhead are seated at an elongated table, while a balding man with a paunch belly stands at the head of the room rifling through a stack of files.

He looks up and nods expectantly my way.

“Special Agent Fallon Baxter,” I say. “And this is Robby—Sheriff Rob Reed.”

The balding man frowns. “Special Agent in Charge Grant Hale,” he says, coming over and shaking my hand. “Nice to finally meet you. I’ve got a special-issued laptop and phone waiting for you downstairs. Be sure to pick them up before you leave the building.” He sizes Rob up for a moment. “You’re the sheriff from?—”

“Elmwood County,” Rob says. “I was with Fallon when she got your message. I didn’t mind showing her the way.”

“Nice,” Grant says with that frown still stationed on his face. “You’re welcome to stay.”

“He should,” I say. “He’s got a few cold cases that might be related.”

“I’m aware,” Grant says, forcing a smile in Rob’s direction, but there’s nothing nice about it. “Fallon, meet Special Agent Nikki Knight and Special Agent Jackson Stone.”

“Just Jack.” The dark-haired man holds up a finger, looking mildly annoyed. He’s textbook handsome, a little rough around the edges with lots of dark stubble and cobalt eyes that glow juxtaposed against all that fur. He looks as if he might have five to ten years on me, landing on the outer edge of forty somewhere.

Nikki is harder to place chronologically—women by and large usually are. She’s beautiful, with cut features, robed in a navy pantsuit, and has a no-nonsense vibe about her.

Both of them look ready to get down to business.

“Nice to meet you,” I say as Rob and I take a seat.

The screen at the front of the room lights up, and soon enough a headless body glows before us. It’s a partially naked torso lying with the lower half submerged in what looks like a creek. A blue skirt with lots of fabric sits bunched up above the victim’s knees, and a blouse of some sort is covered with mud and most likely blood.

“Coroner says it was a series of clean slices that severed the head,” Grant says, zooming in on the neck. “This took a lot of muscle, so whoever did this was very strong or very angry but by no means an expert. Coroner says the vic was most likely dead prior to the decapitation. Body was dumped into the water initially, but we think an animal tried to drag it to land. According to the decomposition, death occurred about forty-eight hours prior to discovery.”

“Who discovered it?” Nikki asks, jotting down notes on the pad in front of her, or come to think of it, she might be doodling.

Grant nods. “A father and son who routinely fish at the end of this road.”

“Now that will make for great Thanksgiving dinner conversation for years to come,”

Rob says and a lethal silence fills the room.

“Rob.” I wrinkle my nose at him as if he just let a foul odor fly. “Not everyone here gets your humor.” I glance over at the SAC. “I’ve known him all my life and I still don’t get it.”

“I get it,” Jack says with a stone-cold expression just as his surname suggests. “I just didn’t think it was funny.”

“Thanksgiving is over six months away,” I tell him and then immediately regret it. Did I just say that out loud? Who the heck cares about National Slaughter a Turkey Day in the middle of a criminal investigation? Way to make yourself look like an idiot. I nod to the SAC in hopes he’ll have mercy and carry on.

He ticks his head to the side and does just that. “The head was found near Cheyenne this morning. CSI completed their investigation at the scene and it’s in forensics’ hands. The head has been reunited with the body at the coroner’s office. Stone, you can take Baxter and give her the tour. Knight, you work with forensics until they get you a set of prints so we can give our Jane Doe a proper name.”

Nikki nods. “I’ll scour the databank for missing persons who might fit the bill as well.”

“What about the cold cases you’re working on?” I ask Rob.

Grant chews on his lip. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I ask, hoping we’ll dig into every cold case Rob can give us. If anything, we can help bring justice to the families that are waiting for answers.

“You take it, Baxter. Dig in that direction,” he says. “You seem especially interested

and that should translate to motivation. Hopefully, it might put a dent in something.” He points a finger at Nikki and Jack. “She’s excited to be here. Don’t pull her down in your vortex of doom. We need that kind of energy to revitalize this place. I want the victim identified and a killer in handcuffs. Make it happen.” He nods to Rob. “Sheriff, thank you for requesting our assistance.”

“I didn’t request.” Rob scowls my way and I bite down on a smile.

It’s been my life’s work to aggravate him socially and the fact I can now do it professionally is the icing on the cake.

“You did by proxy,” Grant says. “The three of you exchange numbers and emails,” he says, nodding to Nikki, Jack, and me. “You”—he points to Rob— “come with me and I’ll show you the state-of-the-art forensic lab we just installed. That might motivate you to call on us more often.” He starts to take off then backtracks. “Stone, when the two of wrap up at the coroner’s office, start in on those cold cases. What’s your plan of action after that?”

“Follow the money,” Jack grunts. “That’s always my plan of action.”

“Good move,” Grant says, shooting him with his fingers. “Let me know what you come up with.”

Hale and Rob disappear out of the room, causing Buddy to whimper, so I give him a hearty scratch between the ears.

Nikki starts tapping into her phone like mad, while Jack stares me down as if I were motivating him to reach for his weapon.

“Follow the money?” I say just above a whisper, and yet again regret the words ever leaving my lips. It sounded as if I were placating him. I was, but that’s not the point.

His left eye comes shy of closing and there's a smugness on his face I'd suddenly love to wipe off, but a growl works its way up my throat instead.

I've never instantly disliked someone, but right now I'm getting close.

He inches back, looking mildly amused. "Did you just growl at me?"

"Must have been the dog." The lie speeds out of me so fast, but I don't mind because I'm too busy staring him down hard enough to let him know exactly who the guilty party is.

A light laugh strums from Nikki as she scoops up her things. "Where are you staying, Baxter?"

"Pine Ridge Falls," I say. "I grew up there, but right now I'm renting a place just down from the lake."

"Whispering Woods Cabins?" Jack asks, lifting a brow.

"Yes," I say, shocked at how well he guessed it. "Boy, you really are good at your job."

"I'm not stalking you," he says, deadpan. "I happen to live there myself."

"Well, well." Nikki laughs. "It looks as if you two already have lots in common." She breezes past me. "We'll talk soon. There are some things I'd love to catch you up on." She takes off and Jack rises from his seat as well.

"What things?" he calls after her and nothing but laughter echoes through the hall. He gives Buddy a hearty scratch on the head and sighs. "See the things I've got to put up with?" He frowns my way. "All right, Special Agent Baxter. It's you and me—we've

got a hot date at the morgue.”

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Special Agent Jack Stone

Fallon follows me for twenty minutes down winding roads as we head to the coroner's office. I stole glances in the rearview mirror to make sure she was still there. But I'll admit, I was tempted to shake her tail, my way of hazing her.

We arrive and I lead Fallon through the brightly lit corridors of the coroner's office. Nothing but a labyrinth of stainless steel with the pervasive scent of antiseptic hanging heavy in the air. The walls are painted a ubiquitous shade of beige designed to soothe yet somehow feel more depressing, and each one is dotted with posters that extol the virtues of forensic pathology.

The buzz of the ventilation system murmurs in the background, and other than that the only sound is the squeak of our shoes until we hit the beehive of activity in the main office.

The place is teeming with bodies and buzzing with an undercurrent of energy as assistants scurry back and forth with a stack of papers in hand. I can appreciate their dedication, a commitment to uncovering the truths that the deceased can no longer voice themselves. That's exactly where my dedication lies as well.

"So, where's the dog?" I try to lighten the mood as we thread our way through the cavernous room. Fallon is stunning, but stunning women are a dime a dozen. Stunning women in this line of work, not so much. Although Nikki is a looker herself. But I have a strict leave my co-workers alone policy. I never said I was smart. "You two seemed pretty attached back at the office."

She rolls her eyes, but there's a hint of a smile there. "Buddy isn't mine. He belongs to Robby—Rob, Sheriff Reed to you."

"I see." I tick my head as I say it. "And what about the boyfriend? Robby?" I shoot her a look as I use his informal moniker, but she doesn't seem amused by my abuse of power. "Should we be expecting him?"

"No boyfriend," she shoots back. "I'm not seeing Rob or anyone else. I'm here for work, not some soap opera subplot."

"Soap opera subplots aren't mandatory in a relationship, you know. I hear a compatible pairing can be useful for companionship."

"I'd rather have the dog."

I swallow down a laugh. "I'd rather have a dog, too, but I got stuck with a cat," I mutter under my breath, but it's true, nevertheless.

I leave out the part where I inherited the feline the day my mother had to report to prison. You know what they say, save some fun for later.

We make our way to the back, passing doors labeled Autopsy Room, Cold Storage, and Examination Room. That last one is where we find the coroner, Miller Thompson.

Miller is a good guy, mid-fifties, tall, beer belly, a swath of dark hair that's quickly dissipating, and an overall friendly demeanor that reminds me of a football coach I once had in high school. He's known for his expertise and knowledge—and we can't forget his unique sense of humor, even if it leans to the grim side. But in a place like this, that's the only side there is.

The room itself is filled with steel walls, mostly drawers filled with the deceased, and a few tables with sheets over bodies. The hum of the refrigeration unit fills the silence along with the faint sound of a phone ringing in the distance.

We find Miller hovering over a cadaver that's been divided into pieces.

Her head has been placed just above her body, and you wouldn't know she was decapitated, save for the two-inch gap that separates them. The woman is a brunette, medium-length hair matted on one side. Her skin is pale, gray to be exact, lips almost non-existent, and the whites of her eyes shine like tomatoes with a hazel iris lost in a sea of crimson. She has a slightly turned-up nose, gaunt cheeks, was pretty.

Her body lies naked, bearing the same pale gray cast as her skin. On the metal tray table next to her, there is an array of scalpels spread out on a bright blue towel.

A Y-incision is carved right down her torso, but Miller has already closed her up. I'm good with that. It's not my favorite part. A magnifying glass lies near her head, and I'd expect nothing less since Miller does a great job of inspecting the minute details.

I glance back at Fallon to gauge her reaction. The first time I saw something gruesome like this my stomach did a revolution and the room swayed beneath my feet, but Fallon doesn't seem to flinch. I'm guessing it's not her first gruesome rodeo.

"Stone." Miller nods my way, clad in a white coat already stained with blood and gore. He nods to Fallon. "Miller Thompson," he says affably. "I'd shake your hand, but considering where it's been, we can save that for another time."

"I appreciate it." She laughs, and I take a moment to frown at her. She didn't laugh with me in the hall. Seems like Miller is suddenly her best friend. "Special Agent Fallon Baxter. I just transferred from Reno."

“Oh.” Miller gives a goofy half-smile. “Love that place. What brings you this way?”

I know he’s not hitting on her, but something doesn’t sit right with me, despite the fact.

Miller has a wife going on three decades and three children, the oldest of whom is wrapping up high school. He’s a good dad, and I’m guessing just as good in the matrimonial department.

“Family,” she says quickly. “And work.” Her cadence slows with that second response as she looks my way.

But the first answer was the correct one. The faster it streams from the mouth, the closer to the truth it is. I can understand the need to be around family, even with a family like my own.

Miller points my way. “Speaking of family—Mitch is here, running around.”

“That’s my brother,” I say to Fallon, not that I would have brought it up myself. Mitch is the only sane one in the family. My own sanity is still suspect even to me. “He runs the morgue out of Elmwood. Probably doing a pickup.”

“That’s exactly what he’s doing.” Miller nods to the body before us and his jaw tightens. “Forensics took the prints. You should get a report soon enough. For now, she’s Jane Doe Number One. Death was caused by strangulation. You could still see the contusions around her neck before it was severed. And it seems her head was severed after rigor mortis set in, so anywhere from two to twenty-four hours after death. You’ll notice the livor mortis, or postmortem lividity, is quite pronounced here.” He gestures toward the bluish-purple discoloration on the skin. “It indicates that the body was left in one position for a while after death before being moved. Helps us understand the timeline.”

Fallon leans in slightly. “And rigor mortis?”

Miller nods. “Rigor mortis had fully set in, which you can tell by the stiffness of the limbs.” He gently lifts an arm, demonstrating its resistance. “It starts around two to six hours after death and can last up to seventy-two hours. Given its state, I’d say she’s been dead no less than twelve hours and likely not more than twenty-four when found.” He sighs for a moment. “Her backside was covered with fresh black soil, the front half with dark clay. Most of her was submerged when they found her.”

“Two different ground soils, you think they moved the body?” I ask.

“It would seem so.” He picks up a long metal prong and tilts her knee. “The dark soil stained her clothes and clung to her skin. The clay was caked on her front side.”

“Why decapitate the woman after strangling her?” Fallon shakes her head as she examines the body. “Seems brutal even for a killer.”

“Why drive her corpse over a hundred miles away?” I counter. “I would have moved the head. A lot less grunt work.”

“Easy.” Fallon buries a smile in her cheek. “They crossed state lines. They wanted us on the case.”

Miller and I chuckle at that one. But there’s a level of unease in my stomach.

“Now that would be something,” I say. “Although they could have killed her in Colorado and moved her head to Cheyenne. Killed her out in the woods where the soil is richer, dumped her in the river among the clay.” Now that I think about it, I’m betting that’s exactly what happened. I nod over at Miller. “Any signs of sexual assault?”

He ticks his head to the side. “No signs of forced entry if that’s what you mean. She was sexually active, but no tears or contusions to report.”

Fallon looks from me to him. “You realize that doesn’t mean a whole lot. She still could have been raped. We can’t rule it out.”

“We won’t,” I’m quick to tell her. The last thing I want is to put out the wrong impression when it comes to how I feel about protecting women and bringing them justice whether living or dead. I hook my gaze to hers and nod, letting her know I can appreciate the gravity of the situation, but she doesn’t look convinced.

When I started out, I was shocked to see how jaded some of my co-workers could be, and I promised myself I’d never get anywhere near that self-righteous emotionally isolative place.

My victims are real people who deserve the exact same brand of dedication to justice no matter who they were or what socioeconomic background they came from. And that’s where my commitment lies.

Fallon pulls out her phone and begins to document the scene in pictures and I do the same. I watch as she taps away, jotting down notes as she studies the body, pausing a little too long as she takes in the woman’s face.

The woman looks about the same age as Fallon, late twenties maybe. Same bone structures, she could qualify as family. I bet it’s striking a chord with her.

“What else have you got?” I ask and Miller purses his lips as he glances at the body.

“There is something about this case that doesn’t sit right with typical homicides of this kind,” he says, tapping a metal prong against the table. “The precision in the decapitation, it’s too clean, almost surgical. You don’t see that level of expertise

outside of a professional setting.”

“Oh?” Fallon pauses to look up from her screen. “Maybe the killer had some sort of special anatomical knowledge.”

Miller nods. “Which isn’t common among your average perpetrators.” His phone rings and he grunts at the screen. “I’d better take this. Stay as long as you like. Nice to meet you,” he says to Fallon before taking off into the next room.

“Not your average killer,” she says in an almost dreamlike state as she runs her gaze across the body.

“Nothing about this killer makes sense.”

We hang around for another fifteen minutes before heading out the door and bump into a tall stack of muscles, dark hair with a brooding face that I know all too well.

“Mitch,” I say, slapping his hand before pulling him in for a partial embrace. He’s clad in a suit, his usual attire for a pick up, and looks as if he’s had a long day already. He’s less than a year older than me, miles smarter, and has always had better luck with the ladies.

“Fallon, this is my brother that I was telling you about, Mitch Decker.”

Mitch tips his head and moans just loud enough for me to hear as he holds out a hand her way.

“Don’t tell me this knucklehead brought you to the county coroner’s office for a date.”

Fallon laughs once again, a bright belly laugh, and I’m starting to get offended.

“Special Agent Fallon Baxter,” she says, shaking his hand. “This knucklehead is my new co-worker. I just landed back in Colorado after a two-year stint in Nevada. Stone and I are working on a case.”

He nods. “Great. Maybe you can teach him a thing or two.” He winks my way and gives me a look that suggests he’d like to teach Fallon a thing or two before excusing himself and taking off.

“Your brother seems nice,” she says.

“You sound surprised.” I frown as I lead us out of the labyrinth at hand.

“Well, I did meet you first,” she muses and her sense of humor isn’t lost on me. Not that I’ll be laughing any time soon myself. “So where to now?”

“Whispering Woods,” I say, cutting her a look. “We’re going home.”

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Staring at a decapitated corpse managed to curb my appetite right past lunch and well into dinner.

I'm not a novice when it comes to corpses, but I'll admit, seeing that poor woman lying in pieces was gut-wrenching.

I kept seeing Erin's face, Erin's body in her place. For all I know, Erin could be a Jane Doe Number One with a toe tag stuck in some county morgue. And boy, was I tempted to start opening and closing those refrigerated drawers at the coroner's office at random. It took everything in me to stop from shoving a picture of my sister in the coroner's face.

But I know all too well that corpses rarely resemble the smiling faces frozen in a snapshot. Besides, I didn't want Jack Stone gawking at my grief. And I do grieve my sister even though I refuse to believe she's gone.

A thought comes to me. Rob has evidence of her from just three months ago at some liquor store out in Elmwood.

I wince at the thought.

Elmwood isn't too far from here, but it's the seediest town in all of Colorado. The only things I associate Elmwood with are crack whores and the crack addict boyfriends who pimp them out. I doubt anything good has ever come from Elmwood, and I'd hate to think that Erin is stuck in some seedy motel turning tricks for her next

hit. If that's true, then she needs me more than ever.

The last we heard from her was about six weeks after she took off. She sent a message to the group chat with my mother, my sister Riley, and me that simply said, I don't want to be found. Nothing more, nothing less.

Speaking of Riley, she texted before I left the coroner's office and said she had a big job out in Denver that would bleed into the evening. She promised we'd get together soon enough.

I pull into the Whispering Woods' enclave of cabins that are scattered throughout a rugged landscape brimming with evergreens. Pine Ridge Lake sits to the right, and some of the more expensive rentals have a decent view of the water. That's exactly what I paid for.

I've made a few nickels working for the feds, and seeing that I'm lousy at spending it on myself, I thought I'd splurge when it came to housing. But now that I'll have to repeat the monetary offence once a month, I'm starting to have renter's remorse.

My cabin is a two-bedroom beauty that looks as if it was crafted entirely out of Lincoln logs. I wheel my suitcase up the gravel driveway and to the porch, before letting myself in to find an idyllic cozy cabin furnished with a plush gray sectional that faces a TV big enough to outfit a drive-in. The floors, the walls, the dining room table, and the coffee table are all fashioned from honey-stained pine. The living room opens up to the dining room and kitchen. The cold white marble counters look shiny and new, the cabinets match the floors, and the appliances are gleaming stainless. If I knew anything about a kitchen appliance, I'm sure I would be impressed.

I give a quick glance in the bedrooms, one double-wide bed, one queen. The property management company assured me that everything had been laundered and is ready to go. A washer-dryer combo sits in an alcove in the hall. There's a shared bathroom,

one for the whole place, and that's more than enough for me.

The view of the lake is from the rear and the bedroom window. But outside of the view to the lake, it was the hot tub sitting out back that sealed the deal. In fact, a nice long soak in a boiling cauldron doesn't sound half bad right about now. Just thinking about it relaxes every inch of me.

A knock erupts at the door and my muscles tense right back up again.

"It's Stone," a deep voice gruffs.

That's right. I seemed to have acquired Jack Stone as both a co-worker and an obnoxious neighbor.

I head to the door to let him in and am more than surprised to see Nikki right there with him.

She's traded her pantsuit for yoga pants and a T-shirt, and her crimson locks are piled on top of her head. Jack is still wearing his suit, and in his arms he's carrying a pizza with a hot pink box on top of that with the word donuts stamped over it.

"Pizza and donuts?" I muse as the two of them file in.

"Clearly, he's not interested in meeting our nutritional needs," Nikki says as she takes in the place.

"Hey, I'm interested in meeting the needs of women," he quips as he lands the food on the coffee table. "Just not the nutritional variety."

"Oh, he's funny," I say, shooting Nikki a look.

She nods. “About as funny as the rest of the men on the team. Welcome aboard, Baxter.” She pulls a few water bottles out of her tote bag. “I brought the libations.”

“Thank you.” At least those I approve of. Heck, I approve of the pizza and donuts, too. I haven’t exactly been meeting my nutritional needs either.

Jack does a quick search of the inside of the cabin as if he were hunting down a criminal before peeking out the back slider.

“Sweet,” he says. “Looks like we’ve got a hot tub. Can’t wait.”

My mouth opens for a moment. “It looks like I’ve got a hot tub,” I correct him before looking over at Nikki. “You’re welcome to try it out any time.”

“What about me?” Jack says as they settle onto the sofa and I dig out a few paper towels to accommodate us.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath for an invite.”

The three of us dive into the pizza first, pepperoni with sausage. It’s from a place called Luigi’s that I used to live off of. Extra cheese is just a part of the recipe. They’re not shy with the pizza sauce either, and lucky for me, it has just the right tang.

“Oh, I’ve missed Luigi’s,” I moan through a bite. “They have the best pizza in all of Pine Ridge Falls.”

“All of Colorado,” Jack says before taking a bite that encompasses half the slice in his hand.

“What brings you to Pine Ridge?” I ask while balancing my pizza with the remote

and turning on a basketball game on low volume.

“It’s not Elmwood,” he says. “That’s where I grew up. My family is still there.”

And I’m back to wondering if anything good can come from Elmwood.

“How about you, Nikki?” I ask.

“Other side of the falls,” she says, taking a quick sip of her water. “I’m up in Silver Peak.”

Silver Peak is less than a ten-minute drive, and it has less of a rural appeal than Pine Ridge Falls since the town was highly redeveloped about fifteen years ago. It’s a polished stone in a sea of untamed wilderness.

“Well”—I say, toasting her with my pizza—“everyone knows Silver Peak has better coffee.”

We share a quick laugh before scarfing down two-thirds of the pizza and half of the donut box before busting out our laptops.

“So what did you do before deciding to join the FBI?” Nikki asks, glancing my way. “I worked cybersecurity in the medical system.”

“Homicide detective,” Jack offers as the two of them zero in on me, awaiting an answer.

“I actually—I have a couple of distant relatives in the force and they inspired me. One was a behavioral analyst for the FBI and the other is a judge up in Vermont. I got my bachelor’s in criminal justice and my graduate degree in forensic psychology.” I tell them. “Then I went on to work as a criminal analyst for a few private

investigators. There were three. It didn't pay much and every case revolved around a cheating spouse."

"I'm impressed," Jack says, holding my gaze a second too long. "All right, Nikki Knight." He nods her way. "What did you get from forensics?"

"The victim's prints yielded the jackpot this afternoon. Her name is Emily Gannon. She was twenty-seven years old. A graduate of Colorado University who majored in journalism. No job history to speak of. Her social media presence was hit-and-miss before she stopped indulging a couple of years back. Someone named Linda Gannon has left an entire slew of messages begging for Emily to speak with her. And judging by all of the pictures of Emily on Linda's social media, Linda is the mother."

"Good work," Jack says, his fingers tapping away at his keyboard. "I'll track down an address."

"I'll probably beat you to it," Nikki says, tapping away at her own laptop at twice the speed.

I head to my emails to send Rob a message about those cold cases, and there's already a message from him waiting for me. I open it up, and the information I want is just within reach.

"I just got a link to the case files of those cold cases Rob is working on," I say. "I'll forward it to both of you." I do just that, and soon the three of us are knee-deep in corpses and a hotbed of hopelessness.

I click on the first case file and begin to read. "Bill Atwood."

"White male, twenty-six," Jack takes over. "No employment history to speak of. Throat slashed, most likely from behind."

“The other three are all women,” Nikki says while slipping a pair of reading glasses on. “Melissa Kilpatrick, twenty-nine, strangled and found in the brush out on the Devil’s Peak Trail. Janelle Medina, thirty-two, died from a nasty gash on her head, found naked in the woods out in Evergreen Pass. And then there’s Brandy Richardson, twenty-eight. Throat slashed, body discovered on a trail in Shadow Valley.”

Jack tips his head a notch. “That’s a lot of trails. Were they hikers?”

“Let’s dig into the notes,” Nikki says and we do just that.

We comb through pages of interviews, ranging from family and friends, but there’s nothing remarkable in them. Bill Atwood would rather play his guitar than hold down a job. He drifted from one nightclub to the next. Melissa Kilpatrick was a free spirit who loved art and animals. Janelle Medina used to work as a ranch hand. And Brandy Richardson waited tables for a short time at the wildlife park downtown.

“None of them were married,” Jack points out.

“None of them had any children according to the notes either,” I say. “They have that in common, I guess.”

“They have something else in common,” Nikki says. “None of them were buried.”

Jack and I exchange a glance.

“She’s good,” I say.

“I’m good,” he counters as he frowns at his laptop. “I just got the address to Emily Gannon’s mother’s house. We can hit that tomorrow.”

“You two hit it,” Nikki says. “I’m going to pull the coroner reports for our new dead friends.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “And I know Rob would thank you, too.”

“He can thank me with dinner,” she says, collecting her things. “He’s a cutie.”

She takes off and Jack closes his laptop as well. “Welcome to the neighborhood, Baxter,” he says, making his way to the door and I walk him out. “There’s one thing to remember in our line of work”—he says, turning back—“the monsters don’t always lurk in the shadows. Some of them walk in broad daylight.”

I know it all too well.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

It wasn't hard to track down Linda Gannon's whereabouts, now that we knew her name.

Property records show that she and her husband purchased a cabin out in Juniper, a forty-five-minute drive from Pine Ridge Falls. The following afternoon Jack drove while I sat shotgun rattling off as much information as I could dig up about Linda Gannon on the ride over.

Sixty-two. Divorced. A freelance writer who writes articles that reflect her connection with nature. Her husband worked for a Fortune 500 before taking off with his secretary. Linda received a nice lump sum settlement in the divorce and can spend her time writing about whatever the heck she wants. Four children. Daughter, Sarah, is in nursing school. Lindsay is still an undergrad. The son, Nate, is a deckhand on a yacht outside of Maine, and the other child is in pieces at the Denver coroner's office. According to her social media presence, she has a beau, but it's still new. And yet every one of her feeds is littered with cryptic messages regarding the whereabouts of her daughter.

It reminds me a lot of my own mother whose social media accounts are littered with the same cryptic messages. But I keep that to myself. Before I left the house this morning, Riley texted and asked if we could get together at the diner later. She said she thinks we need to get serious about Erin.

I'll admit, I took a little umbrage with that. I've been dead serious about tracking down my missing sister. So serious that I've utilized FBI data, time, and resources

without permission to do so. The only reason I'm so quick to risk my career is because I'm convinced Erin is risking her life.

"ETA, five minutes," Jack says, breaking up the silence as we traverse country back roads that weave through the heart of the Colorado wilderness. The windows are down an inch on either side and the dense canopy of pines and the crisp, earthy scent of the forest envelops us.

Soon enough, we pull onto the street we're looking for and head for the last cabin on the end before parking and getting out.

The distant call of birds fills the air and a rustle of wildlife enlivens from the underbrush to our left. Otherwise, it's a serene backdrop for the grim task at hand.

The cabin looks as if it's seen better days, the brown paint is peeling, the green-trimmed windows are dusty, and there's an overgrowth of weeds in the flowerbeds. A brick pathway leads to a small porch and we trot straight to the door as Jack gives three brisk knocks that sound as if bombs are detonating.

"Would you mind?" I reprimand. "She just lost her daughter."

We were apprised that the sheriff's department broke the news to her yesterday via a phone call.

A phone call.

I rolled my eyes at that one when I found out. I'll have to talk to Rob about reaching out to his compadres in this neck of the woods. They could do better than that.

Jack's brows pinch in the middle as he frowns my way. He looks lethally handsome in a dark suit and a dark blue tie that offsets his eyes. But that scowl I just evoked in

him is my favorite feature, mostly because I know I put it there.

“Are you saying you don’t approve of the way I knock?”

“I’d approve if we were trying to summon a battalion of terrorists out of a dungeon. This is some poor woman’s home. She’s probably cowering in the closet by now.”

He grunts, “And you know this because that’s what you would be doing?”

“I’d be grabbing my gun and shooting you between the eyes,” I assure him. “I’m more of a shoot first, ask questions later kind of gal.”

His cheek flinches. “I won’t tell Hale you said that.”

The door opens and the scent of stale cigarettes hits us in the face.

It’s a habit I usually shake my head at, but this woman has earned a cigarette or two—or an entire carton for that matter.

“Can I help you?” Her face is marred by the screen door until she opens that, too, and we find her tucked in a pink terry robe. Her short crimson locks are spiked up in the back as if she hadn’t bothered to comb them in days. Her face is pale and there are deep welled lines around her mouth that indent when she speaks.

“Linda Gannon?” I ask and she nods while inspecting us, wide-eyed. “I’m Special Agent Baxter, and this is Special Agent Stone. We’d like to ask you a few questions about your daughter.”

“Sure, come in,” she says, expanding her arm to welcome us in and two cats bolt from the lumpy tan sofa just as a chihuahua mix runs into the room barking up a storm.

“Quiet, Honey,” she snaps and motions for us to take a seat.

Jack and I land on the sofa while she curls up on a maroon lounge that dances and spins once she lands in it. Honey, the chihuahua, hops before us and continues with her barking spree.

The place is small with dark wood floors and a tiny TV sits nestled in an entertainment unit that looks as if it could fall apart if you look at it crooked. There’s a dining room table to the left and a kitchen that looks as if it was newly remodeled with white cabinets and gleaming stainless appliances. A ray of hope in a dungeon of doom.

“Just got the news yesterday,” she sniffs at a picture in a silver frame that’s sitting next to her before picking it up and passing it our way. “That’s the little witch who ruined our lives.”

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“That’s Emily,” Linda Gannon says with a hard sigh. “My daughter who will forever be frozen in time.” She shakes her head at the picture of the girl she just called a witch. “I’m a little angry at her at the moment.” She shudders. “Heck, I don’t blame her for what happened. I can’t. But a part of me does and I don’t seem to have any control over it.”

The young woman in the frame is smiling. It’s just a close-up of her face, but there’s a softness about her, and not just in her dimples or the way she’s looking up at the camera.

Jack nods as he examines it. “Can you tell us about her?”

“How much time you got?” Linda huffs out a laugh and the fresh scent of cigarettes emanates from her breath. “Emily was always the altruistic one. My husband said that was my fault.” She tries a smile but fails on impact. “He’s my ex actually. We had it all, nuclear family, big house in the hills, country club, you name it. Not long after Emily took off, my husband did the same. My other kids found somewhere else to live, and I wasn’t about to pad around that oversized haunted house all by myself. Too many memories. So I bought this place, or my husband bought it for me. It used to belong to my housekeeper if you can believe it. She was asking nothing for it and I didn’t want to waste a dollar on anything I didn’t need so here I am.” She shrugs. “If Emily did try to come home, I’m not sure she would have known where to look. And boy, do I have stories about Emily.”

Jack and I exchange a glance. It looks as if Linda needs to take the long road, and I’m

all for it. The more information, the better.

“How long has Emily been missing?” I ask.

“She took off three years ago.” Her chest bucks. “We had some contact with her in the beginning, and seeing that she was an adult, the sheriff’s department said there was nothing they could do about it.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I say and mean it.

It’s the same runaround we received in the beginning as well. Erin was no missing child either. That was before Rob took over, but he hasn’t had much luck anyway.

“Emily was always a free spirit,” she goes on with a hint of a dry laugh. “Much like me, but with a restlessness that the quiet life around here couldn’t contain. She moved to Denver, just craving some excitement from life. She was passionate about environmental activism, animals, women’s rights. She was dedicated to any cause that aimed to protect the things she cherished. She loved to paint, too. A real artist, that one.” She swallows hard. “I hoped Emily would come back to me, but not like this.”

“So what happened during those three years?” Jack lands his elbows on his knees. “How did she make a living in Denver?”

“Make a living?” She laughs at the thought. “Once my husband and I cut her off, Emily quickly found out that money didn’t grow on trees. Her paintings weren’t exactly flying off the shelves. She met up with some girls who got her to peddle some hippy-dippy stuff, some self-help courses, and she tried her hat at it. She said she was moving in with the girls and that it would all work out. She didn’t want us to worry. Then out of the blue, about three weeks into her move, she said she didn’t think it was healthy for us to be communicating anymore.”

A small jolt of electrocution pulsates through me and I lift my chin a notch.

Erin.

I shake my head. I need to push my sister out of the way for now. I need to be present and pay attention. Any and every detail is just as crucial as the next.

“So she cut off communication with you?” Jack asks, taking notes with his phone.

“She sure did. All of it.” Linda sighs hard before scooping up the anxious dog at her feet. “We couldn’t believe it. She wouldn’t talk to us, not my other daughters or my son either. She cut off what few friends she had back home as well. It’s as if she wanted us to forget she ever existed.”

“Do you know the names of the girls she was living with?” I ask as my heart begins to race, and it has very little to do with Emily.

The woman lifts a finger and pauses midair. “Lauren and Dana, I think.” She closes her eyes. “No, that’s not it. Lauren and Reyna? Oh, I can’t recall it’s been so long. But she said they were really nice girls and they were moving out of the city.”

“Out of the city?” Jack cocks his head, hoping she’ll fill in the blank.

“Some ranch.” She shrugs. “Or wait, she called it an intent community.” She snaps her fingers. “Intentional,” she says a touch louder and the dog barks up at her. “Oh hush, you.” She drops a kiss to the pooch’s nose. “It was an intentional community, she said. And I remember it because my son was saying that it was an intentional mistake. Anyway, about a week later, she sent her final message, something about how she didn’t think she fit in our lives anymore. She wished us all well and not to come after her because it was time for her to live her own life.”

A breath expels from me, and Jack turns my way an inch as if to assess my needs.

I hold up a hand as if to say I'm fine, but I'm anything but. You could easily swap Linda out for my mother, save for the fact Erin hasn't been found in pieces—not yet anyway.

“That’s it.” She tosses up her hands. “That’s all I’ve got. Our lives went to hell in a handbasket while Emily was out doing who knows what with whom. And we looked for her. We did. My husband and I wanted to drag her back home by the hair. We didn’t care if we were trampling on her rights or whatnot. We wanted our little girl back.” She stares down at the picture in Jack’s hand and he passes it to her.

“She was our baby. She’s going to be my baby forever.” Tears stream down her cheeks as she stares at Emily’s smiling face. I can feel her pain right down to my marrow because I’ve cried those tears myself.

We thank her and take off, driving for less than two minutes before Jack kills the radio.

“Intentional community?” He shakes his head at the thought. “That’s BS for a commune.”

I nod. “And how many of those do we have between here and Cheyenne?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out. We’re also going to need to run a search on every Dana, Reyna, and Lauren, along with Emily’s name, to see if something crops up.”

“I’m on it,” I say, staring vacantly out the window because I darn well know I’ll be adding Erin’s name to the mix.

We end up in Pine Ridge Falls in record time, or at least it feels that way with my thoughts wandering to dark places despite the fact I'm trying to think nice things for my sister. Things didn't end up so nice for Emily, though.

"Are you up for a sandwich?" he offers, breaking the spell. "I know a place that does a mean hot pastrami."

"Crime makes you hungry, doesn't it?" I tease.

"Food and justice." He ticks his head to the side. "That's about all I live for these days."

"What about the cat?" I ask.

"You were paying attention to the details." He slings a short-lived smile at the road.

"Paying attention to the details is what they pay me for."

We drive through the downtown district and Jack's truck slows dramatically enough for me to look up, expecting to see someone's bumper in my face, but there's not another car in front of us. Instead, I note Jack looking to the left, glaring at a man rifling through a trash can. The guy looks down on his luck, thin, dirty, in need of self-care and a nice long shower—maybe a visit to the nearest psych ward for good measure.

Jack speeds up a notch, and soon we're headed into familiar territory.

"My mom's diner is just down the street," I say. "We could eat there if you want. I hear she has a mean hot pastrami as well."

"Sure," he says, his demeanor darkens and there's a faraway look in his eye that

suggests he's not in the mood for hot pastrami or anything else for that matter.

"Looks as if Rob is here," I say, pointing to the sheriff's car parked out front, and something in me enlivens at the thought, but only because I was hoping to see Buddy again.

"Yup," he growls as he pulls in alongside him. "Hey, I just remembered I needed to be somewhere." He winces. "Do you think you could get a ride home with your boyfriend?"

My mouth opens and I choke back a laugh. "Yes," I say. I would have reminded him that Rob isn't my anything, but Jack left the proverbial building about five minutes ago. "If I dig anything up on those women, I'll let you know."

"Thanks." He offers a solemn nod and there's an apology buried in his eyes.

I hop out and he backs up and leaves as if he were late for the preliminaries at NASCAR, like he forgot his kid at the mall two days ago.

Jack's forgetting one other thing, the devil is in the details.

Paying attention to the details isn't just what they pay me for—it just so happens to be my specialty.

If there's a detail or two Jack thinks he can hide from me, he's dead wrong.

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Special Agent Jack Stone

I drive like a bat out of hell, or out of rehab as it were, all the way back to the corner I saw the catastrophe unfolding.

The towering pines cast long shadows in the late afternoon sun and the distant peaks of the Rockies sit etched against a clear blue sky.

Main Street drags on with the townspeople and tourists running briskly into the businesses tucked along each side of the street.

I don't see him.

A wave of relief hits me.

Maybe it was a look-alike, an apparition—hell, I'd take an alien at this point.

The bank on the corner is where I last saw him and it's as empty as his checking account, and just about mine, too. I scour the area once more and my heart sinks.

That's when I spot him, my brother, the jarring blot on the picturesque landscape.

Crap. I park the truck and jump out.

There he is. I shake my head in disbelief. Heck, I believe it.

His hair is mussed, his skin looks pale, and his lips are thin as paper, dry and cracked.

His clothes are filthy but just as familiar to me as he is. His jeans are caked with dirt and probably vomit. His shoes are split open on one side, and I'm silently counting the cost of repairing him to meet with societal standards. Lord knows rehab didn't work out yet again.

Jet lies sprawled near the shrubbery, and you may as well draw a chalk outline around him at this point. A part of me is tempted.

"What the hell, Jet," I bark, grabbing him by the shirt and giving him a shake, but he's struggling to open his eyes.

A discarded bottle lies next to him along with the remnants of fast food bags that I'm guessing he mined from the trash.

A car slows to my left and I glance up to see an older couple looking worried at the two of us. I quickly glance around and spot a group of teenagers gawking this way. The last thing I need is for one of them to whip out their phones.

"Come on, Jet," I say, giving him a swift kick in the leg before hoisting him to an upright position. "You're coming with me. Let's get some coffee in you." I wrap one of his arms around my shoulders and stagger to my truck before tossing him in the back seat. Walking with a corpse would have been easier.

I jump in and speed all the way back to Whispering Woods.

It's another fun chore getting him from the truck to the cabin, but by this point, his buzz is wearing off and he knows he stepped in the deep end of it this time.

"What the hell," I thunder as I shut the door behind us and shove him toward the couch.

The cat jumps from the shoulder of the adjacent sofa and gives a sharp yowl as she runs for cover. Wish I could do the same.

Jet sprawls onto the cushions and moans, his eyes slotted open just enough for me to see them glowing like stoplights.

“What happened at Clearwater?”

Clearwater Recovery Center is where I dropped his ass off six weeks ago. I’ll admit, I haven’t been checking in on him as much as I wanted, but life got in the way. I’ve got cases. And to be honest, I liked the peace for once.

His stay was for three months. I knew that good time would be ending far too soon and I needed some space of my own. A Jet-free world where I didn’t have to lock up my wallet at night or check underneath his bed for a cache of liquor bottles.

He’s had more jobs than I have fingers, lost them all in record time, too. He has no disposable income and yet always manages to mooch a bottle of poison from just about anyone. Heck, Jet would have no problem getting the Pope to give him a bottle if he was in town. Although no one is giving him liquor, they’re giving him cash. Same difference as it turns out.

“Hated it,” he moans, wiping his face down with his hand as he struggles to sit upright. “They’re a bunch of uptight pencil pushers who think they’re better than everyone else.”

“You’re not better than any of them. You were eating out of the freaking trash.” I kick the coffee table and it explodes in two pieces, each flying in a different direction like shrapnel. “How many times do I need to tell you that we do not freaking do that,” I shout so loud the windows vibrate. I wanted to tag it with anymore, but not a single part of my brain wants to relive that nightmare.

Jet sits straight up and it's about as startling as watching a corpse reanimate.

“Well, look at you. An uptight pencil pusher who thinks he's better than me.” A dull laugh strums through him. “I've got news for you, dude. I'm your reflection. You're no better than me. You are me. You'll be sucking back booze in no time. You're just pretending to be sober. How about you get some whiskey for us, the good stuff. And throw in a couple of six-packs. Give me some cash and I'll score some coke so we can celebrate. I'll have a bunch of fat lines ready and waiting when you get back. Then maybe we could head to Middle Street. I bet Gary and his girls are still?—”

“Would you shut the hell up?” I riot. “Say those words one more time and see if I don't shove my gun down your throat and give you something to suck on.” The walls boom as I thunder the words. My throat rubs raw, but the booming continues.

Jet glances to the door and it takes a second to register that someone is knocking.

Just great.

I head over and swing it open, fully expecting to see a concerned neighbor, an irate neighbor, or even some poor delivery guy holding a package.

But it's none of the above.

It's Fallon.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The stench hits me first, the sour smell of rotten milk or vomit, both maybe.

Jack Stone looks tired, angry, and rife with explosive energy—which would explain the yelling I just heard. As it turns out, his cabin is four doors down from mine and just around the corner. Still a brisk walk if you consider that the cabins here in Whispering Woods are divided by a decent plot of land.

“How did you find me?” he growls, looking every bit annoyed. His body glows juxtaposed to the dark open maw of his door.

“I followed your voice.” True as gospel. I wasn’t in my mother’s diner for ten seconds before I decided I’d rather walk home than stay.

“Is your cop friend here?” His eyes widen with something just this side of fright as he gives a visual sweep of the vicinity.

It does make me wonder what he’s hiding and why it smells so darn bad. I spent the entire day with Jack and he held the clean scent of the cologne department at the mall. A touch too strong but not aversive.

“He and Nikki were having lunch,” I tell him. “Or more to the point, snacking on one another. I didn’t want to interrupt the party.” I try to steal a glance past him, but his body is taking up the girth of the door. “Anyway, I was embarrassed for them. Buddy looked pretty embarrassed for them, too.”

He gives a weak attempt at a smile. "That's Nikki for you."

"That's Rob for you," I say. "Sounds like the perfect pairing, if for one night. That's usually the way Rob operates." I crane my neck past him and spot a shadow on the couch. "I shot Nikki a text with the details we gleaned. I told her to stop dry-humping Rob's leg and get back to work. His dog was getting jealous."

"Sounds like you were getting jealous."

"Rob's like a brother to me." I look over his shoulders and, sure enough, there's a man wobbling on the couch. "Who's the guy you were ripping a new one?" I squint past him and stop breathing because I suddenly recognize the man. It's the guy from the street. The homeless man rifling through the trash that we saw driving up Main Street. "Stone, what's going on? Do you need help with this? Is this one of your cases?"

"It's one of my cases, all right." He takes a moment to glare at the man. "In fact, he's like a brother to me." He frowns my way. "Because he is my brother." He takes a step back, affording me the full view and the stench hits me ten times as hard. "Jet, get to your room and pass out already. I've got company. Take a shower, would you?"

The man rolls off the couch and stumbles in my direction long enough to lift a hand my way. He's tall, thin, gaunt face, pale, hair is dark and mussed, not as much of it as Jack has. He mumbles a few words before making a beeline for the back and disappearing down the hall.

"I'd invite you in, but I need to air the place out." He nods to the wraparound porch and I follow him over to the back side where there's a row of cushioned gliders, a small table, and a firepit in the dirt that divides the cabin from the lake.

The water takes my breath away. And here I thought I had a view.

Pine Ridge Lake takes center stage as it stretches out before us like a painting, like a postcard we've suddenly found ourselves immersed in.

"I take it you didn't eat," he says, fiddling with his phone.

"My mother wasn't there. Rob was turning the place into a soft porn theater. And to be honest, I was a little concerned about why you sped out of there as if you just committed a bank heist. So no, I didn't eat. Although I did work up an appetite. Walking home sounded easier than it was. I must be out of shape."

"It's hot out," he says, wagging his phone my way. "I just ordered us lunch. Hope you don't mind, I just doubled my usual. It's the least I can do after what you just witnessed."

"And what exactly did I witness?"

He shifts his gaze toward the water. The stretch of sand is nicer on the other side of the lake, and from our vantage point, the throngs of people gathered there look like ants. There's a marshy patch that runs through Whispering Woods, and I'd say that's a good thing. More peaceful that way.

"Baxter, my family is a nightmare that you don't want anything to do with."

"If we're going to work together, I need to trust you. And for me to trust you, I need to know what makes you tick. And if you're living a nightmare, I'd say that ticking sounds a lot like a bomb. Fill in the blanks so I don't have to." He lifts his chin, his gaze still set on the marine blue of the water. "Tell me what's going on. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. The hard way takes my time away from the case."

He tips his head to the side. "Far be it from me to do that. Just remember you asked for it." He sighs hard and offers a broken smile my way. "Once upon a time, my

mother had a stable marriage to a wonderful man—a tax attorney who worked closely with the IRS. They had two kids, boy and a girl, two dogs, and a white picket fence.”

“Sounds lovely,” I say. “What went wrong?”

“My father injected himself in the picture.” His lips twitch side to side. “Technically, that’s not right. He was in the picture all along. He’s the attorney’s brother.” He shakes his head. “My mother dumped her husband for the bad boy version of him, his kid brother. Younger by years, dumber by miles. My dad was into everything he could get his hands on, dope, booze, coke, girls. He was a hedonist, capital everything. They started messing around, and she got knocked up.” He points to himself. “My uncle caught them fooling around, grew concerned that the baby might not be his—that none of the kids might be his. My mother didn’t even fight to keep their marriage together. She took the kids and moved in with my dad. My uncle divorced her then took off for who knows where. His parents were already dead. Her parents disowned her.”

The sound of footsteps distracts us as a young man trots over and hands a bag of food and drinks our way. Jack thanks him and he takes off.

“Hot pastrami okay?” He hands me a sandwich wrapped in butcher paper along with an ice-cold soda. “Sorry, I should have asked before I placed the order. My brain took the easy way out.”

“It’s perfect, and thank you.” I take a long swig of my drink before returning my attention his way. “You don’t have to go on.”

“We’re just getting to the good part. Besides, it’s not a secret. Nikki and Hale know. It is what it is.” He tips his head back a moment. “Ah yes, my dad couldn’t hold down a job to save his life. Soon after I was born, he discovered the joys of heroin. As for my mother, she had a big group of friends, each one was a hooker. It took me a

while to figure out how she kept the money rolling in. All she seemed to do was go out with her friends in the evenings.”

My stomach knots up just hearing it.

“And well, my dad did his best with day labor when he could get it,” he continues. “We were living in downtown Elmwood. Satin’s Armpit was the affectionate name the locals gave our strip of town.” He shrugs. “I didn’t know better. I didn’t know anything else. Money grew increasingly tight. We were falling woefully behind on the rent. I started working when I was fourteen. I gave my parents my entire paycheck. It didn’t take long for my dad to dig into what little I was contributing in order to support his habit. My brother had already dropped out of school by then and was well on his way to becoming a full-fledged alcoholic. My sister took off to live with friends, the smartest thing she ever did.

“And then two things happened at once. My mother found a new circle of friends, a couple of men who convinced her to help them knock over liquor stores. It worked for about a week before she was arrested. The same night, the landlord had us evicted for nonpayment, and while the police were there, they busted my father for possession and hauled him off to jail. My brother and I were instantly homeless. No relatives to speak of, foster care was our only hope. And there was only one family willing to take in two older boys, the Deckers. I got the cat on my mother’s more recent stint in the slammer in case you’re doing the math.”

“I wasn’t. But that explains Mitch Decker,” I say. “The man you introduced as your brother.”

He nods. “And I do consider him that. I’m thankful to the Deckers. They took booze and instability out of our lives and injected God and a list of rules as long as my arm. I complied a little better than Jet. Not much better, though. But they were great influences. Jim and Sarah are my family forever.” He lifts his soda as if toasting

them. “And that’s the end of the story.”

“Sounds as if it was just the beginning,” I say. “And look at all you’ve accomplished since then. Quantico? You’re the hero of your own story.”

“I wouldn’t go painting me with such a puritanical brush just yet.” He shoots a dark look out at the lake. “The devil was once an angel.”

“So you’re still harboring your fair share of dark secrets?”

His brows lift a notch. “All my dark secrets are out in the open. If my parents taught me anything, it’s that there’s no point in hiding the ugly side of life. Jet is my ugly secret walking around in the light. Which one of your siblings fits the bill?”

“The one who’s missing.”

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Special Agent Jack Stone

“Missing?” I don’t move a muscle. I don’t want to spook her. I want to hear everything she has to say.

“Missing,” she repeats, wrapping her sandwich back up and setting it on her lap.

I glance at the lake just beyond the porch as it reflects the sun like a mirror. Someone screams from the other side of the shore before shrill laughter ensues. A ripple hits the water closer to us as a fish flops to the surface.

“How old was she? When did this happen?” I have about ten more questions I need answers to because my adrenaline just hit its zenith, from zero to hero, and I’m about to jump into my truck and find the girl myself. I’ll admit, I’m a little incensed that Fallon is sitting next to me so calmly.

“Twenty-six.” She sighs. “We couldn’t even file a police report because she let us know she didn’t want to be found. We heard from her intermittently over the course of that first year before she cut us off completely. We don’t know where she is or who she’s with. All we know is?—”

The sound of a car pulling up sidetracks her attention just as a Jeep lands to our right and out hops Nikki along with a yellow lab who bounds right up onto the porch and heads straight for Fallon.

“Buddy.” She laughs as she offers him a hearty scratch up and down his back before pulling his head forward and kissing his nose. “How are you so stinking cute?” She

scoots over and he jumps up on the seat next to her.

“What gives?” I ask Nikki as she heads over and pulls up a chair for herself.

“Lunch got interrupted.” She puts down her tote bag before nodding to Fallon. “Apparently, I was at your mom’s place. Rob was telling me all about how the two of you used to run around this town.” She laughs as she tucks a crimson lock behind her ear. “Anyway, he had to take off. Emergency. He asked if I could watch the pooch.”

“Duty calls,” Fallon chimes as she cuddles up with the beast. “And I’ll keep him.”

“Fine by me,” Nikki says, reaching over and taking the second half of my sandwich. “But he said something about Buddy having a hot date at the dog park later.”

“This dog has more social engagements than I do,” Fallon teases as she offers him another pat.

“How’d the interview go?” Nikki takes a few hungry bites out of my sandwich and I lift a brow her way.

“The victim’s mother was cordial,” Fallon says. “Emily grew up privileged, took off to peddle something that Linda referenced as hippy-dippy, then went on to live at an intentional community with a couple of the girls she met.”

I nod. “And she cut off all communication with her parents.” I cast a glance at Fallon because it sounds like I’m echoing her own words about her sister. But now that Nikki’s here, I won’t dig any deeper unless she reinitiates the conversation.

Nikki pats her mouth down with a napkin. “What prompted that?”

“She told her mother she didn’t think it would be healthy,” I say.

Nikki tips her head and nods. “Any traces of abuse? Physical, emotional? Maybe her parents were toxic?”

“Maybe,” Fallon says. “But I say we track down that intentional community and find out what Emily told her new friends.”

“Intentional community.” Nikki rolls her eyes as she plucks her laptop out of her bag.

Both Fallon and I pull out our phones and start clicking away.

“I’m diving into the database,” I say as I do just that. The FBI has a layout of pretty much every antisocial group from here to Moscow. I doubt this one will be any different. “Linda mentioned that Emily’s new friends’ names were either Lauren and Dana or Lauren and Reyna.”

“She also mentioned that the community was based on a ranch outside of the city,” Fallon says. “She didn’t say state.”

“Where was Emily’s head found?” Nikki asks.

“Cheyenne,” I say.

“But her body was found in a creek outside of Denver,” Fallon says. “I’ll get the location pinned and we can search out any communes in that area.”

“Not if I beat you to it,” I say as I run back in, trade my phone for my laptop, and soon the three of us are racing to the finish line.

“Six known communes in the Denver area,” Nikki says.

She has a sick thing about being first. It’s not her finest trait.

I'd admit to sharing the same trait, but I've never been first.

"The creek where Emily's body was found is called Sagewood Flats," I say, scanning a map of the area on the screen.

"Sagewood," Fallon repeats. "That's right next door to Ironwood Springs, and bingo, we've got a commune there the database lists as Paradise."

We're quiet for the next few minutes as our fingers fly over our keyboards.

"Paradise is a community of hundreds if not thousands," Nikki says. "Looks as if they own several hundred acres. The land deed belongs to Wilhelmina Lewis who bequeathed it to her son Malcolm."

"Malcolm Lewis," I say under my breath as the three of us tap away once again and Buddy gives a soft bark as if cheering us on. "No record."

"No social media," Nikki sighs.

"But he's in sales," Fallon says as she slides her phone my way. "He's shilling self-help courses called Quantum Leap to Success and Freedom. Looks like it's about mindset and manifestation. Calling and speaking yourself into a shiny new existence."

I grunt as I look over the page myself, "Self-improvement and spiritual enlightenment guaranteed. Find your soulmate, escape financial bondage by earning a real income, and become the version of yourself the universe intended." I shake my head at the screen. "Sounds exactly like what every downtrodden soul wants to hear."

"And desperation is a breeding ground for manipulation at the hands of others," Nikki gives a mournful chuckle. "Heaven help us, I have a feeling Paradise is anything

but.”

“Agree,” Fallon says. “Whoever is lapping up these self-help courses is most likely susceptible to being expertly exploited at the hands of those who prey on the vulnerable.”

“Emily’s mother said she was selling some hippy-dippy self-help courses. They’ve got people living at the compound?” I glance at the lake. “Emily said she needed to cut ties with her family. You know what this is starting to sound like?”

Fallon’s lips curve as she looks my way. “Sounds like we’ve got ourselves a cult.”

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Acult.

I'll admit, that jarred me, but it's not what jarred me first. As soon as I heard Ironwood Springs, my blood ran cold.

That happens to be the same location Erin was spotted while heading into a liquor store. Erin, my sweet, far-too-smart-for-her-britches sister, has cut ties with Riley, my mother, and me, and all but gave us the finger.

Okay, so she was a little more polite about it, wishing us well in this life. Just the way Emily did with her family.

The sun is starting to set as Jack, Nikki, and I agree that we should wait until morning to head to Ironwood Springs. I already know I won't be going, but I'll wait to confirm my decision until I can clear my head a bit and maybe get a few more answers.

I take Buddy and walk back to my place, jump in my truck, and drive straight back to my mother's diner, and this time not only is she there, but so is Riley.

"Come here." My sister pulls me into a rocking hug. Her perfume is sickly sweet, just the way I remember, and I'll be darned if it's not bringing tears to my eyes because of it. Every memory of my sister is sweet. I pull back and take her in. Riley is older by two years, dyes her dark locks a vanilla shade of blonde, stands a half foot shorter than me, and those dark eyes she sees the world through have observed far too much heartache and pain as far as I'm concerned. "You look great," I say.

She clucks her tongue and swats me on the arm. “Is that what they taught you out in Quantico? To lie like a pro? Well, you’re still not good at it.” Her attention is waylaid by the cute pooch among us. “Oh my goodness, you sweet little thing, come here. When did you get a dog?” She casts a quick glance at my mother. “See? She doesn’t tell us anything.”

“That’s not true. And this furry cutie belongs to Rob.” I laugh as my mother ushers us to a table near the back.

Bea’s Diner is filled to the brim with dinner patrons, and by the looks of all the delicious meals gracing the tables, my appetite has somehow made a comeback.

“Tonight’s special is slow-cooked pot roast with root veggies and a side of mashed potatoes and gravy. Any objections?” Mom shoots us a look just this side of a threat, and neither my sister nor I dare object. Not that we would. We love our mother’s cooking, and if it’s comfort food, then we love it twice as much. She motions to a waitress and puts in our order as we get situated. “How about this? I got my girls back under one roof for a change.”

Riley and I exchange a glance and Buddy whimpers as if he sensed my unease.

“Not all of them,” I say, trying to sound playful, but there’s nothing playful about it.

“Oh, now that would take a miracle and you know it.” Mom’s blue eyeshadow takes over half her face as she lowers her lids. “Anyway, at this point in my life, I’ll take what I can get. What’s happening?” She nods my way. “How’s it going at the new agency?”

“The new office is fine,” I say. “I’ve already been assigned to a case. But what I really want to talk about tonight is Erin.”

The sound of eighties music filters through the speakers and intermittent bouts of laughter resonate from a nearby table, but among the three of us, you could hear a pin drop.

“Well?” Riley nods my way. “Don’t keep us in suspense. Is she dead? What did you find out?”

“No, not that,” I say, suddenly sorry I didn’t preface the conversation with the fact I have no clue about Erin’s safety. It’s a sad state of events that I’d have to. “Rob found some footage of her out in Ironwood Springs,” I say, stroking Buddy’s back as if he were the one who found my sister.

“Ironwood Springs?” Mom gags as she says it. “That’s over an hour away. Let’s start hitting the streets and asking if anyone’s seen her.”

“I’ll take care of that.” I’m quick to squash the idea of the Baxter women forming a rogue task force.

“Wait.” Riley shakes her head. “What was she doing out there? What kind of footage are we talking about? Is she robbing banks?”

“She was seen at a liquor store. That’s all I have right now.” I shrug at my mother. “Do either of you remember her saying anything about a self-help course? Like maybe she was taking it, or advertising it in some way?” At this point, I’m not sure what I fear more for my sister—death or a life in a cult. Both seem equally dismal.

“Self-help course?” Riley inches back and shakes her head. “I don’t remember anything about that.”

“I don’t either,” Mom says, studying the table as if the answers would somehow carve themselves into the wood. “Wait a minute. Last I spoke to her, she said

something about unlocking the doors to her real self—the one she accused your father and me of denying her.”

Riley groans hard. “This again?”

Mom nods and we sit there a moment absorbing it. I can hear every argument between Erin and my parents playing out all over again.

My sister had the opportunity to graduate from high school at eleven. She tested out of every subject, which would explain why she sat around bored and doodling half the time in class. My parents had a battery of tests run on my sister and the good news was that she was healthy as a horse.

What they also thought was good news was that she had an IQ of 160, which put her in genius range. They quickly shuttled her off to the local college where she was given a full ride.

Erin hated it.

She wanted to be with kids her own age. She didn’t want a leg-up or a head start in life. She wanted friends, normalcy, and she got neither.

She graduated with honors at sixteen and became the world’s smartest hermit. Never leaving her bedroom for years on end. She passed on grad school and any job offers that came her way. She lost herself in books.

Until one day she decided to find herself. She started to party, tried a few drugs, tried hard liquor, and decided that scene wasn’t for her. She focused on finding real friends. And that’s how she ended up drifting until one day she drifted completely away.

“Maybe we should change the subject,” Riley offers just as the food arrives.

And change the subject we do.

We talk about Riley’s business venture with her boyfriend Ryan, the Pick-It-Clean hauling business.

We talk about Mom, the diner, and the fact Mom has not one but three potential suitors sniffing around. I’m not surprised by that. My mother might be no-nonsense to the bone, but there’s a charm about her that just about everyone finds irresistible.

We talk about everyone but Erin.

We wrap it up, and soon I’m back at my cabin. I left a message for Rob and let him know I could keep Buddy for the night if need be and he thanked me for that. My mother fed him two servings of her nightly special, and judging by the way he’s passed out on the hearth, it seems the food agreed with him.

But I’ve got far too much adrenaline coursing through me to get any sleep.

I look up every single mention of the Paradise commune that I can find. I scour the literature available through their website for those cheesy courses they’re pushing.

And I find two things.

An ad copy that reads, Don’t waste any more time, unlock the doors to your real self.

As much as my blood ran cold when my eyes landed on those words, I felt a sense of relief, too. Erin said those magic words to my mother.

The next thing I discover after inspecting the scant images that I could find of the

conferences held by the Quantum Leap Success team was that of a redhead standing in a crowded room of women all clutching Styrofoam cups of coffee and seemingly networking and having the time of their lives.

Sure, Erin is a brunette, but that can be easily taken care of with a box from the drugstore. What can't be easily taken care of is the fact it's my sister's face without a doubt.

Erin Baxter isn't missing anymore.

She's gone to Paradise.

And as much as I'd like to run over there with Jack in the morning while waving my badge, I have a feeling I'm going to need to take a much more clandestine approach. Instead, I hop online and do a little digging until I find a group on social media that's offering the exact courses I'm looking to take me to the next level of consciousness. And just my luck, they offer a one-on-one mentorship program to go along with it. This is my in.

Erin might have joined a cult.

And by the looks of things, I'll have to join one, too.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

Patricia Flanagan

The sun warms my back as Kim and I lean against the fence of the compound, watching the kids run wild and free across the soft spring prairie grass. I look for Annie while Kim looks for Roy. Our babies. The ones who came from our own bodies, fathers unknown.

I sigh as I spot the dark-haired boy screaming and laughing to the left. The children run in throngs, happy as can be, unaware of the hell we've bore them into. A small flock of women have been assigned as watchers, essentially babysitters who work for free, one of which is me. Kim is a forager, but she usually doesn't head out until late noon so she likes to join me.

We watch a cluster of women as they herd the children before breaking off into groups and whispering amongst themselves like Kim and I are doing now. They all look like costumed actresses playing a part in some yesteryear show that takes place on a prairie. At first, Kim and I were both one hundred percent behind the mandatory ankle-length skirts and the billowy blouses, but once we realized we would live in these clothes until they turned into rags, they sort of lost their appeal.

"He's over by the tents," I say, careful not to point him out. If anyone knew what we were doing, we could end up in Nightshade. A fate worse than death because death doesn't allow for torment.

I glance up at the house that sits crooked on the hill. The House of Horror as Kim and I have grown to call it.

Malcolm insists Nightshade is an organic being that the universe sent to protect us all. But at the end of the day, it's a dilapidated mansion that was left to him by his ailing mother.

I did my research before I got sucked in by the undertow.

I suppose he could have called it Hell House, but that would have been far too literal. The real reason he calls it Nightshade is because the select few luminaries that are privileged enough to reside in it are only allowed in after dark.

In fact, only Malcolm, his wife Patty, and the supreme leader are inside at all hours. They claim Nightshade cleanses itself during the day with the sun's purifying rays as do we, and that's why every last member of Paradise is mandated to be out in the fields during the day, each assigned to a chore ranging from menial tasks to hard labor. They save the latter for those whose minds are still full of darkness, claiming physical labor brings you closer to the light.

I scan the field for Annie.

No sign yet.

She just turned four. Roy is three.

An entire sea of pregnant women sit to the right on quilts made by some of the members. They're to spend the duration of their terms lounging and being served by the rest of us. It sounds like heaven, but it was a special kind of hell for both Kim and me. I wanted to walk, to run, to explore nature, but all I was allowed to do was sit on that damn glorified towel and wait for my next sour meal.

Once the babies were born, we weren't allowed to nurse our own biological child. It's highly encouraged that we forget who we gave birth to and love all of the children

here in Paradise as if we had pushed them from our loins.

But a mother never forgets.

The tents in the distance catch my eye once again. When I first saw them, it reminded me of a ragtag circus. They seemed wholesome, and most of them are, but the dusty, faded, navy tents near the woods are anything but.

Both Kim and I arrived in Ironwood Springs at the same time. We grew up in Kansas City together, lifelong friends from opposite sides of the track. My father ran a mortgage company that garnered him millions. My mother ran the social circles and that garnered her a million fake friends. She never cared for me from the get-go, starting with the way I looked. My features were a little too large, a little too drawn-out. She insisted on plastic surgery, new friends, and an elite Ivy League college for grad school. She got none of the above. And when my father passed away, I got zero inheritance as revenge.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Kim butts her shoulder to mine, and I steal the moment to take in her sweet scent. Kim has always held the scent of home to me. “It’s going to take a lot more than sunshine to heal that hovel from all that ails it.” She nods to Nightshade and we share a laugh.

It’s true. The house may be supersized, but it’s seen its glory days. The siding is dirty, the shutters are falling off their hinges, half the windows are boarded up, and the porch has a hole in it that’s been covered with plywood, which is currently held down with bricks.

“I hope to never walk through that door,” I say as a shiver rides through me. “I’m shocked it hasn’t swallowed Malcolm and Patty alive. I think it eats souls for breakfast.”

A dark cloud covers the sun for a moment. It seems appropriate since just looking at Nightshade has darkened our mood. Both Kim and I have heard the screams emanating from inside those walls at night. They try to tell us it's coyotes, but we know better. Someone once said it was coming from the blue tents, that pleasure sounded a lot like pain, but we all but rolled our eyes at that one.

A roar comes from our right as Crazy Jim runs through, looking like a scraggly version of Santa Claus, if Santa was demon-possessed. Jim is the epitome of a homeless drunk, with a long scraggly beard, bloodshot eyes, every blood vessel is broken on his face, and he staggers and screams wherever he goes. Since there isn't any liquor allowed on the premises, we think he has a roster of psychiatric illnesses starting with auditory and visual hallucinations. We're guessing he's somewhere in his sixties and will drop dead eventually. All of us will, seeing how undernourished we are.

Of course, he's not the only one allowed to hallucinate around here.

My eyes drift back to those blue tents.

At first, Kim and I were intrigued by the idea of the polyamorous relationships that Paradise boasted of. But that's when we thought we could pick and choose our poison. As it turns out, women are to be submissive to their husbands. And once we were inaugurated into Paradise, all men became our husbands, all women our sisters. In the beginning, we spent every night in those disgusting blue dungeons. We average three nights a week at best now, and even that is three nights too many.

Malcolm and Patty are smart, though. They sensed the disdain coming from the women early on. A little after we arrived, all those years ago, they introduced what they dubbed as the mood farm. Opposed from the actual farm, which has never produced anything decent, the mood farm is a hothouse that exclusively grows marijuana. You can smoke all you want, but it needs to be done in a blue tent with

your lover for the night. There's always a catch in Paradise.

"Here." Kim pulls something from the pocket of her skirt and slides it my way. "A granola bar. I found a bunch at the bottom of a trash bag. Someone must have been clearing out their cupboards or backpack. It's kind of smushed, but I'm sure it's still good."

"Oh my gosh, thank you," I say, carefully slipping the silver-wrapped treasure into my pocket. Having food outside of the bounty tent is strictly forbidden. All of the food here at Paradise is provided via foragers like Kim, and then the so-called chefs turn their findings into something palatable—although the palatable part is yet to happen.

When asked, Malcolm and Patty will tell you that the food the foragers receive is from the abundance that the supermarkets can't turn away.

Once, I heard Malcolm say that he had an in with a local restaurant supply store and that a lot of our food came from that vendor. But Kim assured me that both are bald-faced lies.

The foragers are nothing more than a group of us who go out nightly and scavenge the dumpsters behind every restaurant, grocery store, and even the garbage cans of tract homes as of late. Kim says the best finds have often come from the wealthier neighborhoods they've hit. The lead forager has access to three vans and they pile in like sardines each night to do their work. There are twenty foragers as of right now, and according to Kim, they've been sworn to secrecy on how they acquire the provisions for us. She says there was a ceremony and that it was bad, but she wouldn't elaborate on the details. But I know how bad bad can be.

A part of our initiation here was to offer the supreme leader our pledge for life that we are willing to live and die for him and would never leave Paradise. We abandoned

our friends and family, and Paradise quickly filled the void for us. A clean slate. A do-over at life. We were so eager to be here, so eager to please. At least in the beginning.

But it didn't matter. They wanted collateral to prove that we wouldn't run. A sex tape is made of each and every one of us. It's a private issue between us and a small group of others—the videographer and the participants. Once the Judicial Court, consisting of Malcolm, Patty, and the always enigmatic supreme leader, has viewed the material and deemed it humiliating enough for the participants, we're enabled to go on with the full seven sacraments of initiation.

I glance down at my torso where the scar of the final sacrament lies.

“Have you seen Jennifer?” Kim whispers, breaking my spell, and just like that, my heart begins to race for what lies ahead.

“I'm sure she's out here somewhere. She's probably with Missy and Annie.”

Jennifer is our best friend. We may not have grown up with her like we have with each other, but we trust her with our lives. She and I were pregnant at the same time and her daughter Missy is best friends with my Annie—or best sisters as they're allowed to be called.

Last week, Jennifer was brutally raped and beaten. But because it happened inside the bounds of the blue tents, it never made it to the Judicial Court. Instead, it was deemed sacred.

As punishment for reporting it, Jennifer was to spend a honeymoon period of forty-eight hours with her attacker, a brute of a man named Archer.

It turns out, Archer has a penchant for rough sex that's led more sisters to the

infirmary than any other physical activity put together. And that was the final straw. We've let them take away our children, our bodies, and our will, but in the end they still didn't have us—not the real us that we buried deep inside once we set foot on Paradise soil. After that horrific incident, the three of us banded together, like real sisters struggling for the next breath to survive.

The plan is that in just a few hours, Kim, Jennifer, and I will pick up our children and take off in the night. On foot. With no money, no food, no water. Thankfully, the Colorado nights have grown increasingly warmer. If we walk all night, we should stumble upon some sort of civilization, and then we're counting on the milk of human kindness to take us all the way home—wherever that may be now.

Kim says a women's shelter is our only hope. I say we head to the nearest sheriff's station posthaste.

I glance over at those blue tents and glare at them as if they were Malcolm and Patty themselves.

Kim clutches onto my arm. "Here she comes." Her voice spikes with glee as we spot Jennifer heading this way, her long dark hair blowing in the breeze exposing the purple welts still visible on her face. I once heard Malcolm instructing the men never to touch a woman's face because it hides no secrets. He said a woman could be taught a lesson on the lower half and he aroused a laugh from them because of it.

"Jennifer," I pant out her name with a smile and a wave. Her lavender dress is heavily stained and tattered on one side. Her lips are still misshapen from the beating. Jennifer was lured from Utah with promises of quantum success and enlightenment. And ironically, she looks like nothing but a shadow of her former self, successful at horror, enlightened by way of a man's fist.

She's been so dead inside after that horrible so-called honeymoon. It's a wonder she

can stand. Her legs are black and blue and her right ankle is the size of a water balloon.

“It’s here. It’s time,” I say just below a whisper as she comes in close.

“It is time,” she says with her eyes staring vacantly ahead.

I’m about to ask what’s the matter, what’s happened, when I spot Malcolm and Patty headed this way in her wake. And on their heels are three of Malcolm’s strongmen, all with stone-cold expressions that promise nothing but trouble.

My blood runs cold.

“Sister Kim, Sister Trish,” Malcolm addresses us while Patty stands smugly by his side with her hair braided down her back, her pushed-in nose and downturned smile looking disapprovingly at us.

Patty once accused me of lusting after her husband in a manner that was frowned upon here at Paradise. I did no such thing. But Malcolm has dragged me to the blue tents far more than any other man here has. The lust is all one-sided. I’m positive Annie is his. They share the same dark eyes. Although in Malcolm’s, there’s wickedness buried in them, and with Annie’s, there’s just love and light. We think Patty is barren, seeing that she’s never had a child and clearly Malcolm is able. Which would explain Patty’s disdain for me. Of course, she denies it. But it’s there as plain as that potato sitting in the middle of her face.

Malcolm nods. “It’s come to our attention that you had plans to leave Paradise this evening.”

My heart stops beating. My adrenaline kicks in, fight-or-flight, but the men must sense it because they take a forceful step forward, assuring us we won’t get far.

“Don’t try to deny it,” Patty snips. “Jennifer told us every last ridiculous detail.” Her eyes flit between us, her face red with rage. “Kim, you’ll be coming with us to Nightshade. We have a special program that will help you realize the height from which you’ve fallen. You’ll be back in the fold in no time.” Her eyes dart to mine, a dark smile curving on her lips. “Trish, we’re going to take a different approach with you. Archer is hungry for another honeymoon and we thought you’d make a wonderful pairing. I have a locked suite in the back house for the two of you. Simon and Prich will take you there right away.”

“No,” I say in a panic. The locked house in the back is nothing short of a torture chamber, one without escape. “You can’t do this to me. He’s a monster. I’ll be lucky if I get out of there alive. Open your eyes. Look what he did to Jennifer.”

The taller gentleman grabs ahold of Kim’s arm and all but pushes her toward Nightshade while the other two grab ahold of me as I bite, kick, and scream.

“It didn’t have to be this way.” Malcolm motions to the men, and soon I’m on the ground.

One of them lands a strip of duct tape over my lips, and the other binds my feet and wrists. A hood is hoisted over my head, and the next thing I know, I’m being carried to my doom.

At this point, death would be a welcome friend.

But I have a feeling that luxury is far out of reach.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

Special Agent Jack Stone

Hale left a message early this morning and asked to see us at the office. I texted Fallon and offered to carpool but never got a response, then drove by her cabin only to see she had already left.

The field office is swarming this morning, just the usual buzz as bodies bustle to and fro. I head to the workroom and find it surprisingly empty of what I was expecting to see. Hale stands near the front, rifling through files and Nikki is clicking into her phone.

“Where’s Baxter?” I ask as I head in and shut the door behind me.

“Good morning to you, too, sweetheart.” Hale frowns as he pushes the files to the side. “Baxter has asked to take a personal day. We’ll be moving on without her.”

“A what?” Nikki barks out a laugh. “I’ve been here for three years and haven’t taken a personal day yet.”

“What happened?” A personal day sounds suspicious. She was the picture of health when she left yesterday. Makes me wonder if this has something to do with that missing sister of hers.

“I didn’t ask.” Hale flips open his laptop and pulls it close. “With women, I’ve learned it’s best not to.” He shoots a glance Nikki’s way. “No offense, but you seem to have more anatomy-based issues that I’d rather not delve into. I told her she can take all the time she needs. But she assured me she’d be ready and raring to go

tomorrow.”

“What do we know about her?” I ask, falling in a seat across from Nikki.

Hale shakes his head my way. “Enough to know that the Bureau thinks she’s more than qualified to be there. They vetted her the same way they vetted you. Don’t go getting a superiority complex just because she’s new. Now, Nikki filled me in on your findings. Nobody’s joining a cult on my watch. The two of you will head out to Ironwood and speak to the landowners. Nothing more, nothing less. I don’t want you to spook them. Just let them know there was a body found not too far from their compound and if they know anything about it. Be friendly. I know it takes effort.” He nods to the both of us because we just so happen to be guilty.

Nikki and I take off. I offer to drive and we make small talk about sports, the weather, the scenery. I make sure to pepper the conversation with just about everything until I get to the question I’ve been wanting to ask since I walked into that office.

“Has Fallon talked about her family?”

“Baxter?” She inches back as if confused as to who Fallon might be.

Can’t blame her. We’ve trained ourselves to respond to surnames. Although I rarely use Nikki’s.

“Yeah, Baxter. What’s her deal? I know her mother runs the diner, but that’s it.”

“She’s got two sisters,” Nikki says quickly enough to let me know she’s already done some digging. If Nikki weren’t an FBI agent, she’d be known as the town gossip. “One owns a hauling business with her coke-fueled boyfriend. Rob says the other took off for greener pastures. Really pissed off her family because they wanted her back, but she’s an adult, adulting somewhere else at the time.”

I grunt as if that's all I care to hear. "What about the father?"

"Dead. Died a few years ago. Rob had the hots for our little Fallon way back when, but she's always believed she was too good for him."

I shake my head and chuckle, but it's forced. Something about the thought of Rob pouncing on Fallon makes my stomach churn. But he's met his match with Nikki.

"So it sounds like things are heating up between the two of you," I say. "I'd watch it. He's a walking predator."

"You just don't care for him because I said he has the hots for Fallon." She tips her head my way. "I'm beginning to think you do, too. Don't bother denying it. I have a sixth sense for these things. I'd tell you what she's thinking about you, but I'd hate to start your day off on the wrong foot."

"Funny." I take a moment to glare at the evergreens to my left just as a long honk comes from the next lane and I swerve to avoid oncoming traffic.

"Geez, Stone." Nikki swats me. "Stop daydreaming like some lovesick teenager, and get your head back in the game. You're only allowed to narrowly get us killed once per day and you've just met your quota," she growls. "Good thing. Because as lovey-dovey as this cult looks on paper, I bet they've got guns."

"Lucky for us, we do, too."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Jack Stone

Ironwood Springs is a flat, dry, wooded area that sits at the basin of a small mountain ridge. Most of the town is rural and the nearest shopping strip sits at least fifteen miles outside of its border. The overall layout of this town is one of the many tributes to nature that has been preserved in the same wild and wooly manner for the last hundred years.

We follow the navigation map to a small dirt trail, not well groomed, that leads to an old wooden arch with the word home painted across it. A swath of steel cables crisscross from one end to the other, letting us know we're not invited to drive on in. The rest of the property looks cordoned off by a bridal fence that spans the girth of it, and on either side and on top it's covered with barbed wire, stretched so thin it hardly makes a difference anymore.

Nikki and I get out and are quickly greeted by the fresh scent of earth and pine. The property is expansive as far as the eye can see. To the right, it looks like a trailer park with nothing but old run-down motor homes and fifth wheels sitting scattered about, most of them rusting. Although I have a feeling they won't be driving anytime soon. It's clear they're being used to house the masses. To the left is a sea of tents, every shape and size. The dark blue ones that line the woods look ominous even from this vantage point.

Throngs of people can be seen in the distance. Some in a grassy patch tossing around a football, others chasing a soccer ball, some lying shirtless on the lawn. All of them are men. Just behind that, there's a group of kids. Their laughter and shrieks of joy resonate to the sky. To the right of them are women with long hair, long skirts, and

I'm guessing long and downtrodden faces. It's always the women that get the shaft in these kinds of places.

"I hate it here," Nikki grunts.

"Ah, come on now," I tease. "Looks like summer camp."

"Yeah, summer camp with the Mansons."

We duck through a narrow opening in the fence and we don't get twenty feet before that field of dreams drains in our direction.

We flash our badges and ask to speak with Malcolm Lewis, the owner of this twisted paradise, and soon a handful of them take off running in the direction of what looks to be a giant haunted house.

Nikki and I had already seen aerial footage of the place. The house once belonged to Wilhelmina Lewis and was passed down to Malcolm a little over ten years ago, and I'm taking a wild guess he's not turning it into a museum any time soon. This place has more of a carnival appeal anyway.

A handful of people offer a friendly welcome, but their expressions quickly grow sober as if we were ready to deliver bad news, like a high school party the cops just pulled up to. Although I'm sure they can make even the rowdiest of house parties look like a visit to a nunnery. This place may hold an idyllic appeal, but I can feel the wicked undercurrent from here like a serpent slithering through tranquil waters.

The crowd parts like the Red Sea and a couple emerges, both with smiles plastered to their faces.

"Here come Mama and Papa," Nikki whispers.

Malcolm and Patty, I'm guessing. Malcolm is tall, thin, and far too pale. His beard outlines his jaw but isn't filling in the way it's supposed to. He looks a bit frail like maybe he doesn't have the testosterone to pull off the feat. He looks to be in his forties, balding, his jeans are worn, and his flannel looks as if it's seen better days. Although I doubt he's out tilling the fields. Monsters like him usually leave the manual labor for those they're stringing along in hopes of a better tomorrow.

The woman is robust. She's not missing any meals. Her dark hair is twisted in long braids. She's wearing a denim dress that brushes the ground as she walks, which would explain the frayed edges.

"Officers." The man offers a friendly wave. "What can we do for you?"

"We'd like to speak with you alone if possible." Nikki gets right to the point.

"Sure thing," Malcolm says and lifts an arm to the crowd before they slowly begin to disperse.

It's clear what he says goes.

A few of the men size us up with hard looks before taking off, and soon enough it's just the four of us.

"Malcolm Lewis," he says, offering both myself and Nikki a quick handshake. "This is my wife, Patty."

We shake as well.

"Pleasure to meet you both," I say and note a fresh scratch running up Patty's right forearm. Judging by the color, the seam of blood has just congealed.

“I’ve got cats,” she says, laughing it off once she spots me looking. “It’s nice to meet you. What’s going on? Is there a problem?” Her eyes widen, alerting us to the fact there is one. She’s just not sure we’ve discovered it yet.

“There was a body found not far from here,” Nikki tells them. “A woman in her twenties, Emily Gannon. We wondered if you might know of her.” Nikki pulls out her phone. “Here’s a picture of her in better times.”

It’s the one from the frame Emily’s mother showed us. Nikki and I decided we’d leave all mention of intentional communities out of the conversation. If we weren’t spooking them already, that might just do it.

“Oh wow.” Malcolm gives a mournful smile. “I’m sorry to hear she was lost so soon. But I don’t recognize her.”

“Me either.” Patty blinks as if her lashes were about to morph into moths and fly away.

She’s lying. I’m betting they both are, but she’s not as good at it.

Nikki’s jaw tenses and I can tell she’s not buying it either. “Her body was dismembered. Her head was carted off to Cheyenne.”

The two of them exchange a look as if this news was unexpected. Funny they weren’t that surprised she was dead to begin with.

I’m betting the dismemberment is the true jolt of reality here.

“What kind of a monster...” Patty shudders. “I guess we’d better keep an eye out.”

“Here’s my card.” I fish one out and land it in each of their hands. “If you see

anything out of the ordinary, feel free to give me a call.” I nod at the compound behind them. “So how does this work? Looks like a playground of some sort.”

The two of them share a laugh as the tension melts right off them.

“It’s utopia, my brother,” Malcolm assures me with a grin taking up the majority of his face. “We’ve got men and women at every age and stage of their lives who have come together to enjoy a rich community. I can assure you, we’re not breaking any laws.”

“But we’re baking bread with the best of them,” Patty chirps and the two of them share a warm laugh. It seems genuine. Patty seems happy. No signs of abuse, no faraway vacant look in her eyes. If anyone is getting abused around here, odds are she’s either doling it out or looking the other way.

“Sounds wonderful,” Nikki says it lackluster and that dark look she’s shooting to the compound in the distance lets them know she doesn’t mean it. “In fact, I’m getting hungry. Can either of you recommend somewhere my partner and I might stop off at?”

“Oh, there’s Roy’s Smokehouse just off Timberline out in Sky Valley,” Patty rattles off quickly. “Such good food. It’s the best smoked brisket you’ll ever have. We sneak out that way at least once a week.” She pats her belly to prove it.

And now I know exactly why Nikki asked for suggestions. Someone there is bound to know something. Or in the least we eat the best smoked brisket we’ll ever have.

We thank them and Malcolm unlocks the gate so we can leave the proper way. We take off and I watch them glaring at us in the rearview mirror until they disappear out of sight.

We head straight for Roy's Smokehouse, and true to Patty's word, indulge in some of the best smoked brisket we've ever tasted.

We ask around with both the waitstaff and the locals glued to the counter about the people in Paradise, and every last one of them echoes the sentiment that it's an outright cult. But we don't yield anything else.

We're halfway to my truck when someone calls out for us to wait, a young blonde, the waitress that brought us our drinks.

"You were asking about Paradise," she pants, glancing over her shoulder briefly. "There was a girl who used to work here. She used to be a part of that place. Her name is Heather Smiley. Goofy last name, right?" She wrinkles her nose. "That's why I remember it. She's dancing now at Boulder Beauties. She goes by Scarlett Blaze. Her hair is like blood red. You can't miss her. She might be able to help you out with whatever you're looking for." She nods at the two of us. "You're cops or something, right?"

"Or something," Nikki says, pulling a twenty-dollar bill out of her purse and handing it to the woman. "Thank you."

"Oh honey." The blonde laughs. "Thank you."

"Steer clear of those people," Nikki tells her.

"Are you kidding?" She shakes her head. "We've got a run on weirdos in the event you didn't notice. I don't need any more trouble in my life."

She takes off and we do the same.

Nikki does a little digging, then makes a phone call and finds out Scarlett Blaze is up

at bat tomorrow night.

“Looks like I’m headed to the strip club.” A lazy grin slides up my cheek as we get back on the highway. “Can’t say I won’t enjoy it. Duty calls and I’m there to answer.”

“What about me?”

“Don’t you have a hot date with what’s his face?”

“If I’m lucky.” She sighs. “I guess I could let you take it with Baxter.”

A strip club with Fallon.

I frown out the window at the thought.

Something tells me she’ll ensure it’s not as enjoyable for me as I was hoping it’d be.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Evil

The air is crisp as nightfall descends over Ironwood Springs, but the coolness of the breeze does little to quell the knot in my stomach as I approach the compound.

It's a good mile and a half hike from where I park my truck to the shanty mansion they call Nightshade. I wear the same black clothes, same black ski mask each time I come out, save for the sacred ceremonies where I don a red hood. There might be a cast of hundreds here on the grounds, but not one of them knows who I am, with the exception of Malcolm. He eventually admitted that he outed me to his wife, but as an odd courtesy, she never acknowledged the fact. I allowed them to live so long as I was their new master. And I am in every way.

Nightshade is dimly lit on the inside and I make my way through the kitchen and to the basement, my ski mask still securely in place.

"In here," a voice calls out and I turn toward the grand room we've come to hold our meetings in. No windows, one door, it all but assures us the privacy we need.

Malcolm and Patty are seated at the sturdy oak table that I'm pretty sure he inherited with this place. I take a seat across from them and nod.

"What's happening?" I received a call a couple of hours ago and Malcolm sounded panicked, saying we needed to talk.

Malcolm looks pallid and sweaty, his skin the color of clay. Patty seems much more reserved and calmer as if whatever they have to discuss doesn't concern her.

“A couple came by today.” Malcolm nods as if I should be picking up on where he’s headed next.

“A lady and a man.” Patty lays it out for me as if I were an idiot and I must be to deal with them.

“What did they want?” My mind flits right to the razor wire. It’s an eyesore. I told them to take it down months ago and it’s still there. A blotch of horror over the pristine landscape. Someone obviously agrees with me.

Malcolm leans forward on his elbows as far as the table will allow. “They were cops. They had a picture of Emily.” He shakes his head my way. “Looked like it was taken a few years back. They said they were looking into a homicide.”

“Someone killed her,” Patty says hesitantly as if this were news to any of us. “They said they found her body in the creek and her head in Cheyenne.” She gives an indecisive nod as if wanting me to admit to it.

“I didn’t do it,” I say. “At least I didn’t dismember her. Maybe some kids found her. There’s a biker gang that makes its home on the other side of Ironwood. Maybe one of their drunks got her and took her head for a ride.” It wouldn’t surprise me. After all the dark things that I’ve seen and done, nothing surprises me anymore.

“Told you,” Malcolm growls at his wife. “We’ve got witches in the hills, real deal Satanists. It could have been anyone.”

“The list of probabilities is a mile long,” I say, trying my best to soothe them. “What did these cops look like? Was it the sheriff?”

Malcolm slices me a glance. “I don’t think so. The man was tall, fit, and wore a fancy suit. He had dark hair and looked like he was mapping the place with his eyes. The

woman was a pretty redhead.”

Patty clears her throat and Malcolm inches back like an abused husband that’s been beaten one too many times.

A smile curves briefly on my lips. “It didn’t take long for them to come sniffing around, did it? Finding a body is enough to invoke the sheriff’s office, but you take the head across state lines and you may as well pen an invite to the feds. Now where’s Grady?”

Malcolm and Patty exchange another look.

“Come now,” I say. “Grady and Emily were inseparable. This was a cry for help. If you can’t see it, then you’re dumber than you look.”

“Emily was trying to leave,” Patty hisses. “She had to be dealt with. And there are others, too. Her friends were plotting an escape as well. But don’t worry. We caught them just in time.”

Malcolm nods. “We had an informant come forward.”

“Who?”

“Jennifer, the pretty one with light eyes.” He nods my way. “She was one of the girls from the enlightenment ceremony last month.”

“That’s right.” Patty cocks her head my way. “You seemed to take a special liking to her.”

“Don’t remember. No offense, they all look the same to me.” Especially in the dead of night with a hood covering my face. “Do you have the situation contained?”

“We’ve got one in the hole and one out back with Archer.” Patty sheds a hint of a smile and I know for a fact that was her doing. “He’s making a honeymoon out of it.”

“Good,” I say, far from satisfied. “I want to speak with the one in the hole.”

They exchange a glance before Malcolm leads the way. I pull the red hood out of my back pocket and cover my head with it. The ski mask might throw her. But the red hood will alert her immediately as to who she’s dealing with.

We make it to the end of the hall and Malcolm gives a soft knock before picking up a lantern off the floor and igniting it. I bought dozens of them and swapped each bulb out for a red one myself. The color of blood and danger, and now the color of my presence as well.

The hall floods with the crimson illumination and we head into the room.

It’s a cell essentially. A jury-rigged contraption that Malcolm and his men built to contain members who needed a little refresher on what it means to stay loyal to his tribe. There are sixteen of these cells down here, each in their own speck of a room. No windows, no facilities, and no access to food or water. Just a bucket in the corner which would explain the stench. Patty is in charge of feeding them. And on occasion, she likes to beat them, too.

A small shriek emits from the girl as she attempts to shield her eyes.

“I can’t see. It hurts to look,” she calls out.

Other than the red light they’re bathed in on occasion, these prisoners are kept in complete darkness day or night.

“What’s your side of the story?” I ask and she juts her head in my direction, still

unable to focus. “I heard you wanted to run.”

“I did.” She whimpers. “We were going to leave. We’re sorry. We won’t do it again.”

“Who’s we?” I ask.

“Trish,” she offers her friend’s name without hesitation. “Malcolm took her to the shack out back. Please, you have to let her go. I’ll take her place. I don’t want her to suffer like that. I don’t want her to suffer like Jennifer. Please, I’ll do anything.” Her fingers slip through the cage as she does her best to rattle it.

“How did Jennifer know you were leaving?” I ask.

“She overheard,” Malcolm whispers.

“She was leaving with us,” the girl says with a ragged sigh. “We were going to take our kids and run in the night. I don’t care what you do to that two-faced witch. I just want Trish to be safe.”

Malcolm shakes his head as if he doesn’t believe her. “She’s just angry.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” I sigh toward the girl. “Have one of my men meet me out back. I want Jennifer brought to me, as well as Grady. I’ll meet you out there once I’m through,” I say as I take the lantern from him and he scrambles out of the room.

“Please,” the girl calls out. “You have to help me. I’ll prove that I’m fully devoted. Just get Trish out of there right now. I’ll do anything for you.”

“Let’s start there, sweetheart.” I close the door to the room behind me as I let myself into her cell.

And I let her prove exactly how far she's willing to go.

About a half hour later, I head upstairs and make my way to the back where I find Keith, one of my men, with a banged up looking woman next to him. Her face is purple, and her lips are swollen on one side. My heart thumps unnaturally at the sight of her. And to think, I'm told I don't have one that beats.

Malcolm steps out of the shadow along with Grady, and I shake my head at the man. I don't need a roadmap. I knew he had it out for me the second I took Emily at the sacrifice. Whenever I have an inkling that a couple is getting too attached, I do just that to teach them both a lesson.

"That will be all," I say to Malcolm. "Keith and I can take it from here."

Malcolm trots back into the house like the coward he is and Keith and I take a walk with Grady and the girl in silence until we're deep into the woods with nothing but a sliver of the moon to light the way.

"So you're going to kill me?" Grady's voice wavers, but it's not from tears. I can sense the rage in him.

Keith is brainwashed through and through. He's my go-to man when it comes to taking care of the dead, and he's scattered more than a few bodies in the vicinity for me. And he puts them exactly where I tell him to. But he's friends with Grady. My guess is that's how Grady got ahold of the body. Keith must have either taken him right to her or told him where to find her.

Grady is a chef, but he used to be a forager. He still has enough access to the vans. A van can take you all the way up to Cheyenne if you wanted.

"No, I'm not going to kill you," I say, pulling my hunting knife out of its sheath.

“You’re going to do the killing tonight.”

“What?” He takes a stumbling step back, and for a second I’m convinced he’ll try to run. But he knows better. These woods are rigged every which way with an entire land mine of animal traps, but they work for humans even better.

“You heard me.” I hand him the knife. “Make it quick. I don’t want to see her suffer.”

“No,” the girl shrieks and tries to run, but Keith gathers her in his arms and clamps a hand over her mouth.

“Do it now,” I thunder at Grady. “It’s your last chance to prove your loyalty to me. I know what you’ve done.”

His eyes latch to mine.

If he’s smart, he’s thinking one of two things—that he’ll be dead if he doesn’t. Or that if he does do the deed, it’ll buy him time to plot his own escape. Frankly, I’m shocked he’s still here. But Emily had a kid. He probably thinks it’s his.

He takes the knife from me and his eyes gloss over as he looks at the girl.

“I’m sorry,” he says before he slashes a quick line across her throat, deep and lethal. It took both muscle and determination, and he grunts as he tosses the knife to the ground at my feet.

“Good,” I say as Keith drops the body and picks up the knife. “Now finish the job,” I tell him.

Grady turns to run, but I trip him with my foot, and soon Keith is on him, slashing his throat as well.

“Clean it up,” I say. “You’ll get your reward. You always do.”

I walk right out of the woods as if it never happened.

It all feels like a bad dream anyway.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

When Jack asked me out for a wild night on the town, I thought he was being ironic and that we might end up noshing on pastrami sandwiches down by the lake. But we hopped in his truck and rode for nearly an hour until he pulled into the Boulder Beauties Gentlemen's Club.

"Okay," I say, switching off the radio. "Is this why you blasted loud music all the way down? Afraid I was going to ask questions?"

"You seem to know which button to push to make it stop." He flashes a short-lived smile my way. "I take it you were afraid I would be the one asking questions."

A silent laugh bounces through me. It's true. I wasn't looking forward to Jack snooping around as to why I took yesterday off. Hale said it wasn't a problem and he certainly didn't pry. I like people who don't pry. I'm not so sure Jack is one of them.

"Fair enough," I say, glancing up at the neon sign that boasts of a woman nearly flashing her bottom. Her hand is pressed over her lips as if she were surprised we were looking.

Honestly, I'm shocked as hell myself.

"Is this where you take all the girls? Or am I just special?"

"You're definitely special," he says, killing the engine. "As in Special Agent Baxter. Nikki and I poked around after Paradise and it led to this place. She said you could

take it with me.”

“That was nice.” I frown over at the wood-rotted facility. The double doors are solid, no windows to speak of. A smattering of men bob in and out of the building, their heads pointed to the ground as if they were committing a crime. And considering half of them are probably married or wrapped up in some sort of a romantic entanglement, they definitely are committing something. “All right. Fill me in on the details.”

“Her name is Heather Smiley. She has some sort of a connection to Paradise,” he says before filling in the rest of the gaps regarding the best smoked brisket he’s ever had. “I’ll have to take you there sometime. Anyway, she dances as Scarlett Blaze. Her set starts at ten.”

We hop out and head for the door.

“Wait a minute,” I say, checking my watch. “It’s only nine. That’s a whole hour from now.”

He holds the door open for me. “You’re good at math. I like that.”

“You’re not funny,” I say as we step inside, and soon we’re ensconced in a crimson world with rock music so loud it shakes the floor.

The walls, the carpet, and if I’m not mistaken, even the ceiling holds that same sultry crimson hue. A long stage takes up the center of the room, wide and long enough to land a 747, as a handful of girls spin on the poles peppered over it.

Waitresses abound, wearing nothing but G-strings and pasties. Men sit in groups, cluttered near the stage like moths to a porchlight. It’s dimly lit, save for the riot of stage lights that swirl in a carnival of colors.

Jack garners the attention of just about every G-string wearing waitress here, and soon an entire herd of them lands us at a table for two near the stage.

I'm not so shocked by the white glove treatment

With his dark suit, his hair slicked back, and the cold look of a killer on his face, Jackson Stone looks downright lethal.

Women are always drawn to bad boys. And despite the fact Jack leans toward justice, there's an unmistakable air of trouble about him. I'm guessing the time he put in down in Elmwood had something to do with that.

"Nachos okay? I hear they're pretty good at places like this," he says, and I marvel at how he got the words out with a straight face.

"Nachos are fine," I shout over the music.

We each order a drink to go along with it and the waitress disappears.

"So are you a regular?" My voice is still an octave too loud, but it doesn't seem to matter. Jack can hardly hear me. I can hardly hear myself.

"Here? No," he says as his eyes stray to the stage.

"So you frequent other locales," I mutter under my breath.

But seeing that both of our chairs are facing the action, and the fact the woman in front of us just released her boobs from some sort of a neoprene restraint, I can't say I blame him. He is a man, and he happens to be free of any romantic entanglements as far as I know. That and apparently he's got some spare change rolling around in his pockets. He's basically their dream customer.

While he might be thrilled at the sight, I can't help but feel as if a couple of alien eyes are looking at me while bobbing up and down.

"I don't frequent these places," he continues with a note of defensiveness in his voice. That or regret. "Not as much as I did in my youth."

"You can quit talking," I tell him just as a platter of nachos arrives, slathered in orange goo. My favorite kind.

We partake, and true to his word, these are some of the best I've ever had.

He scoots in just as the lights dim further and a new crop of girls in plastic heels trot onto the stage.

"So what happened yesterday?" he asks.

Here we go.

"I wasn't feeling well." The fact my truck was missing from my driveway comes to mind. He may have noticed. "I ended up going out and meeting up with a friend for coffee. Must have been a bug. Or a bad sandwich." I wink his way.

I scoured a few of the sights in Denver where those conferences took place, hoping to find a scout out in the wild. But I did have a lot of luck chatting someone up online once I got back. The day wasn't a total loss. I'm definitely on the right track.

His lips twitch just this side of a smile. "You want to tell me about your sister?"

"You mean you didn't do any digging?" I tease. "I'm a little offended."

"Don't be. I asked around."

“What did you glean?” Something enlivens in me, hoping against hope he knows more than I do. “Did something happen out there yesterday?” My heart thumps wildly thinking they might have found her.

He inches back and examines me as the lights spasm from pink to blue. “Wait, does your sister have some connection to Paradise?”

My lips press tight as I glance at the stage, but I don’t say a word.

“She does,” he says. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“I just—I just found something that may imply she’s there.” I pull out my phone and show him the picture of Erin at one of the meet-and-greets for Quantum Success.

“So what happened yesterday?” he asks sternly. “What did you do?” His brows swoop in low as he stares me down.

“The night I left your place I went online and I bought a course.”

“You bought a course?” He looks more than a little amused, and to be honest, I’m shocked at how well I’m capable of holding his attention, present company considered. “How much, what name did you give them, and how did you pay without offering up your credit card information?”

“My mother gave me a card years ago in the event of an emergency,” I tell him. “And I made up a name. No one seemed to care what card I was using. But I like how you think. Have you thought of a career with the FBI?”

He glowers at me twice as hard.

“I didn’t pull the trigger for the whole enchilada,” I tell him. “I opted for the teaser

course. I went into one of their chat rooms—code name, Chastity. A few of the moderators did their best to push me over the finish line. One of them offered to meet up with me for coffee.”

“And that’s where you went?” His eyes bug out. “You do realize we’re actively investigating these people. That’s the very reason we’re seated in this glory hole.”

“Only you would call it a glory hole.” I roll my eyes at that one. “And yes, I do realize that. But I didn’t go anywhere. I ended up not meeting with her. Instead, I played hard to get. As should these women.” My finger twitches toward the stage. “Anyway, the woman I spoke to was a brilliant salesperson. I did end up buying the full course.” I bite down on a smile.

“And?” His brows hike a notch. This time he looks genuinely afraid of what I might say next. “Why do I get the feeling there are a few questionable perks involved?”

“She invited me to a private meeting. I paid a premium for one-on-one counseling. Sloan is a nice woman. I have a feeling she’s going to be my in.”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

The lights spasm and the music dies down once again as the DJ announces the next group of women, and just our luck Scarlett Blaze is one of them.

A woman with hair the color of fruit punch sashays all the way down to our end of the stage and does the splits right in front of us.

Neither of us talks any more about my playdate with my mother’s credit card.

We’re back on the clock.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Scarlett Blaze, aka Heather Smiley, shakes what her mama gave her for the next solid hour. I help myself to the nachos while Jack pretends not to drool.

He's such a man.

After an impressive routine of sideways splits, upside splits, and kiss-the-floor-with-your-keister splits, Scarlett finishes up her set and blows the crowd a kiss before prancing off the stage.

"You can stop swooning," I say to Jack as his eyes stay trained in the direction she disappeared in. With his chin on his chest, he looks as if he's in the middle of a rough hangover. A boob hangover. "Cheer up, sweetheart." I bump my elbow to his in an effort to rouse him. "A whole new slew of women are trotting out next."

"I'm not here to see them." He holds up a hand, and soon a set of pasties is in his face. Jack waves a wad of cash at them. "Private room, please. I'd like to request Scarlett's company."

"Right this way," the woman says, taking the money from him, and the two of us stand.

She shoots me a look and I shrug. "I like to watch."

She threads us through the rowdy crowd, laden with more drooling men than you can shake a stripper pole at, down a dark corridor and into a dimly lit lounge where a

series of alcoves sit laden with purple sofas. Most of the cubical-like rooms are occupied by couples, men lying back while getting the naughty lap dance of their dreams. There's a guard at the door, tall, fit, lots of muscles, and he happens to be fiddling with his phone. He looks bored and disinterested and doesn't seem to be paying a lick of attention to anything happening in those lusty booths.

We're set up in the alcove in the back and I take a seat on the far end of the couch. I wait until the walking pasties tell us to sit tight and disappears before leaning toward Jack.

"How far are you going to let this go?"

"As far as I need to." He tugs at his lapels. "There's nothing I won't do for justice."

"I'll keep that in mind."

The lights flicker before dimming another notch, the music is the same boisterous rock from the main room, and suddenly I feel as if I'm stuck in a porn musical starring my co-worker, of all people.

I'm not a fan of porn, and right now I'm not Jack's biggest fan either.

The redhead appears, her hair glowing like a brushfire, a sequin pink negligée hangs onto her by strings, and her glossy red lipstick looks freshly reapplied.

"Hey, big boy." She wastes no time crawling onto Jack's lap before glancing my way and offering me a casual nod. Clearly, she's seen it all before and my presence is no deterrent to her dirty moves. Heck, if anything, she's expecting the tip to double.

She gets right to gyrating and running her fingers through Jack's hair before things quickly escalate from there. The next thing we know, she's peeled off the top of her

lingerie and is juggling the girls in his face. She does have glittering pink pasties on, but that's sort of a moot point. She flips around, and suddenly she's twerking and jerking and I have the sudden urge to fire my weapon.

Instead, I whip out my badge and shove it in her face.

"FBI," I shout over the music.

Her jaw falls to the floor. She hops off pop so fast, you'd think he stung her. And I'm beginning to think he'd like to.

She lands kneeling on the sofa next to him with her hands raised next to her head, the whites of her eyes are glistening and her lips trembling with fear.

"Relax," I tell her. "This isn't a raid. We're just here to ask you a few questions."

"Questions?" She looks to Jack for affirmation and he gives a begrudging nod. "About what?"

"The Paradise cult," I say, letting the words sink in for a minute.

"Oh, that." She slides her legs off the side of the couch and shakes her head over at Jack. "You're a fed, too, huh?"

"Afraid so."

She bows her head and gives a pitiful laugh. "So I guess I'm not getting any cash out of the deal." She checks her watch. Time is money, and at this point, we're costing her a night's wage. "So what do you want to know?"

"Everything," I say sharp enough to cut through the noise. "And start at the

beginning.”

She shrugs. “I married at eighteen to get out of the house. The guy beat me worse than my stepfather, so I needed to get out of there, too. I was already hooked on the self-help course those nuts offered online. I was waitressing, but it wasn’t enough to get a place of my own. A girl named Sloan was my higher-up.”

My muscles freeze. Same name as the woman I spoke to. If I play my cards right, she’ll be my higher up, too.

“She was selling courses and living rent-free,” the redhead goes on. “I didn’t actually buy the course myself because I didn’t make that kind of bank. But once a week they offered teaser courses. You know, this is what we offer, now are you in, kind of stuff. Sloan saw that I was interested and we started chatting. I let her know my situation and she offered me a space to bunk with her at Paradise. I sort of fast-tracked my way onto the compound because I didn’t have anywhere to stay. She said I’d have to join the community if I wanted to live there, so I checked it out. I’ll admit, it had a creepy vibe, but at the time it was the best deal running.” She shoots a dark glance to the ground. “I went through all of their ceremonies, you know. And then I started to think maybe it wasn’t for me. I mean, I just wanted some money so I wouldn’t end up turning tricks on the corner. Sloan let me try my hand at sales. I started out as a Seeker of Enlightenment, that’s the bottom tier where all newbies begin. I recruited my butt off and received what I thought was a decent income in return, but it was all an illusion. You have to keep buying courses. Anyway, I quickly moved to the next level, a Pathfinder of Truth, and was invited to special events and retreats. But it wasn’t until I reached the top tier, Guardian of Paradise, that I knew it was a scam.”

Jack lifts his chin. “How so?”

“I recruited half their force and produced enough sales to cover the national debt of a small country, but I wasn’t seeing squat. Part of the problem was that funds always

traveled up the totem pole. I was making someone else rich. I thought for sure when I hit the Guardian level, it would be my pockets that were full of cash. More like the trash they try to pass off as a meal. It's pretty common knowledge they scavenge for their food." She shrugs it off as if it were an aside. "And in addition to siphoning my funds to give to my new higher-ups, I was expected to give a sacrificial offering as a sign of my devotion to the freaks that run that place, Malcolm and Patty. And it was a financial sign of devotion. I was already giving it up with my body."

Jack and I exchange a glance.

"So you were asked to give them money," I say. "Like a tithe?"

"I wasn't asked, I was commanded. You don't get to be a member of Paradise unless you give, give, give. It's all for the betterment of the community." She says that last part in air quotes. "Not only that, but they make sure they have you over a barrel. You need to go through a bunch of humiliating exercises until they have enough dirt on you. They basically want insurance that you're not going to scam them and take off out of the blue. They want you by the balls. They want to control you. Dude, I didn't care that I had to sleep with a few creepy men, but they were bent on breaking me. Little did they know, I was broken long before I got there."

"Did they force you to sleep with other members?" I ask, half-afraid I already know the answer.

"Oh yeah, it was required. Once you're there, you're married to everyone else. The women are your sisters, the men your husbands. And guess who gets to call dibs on whoever they want for the night? The men. No contraceptive is provided. I was lucky I was still on the pill. They make them share kids, too. It's so twisted. The moms looked so sad, always scanning the crowd for the kids they knew were theirs. It kind of broke my heart." She lowers her lingerie past her navel. "The supreme leader was a real lunatic. He wears this red creepy hood. No one knows who he is."

“Who do you think he is?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but he must be pretty important to feel the need to hide his identity. I do know one thing about him. He’s the one who does this.” She points to a scar on her side and both Jack and I lean in to examine it

It looks like a triangle on the tip with three lines shooting out from the bottom. One line goes straight, the other two shoot to the right and the left.

“Do you mind if I take a picture of it?” I ask and she nods.

Jack pulls out his phone as well. “At what point did they brand you?”

“Early on. It’s done without any anesthetic. You couldn’t take as much as an aspirin. The pain is supposed to make you ascend higher or some crap like that. All I know is, it hurt like hell.”

“When did you leave?” I ask as she covers up again, this time pulling her teddy all the way up over her shoulders.

She takes a deep breath. “Last spring. And trust me, they don’t make it easy. I’ve seen people ask questions, ask to leave—and soon thereafter, those same people up and vanished. No goodbye or anything. Malcolm and Patty—they’re the ringleaders—they assured us that those people left of their own volition. But I don’t think they did. I was getting a really dark vibe. Like my life might be over if I asked to leave. So I pretended I was all gung-ho, and the next time I went to a conference in Denver I said I was headed to the bathroom. That was the last they ever saw of me. I guess they didn’t think I was a flight risk. Anyway, that’s all I know.”

I nod to Jack. “Give her your card.”

He looks momentarily perplexed before doing just that. I shove a wad of twenties into her hand and we thank her before heading for the door.

“Why didn’t you give her your card?” Jack asks as we settle into his truck.

“Because I make a darn good wing woman,” I say, glancing at my face in the side mirror. A face that’s been prone to lying as of late.

“So what now?” he asks as we head onto the main road, the glow of the moonlight outlining the evergreens as they stretch to the sky.

“I’ll talk to Sloan,” I say. “It just so happens she’s the woman looking to recruit me.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Not if you want the case to progress.”

He grips the wheel and his knuckles press white because he knows I’m right.

I glance up at the moon and wonder if I’m right about my sister and her whereabouts, too.

Paradise, here I come.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Patricia Flanagan

A hard groan comes from me as I'm jostled over the arms of some madman before he lands me hard on my back. He pulls the hood off my face, then the tape from my lips, and I suck in a breath as far as my broken body will allow.

Air.

I can breathe again.

It's dark in here, save for a red glow near the door where another shadowed figure stands. The sound of a metal grate closing pings through the air and then the slam of a door, and just like that, it's dark as pitch.

"Hello?" The faint sound of another girl comes through the wall and I lift my head.

"Kim?" Her name comes out more of a moan than anything discernable, but there's a cry on the other end.

"Trish, is that you?"

"Yes," I groan once again as my entire body aches trying to discern the direction from which her voice is coming. It's so dark I'm beginning to feel disembodied. I'd wonder if I were dead, but I'm in too much pain to contest reality. "Kim, where are you?" I strain my voice and bring my fingers to my lips, only to feel moisture. My front teeth feel loose and I'm afraid if I touch them they'll fall right out. My ribs feel broken. My back is battered, and the insides of my thighs feel as if they've been

squeezed to a pulp.

Let's just say Archer wasn't in the mood for an unwilling victim. Although when I settled down enough for him to have his way, it only seemed to make him angrier. It's as if he wanted the fight, as if he needed it. And he got just that.

"Trish, what happened?" Kim calls out, her voice faint but clear. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Yes, but I hurt him back," I pant as I slide to my left until I hit a cold wall. I press my face against the coolness and lean my arm against it as if I were hugging Kim herself. "I bit him. I got him real good. My teeth, I might lose them. But let's just say, he ran off for help holding his junk in pieces."

A howl of a laugh emits, and if I'm not mistaken, there were two voices joining in the chorus.

"Good job, girl," Kim practically sings through the barrier between us. "I'm proud of you. I hope he dies a painful death. In the least, he can never hurt anyone else again. I'm just so glad to hear your voice. I'm so thankful you're alive."

I don't say anything in response. A part of me wants to ask questions about this new level of hell I've found myself in. But judging by the circumstances, it can't be much better than the hell I left.

"There's someone else here," Kim calls out. "Her name is Angel. She's been keeping me company. We're not in the same cell, but we can hear each other. She's on the other side of me. She says hello."

"Hello," I say back. "Why is she in here?"

“She doesn’t know. She said someone might have thought she was being disloyal. She says she can’t figure it out. But the SL, the supreme leader, he comes in with his red hood. He’s taken us both.”

So that’s what waits for me.

I run my tongue over my front teeth and they give a wobble. They just have to hold on for a little bit longer.

There might be one more man I need to bite into pieces.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

With little to no effort I shore up the invite for coffee with Sloan.

It's late morning and I just trekked over to Denver, to the Pour a Cuppa Coffee Shop that sits nestled against the Front Range. Inside, the thick scent of coffee acts like an aphrodisiac and a hypnotic all rolled into one. A series of picture windows highlight the sheer mountainsides outside and manage to usher in all of their rugged glory.

The place is packed. There's lots of reclaimed wood on the walls and floors, and the soft hum of conversation is just a notch louder than the jazz music playing overhead. I place my order and spot a thin brunette with a bright pink T-shirt waving at me with slight hesitancy from the back. She's dressed just as she said she would be, her hair swept up with a large silver clip. I collect my latte and head that way.

"Sloan?" I say, trying out my best happy-to-see-you tone, twinged with just enough naiveté. The last thing I want to do is be myself. I'm far too cut and dry, far too jaded to ever be invited into a cult of any kind.

"That's me," she says, bouncing out of her seat and offering me a spontaneous hug, far too tight, far too needy. I'll admit, I wasn't expecting that. And for that reason alone, I'm glad I didn't bring my gun. A part of me wonders if that was a technique to see if I had one. That right there was more action than I've seen in months.

Jack comes to mind and I frown out the windows just ahead of us. Both he and Nikki insisted on having lunch across the street in the event something goes awry. I appreciate the safety net, but I'm pretty sure I can handle this one.

Sloan looks about my age, maybe pushing forty at best, with a thin frame, wide smile, and heavily drawn-in eyes. Judging by the many direct messages we exchanged over the past week, I suspected she might be bubbly, but with her bouncing and giggling and nonstop praise of my hair, she's far more effervescent than I gave her credit for.

"I can't believe we're finally meeting in person. Tell me everything about yourself, Chastity," she says as we land in our seats.

"I grew up in Reno. My father died a few years back and my mother lives in Florida with her sister. We don't have much to do with one another. I have a sister in Canada and that's about it." I try to match her glee as I give a little giggle but sound more like an injured walrus.

"Okay." She sobers up as she nods. "So you don't have much family. How about friends? You know, to network with."

"I just moved here from Reno, so tag you're it," I sing and her eyes widen as if she's just caught a live one. Little does she know, it's the other way around.

I figured I'd whittle down the work she'd have to do to lure me to her lair. Or at least, her leader's lair. The man who wears the red hood has me more than a little intrigued. I have a feeling he holds more than one key in this blood-soaked mystery.

I need to get myself to Paradise, as an insider. And I'm about to employ a few tricks and tips I inadvertently gleaned from my new buddy Sloan to cinch the deal.

"Well, we are friends," she says, clasping her hands over mine. Her fingers are icy, and I'm restraining the urge to shudder from her touch. It's not that I don't like to be touched, it's just that I don't want to be touched by her. Especially since there are nefarious intentions at play here.

“Thank you,” I say, threading our fingers together in an effort to remove any barrier of doubt. “I can’t believe I met someone so nice the second I arrived. And like I said, I’m desperate for work. Right now, I’m doing surge hours at a local fast food place near the hostel I’m staying in. They’re paying me under the table. It’s not exactly where I envisioned my life would be at this point. But I still have my mom’s credit card. I can afford a few classes.”

“A youth hostel?” She inches back. “Oh, Chastity.” She shakes her head with a genuine look of horror. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you stay there. Okay, first things first. How serious are you about dedicating your time and effort to being the best you possible?”

“I have no other choice,” I say. “It’s do or die. And right about now, I’d do just about anything to change my circumstances. I mean, don’t they say when you’re at the bottom, there’s only one way to go and that’s up? That’s me in a nutshell.”

“You seem smart.” She cocks her head to the side and examines me once again as if her suspicions were aroused.

“I have an AA degree in marketing,” I say quickly. Do those exist? “I mean, I’m a couple of units shy of getting it. I went back to finish, but it was too much.”

“Oh hon.” She clucks her tongue as a look of pity takes over her bloated features. “I’m going to take care of this for you. You’ve got a great personality. You’re pretty. So right out the gate, you have everything going for you. Okay, I’m going to tell you right now, I’m taking you on as a part of my team.” She pinches her lips with her fingers. “Do you think you’d be willing to help pull more people into the Quantum universe? You know, sell the key course and maybe engage in some upsells as well?”

“Absolutely,” I say with a little too much enthusiasm. “I’m a natural salesperson. My grandmother used to say I could sell a bucket of snow to Santa.” I give a thoughtful

pause. “Hey, can I build my own team, like you?” I feign delight at the thought of working mercilessly long hours in hopes of ensnaring the desperate and the hopeless.

“Of course,” she says, matching my enthusiasm. “And the best part is, they will never make more than you because we get a trickle of sales from everyone in our downline. The more people you have under you, the more powerful you are. I think you’re a natural already.”

“Oh wow. Thank you so much. I mean, I’ll have to work around my day job. And the hostel doesn’t have the best internet, but I’m sure I can?—”

“No way,” she says, swilling her coffee my way. “No downline of mine is living in a hostel, just scraping by. It’s a bad look. The owners of Quantum Success have a ranch out in Ironwood Springs. They let a bunch of us live there for free.”

“What?” I slam my hand down on the table, trying to sound as if I just hit the lottery. And in a strange way, I have.

“It’s true.” She laughs. “And everyone at Quantum—well, we’re just like one big family. And since you’re lacking in both the friends and family department, you’re going to fit right in. Everyone is just going to love you.” The smile glides from her face as she tracks my features with her eyes. “So do you mind if I get personal in another way?”

“Ask me anything,” I say, hiking my shoulders a notch. “Chastity Jones has nothing to hide.” Mostly because she doesn’t exist.

“What’s cookin’ in the romance department?” She licks the side of her cup before taking a careful sip and it’s off-putting.

“I’ve been with a few men. I’ll be honest, though. I just can’t commit. I mean, I

wanted to date my high school boyfriend and this new guy I met in college at the same time.” I laugh at the thought. “And well, that sort of killed both relationships. The last few years I’ve just been bouncing around from bed buddy to bed buddy. I don’t know. I don’t think I’m cut out for that whole white picket fence thing. I’m not looking for Romeo. I just want to have a good time. Is that such a crime?”

“No.” Her voice hikes unnaturally. “It sure is not.” She laughs. “And I get it. I’m the same way. In fact, back at the ranch, we have more than our fair share of handsome men and none of us girls have a problem sharing.” She gravels out a laugh and I join along.

“Sounds like my kind of place. Where do I sign?”

“No signing necessary.” She chews on her bottom lip for a moment. “Actually, we have a welcome ceremony coming up this Saturday. It’s not just for newcomers. It’s sort of the way we run our community meetings.” She clams up for a second. “We do have a few little, let’s say rituals, to indoctrinate newcomers. It’s just for fun. Dress up kind of stuff. It’s sort of our way of making a spectacle out of nothing.”

“Ooh, did I hear the word ritual?” I wiggle my shoulders. “I freaking love the occult and anything to do with it—one of my exes used to LARP. All fantasies are welcome in my book. The darker the better.” I nod. “Count me in. You’re lucky I’m not running there now.”

She belts out a hearty guffaw. “Oh dear, Chastity. Why do I feel as if I’ve just met a lifelong friend? No, a sister. I’ve just met a long-lost sister.” She comes at me with her arms and we exchange a heartfelt hug once again.

We chat away for the next solid hour before she gives me directions to my new home at the ranch.

“The meeting starts Saturday night at nine,” she tells me. “The roads will be dark, but drive slowly and you’ll be just fine. Come around eight-thirty and I’ll meet you by the gate.” She takes up my hands once again, her fingers suddenly hot and sweaty. “I think this is a match made in heaven. And who knows? You might just end up in paradise yet.”

She takes off and I do the same. I catch Jack and Nikki watching me as I head to my truck, but that’s about as far as I’m willing to let them into my meeting. I shoot them a quick text and tell them it went well.

I make sure Sloan is long gone before I ever turn on the ignition.

Ponzi scheme.

Cult.

Malcolm and Patty Lewis are checking off all the boxes. It makes me wonder what other nefarious boxes we’re dealing with.

Come Saturday night, I’m about to find out.

My phone pings as I’m about to turn onto the road and it’s a message from Grant Hale.

Two more bodies have been discovered.

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Special Agent Jack Stone

We hightail back to the field office and I race to get inside because somehow Fallon managed to beat us here.

“All Hale the chief,” I say, mock saluting our SAC as Nikki and I storm the office. I shoot a look to Fallon. “How did it go?”

“Wonderful,” she says, looking stiff and stoic. “She’s comping me another course. I’ll get a chance to go over it in depth this weekend.” Her eyes linger over mine a moment too long and it feels as if I’ve just been fed a line. “I was just filling Hale in.” She nods past me. “Nikki, thanks for covering me today. I appreciate that.”

“You’re a team. That’s what you do,” Hale says, looking at her sternly before offering Nikki and me the same dark expression. “Sheriff Reed contacted the office and let me know there were two more bodies discovered in the woods last night. A man and a woman. The bodies were not buried. Both discovered by hikers. Forensics was able to move quickly. They’re both being processed at the morgue.”

“Where were they found?” I ask, ready to take notes and connect the dots if need be.

“Eagle Pass and Twin Pines,” he says, turning on the screen above his head to a map freckled with red dots. “This is where the bodies have been found so far. All six of them, the head of Ms. Gannon excluded.”

“Look at that.” Nikki’s chest trembles with a laugh. “We’ve almost got a complete circle.”

Fallon nods. "With Ironwood Springs tucked neatly in the middle. It's almost as if the killer is baiting us to find them."

I glance her way and her gaze latches to mine as we think about it.

"The branding," she says. "Can you pull up the autopsies again?"

Hale starts to do just that, but Nikki is already clicking at her keyboard like mad.

"What are we looking for?" she asks.

"Right or left torso. A triangle on top. There's a line running from the top to the bottom. With two other lines fanning out from under the triangle," Fallon tells her.

Nikki draws it out on a piece of paper. "Almost looks like two triangles with the one on the bottom missing a third line. It must mean something."

"Mountains, trees," Hale offers. "Any number of twisted things qualify." A corpse pops up on the screen. "Bill Atwood," he says as he focuses in on the torso.

"There it is," I say, pointing up at the screen. "Zoom in on the hard right."

And sure enough, we've got a triangular image with three lines dancing from it.

We take a look at the other corpses, and Melissa Kilpatrick, Janelle Medina, and Brandy Richardson all have the very same markings.

"Who wants to bet our shiny new corpses will have the exact same branding?" Nikki says, closing her laptop.

"How were the other two killed?" Fallon asks just as Hale pops the sheriff's report

onto the screen.

“Female, late twenties, throat slashed,” he reads. “The body was found with multiple contusions, broken nose, and an arm that looked as if it were twisted. According to this, she was black and blue all over. Purple, green, and yellow bruising were present.”

“Geez,” Nikki gasps. “So if she had contusions that were evident, that means she got those before she died.”

“Black and blue,” I say. “Color indicates time frame. Yellow and green indicate five to ten days, so we’ll go with that. Unless she was beaten daily.”

“And in that house of horrors, it’s completely possible,” Nikki says.

Fallon squeezes her eyes shut for a moment.

“Everything all right?” I ask and she perks right up.

“I’m fine,” she says. “I just feel bad for the victim.” She glances to Hale. “How did the male die?”

“Throat slashed as well,” he says, pulling up another report.

“What’s the score?” I ask Nikki because I’m too lazy to dig through my notes.

“Four had their throats slashed, Janelle Medina succumbed to a nasty gash on the side of her head, and Melissa was strangled. One dismemberment—that would be Emily.”

“Pull up Janelle,” Fallon requests and Hale quickly obliges. “Get a tight shot of her neck.”

The screen zooms in and we're treated to blotchy bruising.

"There it is," I say. "Someone tried to strangle her beforehand."

"They probably thought they did the job." Fallon shakes her head. "But the woman must have moaned or moved and they found a way to finish her off. And according to the coroner, Melissa was dead for several weeks before Janelle was killed. I think whoever did this found out the hard way how tedious and unpredictable a strangling could be."

"Makes sense," I say. "Everyone had their throat slashed after that. It's a cleaner kill."

"A certain death," Nikki says.

"We've got a serial killer hungry for bodies," Hale says. "And he or she is mining them from Paradise. Who are we looking at?"

"Malcolm and Patty Lewis are the head honchos in charge," I offer. "That puts them at the top of the suspect list."

Fallon shakes her head as if refuting the idea. "Yes, but Scarlett pointed out that there was another person, a supreme leader. She referenced him as a man, said he wears a red hood, and that no one knows who he is. She said he was a real lunatic."

"Supreme leader." Hale nods at the three of us as if we've got our answer. "He's the one in charge. But if he's protecting his identity from the general population, he's not going to out himself to us either." His lips curve with a slight smile as if he knows why.

Fallon raises a hand. "They're having a meeting Saturday night. I could try to get?—"

“No,” Hale cuts her off at the pass. “Too many unknowns, too dangerous. Give it a few days, then head back to Ironwood and speak to Malcolm and Patty. I’ll start the wheels moving for a search warrant and put together a task force to help with the project. We need to blanket that compound before anyone gets a chance to hide evidence. We’ll shoot for Monday. That should give me enough time to get things together and hopefully have a full ID on the new bodies. If Malcolm and Patty are guilty, they won’t volunteer a search. They can have their party on Saturday, but come Monday, they’re finished.”

We take off and Nikki heads home to Silver Peak while I follow Fallon to Pine Ridge Falls. We drive down Main Street and she waves as she heads into the parking lot of her mother’s diner and pulls in alongside the sheriff’s vehicle.

My chest expands at the sight and I’m about to take the turn toward Whispering Woods when I jerk the wheel in the other direction instead.

What the hell. I’m feeling a little hungry myself.

I glare at the sheriff’s vehicle as I make my way inside.

A sheriff with seven bodies on his hands should be fired.

The diner is sparse with patrons. The lunch crowd probably left two hours ago, and that leaves the place in limbo until dinner.

The music is soft, the scent of burgers hits hard, and that smug look on Rob Reed’s face makes me want to punch someone—him to be exact.

Fallon is too busy smooching with his dog to notice my presence as I head their way.

“Fancy meeting you here.” I shoot the sheriff a cheesy grin.

“Howdy,” he says with a smile, but it looks forced as if he’s not too thrilled to see me either.

Fallon looks up and her lips curl into a genuine grin. “I would have asked you to join me if I knew you were hungry. I thought you and Nikki just ate.”

“We did,” I confess without meaning to. “But I thought I’d grab something for my brother.”

“Sit,” she says. “We were just about to order.”

A silver-haired maven struts this way, older, early sixties, lots of blue eyeshadow, hips that swivel, and an expression that says just try me.

I like her already.

“Mom, this is Special Agent Jack Stone,” Fallon is quick to fill the woman in. “Stone, this is my mother, Bea. She owns the place.” Fallon winks as she says it because she’s already mentioned that to me.

“It’s a great place,” I say. “I’ve been meaning to stop in. Moved here a little over a year ago. I live out in Whispering Woods, just a few doors down from Fallon.”

“Cozy,” Rob says under his breath, but I choose to ignore it for now.

Her mother sizes me up as if I were a whole new species.

“Oh my word, aren’t you a cup of hot buttered rum?” Bea purrs and elicits a laugh from me.

“Ignore her,” Fallon insists. “She hails from Tennessee and tends to get extra country

when she sees something she likes. Down, girl,” she admonishes her mother somewhat playfully.

“Oh, come now.” Bea waves her off. “I got eyes, don’t I? Lucky you sitting at the table with two handsome men. What can I get for you all?”

Fallon and Rob put in their orders—burger specials for both—and I ask for two of the same to go.

She takes off and the dog bounces over to my side of the table before hopping up and licking my face.

“Down,” Rob growls, but the smart pooch goes on undeterred. He knows a good thing when he sees it, and it’s not his owner.

“That’s okay, Buddy,” I say, offering him a hearty scratch on his stomach. “I like you, too.” I glance back at the man in blue. “So you hear about the bodies?”

“I heard first,” he says, forcing a smile to come and go. “I’m on it. In fact, I’m expecting a full report from the coroner come morning.”

“The other seven were branded,” Fallon tells him before whipping out her phone and showing him a picture.

“Who’s this?” He looks both amused and concerned. And seeing that it’s a half-dressed stripper, I get it.

“Scarlett Blaze in all her glory.” Fallon stretches the picture until her torso is on display. “Looks like a mountain and maybe a rough sketch of a tree underneath.”

“Geez.” Rob winces. “Looks brutal. Why anyone would do that is beyond me.”

“You’d be surprised by the things people can talk themselves into,” Fallon says. “Or more to the point, let others talk them into.”

“I guess so.” He ticks his head to the side. “That’s the world we live in.” His eyes linger on the photo for another moment. “People are forever searching for meaning, and unfortunately, they’re looking in all sorts of places—always thinking they’re on the edge of an event horizon ready to take them to the next level. Teetering on the brink of something profound—and nine times out of ten, it’s just profoundly dangerous.”

“The serial killer we’re dealing with is the dangerous one,” she tells him.

“Maybe so, but you don’t want to spook him. Or he might just want to kill everyone around.”

A waitress comes by and drops off our meals, two plates full of grilled perfection and enough fries to build a ladder to the moon, and a giant paper bag for me.

I wish the two of them a pleasant rest of the day before paying and taking off.

I feel as if I’m teetering on something profound myself—the heels of a killer.

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Evil

Greed.

It's often the endgame for most people. I've seen it play out thousands of times in thousands of different ways. The temptation starts small, you want something better for yourself, you just need that special edge. And for some, that edge is riding on the border of illegal.

I meant to shut them down. Heck, I should have. But I wanted something for myself, too. Something that could fill that dark void in my soul, something that might actually make me happy. But nothing ever could, nor will.

My first kill was out of necessity. After that, it was part necessity, part pleasure. But had any one of those people lived, it would have flushed my entire world right down the toilet, been my undoing in the most humiliating way.

It's not my fault they entangled themselves in this situation. They're the ones that swore allegiance—until death do we part. Or whatever other crap they bought into.

It was them or me. A simple game of survival.

There were only seven.

I let so many others slide.

I'm their god.

I get to decide who stays and who goes.

That's what they want. And that's what I'm determined to give them.

I head to the shed out back and brush the camping and fishing gear from the top shelf until I find what I'm looking for. A small plastic container no bigger than a liter. I hold it in my hand a moment and then sift the powder inside by giving it a shake.

I've confiscated a number of things over the years, but I knew when I got my hands on this, I had hit the jackpot.

A simple white powder, could be flour, could be sugar for all anyone knows. But it has the muscle to knock out a city block's worth of unsuspecting people. It's technically a salt, mostly flavorless, odorless, so unassuming. Highly soluble in water, or the rum punch we'll be serving Saturday night.

I've been grooming them for years in the event this moment should arise. We partake of the blood together. Just a drop of my blood in a vat of the aforementioned cocktail and we all partake at once. Or they will. No need for me to play along.

The kids won't partake, the little ones, the teenagers, they won't know what happened. I'm sure they'll be fostered out and well taken care of.

And I'll be free.

We'll all be free.

I've got a career, a life to resume without them. I should have had those dumpster divers arrested the second I sniffed out their little Ponzi scheme. But hell, it was making a pretty nickel and they offered me a cut in exchange to look the other way.

It wasn't until I hid in the shadows during one of their midnight meetings and witnessed the depravity firsthand that I knew I wanted in on that, too.

It was the power that lured me. I held up a hoop and the two idiots asked how high they needed to jump. Only they know who I really am, my true identity. They have no incentive to call me out. It would be their doom as well. But their doom isn't necessarily mine. That's why this Saturday night I'll dawn the red hood one last time.

I glance out the window at the sea of pine trees that line the back wall of the property. I can't wait until it's over. As soon as they drink up, I'll bolt.

I don't want anything to do with the aftermath. I hate suffering. That's why I believe in a quick and painless death, the kind I offer to those who threaten the family. Their family, not mine. It was never mine.

And now the feds are involved, sniffing around, circling in. It's just a matter of time before the walls close in.

My fingers twitch as the memory of those first few deaths gone awry come to mind. Strangulation takes muscle, patience, and far too much time.

A knife to the throat is quicker and much more humane.

I glance at the powder in my hand. I'm not here to make anyone suffer. I plan on pairing it with benzodiazepines I've crushed to powder. That should knock them out just enough.

Goodnight to one and all, sleep tight, forever.

I place the bottle back on the shelf and cover it up just the way it was.

Two nights to go.

If Paradise is going to end, it's going to be on my terms.

But first, I think I need to head down to Boulder and take care of a little loose end on my part.

Do it right or don't do it at all.

I'm sorry, Scarlett. But you're one blaze I need to put out.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Saturday night has never felt more alive as I roll up to an old wooden arch with the word home painted across the top.

True to her word, Sloan is already at the gate, waving me in, motioning left toward a makeshift parking lot. I pull in just shy of six utility vans and kill the engine.

“Here goes everything,” I whisper as I get out of my truck, and the gravel crunches beneath my feet. The sound of revelry in the distance garners my attention and I look toward the compound, trying to absorb what I can from this vantage point.

The thought of being in the same vicinity, the same property as my sister makes my heart race. I couldn’t sleep a wink the past few nights just thinking about what our reunion might be like.

Would she run if she saw me?

What on earth for?

Just what the heck are you running from, Erin?

The air is alive with the sounds of nature tonight as the distant hoot of an owl blows through the towering evergreens above me. The cool night air holds the fragrance of the woods, the damp earth, and I can’t help but shake my head at the beauty surrounding this misguided place.

To my right sits an army of run-down RVs. The orange glow of lights fills a few of the windows, the flicker of candlelight in others. To the left is a sea of tents flapping in the night breeze. Some are as large as the kind you see at big events; most are smaller, like the kind you might find at a campground. And dead ahead of me is a behemoth house that looks angry and sullen, dingy even from this faraway vantage point.

“I’m so glad you found it!” Sloan nearly strangles me with a hug. Her perfume is thick and floral, and she’s wearing a simple white shift dress that makes her glow like a ghost.

“It wasn’t easy, but you gave great directions. And you were right. The key was driving slow. I could have easily barreled right past the entrance.”

“You’re good at following directions, I like that.” She pulls back and the moonlight washes the color out of her face, her lips turn into thin black lines, and her dark hair has a blue cast to it.

It’s an unnerving sight, but I promised myself nothing would spook me this evening. Nothing could elicit a reaction from me.

I might be playing the part of Chastity Jones, but I’m still Special Agent Fallon Baxter—even if I don’t have my weapon on me this evening. It’s in the truck. But now that I see the distance between the lot and the house of horrors, I may as well have left it at home.

“We’re starting soon,” she says. Her breathing is slightly ragged and her words are pressured. I can tell she’s excited, but I’m not sure if it’s because of me or the upcoming ceremony. You’d think she’d be used to this BS by now. “I’ll give you a brief rundown, but you’ll stand next to me the whole time.” She takes up my hand and I cringe. She’s one of those touchy-feely women, and I can’t stand the in-your-

face, in-your-personal-space touch-feely among us.

“Okay, so I just stand there and observe?” My favorite combination in life. Two things I actually excel at.

“Yes and no. We do a rededication ceremony once a month and that’s tonight, too. But it’s really easy. We say a few words together, reaffirming our dedication to Paradise—that’s what we call this place because look around.” She squawks out a laugh while waving a hand in the direction of the rusted-out RVs. I can see the paint peeling off half of them from here. “And then we all partake in a communal drink. Don’t worry. It’s just rum punch. And you can drink up with the rest of us since you’ll be spending the night.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“I insist.” She pulls me close until her body rests against mine like a cushion. “After the ceremony, I’ll give you a tour of the town, as we all like to call it. We’ve got so much going on all the time. It’s a true-blue community.”

The sound of children shrieking and laughing causes me to snap my head to the left.

“You’ve got kids here?” My heart thumps as I recall what Scarlett said about child sharing. I’m not sure why I didn’t think I’d come into contact with them tonight, and hopefully won’t.

“Oh yeah, tons, but they’re well-behaved and just the cutest. They won’t be at the ceremony. The teenagers look after them and they’ll all be going to bed soon.”

They’ll all be evicted soon if I have my way. I’m not just here to track down my sister, but I’m here to stop this runaway train before it destroys any more lives.

Sloan leads us past the collection of RVs and I scour the grounds in their direction as they sit huddled together like a flock of rusted-out and long-forgotten relics. Their shells are sun-faded and some are up on cinder blocks. And as we move our way past them, the metallic tang of oxidation and the earthy scent of musk envelop us.

On the other side, the tents flap and ripple in the night breeze as murmurs of conversation and laughter emanate from them. A group of women appear from that direction and they all share the same long hair, the same long skirts, and plain blouses. There's an entire prairie vibe going on here.

"What's this?" I hitch my head their way. "You got the Amish living here, too?" I tease, but not because I want to insult the Amish. I need to grease her. Like it or not, Sloan is my only key to getting any answers around here.

A dark laugh gurgles from her. "No." She pulls me close and wraps an arm around my waist for a second as if comforting me. "It's the way some of the girls like to style themselves. They're not out in the world like we are, so they don't have to try so hard, if you know what I mean. Not all the women who live here are part of the Quantum sales force. But you and I, we're a team. And I have a feeling we'll be a best-selling team soon enough."

We pass the tents, and now it's just the shell of a mansion that sits before us.

"That's Nightshade," she says with a shiver in her voice. "We don't have much to do with it. The landowners live in it. Trust me. I've seen the inside and we'll be just fine in my old Airstream. It'll just be you and me and a couple of girls, but they can relocate if you think it's too crowded. We're always careful to cater to the needs of the newbies around here. We want you to feel safe and comfortable. You'll be getting choice food at first."

At first?

I'm tempted to roll my eyes at that one. Scarlett mentioned they scavenged for food. I guess that means I eat trash first.

"Can't wait," I say with a sigh as more bodies appear and begin to drain in just past the house. "Where is the meeting tonight?"

"In the field just behind Nightshade. That house might be big, but it could never hold all of us." She lifts her shoulders and there's an unmistakable touch of pride written on her face. "Oh, wait"—she blinks my way—"you're not a prude about getting naked, are you?"

"What's that?" I blink right back. I'm not a prude, but I'm starting to feel like one.

"Don't sweat it. It's just for the ceremony. Everyone keeps their eyes focused on the action in the center."

"So we stand in a circle?" My heart races, because as much as I don't want to stand naked in a crowd of hundreds of strangers, I couldn't think of a better configuration to spot my sister in a crowd.

"Yes, a circle, but don't worry. It'll go by fast. After the initial community news, they just do a dedication over the offering, and once that's through we all go up and get our refreshments, the rum punch. It's the only time we get any liquor around here so it's kind of a big deal. Then we get dressed and party the rest of the night. I just can't wait for you to meet everyone!"

The field emerges and I watch as one by one adults of all ages peel off their clothes as if they were at the beach. Although there's not a swimsuit in sight. And soon there won't be a stitch of anything in sight.

Not on their bodies, not on mine.

It's showtime.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Sloan and I fall in line and take off our clothes. I've done many things that have felt unnatural to me, but this feels as if I'm peeling off my skin.

It's dark out, save for an expansive table in the center of the enormous circle where dozens of candles glitter over its surface. In the middle of the table sits a giant silver basin where a few people add something to it then stir it with a long-handled ladle.

A man steps into the middle of the grounds, naked, as is everyone else by now. And even though I'm doing my best not to look, my eyes keep stealing snatches.

If Erin is in this crowd, then I'm going to find her. I'll scour miles of flesh to find my sister and tonight I'll have to do just that. But so far, I can't spot her anywhere. But it's dark and there are so many bodies here tonight. I could be scanning right past her. Thankfully, Sloan is determined to introduce me to everyone and anyone, and I hope that includes my sister.

A man sets foot in the center of the circle, holding what looks to be a ram's horn in his hand. He blows into it, and soon a quiet hush falls over the crowd.

Sloan gives my hand a squeeze.

"Remember"—she leans my way and whispers—"it's all dress up. It's all in fun. Sort of like Halloween."

I'm about to make a sarcastic remark about the fact there's not a costume in sight just

as three cloaked figures step forward.

There are a man and woman wearing long black robes. And another figure, taller with broader shoulders than the first man. He, too, is wearing a dark cloak, but he has a red hood over his head.

“That’s Malcolm and Patty without the masks,” Sloan whispers once again.

“Who’s the guy with the hood?”

“The supreme leader,” she says, growing far more sober than I’ve yet to see her. “Time for talking is over.”

“Welcome, one and all,” the man in the red hood booms to the crowd and I startle because it feels as if I’ve heard that voice before. “Welcome to the most important event horizon of your life.”

The crowd cheers for a moment, and yet my insides pinch again because those words sound as familiar as does the voice delivering them.

“A blood atonement must be made for our sins. And once you drink of my blood, you, too, will be cleansed.”

He pulls out a knife and slices his forearm until a trickle of blood drips in the silver basin and the crowd gives a raucous applause.

Rum punch with blood. It’s safe to say I won’t be partaking.

But at least I have a better idea of who the hooded enigma might be. White male according to the skin around his eyes and that of his forearm and hands, sturdy build, good shape. I may not be able to take him.

The woman in the black robe gives a pious wave. “Do we have any new members with us this evening? Please take a step forward so we can acknowledge you.”

I shoot a look to Sloan and she gives my hand another squeeze.

“I knew that might spook you, so I didn’t want to say anything.” She giggles. “Don’t worry. It won’t last but a second. Go on.” She pushes me forward and I’m one in a handful. The three robed figures make their way to those brave enough to step out, and soon enough they arrive to me.

“Welcome,” the man and the woman say in unison, but the man in the red hood tips his head thoughtfully at me.

The moon shines over us and it feels like a spotlight as he steps my way.

“Tonight”—he reaches out and swipes his thumb over my lips—“you’ll be my special guest in Nightshade.” His fingers snake down my torso, all the way down, but I dare flinch.

My eyes latch to his and it’s all I can do to stop my mouth from falling open.

No wonder his voice was so familiar.

He doesn’t have to remove the hood from his head.

I know exactly who he is.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Jack Stone

As I steer my truck toward Boulder, I can't stop thinking about the case.

Why do I get the feeling the answer is right in front of me?

Malcolm and Patty have been whirling through my mind nonstop for the last twenty-four hours, and I've spent about that much time digging up as much as I can on them. No records to speak of, none as of yet at least.

Jet grunts as he switches the radio station. It's his fault we're out tonight. There's a late-night recovery meeting out in Teal and he's been invited. Most likely because no one closer to home will invite him back.

I'll give it to Jet. It takes a lot of work to get booted from a recovery meeting. At least he's good at something.

On our way out, I drove past Fallon's place. No lights on and no truck in the driveway. Makes me wonder who she's with and what she's doing. I suppose her mother and sister are options, but I'll admit, my mind drifted far past any relation of hers.

Fallon is beautiful. And she's smart as hell. She makes a good team member, too. I may not admit it to her, but I'm glad to have her.

The roads snake through the rugged scenery and my mind treks back to the case. Seven bodies. All of them branded.

Murdered and dumped.

Not buried.

I shake my head. It's clear they all belonged to Paradise at one point and found hell in exchange for heaven. That sums up so much of this rotten planet.

The evergreens line either side of the road, blackened by their own shadows, the towering peaks in the distance stretch as far as the eye can see. And soon enough, the landscape shifts as we get closer to Boulder and the wilderness gives way to the manicured outline of the city. But nothing seems to be able to distract me from what evil might be lurking in Paradise. The irony isn't lost on me. But what is lost on me is how so many people can fall victim to such blatant brainwashing.

Unburied bodies...

I shake my head.

It's as if the killer is baiting us.

Four bodies before we were allowed to even look at the case.

Whoever dragged Emily Gannon's pretty little head across state lines was either a fool or knew exactly what they were doing.

But regardless, each of those bodies points like an arrow straight at Malcolm and Patty.

Something Scarlett said the other night comes back to me and my heart lurches in my chest. I take the next exit and Jet sits up as if waking from a stupor.

“Teal is past Boulder,” Jet says, sounding increasingly annoyed with me. He was annoyed when I made him shower. Annoyed when I shoved a burger at him. Annoyed when I told him to stop jonesing for liquor. Annoyance is the state of our affairs as of late. Heck, it has been for the last fifteen years at least. “You took the wrong turn, dude.”

“We’re going to take a little side trip,” I say, and soon enough I pull into the lot of the Boulder Beauties Gentlemen’s Club.

Jet lets out a catcall that nearly takes out my eardrum.

“Now we’re talking.” He slaps his thigh as he laughs with approval. “Dude, is it my birthday?”

“No. And stop saying dude. You know I hate that.”

“That’s why I say it.” He starts to get out and I yank him back.

“Stay here. I’ll be five minutes.”

I jog inside and the music and the stench of liquor hit me like a riot.

I stop the first waitress I see and ask if Scarlett is working this evening.

“Scarlett doesn’t work here anymore,” she says as the smile glides off her face. “She missed three sets. It’s three strikes and you’re out. But don’t worry, honey”—she glides her finger over my cheek—“we’ve got lots of beautiful women here who would love to take care of the needs of a man like you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say as I head out and jump back in my truck. “She’s not there anymore,” I say to myself, stumped, but Jet is too busy scrolling through his

phone to notice.

That conversation with Scarlett plays out in my mind once again. The guy with the red hood must be pretty important if he doesn't want anyone to know who he is.

I nod as the pieces to the puzzle begin to fall into place.

I pull out my phone and scan through the plethora of material Fallon shot to Nikki and me, specifically the file from the Quantum Success program. I studied it as if it were my new Bible last night, and something struck me and I didn't know why. I scroll through pages and pages until I find it.

Get ready to shed the shackles from your past. You stand at the event horizon of a transformative new beginning.

"Huh." I stare at my phone in a daze.

I know why those bodies weren't buried.

I know why they were circling Ironwood Springs like a calling card.

And I sure as hell know why the sheriff's department hasn't budged an inch on any of it.

Hale said that monsters like this prefer to leave their signature, as if their demented behavior is their pride and joy. I pull up the photo of that insignia branded onto the victims and I know exactly what I'm looking at.

His initials. One letter pointing the right way, one sits backwards.

Scarlett was right. The man in the red hood is pretty important.

My eyes dart to the entry of the seedy club before me. The other night at the diner, Fallon mentioned that we had spoken to Scarlett.

Ice runs through my veins.

I have a dark feeling I know why she missed her last three sets.

Then it hits me. It's Saturday night. There's a big hoorah down in Paradise.

Fallon's truck was missing.

I shoot a look out the window.

She couldn't be. Would she?

Why wouldn't she tell me?

Then again, I have a feeling she doesn't tell me a lot of things.

I call Hale and he picks up on the first ring.

"What?" he snaps with all the enthusiasm as my brother.

"We need to get to Ironwood Springs asap. I'm about fifteen minutes away. I'll meet you there. Call Nikki and send backup. I know who the killer is and he needs to be stopped right now."

We hang up and Jet catches my eye.

"Geez." I hit the steering wheel.

As far as I see it, I've got two options—drop him off at the booze and boobs before me or take him with me. And seeing that he has an addiction to both booze and boobs, it's not the wisest move on my part. Even though he doesn't have cash or a credit card, there's nothing that would stop him from trying to down all the booze this place has to offer, and I don't feel like bailing him out of jail tonight.

“There's been a change of plans,” I tell him as we hightail it out of the parking lot and get back on the road.

“You're going to sit in the truck while I take care of a little business,” I say to my brother as I speed us down to Ironwood Springs, to the back roads that lead to Paradise lost, and park as close as I can get to the front gate.

“Don't move a muscle,” I warn as I get out, climb through the fence, and make my way toward the compound in the cover of darkness.

Every now and again I hear the murmur of a crowd collectively cheering and applauding.

I head in that direction, past the RV graveyard, past the tents, past Nightshade, the house that looks as if it's about to come to life and swallow me whole. A cache of red canisters sits dotted every ten feet or so around the periphery of the structure and I make a note of it. Odd location to store fuel.

I spot a crowd standing in a mammoth circle, and the fact every last one of them is naked as a jaybird doesn't seem to surprise me. I shoot across to the woods and duck in a thicket, climbing up the side of a pine until I'm perched about eight feet off the ground. The moon glows over their bodies and makes them shine like aliens. Three figures stand in the middle, clad in black robes. Malcolm, Patty, and a sturdier man with a red hood. A dry laugh thumps through my chest.

I can't wait to take him down myself.

I scan the crowd. Everyone is solemn, so very focused with the exception of a brunette who seems to be shifting her head ever so slightly from side to side. She turns this way briefly and my stomach drops.

I know exactly where Fallon Baxter is tonight.

She doesn't have her weapon on her.

She doesn't have anything on her.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

There he stands before the gathered members of Paradise, his identity obscured beneath the folds of the blood-red hood on his head—hiding like the coward he is.

We've just endured close to an hour of community news and reviews, enough to bore my socks off if I was wearing any.

The so-called supreme leader has taken center stage once again, rambling on and on about the benefits of his kingdom.

"He usually doesn't go on like this," Sloan whispers and I nod because I had figured he was putting on an extra special show just for me.

"Tonight"—he shouts with the conviction of a madman—"we stand at the precipice of our collective destiny, united in our journey toward transcendence. This recommitment ceremony symbolizes not just a renewal of our vows to our shared vision, but it acts as a sacred pledge, reaffirming the fact we're discarding the world around us that fought so hard to confine us." A howl of approval erupts from the crowd. "Tonight we pioneer our way to a new realm, where our spirits will fly unbound and our collective potential will be unlimited."

A new realm? Spirits unbound? For sure I'm not drinking the Kool-Aid.

A thought comes back to me. Something that left me unsettled the other night at the diner—he said not to spook the killer or he might just want to kill everyone around.

“Oh no,” I moan as my mind dips into the darkest territory yet. It makes sense why he’d want to set up Malcolm and Patty if things went south. And I’m guessing that somehow, somehow, the deceased figured out exactly who the man in red was. They needed to be eliminated. But now the feds are here. I’m here.

And like the coward before me said once, he always has a plan B.

I squeeze my eyes tight before glancing over at the silver basin behind him. Busted the mob, confiscated enough cyanide to kill the entire state.

That would give him access to take care of the job.

I try to shake the thought of out my head but can’t.

“Tonight marks the event horizon of our rebirth.” His voice bellows into the darkness and a chill rides down my spine as he says those words echoed from the diner. “Tonight we fly into the darkness as beacons of light, forging a future into eternity.”

I glance to Sloan and she shakes her head my way.

“Isn’t he great?” She giggles as she says it.

“So great,” I mutter.

It’ll be great if we make it out alive.

“Tonight as we drink from the chalice together,” he continues, “we’ll transcend the mundane world as we leave it behind for good. Our unity, our faith?—”

The wailing sound of sirens cuts through the night as the sound of an entire army of cars screeches onto the grounds.

“Come partake,” he shouts, waving the crowd toward the table. “Don’t let them trample on our unity.”

The crowd quickly migrates in his direction just as a set of footfalls speed their way over from my right and I look to see a dark figure barreling this way, brandishing a gun in his hand.

“FBI, nobody move,” the shadowed figure thunders and it sounds like Stone.

Malcolm lifts an arm to his right. “Code red,” he shouts. “Code red!”

Half the crowd disperses and I bolt for the table where some of the men and women already have a cup in their hands and are reaching for the unholy bowl of doom.

I flip the table without hesitating and watch as the liquid spills from the silver bowl, shining like a sanguine mirror in the moonlight.

I’m snatched violently from behind as the crook of an arm lands tight against my neck. Reflexively, my hands want to pluck him off of me so I can catch my next breath, but I pluck off his hood instead. I twist my head just enough until his eyes latch onto mine.

There he is, Robby Reed, my childhood friend staring back at me with a mixture of horror and something this side of pleasure. It would figure he’d get a rise out of this somehow.

The house to my left erupts in a wall of flames and I look that way in time to see a few men discarding red gasoline cans before taking off into the night.

“Freeze.” Jack Stone bounces in front of us and a dark laugh rumbles through Rob’s chest.

“You think you’re a hero?” he growls the words out. “If I’m dying tonight, so is she.”

In seconds, the area is swarmed with what looks to be every member of the force in the state of Colorado. Guns drawn at screaming people, the house behind us roaring out its own brand of protest.

“Say goodbye to your buddy, Fallon,” Rob pants hard in my ear. “It’s time for us to fly.”

The muscles in his arm cinch, and without putting too much thought into it, I wrap my left leg around his as if it were a pole and land us both to the ground.

He spikes his elbow into my ear in an attempt to pin me down, but I lift my knees to my chest and roll him onto his back as if it were a pro wrestling move.

Jack lands on him, and soon enough he’s got Rob’s arms cuffed behind his back.

“All for what?” I kick him hard in the ribs. “Power? Money? They cut you in on the take, didn’t they?”

“I’m sorry, Fallon,” he grunts. “I didn’t mean to drag you into this—I didn’t want to drag any of you into this.”

“Of course not,” I say. “If anything went south, you were going to pin it all on your new friends, Malcolm and Patty. Why didn’t you just shut them down?”

“I wanted to, but something in me wanted this.” He looks up. “Everything I ever thought I wanted was here—money, power, women, and control.”

I shake my head. “And instead of arresting them, you made a cash grab, among other things.”

A dull laugh rides through him. “You always were the smartest Baxter of the bunch,” he grunts and winces.

My heart rattles unnaturally. “Where is she?” I pant as I scan the grounds. “Where is Erin?”

A thin smile rides on Rob’s face and I fall to the ground next to him, turn him over onto his back, and shake him.

“Where the hell is my sister?” I riot in his face.

“She goes by Angel.” His eyes cinch shut as his chest expands. “She’s in the basement.”

I glance back at the house just as the flames reach the sky, engulfing the structure completely.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

An inferno rides into the sky as the house they call Nightshade succumbs to the flames.

I stumble in that direction as if in a trance and note the south end of the structure has yet to catch fire. A small window sits above the ground and I run that way.

“Baxter, wait,” someone shouts, and soon Jack is on my heels. “He said you’d need these.” He holds up a set of keys. “Master key. He had them in his pocket.”

I go to grab them and Jack hikes them out of reach.

“The hell I’m going to let you go in there.” He charges past me and takes the window right off its hinge. Smoke curls from inside and I push Jack aside, snatch the keys, and slip through the narrow opening.

“Erin,” I shout into the dark as a beam of light hits me from above.

“My phone, take it,” Jack shouts and I’m quick to grab it and turn on the flashlight. “This way,” he shouts to someone from over his shoulder. “We need help. We’ve got people down here,” he says before dropping into the chute behind me.

“Erin?” I cry so loud my voice rubs raw.

A series of dark corridors opens up and we hear the sound of muffled cries.

“There’s someone here,” I pant and we race in the direction of the screams of misery until they get increasingly louder.

Soon, two more men are on our heels, both wearing vests with the letters FBI emblazoned on them, and we tackle each door we find and each one has a cage with a girl in it.

I fumble with the keys and run from room to room, never getting a good look at the women slumped in the corners of those cells. My only worry is to open the doors to them all.

A swarm of agents helps hoist the women one by one into the hall, and by that time there’s a ladder leading up to the window where a man dressed in black helps to pull them all to safety. And I think I recognize the man in black as Jack’s brother, Jet. It’s odd, but my mind is racing far too fast to ask any questions.

“That’s it,” Jack shouts as the smoke begins to build. “The rooms are empty. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Erin,” I shout, scanning the crowd of panicked girls as they make their way above ground.

A horrific roar erupts to our left as a part of the ceiling comes down, spilling a sea of fiery embers into the room.

“Everybody out, now,” Jack thunders, and soon the girls are evacuated out of the vicinity, then myself, then Jack who insists on being last.

I get up from my knees and I stagger toward two of the girls I helped rescue. “Erin, did you see Erin?” My voice wavers at the two women before me, thin as rails, one has bruises on the right side of her face that look recent. “She went by Angel.”

“We know Angel,” the taller of the two says. “I’m Kim and this is Trish,” she says, nodding to her friend. “We were trapped down there with her. She didn’t know why she was there.”

Trish, the girl with the bruises, nods. “She didn’t know why she was being punished.”

“I know exactly why she was being punished,” I pant. “He knew who she was. Help me find her. Please.”

“Anything for you,” Kim says. “But promise you’ll make sure we get out of this hellhole.”

“That’s as good as done.”

Jack tosses a warm dress shirt over me and I’m quickly apprised it’s his own.

We comb the grounds as best we can in search of my sister, but we come up empty.

“Erin?” I cry one more time in frustration before falling to my knees.

She never comes back.

She doesn’t want to be found.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:47 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Don’t you dare scoot one inch closer,” I’m quick to reprimand Jack as I sink into the bubbling cauldron of my hot tub. “No playing footsies either. I’m not buying that it was an accident stuff.”

“Fine,” he says, helping himself to a slice of pizza perched on the table butted up next to us and he passes me a slice as well. “But that threat runs both ways.” He shoots a dark grin my way, and something in me pinches with heat. Most likely because I’m sure there are volcanos cooler than this boiling oil we’ve settled into.

The sun dips below the horizon and transforms the lake just past my cabin into a canvas of fiery orange and glowing purple as it mirrors the sky above.

It’s been well over twenty-four hours since we caught the serial killer who was terrorizing the residents of Ironwood Springs—more to the point, the residents of the Paradise cult.

A sharp bark comes from our right and I hike out of the water a notch to see a perky yellow lab bounding this way with a tennis ball in his happy little mouth.

“Stay close, Buddy,” I say, plucking the ball from him and tossing it toward the distal end of my cabin, and soon he’s on the chase. We’ve been playing this same game for the better part of the afternoon.

I stopped by Rob’s place before I ever headed for Whispering Woods that night and brought Buddy home to live with me. I liked him better than Rob anyway.

I picked Buddy up right after Hale reamed me for entering Paradise on my own without notifying Jack or Nikki. I told him about my sister. I bared my soul, and he still wasn't all that impressed. He said if I pulled another stunt like that there would be disciplinary action. He told me to think long and hard because it could not only cost me my career, it might cost me my life.

Malcolm and Patty were arrested in connection with their part in the Ponzi scheme, and the charges against them included mail fraud, human trafficking, withholding funds, holding people against their will, and the list goes on and on.

Rob cried innocent even after confessing to me. He's sure a good attorney can help get him out of the mess he's in. He's already assured them that I'm a scorned woman pegging him as guilty due to unrequited love on my part. He says anyone could have put on a red hood and raped those women, slit the throat of those he killed. He said he was playing a part—conducting his own sting as the sheriff.

But apparently, there's a man named Keith who said he'll testify against Rob in exchange for immunity, seeing that he was the heavy that planted the bodies where he was told.

And speaking of bodies, according to Keith, it was Emily's lover, a man named Grady, who dragged her head across state lines. They had a daughter in the fold and he went back into Paradise after he left Wyoming so he could be with the kid. The plan was that Emily would leave first and find help, but someone got wind of their plan and snitched on her. They didn't realize Grady was in on it, too. The next thing he knew, she was dead.

Kim, one of the women that I met that night, told me that Emily said she had taken off twice already and managed to contact the sheriff on both occasions. When help didn't arrive, she tried again. I'm pretty sure that's why she was killed. I have a feeling there was no snitch who ratted Emily out. Unfortunately, she did it herself without realizing just how dangerous the person was that she went to for help.

What she thought was a savior was the devil in disguise.

The girls I met that night, Trish and Kim, are already headed back to Kansas City along with their children. We had forensics swab their DNA and it was a match. The social workers were content and so were Trish and Kim. I bought the airline tickets for the four of them myself.

It turns out, Trish's mother had passed away and left her a fortune.

They're both going to get tattoos to cover up Rob's initials that were burned into their flesh.

His initials. I shake my head. What a megalomaniac.

No one heard from Angel again.

Erin took off. She doesn't want to be found. I get that. But too bad for her, because as far as I'm concerned, the hunt is back on.

"You know, Stone"—I say as the steam curls around us—"you're lucky I even let you in."

"What's the matter? Afraid I'd see you in a bathing suit? I've seen you in less."

"Funny." I take a bite out of my pizza in haste. Extra cheese, extra sauce from Luigi's, their standard recipe. Tastes like heaven.

"And what do you mean lucky?" he says, shooting me a stern look that decidedly makes my insides quiver once again. "I think after everything that's transpired, I've earned my way into this elite hot tub society of yours."

"Fair enough," I say. "But don't think I'm going to go easy on you next time we hit

the field.”

He thunders out another laugh. “Wouldn’t dream of it, Baxter.”

“So where’s Nikki?” I ask, giving a quick glance around. He doesn’t call her Knight, and I’ve found myself in the habit of eschewing her surname because of it as well. Hopefully, she doesn’t mind. Nikki, I happen to like.

I cast a quick glance toward the driveway.

When I shot out the invite, I sent it to both of them. Sort of a celebratory dip with dinner on me as a way to say thanks for saving my very naked behind.

His phone chimes and he picks it up, grunting as he examines the screen.

“Speak of the devil,” he says. “She’s not coming. She says she thinks we should have a little alone time. She wants us to enjoy our hot date.”

“She did not say that.” I laugh, splashing some water his way.

“Hold your fire,” he says, flashing his phone at me and, sure enough, it’s true as gospel.

“How much did you pay her?” I tease. “On second thought, she probably owes you one.”

“Are you saying I’d manipulate my friends and cut them out of a pizza dinner to have some alone time with you?” A dark grin glides up his cheek, and there’s a look in his eyes that suggests he could gobble me down in three hungry bites.

He’s so cutthroat handsome tonight that I’m not so sure I’d mind.

What am I saying?

“And this isn’t a date,” I’m quick to inform him.

“Maybe not.” He winces and gives the dark scruff on his cheeks a quick scratch. “But speaking of dates, I’ve got a high school reunion just around the corner.”

“The only way you can drag me there is by way of a madman threatening to blow up the building.”

“Duly noted.”

“I wasn’t so big on high school. So all future reunions are a no-go as well.” I frown over at him. “Since when were you Mr. Congeniality? I wouldn’t have pegged you for the reunion type either.”

“I was voted Most Likely to Live Under a Bridge.”

“But then, proving people wrong is part of the fun.” I glide his way. “I’m sorry you had it so rough.”

He tips his head to the side, his eyes never leaving mine. “Why do I get the feeling I’m about to have it real easy?”

“Buddy,” I call out and the furry cutie runs right over. “It’s your lucky night,” I say, chucking my pizza his way and he catches it midair.

Jack quirks a brow. “Is it my lucky night?”

I shake my head.

“I didn’t think so,” he says, pitching his slice over to Buddy as well as he scoops me

into his arms.

I bite down on a smile, because even though this isn't Jack Stone's lucky night, once again his ego and dirty imagination have gone ten paces ahead of him.

Although I'm not above doing this?—

I lean in, and just as our lips are a hair away from touching, a buzz jolts us out of our lust-struck stupor as our phones go off at once.

"It's Hale," he says, looking at his messages as I pick up my phone as well. "Three people have been shot in Aspen Heights and a woman has been kidnapped from the scene. Hale wants us at the field office asap."

"Let's do it," I say as we hoist ourselves out of the water and back into the fray of whatever waits for us in the shadows.

There's another killer on the loose, another set of victims looking for justice.

And that's exactly what they're going to get.

The End