



The Killer You Know

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: You are cordially invited to a killer reunion.

School is back in session and evil is doling out the lessons.

The past never truly dies until you kill it yourself.

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

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

FBI Agent Fallon Baxter is thrust into a deadly game when a high school reunion becomes the backdrop for a chilling series of murders. This time the connection is personal—Jack, her stalwart partner, finds his old schoolmates are the targets and potentially the culprits.

Just days before the reunion the first victim is brutally murdered in her own home and another peer vanishes, leaving behind a blood-soaked message that dredges up a buried past.

The body count is rising and with each one the killer grows bolder as the clues intertwine with Jack's history.

Time is against them as the body count climbs and each hour brings them closer to the next gruesome discovery. The killer uses the reunion to settle old scores, turning former friends into suspects and victims.

Fallon is plunged into a relentless hunt where the next name on the killer's list could be any one of Jack's classmates—including Jack himself.

With the reunion spiraling into chaos, Fallon must confront the darkness of the past to stop the killer from turning this reunion into a bloodbath.

Can she piece together the final clues before the killer's twisted justice claims another life?

Every memory from the past has its echo, and every echo has a

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Robin Hanson

There are two things in life I hate and that's gossip and people—yet somehow my entire livelihood depends on both.

Ironically, I was coerced into specializing in both so I can do what I really love: write cheesy romance novels.

My literary agent couldn't sell the cheesy romance novel I wrote, so she suggested I get myself a platform. She thought maybe we could reverse engineer my road to romance riches via starting off with a vast and hungry audience that waits at rapt attention to hear what might spew from my lips next.

She promised the publishers would come crawling, just begging me to sign on the dotted line, and soon enough I could die in an avalanche of my cheesy romance novels once the publishers gave the advertising push that my books would need to survive.

My agent's parting words were, try to be relatable. Women eat that right up.

So I opened up an Insta Pictures account and started peppering it with wedding photos, seeing that I was newly married at the time, less than five years ago. No one really seemed to care about my white dress or me, or my newly acquired legal eagle husband.

No one cared about all of the artfully staged pictures of my breakfast—avocado toast again!—or when I showed off a glossy new manicure with my coffin tip nails.

They didn't care about anything I had to offer it seemed.

But one summer I took a picture of myself trying on a swimsuit—neck down with the teeny weeny bottoms cutting into my pillowy hips, cellulite dotting my thighs like a solar system, and a belly that could easily hold a baby even though that's never happened for me.

And just like that, my newfound followers did care about something. They liked, shared, and commented. I instantly exploded as some hero in spandex as if I just brought peace to the Middle East by way of belly fat. They couldn't get enough of it—or more to the point, me.

It turns out, my agent was right.

Women were obsessed with relatable me.

They kept begging for more. So I gave it to them in the form of disheveled hair—brunette roots with brassy highlights—the dresses I ordered online that didn't fit, and an entire soliloquy on how I loathed the fact I had to actually leave my house to send them back.

I shared wall color that looked like heaven in a paint chip and as if Satan was moving in once I slathered the room with it. I shared bloodied blisters on the back of my heels from ill-fitting stilettos—then I promptly made every one of my ardent followers swear we would banish those death sticks from our wardrobes. I shared the mom jeans I fell in and out of love with, the stained yoga pants I lived in for weeks on end, the pricey coffee I drank by the gallon and then complained about the cost, the nachos and guacamole that I ate with wild abandon that I claimed comprised ninety percent of my body mass. True as gospel.

They loved me because I was a reflection of them. I became an imperfect, unhealthy,

yet beloved internet celebrity seemingly overnight. I've never been so thankful for cellulite in all my life.

And even though the cheesy romance book deals never came rolling in, the nonfiction feel-good quasi-self-help book deals sure did. A three-book deal with one of the big five publishers which landed me a very nice advance. Two have already hit the shelves and the third is currently with my editor.

Once I got the deal, I was ecstatic because the last thing I wanted to do was write another entry to my Insta Pictures account. As it turns out, that whole a-picture-says-a-thousand-words stuff is baloney. They not only wanted to see my cellulite, but also wanted the cheeky diary entries that came with it.

Over the years, those entries have grown a bit. I started a website and a blog, in addition to posting and reposting to all of the social media apps where I discount my soul.

Nevertheless, my agent squashed my dreams of stepping away from the overexposed circus my life had become. She warned that it would be the end of my writing career if I stopped showcasing my innards to the peanut gallery.

My cellulite and I were forever bound to the masses who had come to adore us. I owed them every last bit of my overexposed self because without my ardent fans, I was worthless.

And now I make a daily sacrifice at the altar of my own vanity in hopes for one more like, one more comment, one more glorious share.

That's exactly how Oh so Relatable! started out. Nothing but a farce to land me a publishing deal five very long years ago.

I glare at the screen a moment before tapping away at my keyboard.

Hey, girls! First up is some gossip from my end of the Rockies. You know I always have the best dirt. A certain resident crooner who has sold out shows worldwide (she'll be ending her tour right here in Colorado—I've got tickets!)—anyway, she and that construction worker who finagled his way to the altar with her are calling it quits.

Rumor has it, he's suing her for spousal support to the tune of seventy-five thousand a month. I guess it's clear why he showed up to the party to begin with. He plans on making her sing, all right, via her lawyers.

He had better secure his hard hat because I have a feeling his delusional self is about to get knocked right back to reality by way of a rather lucid judge.

And if you think that's bad, there's another marital dissolution underway with Aspen Heights very own queen of mean—you know who she is. Her self-help book on how to land a man may have scored her a top spot on every coveted best-seller list, but it did no favors for her when it came to the heart. According to official reports, she and her plus-one have been separated for the entire last year. And yes, they've only been married for one year as well. Fancy that.

Now back to the real world where the rest of us live. My new retinol serum is making me feel as if I've got a third-degree burn on my face. If you have a great retinol you love, please leave the name in the comments.

After all, we're all in this together, right?

Jobs, husbands, aging faces, aging parents, know-it-all siblings who continue to make our lives questionably miserable, and don't get me started on perimenopause.

Speaking of aging, you'll never guess what dropped in the mail two weeks ago—an invitation to my twenty-year high school reunion!

Twenty?

Am I ancient or what?

You know what this means—I'm going to need a dress. Right after I kill my addiction to carbs. And I can't start that until at least tomorrow because I happen to have a chocolate-filled croissant waiting for me in the kitchen.

While I go make quick work of that, drop into the comments and tell me what we're supposed to wear to these things.

A little black dress? A sequined number? A custom frock with heavy beading?

I can promise you, I'm not mortgaging my house for this thing. And I am definitely not haunting a dressing room either.

Better yet, drop me a buy link to a dress you think I should wear. Bonus points if I get free shipping. You know I'm ordering this puppy online.

I post a picture of myself rolling my eyes while standing in front of my farmhouse-inspired kitchen with its rustic chandelier pendant lights and glossy marble countertops. Each design element in my home was voted on and heavily curated by my legion of adoring fans, right down to the reclaimed barn doors that line my halls.

I'm not really a fan of any of it.

Ironically, I liked the house the way it was to begin with, but that's not relatable. Come to find out, relatable is another word for misery.

And if I'm being honest, I've always been miserable. Wanting what someone else has, doing whatever I have to do to get it has been my MO for as long as I can remember. I'm not above stealing, killing, and destroying. Not literally. At least not most of the time. Okay, so I specialize in two out of three.

I can't help it. I was raised upper middle class. My parents made sure I had whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted it. They created this monster. And I get the feeling that the legion of adoring fans I have will finish it.

I head into the kitchen where sadly there's no chocolate-filled croissant waiting for me. Instead, I set out to wash the fat from last night's burgers from the frying pan and pray my mother-in-law, Ellen, doesn't just happen to drop by—because we happen to look like hoarders at the moment.

I've been meaning to do some latent spring cleaning, really just pitch everything in the trash and start over. But I can't. I have to donate it all and document the hell out of it.

Everything is a production now. My life under a microscope.

Last week, I dragged them to the gynecologist with me and my feed exploded when I took a picture of my feet in stirrups.

Don't forget to scoot down to the edge, they chimed in numbers.

A little lower, a little lower than that.

Scoot some more!

Oh, they had a field day with that one.

With my chapped lips, my love for a good wedge over high heels, and my bulging midsection, I've become an inadvertent hero to women over thirty.

As it turns out, my love of trashy romance novels spawned my very own book club. And come next week I'm going to sit down and outline the podcast I'll be starting up in the fall.

Yes, my life is finally coming together. It's not what I wanted it to look like, but ready or not, it's coming in hot, bigger, and far rowdier than I could have imagined.

A soft click comes from the mudroom and I glance at the clock.

It's not even four in the afternoon. My husband doesn't usually make his appearance until after six-thirty.

I haven't even showered yet.

"Daniel?" I call out, but there's no answer.

The distinct sound of footfalls emanates from the right of the kitchen as they head this way and my heart gives a few unnatural thumps.

It's probably just Ellen. She knows where the hide-a-key is, although I never lock that door during the day so she wouldn't need it. I'm back and forth in the garden all afternoon trying to keep my vegetables alive even though I do get more likes and comments while they're dying. Lucky for me because everything is dying out there.

"Ellen?" I call out as the footsteps creep this way. They're soft as if she doesn't really want to make a scene.

She's been known to drop by at will, and lately it seems she wills it a lot. She's been

lonely since my father-in-law left her for younger pastures a few years back. Let's hope that infidelity isn't passed down on the father's side or I might be moved to kill quite literally.

My mind flits to my past. I haven't always been an angel myself.

"Ellen, is that you?" The silence that follows my call is heavy, loaded with my anticipation. My heart starts to race, my adrenaline kicks in, but I can't seem to stop my feet from moving in that direction.

The soft footfalls cease, and yet the stillness of the house that was once comforting now feels oppressive and suffocating. There's not a sound. Nothing but the sound of my own heartbeat, pounding in my ears like a drum.

I must have imagined it all.

I'm about to turn around when I catch a glimpse of movement, and just like that, a figure clad in black with a ski mask obscuring their face and dark gloves covering their hands steps in front of me.

A wild panic electrifies me from the inside out, and yet I freeze solid. Not even a scream comes from my throat.

This isn't Ellen.

This isn't Daniel.

This is everyone's worst nightmare, materialized in broad daylight.

"Who are you?" I pant out the words as I start to back up.

But they don't answer. Instead, they head my way and I gasp and scream as I turn to run and dart through the house in a desperate bid for safety.

I need to get to the front door.

I need to get out.

Every second feels like a lifetime.

A primal terror grips me as I weave through the living room, knocking down a lamp in haste. And just as I'm about to hit the foyer, I'm grabbed by the hair and thrown to the ground.

I flop onto my back just in time to see a knife plunging at me.

"No," I scream, deflecting the blade with my hands. "I'm sorry," I shout, apologizing for who knows what. But I know the list of my grievances is long.

The dark figure looms over me, hoisting that blade above me once again like a threat.

That public persona I've built up, the one million adoring fans, the book deal, the spotlight I've both loved and loathed—it all means nothing now.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, this time holding my hands high up, clasped and pleading. My entire existence has whittled itself down to this very moment, to this imminent threat, and I will say anything in order to survive. "Take whatever you want. Do whatever you want. Just please let me live."

Blood trickles onto my face from my fingers. I haven't even inspected my new wounds yet.

A dull laugh comes from them just as the knife comes down and that blade spikes hard into my chest.

They pluck it out just as quickly as they plunged it, and I can't breathe through the wild, white-hot pain.

They take the blade and scratch it along my forehead just as the world fades to darkness.

I just wanted to tell a story, and now mine has reached its final chapter.

Murdered in cold blood.

Not all that relatable.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The second Jack and I step into the FBI headquarters here in Denver, the air crackles with urgency. Three people have been shot in Aspen Heights and a woman has been kidnapped from the scene.

It was Jack and I that both got the call this evening while we were still waist deep in my hot tub, celebrating the win from our last case. I met Special Agent Jack Stone a few weeks back and that last case, which was also our first together, bonded us faster than a shotgun wedding could have.

We head straight for the situation room where we find our SAC, Special Agent in Charge, Grant Hale clicking away at this laptop, and across from him at the elongated table is a feisty redhead, our colleague Special Agent Nikki Knight.

Nikki and I work well together, unlike Jack who is known to crawl under my skin and stay there for the fun of it. As it turns out, Nikki was supposed to be celebrating with us in the hot tub but backed out last minute for no good reason. I might have to get back at her for that, seeing that I almost made a questionable decision with Jack because of it.

A sharp bark comes from my right and I quickly give my new dog, Buddy, a quick pat. Let's just say he was collateral damage in our last case and I didn't hesitate to bring him home and make him mine.

Buddy is a sweet yellow lab who happens to be young still, so we have quite a bit of runway ahead of us and I'm glad about it, too.

“Stone, Baxter.” Hale stands as he gives a nod our way.

Grant Hale is tall, balding, with a paunch belly at hand. He’s put in his hours with the Bureau, and from what I’ve gleaned in the short time I’ve been here is that he’s a darn good leader.

I just transferred from Reno a few weeks ago where I finished up a two-year stint in their FBI department, but now I’m living right back in the hometown I grew up in, just about twenty minutes from Denver. And I’m glad to be back.

The truth is, I missed my sisters and my mother. The only reason I took the job in Reno to begin with was because my younger sister, Erin, has been missing for going on three years now. Erin was always the smartest of the bunch, a child prodigy who could run circles around college professors before she was old enough to drive. But she’s well into her twenties now, missing in action, and as it turns out, she doesn’t want to be found—she’s made that abundantly clear.

There was a sighting of her at the cult compound that our last case was centered around. But once we blew the lid off that, Erin made a run for it to who knows where. I’m so angry at her, but nonetheless, it doesn’t seem to be waning on my desire to hunt her down. How else am I going to slap her for putting our family through this hell?

Hale nods our way. “Like I said in the message, we’ve got a serious situation unfolding in Aspen Heights. Three people were shot and a woman kidnapped right from the crime scene. I don’t have to tell you time is not on our side. The details are still coming in.” He clicks at his keyboard and frowns at his screen.

Buddy leaps and hops between Nikki and me as we scratch and pat him as best we can.

Nikki wrinkles her nose my way. “How come I didn’t end up with the dog? I was the one sleeping with his owner.” Nikki pulls the pooch close and offers up a kiss to his little nose.

“You just admitted to sleeping with the killer,” I say, trying my best to woo Buddy in my direction but to no avail. “Clearly, you have questionable decision-making skills.

Nikki scoffs before looking at Jack. “Oh, she is hilarious.”

“You should have seen how funny she was in the hot tub,” he shoots back while flipping open his laptop.

“Hey. Watch it.” I try to swat his arm, but he’s too far out of reach. “Nothing happened in that hot tub.” I look right at Hale as I say it.

The last thing I want is to give Hale the wrong impression of me. I’m not some lust-stricken teenager. I’m here to work for the Bureau in the most sincere capacity—and utilize every resource the FBI has to offer to track down my sister. But I’m not sharing that last detail with anyone.

I hardly doubt Hale would appreciate the fact I’m using their database for my personal gain. Although so far it hasn’t netted me anything. Regardless, Hale holds my career by the reins. Him, I still need to impress.

Buddy trots over to the front of the room and begins sniffing around a chair that’s filled with Hale’s belongings.

“You just reminded me of something,” Hale says as he slips a platter out of a plastic bag and lands it on the table. “I’ve got a cheese tray. Help yourselves.”

True to his word, there are three rows of different cheeses, each sliced and cubed into

one-inch portions, enough to feed the masses. Looks like Gouda, Swiss, and cheddar.

“A cheese tray?” I lean over and pick up a slice of cheddar. “I didn’t know a near mass shooting called for one.”

“It’s the kidnapping we’re more concerned with,” he says as the giant screen ignites behind him. “And I was on a date when I got the call. I didn’t see the need to waste it.”

“Speaking of dates.” Nikki shoots a grin from me to Jack. “You never did extrapolate on how that little tussle in the hot tub turned out.”

And just like that, the night gets worse.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Our little tussle in the hot tub was interrupted,” Jack grunts as he takes a few slices of cheese for himself as we huddle in the situation room of the field office in Denver.

“And it wasn’t a date. We were celebrating our first win,” I say to Hale, primarily because he’s the only one not in the know.

“In a hot tub?” Hale ticks his head to the side in amusement. “Sounds like a date.”

Nikki nods. “That’s what I said.”

“Do we have any leads on the shooter or the kidnapper?” I ask, more than happy to change the subject, even if it is a grim one.

I’ll admit, Jackson Stone is handsome to a fault, emphasis on the fault. Dark hair, blue eyes, slight dimples, well-fitted Italian suits—he checks off all the boxes to make my ovaries go wild, and that’s exactly why I’m taking a vow to stay away from him—outside of a professional setting, that is. Good-looking men like him are always trouble with a capital everything. And Lord knows I’ve got enough trouble brewing in my life as it is.

“Details are still scant.” Hale blows out a breath. “What we do know is that this was a targeted attack. It appears the shooter knew exactly who he was after. Three women were grazed with bullets and they scattered as best they could. The kidnapped woman, identified as Brittney Walker, was apparently the primary target. The others seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Our victim vanished less than two

hours ago,” Hale continues while displaying Brittney’s photo on the screen. It’s a professional shot with a wide and confident smile, dark hair pulled back, dark eyes, bright red lips. “She was taken from a high-end property she was showing. No security cameras on site, but we’ve got three witnesses, the women who were shot at the scene. They survived, thankfully, but we’re left with more questions than answers. According to the women, after firing, the shooter went after Ms. Walker and stabbed her in the chest with a hypodermic needle before dragging her off like a ragdoll.”

“She could have been roofied,” I say as I look at Jack and he inches back and frowns my way.

“Now why would you look at me when you say that?” he says, obviously taking umbrage with the fact.

“I don’t know, have you roofied anyone?” I’m teasing, but I’m also annoyed. “I looked at you because you’re my coworker. But don’t worry. I’ll make it a practice to look at Nikki first so you won’t get offended.”

He lifts a brow my way. “Thank you, I think.”

“Baxter is right,” Nikki says. “She could have been roofied. Or hit with Midazolam, Diazepam, or any number of goodies. It could have been rat poison for all we know.” She glances at Jack. “Note, I didn’t even slightly look in your direction when I said the word rat.”

“Now I’m really getting offended,” he says, clicking away at his keyboard.

“Are you kids ready for the show, or are you still warming up?” Hale glowers at the lot of us. “Our victim, Brittney Walker, has a name you might recognize as one of the top real estate agents around Aspen Heights. As I mentioned, she was showing a

house for a client when the attack happened. CSI is there now, forensics is ready to do its thing and I told them we'd head that way as soon as we touched base."

"Brittney Walker..." Jack cocks his head to the side, his tongue pressing into his cheek. "That does sound familiar." He lifts his head suddenly as if it's just come to him.

"Well?" I say. "Don't keep us in suspense."

"You know that little surprise I was hinting at back in the hot tub?"

"I thought it had something to do with the high school reunion." I nod. "What is it?" Jack said he'd let me know once we got here, and in truth, I had forgotten about his mental game until now.

He grimaces a moment. "I went to school with Brittney. And yes, our twenty-year high school reunion is coming up in a little under two weeks." He glances at Nikki. "I asked Baxter to come with me and she turned me down."

"That's not true." I lift a finger his way. "I said the only way you can drag me there is by way of a madman threatening to blow up the building."

Hale shrugs. "I'd show up for that."

"We all would," Nikki says before looking at Jack. "So you went to school with the woman? And you've got a high school reunion on the horizon? Looks as if we've got one of your classmates to track down and the clock is ticking. I'd hate for her to miss the big dance."

"The assailant was dressed in black with a matching ski mask and gloves," Hale goes on. "They managed to evade any sort of identification. We can't confirm if we're

looking for a man or a woman.”

“What about the getaway vehicle?” I ask.

“The women were shot in the back of the property. They had no idea what the perp left in. The sheriff’s department is collecting the data from any nearby security cameras. It’s a rural neighborhood, so it might be a challenge.”

Nikki shakes her head at her laptop. “Looks like Brittney’s life is an open book online. I’ll dive into her social media, looking for any unusual interactions or threats. By the looks of it, she shared a lot, maybe too much.”

“Good,” Hale says. “I want the three of you to deep-dive into her public persona, her finances, figure out if she had any known enemies, and anything else you can ascertain about her personal life. Stone, let me know if this hits too close to home. I can always pull you.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jack says as he shuts his laptop. “With the exception of the crime scene.” He tips his head my way as if asking if I wanted to join him. And seeing that we drove in together, I had better.

“Time is not on our side,” Hale says firmly. “Baxter, Stone, I’m sending you to Aspen Heights. Knight, keep digging through her digital life. We need to uncover anything that can lead us to Brittney. I’ll do the same. It’s all hands on deck.”

“Let’s do it,” I say.

Jack and I take off with Buddy bouncing by our side.

We’ve got a woman to find, and like Nikki said, the clock is ticking.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The drive to Aspen Heights feels as if we're transitioning into another world, a polished world filled with heavenly landscapes peppered with socialites. And a world where the Colorado summer night unfolds in its most extravagant form.

Air blows in from the open window with a mix of pine and fresh mountain coolness, and it's a scent I can't get enough of.

I missed this back in Reno. If I could bottle it, I would in a heartbeat.

Moonlight dapples through the dense canopy of trees lining the road, casting freckled patterns of light and shadow as we ascend the winding roads leading to the neighborhood at hand. The hum of the city fades, replaced by the tranquil sounds of nature. The farther we drive, the more pronounced the silence becomes, save for the occasional rustle of leaves stirred by a gentle breeze.

Aspen Heights itself is a testament to opulence. Each home is basically a secluded palace nestled on sprawling acreages with the promise of privacy and exclusivity. The lawns are impeccably manicured and every hedge and flowerbed has been arranged with precision.

It's the kind of place I had hoped I would live in one day, but now that I'm back in Pine Ridge Falls, living in Whispering Woods, an enclave of cozy rustic cabins by the lake, I wouldn't trade it for any of this.

The house we're headed to sits majestically at the top of a hill and I can see the

architecture taking shape against the night sky as Jack pulls into a makeshift parking lot filled with sheriff's vehicles, an ambulance, and CSI.

Although I doubt the architectural wonder before us qualifies as a simple house. It has all the appeal of a log cabin with the size and the girth of a mansion. It's a perfect blend of rustic elegance and timeless luxury. It's hard to imagine it was the scene of a shooting and a violent abduction just hours ago.

"We're here," Jack says, taking the place in for a moment before we get out of his truck. We leave the windows down for Buddy who seems to be more than content napping in the back seat.

It's a beehive of deputies and the CSI team here at the scene, as bodies swarm in and around the grand house.

The scent of pine and earth fills my lungs as I take a deep breath, and the weight of the unknown lingers in the air as well. As much as I get a rush of adrenaline when I arrive at the scene of a crime, I never get a rise out of it. I'm about justice, not getting off on someone's misfortune.

It's because of Erin. She's the reason I can empathize with the victims and their families. I can feel their pain because I know it. I own it every single day. It keeps me up at night, and it drives me to work a little harder during the day.

Jack and I thread through the melee as we make our way to whatever waits for us.

"It's too nice out tonight for this," Jack says, nodding at the chaos. "I should have been a forest ranger. Less kidnapping, more fishing."

A dark chuckle strums through me. "And miss out on all the fun of chasing down a suspect?"

“Point taken. But you have to admit, a view like this beats the office any day.”

He’s right. The majestic mountains stand like the shadows of soldiers guarding the land, their peaks reaching to the stars, while the greenery of the forest stretches out like a lush, dark carpet.

“In a lot of ways, this is our office,” I say. “Tell you what, you behave and I might just go fishing with you at the lake.” Jack’s cabin is just a short distance from mine and he happens to have a better view of the lake at that. I’m a little bitter about it but I’m not sure why.

He inches back to inspect me. “It’s a date.”

“It’s not a date. It’s fishing. Buddy will be there. I bet he out-catches both of us.”

“That’s probably true.”

We flash our badges at a couple of deputies and they point us straight to the sheriff, a man in his fifties, graying hair, deep tan, stocky build.

“Special Agent Stone,” Jack says to the man. “This is my partner, Special Agent Baxter. Our SAC filled us in, but we’d like to hear it from you.”

“Sheriff Diaz,” he says with a low rumble. “Glad you could make it. Busy night. We’ve got a mess on our hands here.” He gestures toward the magnificent structure that somehow feels a lot more imposing rather than inviting. “Three shot, none fatal, thankfully. A realtor was showing the property, three of the women were out back when a masked gunman arrived. He shot two, took the realtor. Headed out front and shot the third victim before taking off. Brittney Walker is the name of the realtor. She’s pretty popular around these parts, so it’s a bit of a shock. No witnesses to the getaway vehicle so far. No one saw the abductor’s face, no cameras in place. It’s as if

they vanished into thin air.”

I glance up at the ambulance and note a woman sitting in the back, tall, medium build, shoulder-length wavy light brown hair, hollow looking eyes with dark rings around them. She’s wearing a blue sundress, and by the looks of it has a wad of gauze wrapped around her left thigh.

“Who’s she?” I nod her way.

Sheriff Diaz spins around. “That’s one of the women that was hit. The other two were taken to Aspen Heights Memorial. You could start with her if she’s up for it. When you’re done, take a tour. We have everything marked out where the bullets landed.”

I scan the scene and note the meticulous work of the CSI team. “Any leads on where they might have taken her? Tire tracks?”

“No idea,” Diaz says with frustration evident in his tone. “But we’re combing through everything, tire tracks included. Anything you folks can do to help would be appreciated.”

We split ways with him and Jack and I make a beeline for the woman in the back of the ambulance. A paramedic removes a blood pressure cuff from her arm and walks away, leaving her to scan the vicinity as the officers and technicians invade the space.

“Hello.” I force a smile to come and go. I’m not friendly by nature, but I know enough to warm up when a victim is concerned. “We’re with the FBI.” I flash our badges and omit any other formalities. The last thing I want is for her to feel as if she’s to blame. “The sheriff filled us in a little. Would you mind telling us what happened? We’d like to hear it from you. How about we start with your name?”

“Vanessa Copeland,” she says, shivering as she holds herself despite the summer heat

in the air. “My mother owns this place. Everything was going pretty good right up until the end and then things went to hell pretty quickly.” She offers a half-smile our way before doing a double take at Jack. I can’t blame her. Most women do.

“Jackie?” She inches back and her mouth squares out with a slight look of horror.

Now there’s a look most women don’t give him.

And Jackie?

Now this I’ve got to hear.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Nessa?” Jack’s voice sounds just as bewildered as hers before he steps forward and offers the brunette a partial embrace as she sits at the edge of the ambulance. “I can’t believe this. It’s been years.”

“A million, it feels like.” A tiny laugh sputters from her as she loosens a bit. “So you’re with the FBI now? I thought I heard you were a cop or something.”

“I was a detective before I went with the FBI.” He sheds a short-lived dimpled grin. “Baxter, Nessa and I went to school together.” He sighs her way. “I heard they took Brittney. Tell me everything that happened. Don’t skip a single detail. Anything could help bring her back.”

“Yes, of course.” She shudders as she glances at the house. “My mom passed away about six months ago, and after I cleared out her place, I decided to sell it. Brittney and I sort of kept in touch. We’re a part of some big message thread, girls of Aspen Heights High, just our class. You know, wishing one another a happy birthday, updates on life events, networking. Anyway, she seemed happy to sell the place. We didn’t get any hits for a while, but she found a woman who was interested and she brought her sister out today. Those are the women who were shot,” she says my way. “Along with me.” She swings the leg with the gauze on it. “Anyway, I was hanging out here in the front once they arrived. Brittney introduced us briefly and then I let her do her thing. About fifteen minutes into it, I heard a couple of shots. I thought maybe it was from one of the neighbors. The next thing I know, I see some lunatic dragging Brittney away like she was nothing. I shouted at them to stop, but they fired at me. So I took off into the woods. I ran for my life,” she pants, glancing at the dense

forest just to the left of the house.

“You were out the front?” I ask. “Then you must have seen the car they were driving.”

She shakes her head. “They may have been parked beyond those hedges.” She nods to a row of dense shrubbery just beyond where Jack parked. “That’s the only thing I can think of. I mean, I would have seen them otherwise. But then, I was running for my life.”

“Okay,” I say, snapping a few quick pictures of the shrubs from this angle, along with the house.

Jack sighs. “How did Brittney seem when she showed up today?”

“Fine.” Vanessa shrugs at the thought. “She said she spent the day in her office. It was late afternoon when she got here. There was still plenty of light at that point to show the property. I was hopeful for something good to come out of this. We both were.” She closes her eyes a moment. “Anyway, Brittney and I weren’t close or anything. I don’t really know if there was anything happening behind the scenes.” She lifts her head a notch as she looks at Jack. “I think she was still dating Derek on and off. You remember Derek.” She frowns at the mention of him before tossing me a glance. “He was the resident bad boy, along with Jackie and Mitch.” She sucks in a quick breath and smiles. “Hey, tell Mitch I said hello. I keep forgetting the two of you were sort of brothers.”

Jack does consider Mitch Decker a brother since Mitch’s parents took in Jack and his biological brother, Jet, after their parents were both imprisoned. His mother for robbery, although she was a prostitute as well, so who knows what the final charges were. And all I know about his father is that he was a heroin addict who was chronically late with the rent.

Jack offers a forlorn smile. “I’ll tell him you said so. And I do remember Derek. Do you have any idea where I can find him?”

“He owns a bar in Elmwood.” She quirks a brow at the mention of the town. I’m guessing because Elmwood is the armpit of Colorado. It also happens to be where Jack’s family hailed from. “I think it’s called the Penalty Box. If anyone knows about Brittney, it’s probably him.”

“Thank you,” Jack tells her as he hands her his card. “Call me if you remember anything else. And I mean anything. We’re going to take a look around. You should really get to the hospital and have them check you out properly. I’ll take care of everything here. I promise it’s in good hands. And I’ll do my best to find Brittney, too.”

“Thanks, Jackie.” She lunges his way and offers him another hearty embrace, nearly falling out of the ambulance while doing so. “The sheriff has my information. And I teach art now out at Aspen Heights High if you need anything. So please don’t hesitate to call me either. I’m really worried. Things like this never seem to end well.” Her lips quiver as she glances back at her bandaged thigh.

We take off and inspect the property, the front and the back. We don’t bother heading inside since according to the sheriff and the witnesses, the perpetrator never entered the house.

We wrap it up just as the ambulance pulls away with Vanessa in it, and our phones chirp at the same time—and as of late, that’s never a good sign.

“It’s a message from Hale,” I grunt as I inspect it.

“Same,” he says. “There’s been a murder less than six miles from here.” His chest broadens with his next breath. “Looks as if our busy night just got busier.”

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Jack's grip on the steering wheel tightens as we approach Cedar Grove and enter Granite Estates, the enclave of houses where our next victim lived.

We hardly finished up at one crime scene and now we're about to walk into the next.

Cedar Grove is far more residential than Aspen Heights. We've traded rural pastures for the bright lights of the suburbs, and judging by the neighbors crowding around the house in question, nobody in the suburbs is going to get a stitch of sleep tonight.

Jack parks cockeyed near the sidewalk, and we leave Buddy in the truck once again with the windows down. Although this time he looks much more motivated to join us.

Jack and I thread our way through the humanity, flashing our badges until we catch up with Nikki and Hale huddled with a deputy near the garage.

"What's going on?" Jack asks as we jog their way just as the deputy takes off.

"Tough night in this end of Colorado." Hale sighs as he glances at the house. "The husband called 911, reporting the fact he found his wife in a puddle of blood near the front door. Report says a knife wound is evident in her chest, her face was bloodied. She was dead when the husband arrived."

Nikki nods as she looks up from her phone. "The sheriff just filled us in on her briefly. Apparently, her name was Robin Hanson, otherwise known as Relatable Robin. She has an Insta Pictures account with over one million followers called Oh so

Relatable!”

“A million followers,” Jack grumbles. “That’s a million leads. Let’s go in and check it out.”

We do our best to navigate through the crowd as the CSI technicians move around us like ghosts, their cameras capturing every detail of the scene where Robin’s life brutally ended. The coroner’s office is here as well, moving methodically near the victim’s body. The poor thing is still lying exactly where she fell, like a silent testament to the violence that invaded this space.

The sheriff cuts us off just as we’re about to enter.

“You again.” Sheriff Diaz nods to Jack and me before introducing himself to Hale and Nikki. “We figured the intruder entered this way.” He leads us around to the side of the house and points to the back door. “The husband says it was rarely locked. No sign of forced entry, so that would make sense. We think they chased the victim to the front door. She was stabbed before she could unlock it. Fell to her death. There are tire marks around the corner. CSI is taking care of those.

“Her husband tried to enter through the front and hit the body with the door. He freaked out. Says she wasn’t breathing when he checked. He tried chest compressions, but that’s where her stab wound was. He called 911 and here we are.” He leads us around to the front where the door is opened and the woman’s body lies splayed out before us. “The husband moved her enough to let the EMTs in. I guess he was holding out hope, but the coroner thinks she was dead hours before the husband claims to have arrived.”

Claims.

I’m glad he’s still on the suspect list with the sheriff. He’s not getting off mine too

easily.

Someone calls for the sheriff and he takes off.

Hale leans in. “I have one of our own taking footage of every person in the crowd.” He nods to the looky-loos gathering in droves. It’s a known fact that perpetrators like to come back and gawk with the peanut gallery. “The perp was caught on surveillance camera this time. They were clad in black, black ski mask, and gloves.”

“You just described the perpetrator from the kidnapping,” Jack says.

“I know.” Hale ticks his head wistfully. “Could be a coincidence, but we can’t rule out that it’s not. It is the attire of choice for criminals,” he muses. “And we have grainy footage of the getaway vehicle, a dark sedan bolted out of the track. So far none of the neighbors reported seeing anything out of the ordinary. No one heard any screaming either. At least not until the husband began to freak out. Hang tight, I’m going to speak with CSI.” He takes off and Nikki steps in.

“I’ve already amassed some info on our missing girl,” she says. “And since Robin was a well-known public figure, I’m going to have a lot to tease through here as well. I’m heading home to do just that. We’ll get together tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” I say as she takes off. “Let’s get inside,” I say to Jack. “I want a better look at that body.”

“And I want to trace the killer’s steps,” he says as he leads the way and the coroner’s office lets us through the door.

Our victim is the first to greet us.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Robin Hansen lies with her mouth slightly opened, her forehead washed in blood right here in the foyer of her home in Cedar Grove. She's wearing a black T-shirt and black yoga pants, and save for the small puddle of blood beneath her, you wouldn't know she was stabbed. Her dark blonde hair is splayed around her, her right arm upturned, her left on her stomach. She looks about five-five, maybe a hundred and fifty, sixty pounds at most. A set of bloody footprints are smudged into the stone flooring, but they're not well defined, smeared from end to end.

"Look at that," I say to Jack. "It looks as if they were slipping their way out."

"Or smudging their prints so we couldn't get a good look at them."

We start snapping pictures of the deceased, the footprints, the lamp on the floor in the living room. We follow the path of the footprints through the kitchen and take as many pictures of the scene as we can before we're forbidden from straying into evidence.

The house is neat and clean, modern to the hilt, large but not a mega mansion like Vanessa Copeland's mother's estate.

The sound of sobbing comes from the dining room and Jack and I drift that way to find a man in a suit, his jacket off, his white dress shirt smeared with blood. A few deputies surround him and one brings him a bottle of water that looks as if it came from the fridge.

“Thank you,” he says just above a whisper.

Jack nods to the deputies and they make themselves scarce. “Mr. Hanson?”

The man looks up, long face, high forehead with lots of frown lines, eyes laced with crimson tracks. He looks to be in his late forties, not too muscular but strong enough to overpower his wife if he had to.

“Special Agent Stone,” he says. “This is my partner, Special Agent Baxter.” He flashes his badge as we step in close. “Do you think we can have a quick word with you?”

“I’ll do anything to find the monster that did this,” he says, landing his water on the table.

“Let’s start with what happened when you got home,” I say.

He sniffs hard and nods as his gaze falls to the floor. “I was coming home late. I stopped by to pick up some food for the two of us. I sent her a text while I was in line at the fast food place to see what she wanted, but she didn’t text back. I figured she was in the shower or something. I came home and had a hard time getting the door to open. I called out for her just as I forced it and there was a thud.” His voice breaks and his eyes fill with tears. “That’s when I saw her. At first, I didn’t even think it was Robin. There was so much blood I couldn’t comprehend it. Immediately, I checked her breathing. I tried to do CPR, but that wasn’t working so I called 911. The operator told me to get out of the house, but I couldn’t leave her. I wouldn’t.”

He sounds sincere and devoted. Although most sociopaths can pull that off no problem. Not that I’m accusing him. But I’m not taking him off the table either.

“Mr. Hanson,” I start.

“Daniel, Please, call me Daniel.”

“Daniel,” I say in a softer tone than before. “Did your wife have any enemies? Any trouble with anyone at all that you’ve seen or that she may have mentioned?”

He shakes his head emphatically. “Not that I know of. But to be honest, I don’t keep up with her like the rest of the world does. She’s been a social media maven for the last few years. To say it’s taken over our lives is an understatement. We couldn’t eat dinner without staging our food. Heck, we couldn’t brush our teeth without her having to snap a picture. She was successful and I was happy for her. Robin, on the other hand, was never too happy, or I should say content. And she acknowledged it. She said that it gave her the competitive edge she needed to feed off.”

“Do you know her passwords to any of her social media accounts?” I ask.

“No, but I already told the sheriff they could take her laptop and phone if needed. They said the FBI would do the honors. I’m guessing that’s you.”

I nod. “That’s us, all right. Once CSI clears it, we’ll take a look at it.”

Her phone is near her body and CSI is sending it to forensics next, so we’re still a day or two away from getting our hands on either of those things.

Jack and I give Daniel our cards and assure him we’ll do everything to find his wife’s killer. Even if the killer is Daniel himself, but I keep that last part to myself.

We’re about to head back out when Jack stops cold in front of the wedding picture that hangs on the wall.

Both Robin and Daniel wear dreamy smiles, looking like a bride and groom right out of a storybook as they stand under an arch comprised of white roses.

A heavy sigh expels from Jack and he staggers back toward the dining room at a quickened pace.

“One more thing,” he says to Daniel as he sits hunched over himself. “What was your wife’s maiden name?”

“Lowell,” the man says.

“Thank you.” Jack speeds us out of the house and away from the crowd as we head for his truck.

“Are you going to tell me what that was about?” I ask just as Buddy perks up from the back seat, happy to see us.

“I thought Robin Hanson looked familiar.” He glances back at the house as the red and blue lights from the sheriff’s cars tear through the night like a seizure. “It’s because I knew her as Robin Lowell.” His eyes latch to mine. “She was in my graduating class. Two of my classmates are assaulted on the very same night and one of them is dead. I think we can cross off all coincidences from here on out.”

“It’d be hard not to.” I glance back at the house. “I take back what I said. I am definitely going to your reunion.”

“Good,” he says as he starts tapping into his phone. “That is, if any of my classmates survive that long.”

“What are you doing?” I ask as he finishes up a text message.

“I let CSI know I want those tire tracks sent to me along with the tracks from where Brittney was taken. I want to juxtapose them as soon as possible. We need to figure out if one person could have pulled off both feats.”

“Or a group of people,” I say. “Although it feels too ambitious if you ask me.”

“I agree. We need to shore up the timeline. Tomorrow we can speak with the sisters that were shot along with Vanessa.”

“And other than the fact Brittney and Robin were classmates, I want to look at any other ties they might have had.”

Daniel comes to mind once again, but I don’t say a word.

Jack and I drive back to Pine Ridge Falls with our thoughts fracturing in a thousand different directions.

We each head to our own cabins, texting along with Nikki all night as we dive into both cases at once. Both victims have prolific social media accounts across every platform and we wade our way through them one post at a time.

As the night deepens, it’s just the glow of my screen that lights up my cabin. Buddy snoozes next to me in bed while I search for anything that might help unravel these mysteries.

There’s a killer out there hoping I won’t.

But everything in me says I will.

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Special Agent Jack Stone

With only three hours of sleep under my belt, the morning sun feels like an intrusion rather than a welcome.

The fact it's hardly morning anymore is another thing I need to grapple with.

As soon as my lids cracked open, I shot a message to Mitch and asked if he could drop by my cabin.

There aren't any new messages from Fallon or Nikki and for that I'm grateful. That means they're probably still dead to the world. We were shooting texts in our group chat well past five in the morning, and seeing that it's almost nine-thirty, that means I got roughly a whopping three hours of sleep.

I throw myself in the shower, and by the time I get out Jet has already let Mitch into the living room.

The Deckers were saviors to Jet and me after our family imploded. Mom went to prison for knocking back liquor stores and Dad went in for possession of heroin at exactly the same time. My older sister was living with friends at the time. Jet was already eighteen, no room for him in the foster system, and I was seventeen, about to age out myself. But a social worker linked us up with the Deckers who graciously offered to take us in. I finished out my senior year with their son Mitch at Aspen Heights High.

I figure he may have known the women who were targeted better than I did. Mitch

and I had the same senior year; Jet was one year ahead of us and out of school at that point.

“Rough night? You look like crap,” Mitch says with a smile like only he can do.

Mitch is tall, dark hair, dark eyes, and always happy. I don’t see why not. There’s not a thing that’s ever gone wrong for the guy. He was an only child until he got saddled with my brother and me. My sister never really got into the Decker picture. She kept up the disappearing act and is hard to keep track of even to this day.

“Thank you,” I tell him with a scowl. “You want coffee?” I say, moving toward the kitchen, eager to help myself to a cup of joe.

“I brought it,” Mitch says, heading to the kitchen table where Jet is already sucking on a cup from the local coffee shop and there’s one for me, too.

“I hope it’s black, strong, and lethal,” I moan as I take one of the brown cardboard cups for myself and toast Mitch with it. “Thank you.”

Mitch looks sharp in a dark navy suit and red tie. Unlike Jet whose hair is mussed and eyes are rimmed with what looks like dark bruises.

Jet is tall, lanky, and sinewy, although with less muscles than should qualify. He’s been an alcoholic for as long as I can remember, and for a good portion of our teenage years, I was right there with him. I cleaned up when we landed at the Deckers’ house, but he snuck liquor and coke and whatever else he could find to continue with the destruction of his existence.

Cocaine was my thing for a while, too, and every now and again I’d love to have a few lines to get me through a rough patch. Last night would have been great.

“Jet,” Mitch says as the two of us join him at the table. “I heard they couldn’t keep you tied down at that rehab center last week. You okay? You need a ride back that way?”

“No.” Jet is quick to reject the offer. “I’ve dried out enough for now. Jack likes to make it a challenge to wet my whistle. I’m content with just being fed for the time being.”

I’d make a quip about growing up, getting a job, getting a life, but it’s nothing that hasn’t been said before and I’d rather not waste the energy. I’m going to need every ounce of it for what the day ahead is going to bring.

“So what’s the plan?” Mitch asks the questions for me, looking at Jet from over the rim of his coffee as he takes a sip.

“There’s a help wanted sign down at the diner.” Jet gives a greasy smile in my direction.

“No way,” I say, aborting a sip of my coffee to get the words out faster. I shrug at Mitch. “It belongs to my partner’s mother and he knows it. He’s just trying to get under my skin.”

“I’m just trying to get a life,” Jet huffs my way as if he means it.

He doesn’t.

Mitch lifts a brow. “Special Agent Fallon Baxter?”

Mitch and Fallon met at the coroner’s office a couple of weeks back. I can tell she made an impression on him. The wrong one.

“Yes, her,” I say, shooting him a look that suggests we change the topic.

“So what’s up?” Mitch lifts his chin my way while bringing his coffee to his lips again.

“I’ve got a couple of cases that came in last night. A kidnapping out in Aspen Heights and a murder in Cedar Grove. I thought you might want to know about them.”

“Why’s that?” Mitch’s demeanor darkens a notch and I can tell he’s wondering if this has something to do with the morgue. The Deckers own and operate the morgue down in Elmwood. Mostly it’s just Mitch these days since Jim and Sarah have all but retired.

“The kidnapped woman is Brittney Walker. She was taken from a house she was showing in Aspen Heights.” I pause long enough for his eyes to widen a notch. “And miles away in Cedar Grove, someone broke in and stabbed Robin Lowell to death.”

Mitch inches back, his face losing color. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Is this connected?”

“I think so,” I say. “Although I can’t stake my life on it. But these women do have something in common outside of both being from our senior class.”

“I dated them both.” Mitch’s lips turn down as he glowers at me and nods. “And so did you.”

Silence clots up the room before Jet sighs hard. “Dude.” He lands his coffee hard on the table. “You’re both in deep.”

“Neither of us is in anything,” I say, looking at Mitch. “Between you and me, we dated nearly every girl we graduated with. At this point, it hardly means a thing. Do

you remember anything about them? Were they troublemakers?"

I spent all night scouring my memory for anything that could have stood out.

"We only went out with troublemakers," he says without missing a beat. "That was essentially our type."

"True," I grunt. "Do you still have your yearbooks?"

I didn't own one myself. It cost a mint and I didn't have the money. And even though I held down a part-time job back then, I didn't want to fork out what amounted to an entire day's wage. I figure Mitch had one, that was good enough.

He thinks on it a moment. "They're at my parents' house. I'll run over and scoop them up for you."

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I fish it out. It's a text from Fallon.

"Baxter is headed to the coroner's office," I say. "I'm heading that way, too."

"Then that's where I'll find you," Mitch says.

He takes off and I throw on my shoes. I threaten Jet to stay the hell away from the diner as I dart out the door.

It looks as if I'm going to be catching up with Robin Lowell once more.

Too bad it's with her corpse.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The coroner's office sits about fifteen minutes from the FBI field office in Denver. Before I headed out this way, I stopped by my mother's diner.

My sister, Riley, had messaged and asked if I wanted to have breakfast with them. I ran in and gave them both a hug and let them know I had not one but two important cases nipping at my heels. When they found out where I was going, Riley offered to take Buddy to the dog park while I played with the dead. Her words, not mine.

I spot Jack's truck already in the lot of the coroner's office before I enter the building.

The smell hits me first—the clinical scent of antiseptics mixed with something colder and harder to define. Somewhere in there is the smell of death, sanitized and contained within these walls. I could never work in this place, at least not any more than I have to already.

The fluorescent lights hum quietly overhead as I thread my way through to the back of the building. There's a door marked Examination Room, and that's where I find Jack speaking with Miller in the middle of the room.

Miller Thompson is the coroner who handled our last case as well. I like him. He's somewhere in his fifties, tall, heavy-set, warm eyes, warm smile, and a warm personality. It's a wonder all of that warmth manages to survive and even thrive in an environment like this. It's not exactly the warmest setting in any capacity.

The room is stark and bathed in a harsh light that leaves no shadow untouched. The

disinfectant in here smells stronger, and yet layered underneath that is the undeniable presence of death.

Both Jack and Miller look up and say good morning simultaneously.

“Where’s Buddy?” Jack glances past me as if expecting to see him bounding this way.

“With my sister at the dog park.” I nod to Miller. “I inadvertently acquired a dog.”

A deep chuckle strums from him. “That’s exactly how I’ve acquired every single pet in my household. Although I’m pretty sure my kids had more than a little to do with it.”

Jack flexes a half-smile. “I like to think of him as our dog.”

My mouth rounds out, not sure where to go with this one.

“Special Agent Baxter, this way,” Miller says, leading us toward one of the examination tables where a body lies covered with a pristine white sheet.

Saved by the coroner.

The ambient noise of the facility seems to fade as all my attention diverts to that glowing sheet. Miller pulls it back to reveal Robin Hanson with her features at peace despite the violence that ended her life. The blood has been washed from her face and her hair slicked back. Nothing like a day at the spa, even if that spa is the county coroner’s office. Although what was once a vibrant young woman now lies motionless on a stainless steel table. I watched enough videos, looked at endless pictures of Robin’s oh-so-relatable life yesterday to feel as if I know her.

Her skin has a gray cast to it and there's a slender red line in the center of her chest with a slight gap.

"Stab wound to the chest," Miller begins, and his voice is clinical yet not devoid of compassion. "Pretty clean and precise. Whoever did this knew exactly how to inflict fatal damage with minimal effort. That or they had some serious aggression to work out. They missed her sternum and veered left. That would have made it more of a challenge. Probably a lucky shot. There is some tearing consistent with a serrated edge. And considering the damage they did when they plunged in, I'm guessing they used a hunting knife."

My eyes are drawn to Robin's face, to those odd scratches on her forehead that seem out of place amidst her rather serene expression.

"What about those?" I point to them, and I must say, my curiosity is piqued. I pull out my phone and snap several pictures before he can answer.

"I've been looking at them all morning." Miller leans in, examining the marks with his practiced eye. "Curious, aren't they? Not deep enough to be defensive wounds. Just a few light scratches. It's almost as if they were made post-mortem."

Jack and I exchange a glance and he quickly documents the scratches with his phone as well. We did the same last night, but with the blood washed away it almost looks like a roadmap of some sort.

"Why defile her body after taking her life?" I shake my head. "It just adds a layer of cruelty to the already heinous act."

"Maybe that was the killer's way of signing his work," Miller teases.

"Maybe," I say. "Although they did a lousy job at it."

“I’ll say.” Jack sighs as he puts his phone away. “But then again, I get the feeling they were in a hurry to get the heck out of there. And more likely than not this was their first rodeo.”

“But will it be their last?” I say before reverting my attention to Miller. “Any idea what could have caused those scratches? Do you think they did this with the murder weapon?”

“Could be,” he sniffs, pulling down an illuminated magnifying glass from above, allowing us a better look at the marks. “We’ll run some tests, see if we can lift any DNA or find any trace evidence that might give us a lead. It could have been done with a fingernail for all we know.”

The sound of rhythmic footsteps interrupts us and we look up to see Jack’s brother, Mitch, clad in a suit, grin on his face, and he’s holding a plastic bag from the grocery store.

“Morning, Fallon.” His grin widens with the greeting. “Miller.”

“What’s in the bag?” Miller’s curiosity is piqued and so is mine. “Blueberry muffins?” He waggles his brows, hoping to make all of his blueberry dreams come true.

“Yearbooks,” Mitch counters. “Four of them to be exact. I’ll leave them with you, Fallon. Jack is only in the last one, senior year, but he left an interesting legacy—most of it documented between the pages of this tome.”

“Wow, I can’t wait to see young Jackie.” I laugh as he sets the bag down on the table next to me and pulls out the book in question.

“Here he is,” Mitch says, opening the book and showing me a younger version of

Jack looking cocky while standing under an oak tree. He's wearing a letterman jacket while bedroom eyeing the camera, and below the picture it reads, the best part about Aspen Heights High is all the new girls I get to meet.

"All the new girls you get to meet?" Miller reads from over my shoulder and howls with laughter.

"And meet them all he did," Mitch says. "Jackie here dated just about every girl in our senior class."

"Only because I followed your lead," Jack says, frowning at his brother.

"Wait a minute," I say, my own laugh dying down quickly. "Did you date Brittney or Robin?" My eyes enlarge because this conversation happens to be taking place in front of Robin's corpse.

Jack averts his eyes. "Let's just say I didn't leave any stone unturned."

"Wow," I muse. "So you dated both the kidnapped woman and the deceased?" I raise a brow. "Was there anyone in your class you didn't go out with?"

Jack gives a wry smile. "All right, fine. My dating life could be labeled as prolific. But it was high school. We all have a past."

"Sure," I huff with a laugh. "But most of us don't have our pasts coming back as key figures in a murder investigation."

"I'm not a suspect." He's quick to eliminate himself. "In fact, I was with you all day yesterday. You're essentially my alibi. Besides"—he shoots a wry smile at Mitch—"you dated both victims as well."

Miller chuckles. “All right, before you go making any arrests, I’m about to take my lunch break.”

“We can take a hint,” I say before looking at Jack. “Thanks for the yearbooks, Mitch—and the intel. Somehow this new information adds a little depth to our investigation.”

“Depth, huh?” Jack doesn’t look impressed with the thought. “Well, if we’re diving into past relationships, I might need to start taking notes on yours—for investigative purposes, of course.”

A chill rides through me despite my laugh. “Good luck with that. Unlike some people, I didn’t leave a trail of broken hearts across Pine Ridge Falls High.”

We say goodbye to Miller and he lets us know he’ll give us the heads-up on any new findings.

Mitch, Jack, and I go our separate ways, and no sooner do I pick up Buddy from the dog park than I get a message from Nikki.

Forensics has cleared us to inspect Robin’s laptop at their offices.

“All right, Buddy. We’re headed to the field office,” I say. “Time to dive into the digital side of this investigation once again. Here’s hoping it unravels a mystery or two.”

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The forensics department has a distinct vibe with a blend of concentrated focus and the hum of cutting-edge technology at work. It's located just one flight up from our situation room at the field office in Denver and was recently updated with state-of-the-art equipment. I'm expecting big things this afternoon, but not from the state-of-the-art equipment—from Robin's laptop to be exact.

Buddy trots by my side as we step off the elevator, and the familiar scent of Jack's cologne greets us before we ever see him. That and the subtle undertone of coffee—a staple in a place where the work never sleeps.

I head into the lab, a dark room with screens and monitors lining the walls. Rows of elongated tables and chairs are set out and I spot Jack and Nikki huddled over a workstation in the corner with the blue glow of the computer screen casting an ethereal glow on their faces.

Nikki has her crimson locks tossed up into a bun, and she's clad in black yoga wear. Her face looks fresh. No signs of a rough night in sight. I'll have to ask how she does it.

"Baxter." Jack stands as Buddy runs to him. "Hey, Buddy. Looks like the team is all here. You ready to suss out a killer?"

Buddy gives a chipper bark as if agreeing to it. I wouldn't complain if he got the job done.

“I’ve got pizza,” Jack says, motioning to the two large boxes nestled next to Nikki, the lid on one slightly ajar.

“Two large pizzas?” I muse. “This is going to be a long day.”

“I figured between Buddy and me, we could polish them off.”

“Count me in,” Nikki says, reaching in and helping herself to what looks like sausage and mushroom. “I’m starved. Did you get any sleep?” She looks my way.

“It was hit or miss. But my mom shoved a cup of coffee in my hand and I’m feeling a little better than a reanimated corpse.”

“Speaking of corpses...” Nikki motions for me to take a seat on the stool next to her and I do just that as she pulls forward a rose gold MacBook Air. “Let’s see what Robin’s got for us today.”

The laptop lights up and the screen displays a litany of folders and files, all of which are a digital representation of Robin’s work. And since her work was shedding her soul before her million loyal fans, that computer may as well be her diary. Or at least here’s hoping.

Jack lands in the seat on the other side of Nikki. “Let’s see what secrets we can uncover.”

“Jack dated her,” I offer without warrant. “How’s that for a secret? He dated Brittney Walker as well.”

Nikki’s fingers freeze over the keyboard as she shoots our resident Casanova a look.

“You’re kidding me,” she grunts.

“What can I say?” His lips twitch just shy of a smile. “I was a hot commodity back in the day.”

“You were trouble,” she says, shaking her head as her fingers get to clicking away.

We quickly deep-dive into the heart of Robin’s digital world as the sounds of the forensics office fade into the background and our focus narrows to the screen.

I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to navigating through someone’s life this way, but if it brings us closer to understanding what happened to her, then it’s a path I’m committed to follow.

“Look at this,” Nikki says, shaking her head as she runs from Robin’s inbox to each of her social media sites. “There’s an unbelievable amount of data here. Emails, blog drafts, social media. It’s a freaking goldmine.”

We sift through Robin’s files, her emails one at a time, and her browser history first. Every click reveals a little more about the woman. She really did live her life as if it were an open book. Or at least it appears that way.

We head to her Insta Pictures account, her most prolific work, and inspect the names of those who have left comments and likes.

“Derek Russell’s name keeps popping up,” I note, glancing at Jack.

“Who’s that again?” Nikki asks as Buddy curls up at the base of our feet.

“Vanessa mentioned him,” I say. “She was the woman who owned the house Brittney was showing. She said something about Brittney dating him.”

“So he’s the boyfriend of the kidnapped woman?” Nikki makes a note on the legal

pad next to her. “I know what we’re doing next.”

“He owns a bar out in Elmwood, apparently,” I say. “A bar and grill. I know what we’re doing for dinner.”

“Good,” Jack says. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with him.” His demeanor darkens.

“What?” I ask. “What’s that look about? Did you like the guy?”

“He was decent.” He shrugs it off, but his expression dims another notch. “If you happen to like a chronic A-hole.”

“Ooh.” Nikki laughs. “This is going to be interesting. Good luck getting rid of me. I’m not missing out on this one.” She clicks away from the front page of Robin’s Insta Pictures account and heads into the direct messages. “Speaking of interesting, I bet this is going to be a party.”

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And a party it is. Robin's direct messages are a potpourri featuring pictures of dirty man parts, spammers, and an entire cache of women sharing their personal stories and anecdotes with her.

"Here it is," Jack says, pointing to the lower half of the screen. "@DBag. That's Derek."

"At least he's honest," Nikki says, clicking in and, sure enough, there's a decent exchange between the two of them.

We read over it quickly.

"He's letting her know he's back in town," Jack reads above a whisper, mostly to himself. "Asking if she's up for coffee. He's looking to reconnect. Nothing particularly nefarious."

"Really?" I say. "The woman was married. I don't know. What exactly is he looking to reconnect?"

"Maybe they were close friends?" Jack offers, although not convincingly.

"Maybe so," Nikki says. "But like my mama always used to say—that third leg of his will always get in the way."

"Your mama is wise." I laugh. "But look, Robin turned him down."

Buddy gives a soft woof and Jack rewards him with a slice of pizza.

“That’s right, Buddy,” Jack says, giving him a scratch. “I think we’re on the right track, too.”

We zip over to Facebook and take a look at her private messages there.

“Look at this,” I point to the middle of the screen, “A group chat called Girls of AHH. I bet that’s Aspen Heights High. And I bet this is the group that Vanessa mentioned.”

We click in and there are more than fifty girls in there.

Jack leans in hard and grunts as he inspects the list of names under members. “I can confirm they’re all from my graduating class.”

Nikki tips her head. “Can you confirm how many of these women you deprived of their virginity?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.” He winks my way as he says it.

“What did you wink at me for?” I say, taking umbrage with the fact before shaking my head at Nikki. “We have nothing to hide.”

“That’s one direction I’m not hunting for clues in,” she’s quick to reply.

“Brittney’s in the group, too,” Jack says, nodding back at the screen. “See any interesting exchanges?” He leans in once again as we strain to race through the trough of messages. Several happy birthdays, lots of holiday greetings, women asking for a good esthetician, the hunt for the best place for Mexican in Aspen Heights, a few inquiries about private schools, and —

“Bingo,” I say, pointing to the bottom of the chat. “Someone’s asking for a realtor.”

“And someone chimes in that Brittney is the best,” Nikki says. “Next comment up is Robin, attesting to the fact. Sounds like Robin worked with Brittney in a professional manner.”

“Come to think of it, they hung out a lot,” Jack says.

“Good to note,” Nikki says and does just that.

Nikki scrolls through the messages rapidly. “Mostly reminiscing about high school days—wait, here’s something about the upcoming reunion.”

“Look at this.” I laugh just below the chatter of the reunion. “They’re listing the boys they can’t wait to see again. And there’s your name, Jackie,” I say, reaching over and patting him on the back. “You must be so proud.”

“Not really.” His chest expands as his eyes stay glued to the screen. “Derek’s name is there, too.”

“A woman named Sophie Clark says, ‘The things we did with that boy!’” Nikki lifts a brow my way. “Derek sounds as if he got around as well.”

“Were all the guys players at this school of yours?” I ask Jack with a hint of a smile. “And what exactly were they teaching there?”

“Never you mind,” he teases. “I think I’ll call down to the Penalty Box and see if the owner will be in tonight.”

He fiddles with his phone while Nikki traverses back to the Insta Pictures account, right back into the DMs. We start on a scrolling spree just to see if anything new

catches our eye. And it does.

“Stop,” I say, pointing to the avatar of a smiling Brittney Walker. “@BWsellshouses, that’s Brittney.” We’re familiar with it and her handle since we slogged through the public side of her account last night, along with Robin’s.

“Huh.” Nikki leans in just as Jack hangs up. “It says, ‘Looks like our past is catching up. Can we meet?’”

Jack shakes his head. “We need to get our hands on Brittney’s laptop and phone if she left it behind.”

“She did,” Nikki says. “It’s still being processed. I’ll ask the team how soon they can release it.”

“Good,” Jack says. “In the meantime, I’d like to ask you ladies out for dinner. There’s an old friend I’d love to introduce you to.”

“I’m in,” I say. “And I want to speak to those other two women who were shot along with Vanessa. See if they can give us a build, a voice, a hint of skin color when it comes to our perp. If we’re on the right track, we could wrap this up quickly.”

“I hope so,” Jack says. “I’ve got a reunion to get to.”

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The Penalty Box pulses with the vibrant energy of a typical sports bar and grill. The clatter of dishes and the murmur of conversations blend with the occasional cheer from patrons watching games on the numerous TVs mounted on the walls.

The scent of grilled burgers and fries wafts through the air, making my stomach rumble. And the slight tang of beer is hypnotizing me as well.

The décor is thematic and to the point with various sports memorabilia littering the place. There's an endless array of jerseys encased in glass frames, trophies, autographed balls of every shape and size, and a few autographed posters as well. Green and yellow neon signs cast a warm glow over the wooden booths and tables and give the patrons a sickly cast to their skin.

The lighting is dim and the music is loud, which lends the place a cozy, if somewhat noisy, appeal. The bar itself is the focal point, with patrons lined up and engaging in animated conversations. Most of those are men hitting on women who look as if they don't mind.

Jack, Nikki, and I settle into a table for four as the hostess drops off a trio of menus before taking off.

Jack dressed casual for the occasion with jeans and a powder blue dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves.

Nikki and I are clad in jeans as well with a frilly pink top for Nikki and a red T-shirt

that clings to my skin for me. Nikki and I have our weapons in our purses. Not sure if Jack is packing heat, but he is hot I'll give him that.

Jack and I drove out together and met up with Nikki in the parking lot. I left Buddy at home with a bowl full of food and some show about animals flickering away on TV. He seemed more than content.

"Can you believe it?" Nikki ticks her head wistfully. "We just wrapped up with the last case and we're knee-deep in another."

"The unfortunate nature of the beast," I say. "It's a wild and wicked world we live in."

"Speaking of our last case..." She shrugs my way and pauses as if letting me catch up with her. "Did you ever comb through the list of names of the people who were at the compound that night?"

I glance from her to Jack.

"Baxter was being seen for wounds before we left," Jack tells her. "She may not know that the Bureau was taking the names of every soul there."

My eyes widen a notch. My heart gives a dramatic thump.

"Wait," I say, trying to wrap my head around what this could mean. "You're saying the FBI took the name of every person who left the Paradise compound that night? We had the entire property surrounded?"

"Exactly. They not only took their names but the information of where they thought they'd go since the compound was shut down," Nikki confirms just as a waitress dressed in short shorts and a white and black striped umpire's shirt drops off a tray

brimming with glasses of water, each with a slice of lemon, before making herself scarce. “I don’t think there’s anyone who slipped out unnoticed. Your sister—if she was there, her name has to be on that list.”

A knot forms in the pit of my stomach.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know this. I mean, she was using a fake name, Angel. And she could have lied again to whoever she spoke with, but still. This could be a solid lead. I need to check that list.”

“I’ll help,” Nikki says with an earnest nod. “Off the books. I don’t care. Whatever you need, Fallon, I’m here to help dig through the data.”

“Me, too,” Jack says without missing a beat. “I’ll help you find your sister, Baxter. I want to help you bring her home.”

Nikki leans in. “Do you have any idea what she’s running from?”

Before I can answer, another waitress comes by and we put in our order. A platter of the spicy buffalo wings to start off with, and for our individual meals, three of the Penalty Box burgers, medium rare, with fries.

The waitress is about to take off when Jack lifts a finger. “Excuse me.”

Her eyes widen a notch once she gets a better look at him and she licks her lips his way as if Jack was her next meal. And if she plays her cards right, he probably will be. After all, pattern is prophecy.

“Is there any way we could speak to the owner?” he asks, glancing past her at the bar and I cast a glance in that direction, too, in the event I recognize our suspect for the night. I looked him up in the yearbook, then again on his social media sites, which

were scant, but it still afforded me a good description of what he looks like.

“I’ll get him right away. Anything for you, honey.” She winks at Jack before taking off.

“Hear that, honey?” I say. “Anything for you.”

His lips curve at the tips as he slices me a glance. “Do you mean it?”

My insides bisect with heat when he says it and that only makes me frown harder at him.

A shadow darkens the table and we look up to see a strapping man who has about ten years on me, dark reddish brown hair, same color scruff taking over his face, and light eyes with dimples high on his cheeks. He grins hard at the lot of us, and something tells me Jackie here is about to wipe the smile right off his face.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Welcome to the Penalty Box, folks. Derek Russell, proud owner. What can I help you with?”

“Derek freaking Russell.” Jack hops out of his chair and shakes the man’s hand. “Jackson Stone. We went to Aspen Heights together.”

“Geez.” The man’s eyes widen as he takes Jack in. “Jackie?” He slaps him on the shoulder with a laugh.

“Join us,” Jack invites him and they both fall into a chair. “Dude, you’re the owner here?”

Jack doesn’t say dude. It’s not in his lexicon, or if it is, it’s something he’s been keeping from me. But he’s putting on a darn good show.

Derek laughs. “Yeah, can you believe it? Took over the Penalty Box about a year ago when I got back to Colorado.” He looks to Nikki and me. “I was working construction with my uncle in Connecticut for a while but got tired of throwing my back out of joint. Now I just throw my bank account out of joint.”

We share a laugh at the thought.

“Derek, these are my friends, Nikki and Fallon,” Jack says. “I was just giving them a tour of my old stomping grounds and saw this place, so we stopped in for a bite.”

Jack did grow up in Elmwood. He's quick on his feet, I'll give him that.

"Nice to meet you, ladies." Derek offers us an amicable smile while mapping out our faces a moment too long. Most likely trying to decide which one he'd like to steal for the night. He gives a slight wink over at Nikki.

Winner, winner, Nikki dinner.

I frown over at Jack and he lifts his brows my way as if he were amused.

"It's been a long time." Jack sighs over at Derek, his sober personality shining through a bit more. "You going to the reunion?"

"Dude, I would not miss it."

Dude. It must be a catching condition. But it's probably best that Jack speaks his language.

"I hear we're ditching a fancy hotel in lieu of the home of sweat socks." Derek laughs as he says it.

"It's true." Jack shrugs at Nikki and me. "It's not at a fancy hotel. It's at the school gym which, by the way, was rebuilt from the ground up a few years back and has more bells and whistles than most hotel ballrooms. Our class voted to abscond the pricey hotel, collect the funds, and donate them to charity instead. It's our little contribution to the world."

"So that's where you get your altruism from," Nikki teases with a wink.

"I had to learn something from that place," Jack says before tipping his head to the guy. "Have you heard the news?"

Derek's expression quickly sobers up as well. "Yeah, I heard it. Something about Brittney Walker missing and then Robin getting slaughtered in her own home?" He leans back as a despondent look takes over briefly. "What the heck is this world coming to?"

"Have you seen either of them lately?" Jack asks a little too direct to be polite.

All hints of anything jovial melt right off of our suspect's face.

He glances at Nikki and me before returning his gaze to Jack.

"Didn't I hear you work for the cops or something now?" Derek's lips purse as he fixates on his old buddy.

"FBI." Jack's right arm flinches as if he were about to reach for his badge but thought better of it.

Derek casts another glance at Nikki and me and we both nod his way as if to affirm his suspicions.

"I take it this isn't some random dinner at the bar then." The man sits up and his chest expands as he wraps his head around it.

"Nope." Jack strums his fingers over the table, his face like flint. "Tell us what you know."

"Geez, I haven't spoken to either one of them in years." He blinks a little too much, a little too long.

Jack, Nikki, and I exchange a glance because we happen to know he's lying right off the bat. We saw those messages he left Robin. They were recent. And Vanessa

seemed to be under the impression he was dating Brittney. I guess we'll see about that.

"You haven't reached out to either of them since you've been back in Colorado?" Jack tries to jog his memory.

"Nope." Derek sits up straight. He's getting nervous now, too.

"Okay," Jack says softly. "I spoke to Nessa Copeland recently." He nods, trying to walk Derek into the conversation. "It was her mother's house that Brittney was showing when she was taken. Nessa seemed under the impression you were dating Brittney."

Derek goes rigid and his casual demeanor evaporates in an instant.

"Dating? Nope," he says it so fast, I tend to believe him. Although we can't rule out hooking up. "We were friends, sure. We met for coffee a couple of times to catch up. But dating? That's not what it was." His denial is as swift as it is strong, leaving little room for doubt about his stance on the matter. But he is picking at his fingernails. He's still nervous enough.

"When did you see her last?" I ask.

"Let's see." He lifts his chin and glances at the ceiling, his lips moving as if he were counting. "I guess Brittney did stop by a few weeks back. That's right, she was doing a showing in Elmwood."

"That seems out of her territory." Nikki looks to Jack for confirmation.

"Could be." He shrugs. "According to her social media, she painted herself as an upper crust mover and shaker."

A dull laugh thumps through Derek. “She wishes. She wasn’t moving half the houses she would have let you believe. She told me inventory was low and so was her checking account. She was even asking if I’d want to sell this place. Sounded pretty desperate to me.”

“What about Robin?” I ask. “When did you see her last?”

His eyes flit to the bar for a moment. “She came by, too. Always friendly, always inviting me to sit and have lunch with her.” He taps his hand over the table. “What do you need? Security footage? Want me to take a lie detector test? Maybe have a séance in here to help track down the killer? Man, I don’t have anything to hide.” His lips tug at the edges like maybe he does.

A waitress drops off our wings and sodas, breaking the spell.

“I think we have enough for now,” Jack says, flicking his card at his friend.

“Take mine,” Nikki says a little too eagerly and the man takes hers instead.

“Dinner is on me,” he says, winking her way once again before frowning at Jack. “I’m sure we’ll talk.”

He takes off and we stare at one another for a few seconds.

I shake my head at Nikki. “Are you determined to sleep with every killer in Colorado?”

“The slice of beefcake is innocent until proven guilty. Change my mind,” she says, digging into the wings.

I shoot Jack a look. “We had better change her mind quickly. Secure the footage.”

“He did offer.” He toasts me with a wing.

We make quick work of the spicy treats, and then we make quick work of the burgers, too.

Derek claims not to know what happened to Brittney or Robin, but he wasn't above lying right to our faces. We already secured that fact.

Derek Russell has a secret, and it makes me wonder if it's a killer secret indeed.

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Brittney Walker

“Hello?” My voice croaks from me weakly as my lids do their best to flutter open.

Every last inch of me aches as I struggle to make sense of my new surroundings. Those last few memories flit through my mind in jags, the sound of shots being fired, someone clad in black, their face covered with a ski mask then tackling me.

The needle.

That sharp pain in my chest.

My hand reaches there and it still feels sore.

I’ve been coming in and out for the last few hours. Every time I open my eyes, I refuse to believe what I’m seeing. I just drift back to sleep and hope to somehow rouse from this nightmare. I’m lying in a room that feels more like a tomb than any place for the living.

There’s a chain shackled to my left leg, attached to the base of the impossibly heavy bedframe, and the chain allows enough lead for me to make it to the toilet.

It’s dark, save for the single nightlight emanating from the tiny bathroom. There’s a bed that’s made up, but I haven’t had the energy to crawl onto it just yet. The floors are carpeted with a thick pile and that somehow brings me a modicum of comfort.

The smell of mildew is thick, and the air is cold. It’s the kind of cold that seeps into

your bones, making every shiver a reminder of how far you are from everything you know.

The bathroom is devoid of any bulbs in the light fixture, and the mini fridge to my right is stocked with nothing but water and apples. They're my only companions in this confinement, and a part of me prefers it that way.

Who the heck is this monster who's brought me here?

I try my hardest to remember even the smallest detail, a grunt, a whisper, but they didn't say a word before they tossed me into the trunk of their car.

The car was a dark color. That I know for sure. It's the one thing I zeroed in on before I blacked out. But that won't get me far.

The only thing I care about right now is getting the heck out of here alive.

There's a small window to my upper left, letting me know I'm probably in a basement of some sort. But it's boarded up, stealing even the smallest glimpse of the outside world from me. Not that I can travel to it with the short lead on this chain. Earlier there was a seam of light outlining the window, and for a second I thought it was a porthole to heaven. How I wish it were. But it's gone.

It must be night. Although I doubt I'll get a wink of sleep now that I'm coming out of whatever they pumped me full of.

"Help?" I moan as I struggle to get onto my knees. "Anybody? Can you hear me? Please, I need help!"

My heart pounds against my chest as if trying to escape this nightmare. The silence is deafening, but there has to be someone nearby—someone other than that monster.

My mind begins to race.

What the heck could I have done to deserve this?

Was this random?

Why me?

Why not those other women?

I riffle through my past at lightning speed, trying to search out something, anything, that could have led to these consequences. An entire litany of people that I've wronged with my blind ambition flits before me. The competitive edge that drove me in the real estate world—that push that led me to believe I always had to be on top—now feels like a curse. The faces of those I've stepped on along the way play out like a parade of horrors, and it's as if I can hear their voices mixed in with the creaks and whispers of this house.

Is this punishment for my sins? A reckoning for the hearts I've trampled on my way to success? Or simply just the hearts I've trampled?

And just like that, I go from fear to fury.

Whoever is behind this is going to pay. I'll make sure I punish them myself. I won't need the police.

They messed with the wrong woman if they think this is going to end in their favor.

I'm getting out of this alive and they'll be dead once I'm done torturing the crap out of them.

The sound of rustling emits from the other side of the door and I gasp.

“Hello?” I call out in a panic. It’s either a savior or a devil. And with the way my luck has been going, I’m betting on the latter. “Hello, can you hear me?” I cry so loud my voice pierces my ears.

“Yes, I can hear you,” a deep, slow, and methodical voice calls from the other side of the door and I shriek in terror.

That’s no savior.

That sounds like the devil himself. And oddly, it sounds a lot like Darth Vader, too.

“Can you hear me, Brittney?” they continue.

“Y-y-yes,” I stammer, unsure if that was the right move.

“Good. I hope you’re comfortable. I’ve been thinking about you all day. Have you been thinking of me?”

My heart jumps its way into my throat and I can’t bring myself to answer.

“I’ll take that as a yes, too.” The disembodied voice warbles with laughter. “I’ve got some sad news for you. Robin Hanson was found dead in her home.”

Robin? My mind reels with the possibilities.

“Robin was killed”—they pause for a moment—“but you won’t have it so easy.”

I pull my knees up and bury my face between them, trying to muffle my whimpers.

“I’ve brought a present for you. Do you like presents? I thought you might get lonely, so I brought you a couple of friends. But don’t worry. I’ll be back in a little while to keep you company myself.”

The door opens and a box is hurled this way. No sooner does it land on the ground than two large gray rats scamper out of it.

I scream my head off as the door shuts tight once again.

And that disembodied voice laughs like mad.

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Special Agent Jack Stone

After wrapping up at the Penalty Box, Fallon and I split ways with Nikki. We drive back to Pine Ridge Falls and grab our laptops and Buddy as well, before driving down to Bea's Diner.

It's time for the next phase of our investigation via working through dessert.

Bea's Diner isn't just any local eatery, it's basically the hub of Pine Ridge Falls, where the conversations flow as freely as the coffee. Not only does it sit at the base of Main Street, but it has a spectacular view of the waterfall that roars down from the mountain standing tall at the helm of this small town.

Bea's is the perfect place to sift through the digital breadcrumbs left by both of our victims, with the added comfort of her homemade pie sustaining us through the hours ahead.

Robin Hanson's laptop had all of her passwords and usernames stored in the security bank and Nikki copied each and every one of them and gave them to Fallon and me. We'll be able to work at the diner as effectively as we would have down at the forensics lab in Denver, so that's what the plan is.

We pull into Bea's and the diner's windows glow like a beacon in the night.

"All right, Buddy," I say, giving him a quick pat over the side as we head for the door. "Dessert is on me tonight."

“He’ll hold you to it,” Fallon says as I hold open the door for her. “And so will I.”

“You should. I take my dessert seriously.”

“Well, I guess we have that in common.” Fallon pauses in the entry as we take a glance at the crowd amassed here this evening. “Fair warning, I typically opt for two desserts.”

“Fair warning, so do I.”

The warmth inside envelops us as does the buzz of conversation and clatter of dishes.

Easy listening music hums overhead and the scent of grilled burgers overpowers our senses. The décor reminds me of a quintessential fifties diner—black and white checkered floors, red Naugahyde booths, and a few tables scattered around as well.

There’s a long Formica counter, and a few overworked waitresses trying to hold the place together. I cast a quick glance around but don’t see Fallon’s mother, Bea. She’s a no-nonsense, warm-hearted gal and I like her, sometimes more than I like her daughter.

A waitress walks by with a couple orders of what looks like warm apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream quickly melting on top, and I can’t help but moan.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” I say, patting my stomach in anticipation of the comfort food to come, but before I can drool another second, the idea of finding any comfort here tonight disappears when I spot Jet tucked away in a booth by himself. “Wonderful,” I grumble, nodding his way.

Just what I needed.

His presence here is nothing but an unwelcome complication, and one that I'm not ready to deal with. I'll never be ready to deal with Jet.

"Isn't that your brother?" Fallon nudges me forward. "Let's join him. I still haven't officially met him. And he looks in much better shape than the day I saw him back at your cabin."

That's because the day she spotted him at my place I had just peeled him off the streets during one of his benders. He had just finished picking his way through the trash for a snack and rolled over on the sidewalk to take a leisurely nap.

He's dried out pretty well since then. He might be staying with me, but in all honesty, I don't know what's going on in his free time.

I want to resist, to find any excuse to keep our worlds separate, if not for a few hours, but Fallon has already started moving in that direction and so has Buddy.

Jet is seated next to a window at the far end of the diner, and as luck would have it, there's plenty of room for Fallon and me, Buddy included.

"Hey, Jet," I grunt as we slide into the booth across from him. "Mind if we join the fun?"

"Please do," he says rather chipper and I'm not sure why, but it annoys the hell out of me.

The burger on his plate is all but gone, and I'm hoping soon he will be, too. Considering he doesn't drive, he must have walked. It's a good fifteen to twenty minutes on foot from here to Whispering Woods.

Buddy settles at our feet and Jet reaches down and gives him a quick pat. Jet's got a

baseball cap on, looks showered, not shaved, but neither am I. His clothes look relatively clean, and for that I'm grateful.

"Jet, this is Special Agent Baxter," I say. "She's working with Nikki and me now. And that's her dog, Buddy."

"Nice to meet you," Jet says, actually making eye contact with her. It usually takes effort on his part. But then, he's not loaded, so that's a win.

"Likewise," she says. "And please, call me Fallon. We're neighbors back at Whispering Woods. I'm four cabins down and around the bend. I keep telling your brother you have a better view of the lake."

"Yeah, but you have a hot tub," I'm quick to remind her before turning my attention to Jet. "Which you will not see at any time in the near future."

"Neither will you," Fallon teases and I frown her way.

"What are you doing here?" I growl at him.

Fallon gives a short-lived laugh. "He's eating. What do you think he's doing here?"

"I don't know, robbing the cash register, thinking about dining and ditching?" I nod his way and he laughs.

"It's nice to know you've got faith in me." He shrugs over at Fallon. "That's all right. Someday I'll swing by your place and fill you in on all the dirt I've got on him."

"Ooh, make it soon," she tells him, a little too giddy for my liking.

My body heat index spikes at the thought, because there's no way in hell I'm letting

Jet anywhere near Fallon. Especially not on his own.

The scent of sugary perfume wafts over, and the next thing we know, Bea herself is standing at the helm of the table.

“Well, look who the dog dragged in,” she says with a slight country drawl. Tennessee is where Fallon says her mother hails from. Bea is somewhere in her sixties, wears her salt and pepper hair in a beehive, has the same strong cheekbones as Fallon, and wears lots of blue eyeshadow. “How’s it going, Handsome?” She offers my cheek a quick pinch. “This one giving you trouble?” She nods to her daughter and winks.

“He’s the troublemaker,” Fallon doesn’t hesitate to fill her in before turning to Jet. “Did you know that your brother dated just about everyone at Aspen Heights High?”

Jet tips his head and laughs. “And he hasn’t slowed down since.”

“Good to know.” Fallon gives me the side-eye and all I can do is sigh.

So much for making a good impression on her. And for reasons unknown to me, that felt necessary.

“It was nice meeting your brother,” Bea says my way. “He introduced himself when he came in for the interview.”

“What interview?” I grouse, shooting Jet a look that promises certain death.

Is he forgetting that I pack heat? Quantico taught me a lot about decomposing bodies. And I haven’t fully implemented that knowledge firsthand yet. I could dispose of him and no one would be the wiser.

“He came in looking to fill the position for the sign in the window,” Bea says, chipper

as a hummingbird. “Jet, you can start anytime you like. Let’s do four days a week to begin with, eleven to seven. You’ll bus, wait tables, and take out the trash before you leave in the evenings. You got a problem with that?”

There goes Bea’s no-nonsense style, and even though that is what I like best about her, right now I’m not liking anything about this conversation.

“No way.” I sit up a notch and Buddy pokes his head between Fallon and me as if to inspect what’s going on. He’s no fool. He senses trouble, too. “But thank you very much, Bea, for thinking about him.”

“I’m not talking to you, Hot Shot.” She’s quick to shoot me down. “Jet, you’re a grown man. You can start tomorrow if you feel like it. It’ll be good training. Other than that, it’ll be Thursday to Sunday and then we can take it from there. Now”—she offers a crooked grin my way—“what can I put in you to make you less cranky?”

Fallon leans her way. “He had his eye on the apple pie, scoop of vanilla to go with it. Maybe make it two scoops of vanilla. He’s been extra cranky tonight.”

I shoot her a look for the quip.

“I’ve got piping hot pie with your name on it,” Bea says. “I’ll bring a round for the table.” She pats me on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Papa. They gotta grow up sometime. If I were you, I’d be more concerned with that one on your right. She’s been known to throw a fit if she doesn’t get what she wants. If you know how to make a girl happy, she might just keep you around just for kicks.”

“Mother,” Fallon scoffs with a laugh buried in her throat. “Stone and I are professionals.”

Bea waves the thought away. “Oh, hon, he’s too hot for me to care about some

paycheck, and you know it's true for you, too."

I glance her way as Fallon pulls a menu up over her face.

"What's going on?" someone calls out from behind Bea and the entire lot of us turns that way.

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Special Agent Jack Stone

The diner is buzzing tonight as Fallon and I sit across from Jet on our way to garnering some piping hot apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. The stuff of dreams.

Bea steps aside, revealing a blonde with dark roots near the scalp, light eyes, and cut features. She looks harmless enough, save for the hardened expression she's trying to sell us. I'm not buying it. She seems friendly to a fault.

"Riley," Fallon says in a tone that's a touch more cheerful than I'm used to. "This is Special Agent Jack Stone and his brother, Jet. Gentlemen, this is my sweet sister."

"Nice to meet you," Jet and I chime together like a couple of morons and I shake my head at the woman. "Please, join us. You, too, Bea."

"I've got a diner to run," Bea says, pulling a pen from her hair. "Apple pie a la mode all around," she shouts as she takes off.

Riley lands next to Jet and pats the space between the two of them for Buddy to hop up and he does just that.

"I can't believe I get to meet you." She wrinkles her nose my way and the excitement is practically bubbling from her. "Fallon worked up in Reno for a while," she says to Jet. "I never got to meet any of her coworkers there."

"Speaking of coworkers, where are yours?" Fallon asks before glancing at Jet then to

me. “My sister and her boyfriend own a clean-up business called Pick-it-Clean.”

Riley frowns as she casts a dark glance out the window, and suddenly I’m fearing for the boyfriend. That look can’t bode well. I should know, I’ve seen my fair share of women give it.

“I don’t know where Ryan is,” she says with an edge to her voice. She forces a smile as she looks my way. “I have a small pool of employees that I can call anytime to help with a job.” She looks to Jet. “Mostly we clean out houses after estate sales, or if someone passes away from whatever. Usually, the surviving family goes in and takes what they want and leaves the rest to my crew and me. Believe me, we can pick a place clean in just under a couple of hours.”

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks,” Fallon teases. “Hey”—she looks my way and pauses—“I bet Vanessa could use her services. Although under the circumstances, I wouldn’t dare so much as pass her a business card.” She offers her sister a forlorn smile. “Vanessa Copeland was one of three women that was shot earlier this week while the realtor was showing her mother’s house. And the perpetrator ended up kidnapping the realtor.”

Jet nods. “Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Who are you talking to?” I ask, suddenly alarmed. I thought he never left the cabin, and suddenly he’s got a budding career and a social life.

“He’s right.” Riley shrugs. “I’ve heard people talking about that and the woman who was knifed in her own home, Relatable Robin.” She shudders. “Another one of your cases, I’m presuming?”

Fallon nods. “Stone and I were just going to deep-dive into it.”

“Don’t let us stop you.” Riley’s eyes grow twice their size. “I’ve always wanted to take part in an FBI sting operation.”

“It’s not a sting operation,” I tell her.

“And we’re not sharing anything with either of you,” Fallon tells them.

Jet chuckles. “She’s mean, good-looking, and she packs heat? The woman is a triple threat.”

“Thank you,” Fallon says with a serpentine smile just as a waitress delivers us each a slice of warm apple pie with a couple of generous scoops of vanilla ice cream gliding right off the top and forming a puddle of everything I’ve been craving.

We dive right in, and there are a good few minutes of silence as we pay homage to this fresh from the oven perfection.

“Before I forget”—Riley lifts her fork—“if you talk to Vanessa again, please tell her I’ll do a clean out for free. The poor woman was shot and there was a kidnapping on the property? I think she has enough going on as it is.” She winks over at Jet. “I like to do a little pro bono work now and again.”

“If you need a hand, I’ve got two,” he says, holding up his mitts.

“No,” I growl his way for even thinking of it.

“Thanks,” Riley tells him. “I could use all the help I can get on some of these places.”

“I’m working for your mom now,” he says with a touch of pride and I don’t have the heart to shoot him down. Not even playfully. “I’m still working on getting a phone, but I’ll be here Thursday through Sunday.”

“Great.” Riley nods to Fallon. “If Vanessa needs me, tell her Monday through Wednesday works good for me.”

I can’t help but frown at how quickly everyone is so eager to hire my brother.

Honestly? I’m not sure what to make of it.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to her again,” I say. “I’ll let her know you threw out the offer. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it if she hasn’t tackled the job already.” I turn to Fallon. “And for the record, I didn’t date Nessa.”

“Now’s your chance to round things out,” she teases.

As it turns out, Fallon and I don’t get any work done. I save some of my pie for Buddy since I promised him dessert and soon we’re wrapping it up.

“All right, Jet.” I tick my head toward the door. “I think we’re going to call it. Fallon and I have had a long day.”

And seeing that we didn’t get any work done here, we’ll probably have a long night combing through Robin’s social media accounts once again. Separately, of course.

Riley blinks his way. “I can give you a ride home when you’re ready.”

I’m about to protest or point out that he’s done with his pie, but Fallon lifts her shoulders my way so I don’t say a word.

Instead, we say goodnight and duck out.

“Looks as if my brother has half of your family under his spell,” I say as Buddy hops into the back seat of my truck.

“I like him, too,” she counters. “So that spell must be pretty powerful. I think you’re just jealous of all the attention he’s getting.”

“I guess I should be cheering on the job offers,” I say as I land behind the wheel and start up the engine. “How about we see if we can track down those sisters tomorrow?”

“Already on it,” Fallon says. “One is still at Aspen Heights Memorial. I called and asked if we could meet with them at eleven in the morning and they agreed.”

“An hour before lunch, I like how you think,” I say as we head for Whispering Woods.

“You think about food all day, not me,” she says just as Buddy barks from the back. “Okay, you do, too. You’re both food-obsessed. How about we get obsessed about bringing Brittney Walker home? We’re just about to skate past the forty-eight-hour mark.”

I groan just hearing it. “I know,” I whisper.

Victims are less likely to be found alive as time progresses.

We’ve just crested the golden hours, and now we’re staring straight into the heart of the abyss.

I shake my head. “We had better hope those sisters have something critical to say that can crack this case wide open.”

“I looked at the sheriff’s report,” Fallon says, unblinking into the dark road ahead of us. “They don’t.”

“We’ll make them.” My fingers flex over the steering wheel. “Someone out there knows something.” A thought occurs to me. “I want to revisit forensics. I want those bloody shoeprints at the Hanson house juxtaposed to every print found at the kidnapping scene.”

“Those bloody shoeprints were smudged every which way, remember?”

“I do. It’s time to rule in or rule out if we’re hunting down one suspect, two, or an entire team of them.”

“If whoever killed Robin is the same person that kidnapped Brittney, they must think they’re pretty good.”

“Maybe so, but we’re better,” I say.

Buddy gives a sharp bark as if he agrees.

Now it’s time to prove it.

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Special Agent Fallon Baxter

It's the next day and this time I'm the one behind the wheel as I drive Jack and me out to Aspen Heights. The Colorado summer sky is crisp and blue and the scent of fresh pines permeates the air on the scenic drive over.

I've brought Buddy along, but only because he looked so hopeful when I was getting ready to leave. We pull into the hospital parking lot and I park under a bushy willow that offers enough shade for half the planet, roll the windows down all the way, and fill up a water bowl I brought along and set it on the floor in the back seat of my 4Runner.

"Sorry, Buddy," I say, giving his ears a quick scratch and he promptly rolls into a ball and closes his eyes as if he were resigned to his fate. "I'll make it up to you."

"I'll make sure she makes it up to both of us," Jack says, adjusting his sunglasses. "Lunch sounds good. Sandwiches, maybe? I think Buddy agrees."

"I'm sure he does," I say as I lead the way into Aspen Heights Memorial Hospital.

As soon as we step inside, the crisp antiseptic scent that can only rival the coroner's office hits us. We check in with the orderly at the front desk and she directs us to the third floor where a labyrinth of beeping monitors, a handful of distant conversations, and the soft squeak of nurses' shoes on the linoleum floor greet us.

"I'm not a fan of these places," Jack says as we try not to get lost in the white labyrinth of hallways.

“Unless you’re getting paid to be here, most people aren’t.”

“Technically I’m getting paid to be here, but I’d rather sit in the car with Buddy.”

“For Pete’s sake, think of the sandwiches,” I tell him as we continue to hunt for the room number we were given.

We navigate through the corridors, following the directions to Stella Johnson’s room, where we find both sisters waiting for us.

Stella Johnson—forty-five, shot in the upper left thigh. A mild infection set in so they’re pumping her full of antibiotics. And since she has a history of rejecting an entire litany of drugs, they’re keeping an extra eye on her for another day. Jack and I gleaned that on the report the sheriff’s department sent us this morning.

Her sister, Connie Berkley, is forty-nine, grazed by a bullet in the upper left arm. Both women are lucky to be alive.

Either the kidnapper was a lousy shot or never intended to kill them. Most likely both.

We find a dark-haired woman propped up in bed, the yellow hospital gown making her already sallow skin color look pallid.

Next to her sits Connie, short dark hair neatly curled under, full face of makeup, dressed as if she’s on her way to a board meeting. She stands as we enter and offers a kind smile.

“You must be the officers,” she says, shaking our hands without waiting for an introduction.

“Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Berkley.” I nod to each of them. “I’m Special Agent Baxter, and this is my partner, Special Agent Stone. We appreciate you agreeing to speak with us.”

Stella offers a pained smile. “We’re willing to do anything at all to help catch whoever did this.” She winces a moment. “Please tell us they found that poor woman.”

Jack shakes his head. “That’s why it’s crucial that you tell anything at all that you can remember.”

Stella leans forward with her brow furrowed with concern as she looks at her sister.

“It was a nightmare,” Connie starts, nodding at her sister with a look of lingering fear. “We never thought something like this could happen at a house showing. And believe me, we’ve been looking for months on behalf of our mother. She’s in Texas now and wants to move back to the area to be closer to the two of us. Of course, now that house is off the table.” She says that last bit firmly as can be.

Jack pulls out his phone to take notes and I do the same. “Can you walk us through what happened that day?” he asks gently, encouraging them to open up at their own pace with his tone.

Stella takes a deep breath as her gaze steers out the window. “It all happened so fast. One minute we were admiring the yard out back, and the next, there was just...chaos.”

Connie reaches out and takes ahold of her sister’s hand. “There was this person, all in black. We didn’t even see where they came from. We heard a powerful pop—twice. Stella got hit first, then I felt this sting on my arm.”

“The person in black,” I start. “Did you see their face? Anything distinctive about

them? The skin around their eyes? Could you see the color of their flesh?"

Both sisters shake their heads.

"It was all such a blur," Stella admits. "But they were definitely there for Brittney. They grabbed her and—and that was the last we saw of her." Her voice grows weak and wobbles.

I lean in. "Before the perpetrator arrived, what was going on? Was anyone else with you on the premises? A gardener, a painter, anyone at all?"

They exchange a look and shake their heads at one another.

"Just Brittney, the realtor," Connie says. "And the daughter of the woman who owns the property."

"Blondish, light brown hair," Stella says, nodding. "She introduced herself as Nessa, I think?"

Connie nods back, affirming the fact. "We met briefly in the driveway. She and Brittney were chatting away when we arrived."

"Did you happen to hear what they were discussing?" I tip my ear her way so as not to miss a word.

"Oh, this and that." Connie waves it off. "It sounded like small talk."

"Something about a reunion." Stella lifts a finger as if it was coming back to her. "They mentioned someone named Derek and then they laughed. I remember thinking I missed laughing with my friends like that." She pats her sister's arm. "Who am I kidding? Only you can make me laugh like that."

They share a quick chuckle because of it.

“Laughing about Derek?” I say to Jack just above a whisper and he shrugs as if he didn’t blame them for that one.

“They mentioned someone named Alicia, too,” Connie says with furrowed brows. “Something about her being a snitch,” she whispers that last word as if it were salacious. “Alicia Adams, I believe. They both said her name.”

I jot it down before making eye contact with Jack, subliminally asking if he knew her, too.

He nods my way, affirming the fact. Or maybe he’s admitting to dating her? At this point, it’s the same difference.

I’m really lucky I didn’t go to that school.

“Did you hear the getaway vehicle?” I ask and they both shake their heads.

“We were screaming our heads off,” Connie says. “We were deaf to everything else.”

We ask a few more routine questions before a candy striper delivers Stella’s lunch. A mystery meal contained in small mauve plastic dishes, the smell of which is making my stomach churn.

We thank them both and give them our cards, encouraging them to call us if they can think of anything else.

At least we got a couple of names. Whether or not we can use them, that’s another story. Let’s hope the pieces of this puzzle are finally coming together.

Jack and I bolt from the building as if it were about to blow up, and we both take in a lungful of fresh mountain air once we step outside.

“I guess I owe you a sandwich,” I say.

“And I owe you some answers I gleaned last night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me on the ride over?”

“I didn’t want you to get lost in your own head. It’s not about the case,” he says just as I unlock my truck. “It’s about your sister.”

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Evil

The thrill of the hunt and the sweet taste of justice—my adrenaline surges just thinking about them. There's nothing quite like it. All these years I've dreamed of doing this, and now that it's here, a reality of my own making, it's so much sweeter than I could have ever imagined.

Those women with their smug smiles and their deceitful ways, they thought they could ruin my life and simply move on.

They were so very wrong.

They were dead wrong.

The satisfaction of making them pay, of finally balancing the scales is a balm to the wounds they inflicted upon people—the wounds they inflicted upon me.

Those wounds destroyed my future and they knew it. They knew what they were doing then. They weren't sorry. It was just as thrilling for them to cut me down as it is for me to end them.

The scene of chasing Robin through her immaculate house comes back to me and elicits a smile like no other. That model home was the very symbol of the life she built on her lies.

Her panic was palpable.

Hearing her scream was exhilarating.

Just witnessing the fear taking hold of her, and seeing the realization in her eyes that her actions had consequences, it was so deeply satisfying. It's something I've needed for so very long and I will treasure those moments forever.

Then to end her life with my own two hands, to extinguish that spark of treachery once and for all—it was poetry in motion. It left me with a satisfaction that resonated down to my very core.

Of course, I have something other than satisfaction.

I hold the small glass vial in front of me with just over an ounce of sanguine liquid in it. But just knowing it came from Robin's dying body gives me pleasure.

I won't let a drop of it go to waste. I can't. I worked too hard to get it.

But with Brittney, oh, with Brittney, the game is far from over.

I've been saving her, keeping her close to me, and it's a pleasure all its own. I'm savoring her terror, enjoying every moment of my day knowing that her day is warped with fear of the unknown and that her future is just out of reach.

And those rats.

A laugh pumps through me.

It was a stroke of genius on my part. What better way to add a little more torment while I'm not there?

But those rats are just the beginning. A mere taste of what's to come. And judging by

the way she screamed on and on, long after I shut the door, lets me know it's a fitting terror for the woman who has been nothing but a terror to me.

She's been getting off easy so far, but all that's about to change. I've planned something special, something that will break her spirit the way she broke mine.

This isn't about revenge.

It's about taking back my life, piece by shattered piece. Each moment of their fear, of their suffering, is a step in the right direction when it comes to redeeming the past.

Those monsters took everything from me, but now I'm the one in control.

It's their turn to lose everything, piece by piece until there's nothing left but the memory of their torment.

Robin's life is done and destroyed, just the way she destroyed mine.

And as for Brittney, she'll wish I had ended her life quickly like Robin's.

We all know that some fates are worse than death, and I'm going to ensure she experiences every agonizing moment of what I'm about to give her.

A dark sense of joy rises in me at the thought.

But for now, there are others that must be dealt with. Another monster that needs her life taken down a notch or two.

Those monsters think I've forgotten the way they've treated me. But I've simply written down their names on the blackboard of my mind.

It's time to take roll call again.

And the next name on my list is Sophie Clarke.

Don't worry, Soph. I know exactly where to find you.

You can run, but you can't hide.

Sophie Clarke

Starting my day with a kale smoothie seemed like a good idea about four months ago—back when I was starting my day off with pancakes and coffee. But this year has been coming down the pike, about as welcome as a tax audit.

My twentieth high school reunion is at hand and I loathe that I was coerced into going. I missed the ten-year fiasco. There wasn't a fifteen. I guess we're sticking to round numbers.

And speaking of round, that's something I refused to be come that infamous night. And since I've managed to shed zero weight over the last year—not that the effort wasn't there on my part—it's do or die at this point.

So far I've tried it all, keto, paleo, intermittent fasting, and working out like a loon. As it stands, I've decided I need fuel in the morning, thus this quasi-palate-pleasing green concoction that I somehow manage to choke down.

As soon as I chug the glug as I've come to call it, I lace up my running shoes for my usual trail run through the backwoods behind the condos where I live.

Deer Lick Flats is no Aspen Heights, but that was my parents' zip code. That's what they made for themselves. This is what I have. I should be proud and go into the reunion with my head held high. Although Deer Lick isn't exactly anything to brag about either. Neither is my faltering career.

I do medical billing from home and I enjoy it. I get to choose my hours and my nap

schedule. Honestly, it's a dream. But in the back of my mind, I've already started comparing myself to the rest of my graduating class. It's hard not to.

Alicia Adams, our old class president, started up a Facebook group where she asked us to reintroduce ourselves to one another and fill in the blanks about where we are now in life. I've never seen so many doctors, lawyers, and CEOs of Fortune 500s. Of course, there are the SAHMs and the self-professed MILFs, which got a laugh or two out of that last category. But everyone seems to have made something of themselves, something big, something with a legacy, even if the only thing that legacy is contributing to is a gene pool.

I step outside and take in a lungful of the fresh mountain air. The early morning light bathes the Colorado landscape in a soft, golden hue, casting long shadows alongside me as I jump onto my usual trail. The path ahead is flanked by towering pines and aspens, their leaves swishing softly in the gentle breeze like a choir that accompanies me on my every step. Ironically, the last time I ran like this was in high school and only because one of my grades depended on it.

But four months ago, when my bathroom scale topped out at a record peak, I bought myself a pair of track shoes and never looked back. Same trail day after day. The snow has finally melted, but in a few weeks fall will be upon us and the scenery around here will change once again.

I haven't thought about whether or not I'll hang up my running shoes after the reunion. I've sort of grown accustomed to my time with nature. Up until a few weeks ago, I had earbuds stuck in my ears, blasting the deep cuts of my youth just to get me in the mood. But one day I forgot them, and surprisingly I found myself enjoying the solitude and the sounds of nature even more.

I'm pretty sure that means I'm old.

I chuckle to myself at the thought. It had to happen one day. I'm just glad it was by way of solitude rather than a broken hip.

The crisp air fills my lungs, carrying the earthy scent of pine needles and damp soil, mixed with the subtle sweetness of the honeysuckle that dot the trail's edges. The vibrant colors of the wildflowers are a sharp contrast against the lush green forest. The splashes of yellow, purple, and blue always seem as if they're cheering me on as I trot by.

The serenity of the trail, with its towering pines and fresh mountain air, has become my sanctuary. Although, today, my mind is anything but serene. The looming high school reunion is a cloud over my sunlit path. It's just days away, and in all honesty, my bathroom scale hasn't moved that dramatically since I began this misadventure.

I haven't touched a carb in months, all in the name of looking good—and for what? A night of forced smiles and feigned interest with people I've spent the better part of two decades avoiding?

And don't get me started on the fact I'll be showing up stag.

My mind flits back to that seven-year disaster I just crawled out of. I thought Stephen and I would last forever. And apparently, he thought we'd last until he found someone younger, hotter, and far more limber in the bedroom.

Stephen leaving me for some fresh-out-of-college girl who probably thinks his job at the local movie theater is the pinnacle of artistic achievement still stings.

But who needs him when I've built a new circle of friends? My coworkers, the librarians whom I love, and the baristas at the coffee shop. I have friends who value me for who I am, not the girl I was in high school.

Okay, so they're more acquaintances than they are friends, but after the trauma my so-called friends put me through way back when, I've decided it's best not to get too close to people.

I pound the trail harder as the ghosts of those days sneak up on me. I was part of them once—the Queens of Aspen Heights we called ourselves while reigning over the school with sharp tongues and cold shoulders, making life miserable for anyone who dared cross us—and even those who tried to steer clear.

Once the rest of the kids got wind of our little self-absorbed moniker, they gave a more reality-based twist and we were the Queens of Mean from there on out. We stepped right into that one and we knew it. But we sure as heck lived up to that name as well.

The thought of Robin and Brittney worms its way into my consciousness again, no matter how hard I try to shake it off. A double horror right here under our noses and just minutes from the big reunion they've both been clamoring over.

It doesn't seem fair.

It's not fair.

Murder never is.

And what about Brittney? They never found her body. Unless she's still alive, but a part of me doubts that. These things never end well.

Their fates were so dark. And for some reason, it's a reminder of the cruelty we once dished out so carelessly.

My therapist's advice echoes in my head—Don't let any rancid thought seep into

your brain longer than three seconds. Combat it with three happy thoughts.

I've been seeing her to curb the trauma from my divorce, but now that Robin and Brittney have incited more than a few rancid thoughts in me, I've come to implement the technique when it comes to them as well.

One happy thought that you can control. One that you have on your vision board (another slightly woo-woo exercise she demanded I do in order to create the reality I wanted for myself). And lastly, a unicorn thought that is as wild as wild can be. But, of course, happy.

Okay, happy thought number one: The day after the reunion, I have an entire menu of indulgences planned out, mostly centered around a decadent chocolate cake. No softball game for me the day after that trauma. No thank you. I'll be savoring every bite of my well-earned chocolaty feast.

Happy thought number two: I see myself on a beach in Hawaii, the warm sun kissing my skin as the sound of waves lulls me into a state of bliss. That's where I belong, far from the petty concerns of high school politics and closer to my own peace. How I wish I could have run away to Hawaii way back when. How I wish I could be there now.

And my unicorn thought, my magical wild wish that never fails to bring a smile to my face: The idea of all of us former Queens of Mean coming together to make amends and somehow, someday heal the wounds we inflicted. It's a far-fetched fantasy, I know—especially now that one of us is dead and another missing, but the thought of us sharing stories of redemption on a warm, sunny beach is my secret balm.

The trail widens a bit and I pick up my pace. The soft rustling of leaves and the distant call of a blue jay echoes through the trees. The occasional chatter of squirrels

makes me slow down a notch as I watch them dart from one tree to another with their bushy tails moving in a blur of motion.

Above me a hawk circles lazily in the sky, its sharp eyes scanning the ground below for its next meal.

If only I can soar that high.

As much as I'd love a bird's-eye view of this place, I'd love to let the wind pick me up and carry me off to wherever. I doubt I'll ever be as free as a bird.

My life is a lot of things, but carefree isn't one of them.

I slow my pace, trying to catch my breath, and my thoughts drift back to Stephen. All that bitterness swells up inside me as familiar as an unwelcome guest.

How could he toss away what we had for someone barely out of college?

He traded a woman for a girl. He's practically a predator at this point.

I'll admit, the wound is still fresh no matter the fact that a solid year has passed. A visit to my therapist is about as useful as lighting my money on fire. Come to think of it, I might have more fun with the fire.

Stephen is nothing but a constant reminder of my flawed judgment when it comes to men. I've had more boyfriends than I care to count, and each one of them was a walking, talking, red flag.

How am I such an idiot when it comes to all things heart-shaped?

Obviously, my picker is broken. And I can trace all of my boy-based malfeasances

right back to high school—the origin of all my miseries. That’s where I started the pattern of falling for the wrong guys. No sooner did I crest puberty than I suddenly had a hankering for bad boys. And Aspen Heights had an entire litany of bad boys to choose from. My faves were Mitch, Derek, and Jackie.

A tiny laugh rumbles through me as each name conjures a whirlwind of memories, along with a mixture of thrills and the inevitable disappointment that followed.

Mitch, with his rebellious streak and that smirk that promised adventure but ultimately led to chaos. He was the one who taught me that boys are after one thing and it’s not holding hands in the park while eating ice cream. We were short and not-so-sweet, and I learned a hard lesson from the crash that followed. I wouldn’t say I was in love with him, but the pain was real once he moved on, after he announced he felt it was time.

Then there was Derek. A chill rides through me. I never should have looked in his direction, let alone made a move.

Jackie comes to mind. Oh, good grief.

I laugh out loud as I shake my head at the memory.

Jackie showed me the highs of attention and the lows of neglect, leaving me always wanting more but never fully satisfied. He’s a man’s man in a nutshell. I can’t believe I’ll be seeing him in just a few days. That is, if he shows. But according to Alicia, his name is on the roster. I should know, I asked.

I’m going to give him the biggest hug. Boy, was he hot.

What are the odds of him being single? Maybe we could pick up where we left off? How I’d love to parade Jackie Stone in front of Stephen and that walking tramp

stamp he's leashed himself to. That would teach him.

Derek comes back to mind and my mood darkens.

It was all based on a dare, a challenge thrown down by Robin who was the ringleader of our ridiculous clique. With Derek, the entire ordeal felt like a performance, because it was.

He had a girlfriend, for Pete's sake. A sweet thing if I remember correctly. But then, Derek would bed a squirrel if it shook its tail his way. The guy gave even bad boys a bad look. Or more to the point, he was the leader of the bad boy pack.

Robin's wickedness was undeniable. But she had the type of personality that made you want to be near her. Everyone wished she was their best friend, and for those four years, she was mine. How I wish she wasn't. As much as I hate to speak ill of the dead, that girl was trouble.

She's the reason I ditched those friendships as soon as graduation hit. I could only take so much of her toxicity. And I guess whoever thrust a dagger into her heart felt the exact same way. Leopards don't change their spots. I read enough of her catty blog to know that.

One million fans.

More like one million suckers.

Some people wish they could relive their high school glory days all over again. And with Robin's gossip gab sessions, it made you feel as if you were right back in homeroom.

I force all thoughts of the reunion, of the deceased, and the kidnapped out of my

mind. Instead, I take in another lungful of fresh Colorado summer air. But no matter how hard I try to relax, there's something gnawing at me, something grave and dark.

My eyes flit to either side of the woods as I begin to slow down. For whatever reason, these past few weeks I've had the eerie feeling that someone is watching me.

It's stupid, I know, and totally paranoid, but if I've been anything these last few days, it's been paranoid.

I mean, what are the odds that something happened to both Robin and Brittney? What if there's some maniac out there who's decided to pick all of us off one by one?

I shake the thought out of my head. It's ridiculous. Those things only happen in horror movies. It's not like we hurt anyone. Okay, so it's not like we decapitated anyone. Although it probably would have felt better to a few of those people we dragged through hell.

As I push forward on the trail, another shiver runs down my spine. I try to shake it off. I've got one heck of an overactive imagination.

But then I see it—a dark figure emerging from the shadows ahead, the glint of what looks like a hunting knife in their hand.

“What?” I hiss as I slow to a stop and blink hard that way, hoping that it's nothing more than a bear.

A bear, of all things. I never thought I'd hope so hard to see a wild animal that could maul me.

The figure lunges my way and a scream gets locked in my throat.

They're clad in black, ski mask included, nothing but the glint from the whites of their eyes staring back at me, and that knife gleams with the promise of a certain death.

Panic seizes me and grips my heart like an ice-cold vise.

My feet do an odd pirouette as I turn and start running back the way I came, and suddenly my legs feel like rubber.

A grunt evicts from me instead of a scream as I propel myself forward in a desperate sprint fueled by sheer terror.

"No," I pant as I hear their footfalls closing in. "Please." I gasp as the world seems to spin into a blur.

The trees give a demonic sway and the ground seems to be coming up to greet my feet, making me falter as I'm electrocuted by this newfound blind panic.

The trail that once seemed so tranquil has morphed into a nightmare as the footfalls quickly catch up from behind.

My breath comes in ragged gasps as my mind begins to race. My eyes flit to the woods on either side, far too dense to get three feet, let alone escape.

"Help," I whimper as my right hand fumbles for the phone in my pocket.

I'm tackled from behind and hit the ground face-first. I'm flipped over in one violent move and I look up in time to see the blade as it plunges into my chest.

A wildfire of pain explodes through me all at once. A weak croak escapes my throat as the world begins to fade.

That hawk and the bird's-eye view of the world I've always wanted comes to mind just as I rise out of my body.

Death can bring the strangest gifts.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

It turns out, there was only one woman going by the name Angel that night at the Paradise compound.

According to the report, she said she was going south to stay at a friend's place in Colorado Springs. I racked my head trying to think of anyone Erin could have known down there. My sister wasn't exactly a socialite, but who knows what dicey friends she's amassed after living in the cult.

"It's about time the two of you showed up," Nikki says as Jack, Buddy, and I enter into the forensics lab at the FBI field office.

After we left the hospital, Nikki shot us a message saying that Brittney's mother dropped off her daughter's laptop. Forensics already had her phone, and that's why we're here.

We stopped off and picked up sandwiches—a hot pastrami for Jack, two turkey with avocado for Nikki and me. Buddy is already sniffing around the bag with a whimper even though I busted out a healthy helping of kibble I brought along and he wolfed it down in three easy bites.

Nikki is in the digital enclave, a smaller segment of the lab, dimly lit with an endless array of computers and equipment. Her crimson locks are pulled back and she's clad in yoga gear as she calls Buddy to her and offers him a hearty back rub. Buddy likes Nikki almost as much as he likes food.

The walls in the room are black and lined with screens. A white counter rims the room and acts as a desk system and there are a litany of stools on casters to accommodate a small army at once if need be. But for now, it's just the four of us in the room.

Nikki sits at the counter with a giant monitor glowing in her face, her own laptop is open next to it, and she's got a phone in her hand with a hot pink case, Brittney's I'm assuming.

"I hacked my way in, like slicing butter with a hot knife." She motions to the monitor in front of her that's able to test hundreds of thousands of codes per second. It's nice that the good guys have the technology to crack their way when necessary, but the bad guys have it, too.

"So what are we looking at?" I ask as Jack and I pull up a seat.

"I waited to start the party," she says. "I coasted through some of her social media accounts but didn't deep-dive into the nitty-gritty. Let's head to her messages."

We lean in as the entire screen is populated with messages from dozens of people. Most of the recent messages are laced with comments like are you okay, please tell me this is a joke, and I'm praying for you.

"Here's one from Nessa." Jack points to a message near the bottom of the screen.

Nikki clicks in and we quickly scan them to see the two of them chatting about the sale of the house, how happy Nessa is to have her doing the honors, and Brittney's exuberance to show the house to the sisters last week. Nikki backs out and we scroll down the list of messages.

"Whoa," I say as we settle our eyes on a certain name at once.

“Derek Russell.” Jack clucks his tongue. “Let’s see what that’s about.”

“It shouldn’t be about anything,” Nikki teases. “He said they haven’t spoken recently, remember?”

“I remember a lot of things.” Jack sighs. “I’m getting the feeling Derek has a selective memory problem.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I have a feeling it’s called not wanting to get caught.”

Nikki clicks in and we quickly scan it and shake our heads. According to their chat, they’ve been meeting up quite regularly for the last few months—coffee here, a Mexican restaurant there, and they even took in a basketball game last winter. The flirtation is unmistakable. Their messages are littered with innuendos and plans to do far more than have coffee.

Jack taps the screen. “Let’s see that last message she sent again.”

“You don’t get to act that way anymore,” I read. “I’m not seventeen anymore. Grow up.”

“Sounds harsh,” Nikki says. “And his reply is, try it yourself.”

“That’s equally as harsh.” Jack clasps his hand to the back of his head as he weighs it. “All right. We’ll talk to him again.”

“I want to search his bar, his home, and any other facilities he has access to,” I say.

“I’ll start the procedure,” Nikki offers as she pulls her own phone out.

Jack ticks his head. “Go ahead, but I think I’ll drop by the bar and see if he offers up

a freebie. If he's got nothing to hide, then he shouldn't put up a fight."

"Agree," I say. "Let's get the security footage as well."

"Done," he says.

"Let's see what else we have," Nikki says and we deep-dive back into Brittney's phone. No other text exchanges arouse suspicion, and neither do any direct messages on her other social media sites. "I'll keep digging," she says. "Just in case something sounds off. I know Derek isn't looking too good, but I'm not putting all of my eggs into Derek Russell's basket."

"Good," Jack says, shaking his head at the hot pink phone before us. "As much as I didn't care for the guy way back when, I still don't want him to turn out to be a monster." He gives Buddy a quick pat. "I'll call him and see if he's there."

Jack steps to the corner of the room to do just that and I lean toward Nikki.

"Jack did some digging in my sister's direction. It turns out, there was only one person named Angel that night at the Paradise compound. She claimed she was heading south to Colorado Springs. I just can't figure out who she might have known there."

"Okay, that's good." Nikki closes her eyes a moment. "Your sister's social network might be a black box right now, but we'll crack it open."

"Thank you," I say just as Jack lands back in his seat. "So what's the verdict?"

"He's not picking up his phone." Jack pulls his sandwich out of the wrapper and breaks a piece of it off and gives it to Buddy. "The bar says he'll likely be in this evening."

“That works for me,” I say.

“I’m skipping,” Nikki says, clicking into Brittney’s phone once again. “I’m going to scour the heck out of the internet for both of our victims. Something is out there, I can feel it.” Her eyes flit to mine. “And I’m not forgetting about your sister either. I meant what I said. We’re going to crack this. She won’t even be a challenge.”

I nod her way. “Here’s hoping.”

Jack pulls a keyboard forward. “I’ll pull up those bloody footprints from the scene and a few scuffs in the dirt from the kidnapping.”

Frame by frame we inspect the measurements of the footprints and, oddly enough, there aren’t any clean prints at either locale.

Jack shakes his head. “It’s almost as if the perpetrator at both scenes knew to smear their footprints just enough to throw us. I’m hard-pressed to believe that this was unintentional.”

“I agree,” I say as a fresh wave of adrenaline courses through me. “It’s as if they had the same MO.”

“Then we can’t rule out the fact it’s either the same person or same network of people,” Nikki says. “I don’t think we need any more clues to confirm this.”

I pick up a laptop from the lab and key in the passwords for every social media site and email server that Brittney and Robin had access to.

Nikki and I spend the next few hours turning over every stone the internet has to offer with all of their digital lives laid bare before us. The perpetrator may have taken off in a dark sedan according to security cameras in Robin’s neighborhood. I look up

every vehicle registered to any and everyone from Vanessa, to Derek, to the sisters at the scene of the kidnapping to Brittney herself. No one checks off the box.

Evening starts to roll around and Jack and I take off with Buddy in tow.

Jack makes a call and, sure enough, the boss is back in the Penalty Box.

We head to Elmwood for the second half of this day.

Derek Russell, we're coming for you.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Jack and I step into the Penalty Box as the familiar cacophony of clinking glasses and friendly banter fills the air.

The place is dimly lit, filled to the hilt with bodies, there's a baseball game on just about every screen, and the scent of grilled steak hits a high note with our senses, and that of Buddy's.

The poor pooch looks up at me, hopeful, and I give him a quick pat. "I'll make it up to you," I say as Jack nods.

"My stomach is asking me to do the same," he says. "We should get dinner after this."

"This whole eating thing is cyclical with you, isn't it?" I tease.

"It's one of my finer qualities," he says.

"It's one of Buddy's, too," I say, offering him another quick pat. "You seem to have a lot in common with the dog." I give a little wink as I say it. Considering that the dog in question is Buddy, it's basically a compliment.

"I'm starting to think some of the women at the reunion would agree with you." Jack sighs hard as he looks around at the place. "Thank you for agreeing to be my plus-one."

“You mean plus-two. Nikki’s going as well.”

“Yes, but she’s just going as a friend. You’re my official date. I’ve seen the way Nikki dances. I can’t be too closely associated with that.”

“I’m not any better,” I warn just as we spot that familiar dark-haired man behind the bar.

Derek is busy wiping down glasses with an absent-minded efficiency before looking up as we approach. And just like that, his easygoing demeanor dissipates.

“Hey.” He nods our way, forcing a smile, but it never initiates. “What’s going on? Did you find Brittney?” His question slices through the din of conversation and seems to be weighted with genuine concern. But where his concern lies is the question.

“Not yet,” I say. “And sorry about the dog. I just didn’t want to leave him in the car.”

“The dog is welcome,” he says as his eyes flit from Jack to me. “The two of you, I’m not so sure about. You look pretty serious.”

“We’ve heard you might know something that could help us out.” Jack doesn’t hesitate to cut to the quick.

Derek inches back and his brows furrow. You can see the defensiveness growing on his face.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve heard.” Derek looks perplexed. “I’m as in the dark as you are. But if there’s something I can do to help, then I’m all yours.” He puts down the glass hard as if to punctuate the point.

Jack and I exchange a brief glance. It's time to test the waters, see if we can't shake something loose.

"We've got a tip suggesting you might be holding back some information," I say. I may as well play the part of bad cop even though Jack doesn't want to claim his old acquaintance as a friend. "Mind if we take a look around?"

Derek's mouth falls open, and for a moment he seems to weigh his options, then shrugs with an air of indifference.

"Sure." He gives a short-lived smile. "I've got nothing to hide. Follow me."

He leads us on a tour of the dining room, pointing out each piece of memorabilia he's collected, along with the renovations he's recently made. And there's a notable hint of pride creeping into his voice despite the circumstances. It's easy to see the Penalty Box is more than just a bar to the guy, it's a labor of love.

"I can tell you really care about this place," I tell him, softening my tone in an effort to keep him loose.

"You bet," he says without hesitating. "There's a piece of me etched into every corner. I've always been a big sports guy. You toss in all the burgers I can eat and it's a match made in heaven." He pats his belly as if to affirm the fact.

"Maybe I should open a bar?" Jack muses and we share a laugh.

Buddy gives a soft woof of approval and we chuckle once again.

"It looks as if you have a willing business partner," I say to Jack. "But the two of you would eat your way right through the revenues." I glance back at Derek. "You have no idea how much this guy can put away."

“Same old Jackie.” He gives a wistful tick of the head. “You still gobbling up the girls just as fast?” He nods my way. “This guy used to pack ’em in. Six dates a night.”

Jack huffs, “Only because I was trying to give you a run for your money.”

“Hey.” Derek laughs, holding up his arms. “I was tame by comparison. I had a ball and chain.”

“Nothing kept you down,” Jack says sternly. “Thank you for the tour of the place. You mind if we take a peek at your office?”

Derek’s expression darkens and he shakes his head. “Sure.” His words contrast his actions. “This way,” he says it slowly as if he were leading us to his doom. “I can send you the security footage we have. I’ve got the last six months. Then after that, it rewrites itself digitally.”

I lift a brow at Jack. The fact the guy just volunteered his security footage once again is a pretty good indication he’s confident we won’t find anything.

He leads us through a small hallway, through a portion of the kitchen and into a small back room with a cluttered desk, an ancient-looking computer system, and a dirty white phone on the wall. There’s a leather office chair with a jacket tossed over it and a giant poster that extols the virtues of washing your hands.

“That’s it.” Derek extends an arm at the place.

“What’s this?” Jack taps his foot over a square cutout in the floor. “Trapdoor leading to the underground lair?” he teases.

It’s a ground safe. We both know it.

“You caught me.” Derek laughs and his mood begins to lighten once again. “But that’s not the porthole to Hell. That would be right next to the arcade games, behind the Out of Order Pac-Man.”

A dark chuckle rumbles through Jack’s chest. “All right, man. We appreciate this. Where are you staying these days?”

Derek shakes his head. “I’m in Brighton, just six miles north. You want to poke around there, too? I’ll take you right now.”

“It would save us a little time,” Jack says.

Soon, we’re following Derek right out of Elmwood and into Brighton where he parks in front of a two-story townhouse. He lets us in and gives us the run of the place, and Jack and I quickly trot from room to room.

The townhouse is minimally furnished, maximally unkempt, there’s an outbreak of mold in his shower, and his bathroom sink is glowing with orange slime.

The kitchen sink is brimming with dishes and a few fast food bags thrown into the mix.

No basement.

No sign of anyone roped up in his closets, so we thank him and take off.

“Just seeing that mess makes me think twice about eating out,” I say as we land back in the truck.

“True,” Jack says as we make our way back onto the road. “But in his defense, there’s no health inspector stopping by to make sure he’s not going to poison himself

by way of questionable kitchen practices.”

“So we came up empty.” I sigh as Buddy crops up between us, hopeful for another treat.

“We still have the security footage,” Jack points out while fishing some doggie biscuits out of my glove compartment and giving a handful to the cute pooch. “And I’ll run Derek’s name and see if he has any storage facilities he might have access to. The second I saw it was a townhouse, I knew he didn’t have her here.”

I nod. “If I had to guess, Brittney is somewhere secluded, somewhere where she can scream her head off and no one will know. Unless, of course, she’s dead.”

Jack growls at the thought. “If another week goes by, she most likely will be.”

We head back to Pine Ridge Falls listening to Buddy snore in the back seat.

“We’ll talk to Alicia Adams tomorrow,” he says once we crest Whispering Woods. “She’s a teacher now at my old stomping grounds.”

“Just like Nessa,” I point out. “Maybe we’ll get a two-fer.”

“Maybe we’ll get a killer,” he says with a note of dejection in his voice as if maybe we won’t.

Someone out there knows something.

It just so happens, it’s not us.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Jack Stone

We met with Nikki for breakfast at Bea's Diner this morning.

Jet hadn't begun his shift just yet, and for that reason alone, I enjoyed every bite of those soft, fluffy pancakes.

Since Fallon and I were heading out to my old stomping grounds, Nikki offered to take Buddy to the forensics lab with her. Fallon quickly agreed, seeing that a dog on a high school campus would cause a mob scene. I have a feeling she's right.

As we pull into Aspen Heights High, the memories flood back with every turn of the wheel. This place was a backdrop for my better youthful years, or year to be exact, seeing that I just spent one here. But what a magical year it was.

I shake my head at the place before we jump out of the truck. The scent of the pines surrounds us like a welcome embrace. And the scent of the football field, the faint scent of books, it all takes me back in an instant.

It's almost three-thirty and classes have already been dismissed for the day.

"There's no place like home," Fallon says as she comes around to my side. "This place is immaculate." She shields the sun from her eyes with her hand as she inspects the grounds.

Aspen Heights High sits like a testament to traditional and modern educational architecture, which blend seamlessly together. The main building is a grand structure,

comprised mostly of red brick, and it stands proudly at the heart of the campus. Several newer buildings surround it with expansive glass facades that reflect the sky and scream the fact they're firmly planted in the twenty-first century.

"It's nice," I say before pointing to the newer construction. "Those weren't around when I was here. But I hear they house state-of-the-art facilities."

"I don't doubt it."

We head out of the parking lot and onto the grounds.

The campus is sprawling with meticulously maintained green lawns that stretch between buildings, offering students and staff alike spaces to gather, relax, or study under the shade of rambling oaks. We did a little more than relax back then, but I'm keeping my lips sealed regarding the many malfeasances of my youth.

Concrete pathways crisscross before us, leading to destinations all across campus, from the science labs to the art studio that overlooks the courtyard.

In the heart of campus sits the quad, where we find students lounging on benches, tossing frisbees, and huddled over textbooks.

The quad is flanked by the school's athletic field, where the vibrant green grass contrasts sharply with the crimson track that encircles it. Both areas are buzzing with activity as the teams practice under the watchful supervision of their coaches.

Next to that, there's an outdoor amphitheater with stone seating and a stage that has hosted more school assemblies and open-air concerts than I care to remember.

"She's in room 212," I say. "I checked a map of the school last night. It's this way. I spoke to the attendance office this morning and they assured me she was here today."

“Let’s hope we catch her before she ditches the premises,” Fallon says as I speed us to the outdoor corridor that leads to the English department.

The left side of the corridor is flanked by a wall with an outline of a mural as a handful of students meticulously paint various pieces of it. From this vantage point, I can’t quite make out the picture, outside the fact it looks to be a nature scene of some sort.

A tall brunette with a heart-shaped face steps out before us. Her curly hair dips past her shoulders, she’s dressed in a denim dress with a yellow belt, and she’s cradling an overstuffed tote bag in her arms. She turns to head in the opposite direction and I jump forward.

“Alicia?” I call out and she turns my way. The look of surprise on her face grows and it’s clear she has no idea who I am.

And she has no idea what’s about to transpire.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Jack Stone

“Can I help you?” Alicia Adams sheds an easy smile, the same easy smile I remember right here on the holy grounds of Aspen Heights High.

I probably should have clarified to Fallon that Alicia and I didn’t date, but she probably wouldn’t believe me.

“Hey, it’s me, Jack Stone. Not sure if you remember me but?—”

“Jackie,” she howls as she puts down her bag on the bench lining the wall next to her, and before I know it, I’m engulfed in a rocking embrace. “Oh my word, you look exactly the same.” She leans back and shakes her head as she inspects me. “Well, maybe with the exception of this.” She laughs as she gives my facial scruff a quick scratch. “So what brings you here? Do you have a student coming this way in the fall?” She looks at Fallon and gasps. “Is this your wife?” She laughs with glee at the thought. “Alicia Adams, so nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you as well,” Fallon says but leaves the formal intros to me.

“Actually”—I wince. “She’s a coworker.”

“Oh? So you’re still single?” She laughs again before looking at Fallon. “You had better snatch this one up quick. Our reunion is just days away, and once those witches find out he’s on the market, there’s going to be a turf war all over again.” She bites down on her lip as she inspects me one more time. “Can you believe it’s been twenty years?”

“It seems like forever ago and yesterday all at once,” I say. “I miss those days, especially when all we had to worry about was pop quizzes and football games.”

“And you were an ace at both,” she says. “It really does feel like just yesterday we were planning our senior prank.”

“Oh?” Fallon perks up. “Do tell.”

“We filled all of the administrative offices with balloons—and those balloons were loaded with confetti,” she says with a laugh. “Nothing illegal and it was all in good fun.”

“That’s right,” I say. “In fact, I’m still keeping it on the straight and narrow when it comes to the law.” I flash my badge her way. “I’m with the FBI now.”

Her expression darkens a notch. “Oh wow.” She leans in. “I guess you heard the news about Robin and Brittney.”

“We have,” Fallon says. “I’m Special Agent Fallon Baxter.”

“I see.” Alicia’s voice grows in amusement. “What exactly are you doing here?”

“Actually, I was hoping to speak with you,” I say softly before turning to Fallon. “Alicia was our class president. She knew everything about this place back in the day, and I’m assuming the same holds true now.” I turn back her way. “And you’re also in charge of the reunion. That’s quite the undertaking. Thank you for the effort.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” She gives a little laugh. “And I have a small army helping me out behind the scenes. And look at you, from high school prankster to FBI agent, huh? I always knew you’d end up somewhere interesting, Jackie. So what’s going on with Brittney? Have you found her? What about the nutcase that killed Robin?” Her

eyes enlarge as she awaits an answer.

“We don’t know where Brittney is and we don’t know who killed Robin. It’s a mess,” I tell her. “But any insight you have on Brittney or Robin, anything at all, could really help us out. And that’s exactly what I’m hoping for today.”

“Oh geez.” She rocks back on her heels as she glances to the sky. “They were both pretty active in our Facebook group. We’ve met up every couple of years as a group, too. Not everyone comes to those things, but they did. I remember Robin had just gotten married a few years back. She was so happy. And Brittney was always between men.”

“Do you know who she dated recently?” Fallon asks.

“Oh geez.” Alicia taps her fingers to her lips. “I don’t know, but she had a history with Derek. I think they were off and on forever. But then again, those girls used to share him like a pair of used shoes back in the day.” She gives a hearty laugh. “You weren’t far behind.” She taps me on the elbow. “I guess I don’t know that much about them. Robin had volunteered to help with the reunion, but I already had a brigade by then. I told her I’d get back to her as it got closer if I needed anything. I’m so sorry for what their poor families are going through.”

I’m about to agree just as a familiar light-haired brunette speeds this way.

“Nessa,” I say with a cheerful smile. “Glad to see you again. And glad to see your gait hasn’t been affected.”

“Jackie?” She pulls me close a moment before nodding to Fallon. “Special Agent Baxter. What’s going on? Did you find Brittney?”

“No, actually.” I sigh. “We were just in the area and I thought I’d show off my old

stomping grounds. I thought maybe I'd speak with Alicia and here she is."

"What did you tell them?" Nessa bites the air with the question as she looks at Alicia. Maybe Alicia is the key to this after all.

"Nothing." Alicia scrambles to pick up her tote bag once again. "I don't know anything at all." She offers a forlorn smile at the two of us. "I'm so sorry. But please tell me I'll see you both this Saturday night."

"You will," Fallon assures her. "I can't wait."

"And I can't wait to get our groove on and hit the dance floor," she says, walking backward. "Jackie, you're not getting out of there without cutting loose with me first." She waves and quickly ducks out of the hallway.

"I'm so glad you're both coming," Nessa says. "I hear they're going to have a memorial for Robin and some kind of a vigil for Brittney, too. I think it's good. We might get some answers." She holds up a small milk carton with a paintbrush sticking out of it that's slicked with crimson paint, so dark it almost looks like chocolate. "I'd better get going. I'm the leader of this catastrophe." She laughs as she nods to the mural.

"That's right," I say. "You're the art teacher around here."

"It's going to be beautiful," Fallon says.

"I hope so." Nessa sighs back at the wall of wonder. "The kids helped me design it. I'm in charge of filling in the flowers. I thought I'd throw in some poppies along with the blue columbine." She plucks the brush out of the carton briefly as if to prove her point.

“The columbine is the state flower,” I say. “Nice touch.”

“You better believe I’m putting blood, sweat, and tears into it,” she teases. “Good luck with the investigation. Can’t wait for Saturday night.”

“Oh, before I forget.” Fallon digs a business card out of her purse and hands it to the woman. “My sister owns Pick-it-Clean. She felt so bad about what happened on your mother’s property, she offered her services for free if you need them. She hauls away anything you don’t want to deal with.”

“Really?” Her eyes expand. “I could really use something like this. That place is filled to the brim. In fact, it’s just the tip of the iceberg. My mother owns a couple of other properties in the area that are still filled with old junk. I’m an only child and my father has passed as well. So it’s all on me. I hope your sister is ready for the onslaught. Please thank her for this. Or on second thought, I’ll thank her myself when I give her a call.”

We say goodbye, and soon Fallon and I are headed back to the parking lot.

“Thoughts?” I ask as a group of students fly past us as if they can’t get out of here fast enough.

“Alicia sure hit the road as soon as Nessa came out.”

“I thought the same thing, but it’s probably nothing. Or it’s probably something. They might have a tiff going. They’re coworkers. I’ll get to the bottom of it Saturday night.”

“And I’ll be right there as you’re getting the dirt—while we get our groove on,” she teases, echoing Alicia’s words and I frown.

I'm not exactly a fan of the dance floor.

We land back in the truck just as Hale shoots us a message.

Another body just turned up.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Jack and I race back to Denver and all the way up to the situation room at the FBI field office.

Hale is already at the front of the room with a screen lit up behind him, and we find Nikki getting cozy with Buddy at the desk.

“Fill us in,” Jack says as we land in our seats.

Hale offers a forlorn smile our way before glancing at his laptop.

“The body of a thirty-eight-year-old female was found on a remote hiking trail out in Deer Lick Flats. A couple of joggers found her early this morning. Coroner says she died from a stab wound to the chest. She also had significant carvings to her forehead.”

“Carvings?” I cock my head his way and he nods.

“Yes,” he says. “The coroner is sending me photos as we speak.” He sighs heavily at Jack. “Her name was Sophie Clarke. Did you date our latest corpse?”

Jack’s eyes grow in size. “I—yes, I knew a Sophie Clarke.”

“Good grief.” Nikki leans back as she inspects him. “You’re not our killer, are you?”

“No,” Jack growls and Buddy growls right back in response. “What the hell?” He

shakes his head at Hale. “This cinches it. This is all related.”

“Agree,” I say. “And now I want to see those carvings on her head. Maybe we can finally make sense of the chicken scratch on Robin’s forehead.”

“And the photos are here,” Hale says, fiddling with his laptop. Sheriff says the woman was recently divorced, changed her name back to where she started. Her mother says the victim seemed happy as of late, not dating, not looking, did medical billing from home.”

The screen behind him comes to life as the first photo flickers into view, casting a somber light across the room.

It’s a woman lying on the metal bed at the coroner’s office. Her dark hair is mussed and the carvings on her forehead are far more visible than those that Robin had.

I pull out my phone and click over the pictures I took of Robin that day at her home and at the coroner’s office.

“Some of these lines match,” I say, looking from Robin to Sophie.

Nikki leans into Jack’s phone as they do the same thing.

“There’s definitely a similarity,” she says. “Hale, pull up the picture of both women’s faces. Let’s superimpose them on another screen.”

The screen to Hale’s left lights up, and soon Robin Hanson’s lifeless body is staring back at us as well. It takes less than a few seconds for him to superimpose the images and enlarge Sophie’s picture until the writing is about the same size.

“Looks almost like a lightning bolt to the left,” Hale says.

“Then a slash.” Jack nods. “A square cut U.”

“Slut,” I say so fast it elicits a bark from Buddy. “It says slut.” I shake my head in disbelief.

“Slut.” Nikki sighs. “Were all three of our victims sluts once upon a time?” She turns to Jack for answers.

“All three were friends,” he says.

A thought comes to me. “In that yearbook you lent me, Mitch’s yearbook, there was a page where Robin was in a group photo with a bunch of girls. The caption read Queens of Aspen Heights, but someone scratched out the words Aspen Heights and wrote in the word mean, so it read Queens of Mean.”

“That’s what people called them, mostly the girls.” He blows out a breath, glancing back at the screen. “It was all in fun, just a play on words.”

“No way,” Nikki says. “If other girls called them mean, then that’s probably what they were.”

I nod. “We tend to call it like we see it. Do you remember anything they did that could qualify as mean? Any big incident at school?”

“None,” he says without hesitation.

Hale chuckles. “His head was too busy buried between?—”

“Whoa.” Jack holds up a hand to stop him.

“I was going to say books,” Hale finishes. “We’ve got ladies in the room. What kind

of a gentleman do you think I am?”

“You weren’t exactly a gentleman,” I say to Jack. “And to that point, you were exceptionally busy honing your skills. We need a gossip, someone who can fill us in on all the dirt. Who do we call?”

He scratches the back of his head. “There is someone I know who seems to collect all the facts—mostly by proxy from the girls who haunted his back seat.”

I know exactly who he’s thinking.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Soon, we've got Mitch Decker on the speaker. Jack filled him in and he's laughing to himself just thinking about it.

"Yeah, I had more than a few girls who were talkers. And unlike Jack, I actually listened. Gossip, let's see..." He pauses a moment. "Okay, so remember Alicia, right?"

I glance at Jack. "The one we spoke to this afternoon?"

"That's right." Jack leans toward his phone, his brows furrowing. "Class president."

"Yup, that's the one," Mitch says. "She had a thing going with the chemistry teacher."

"Oh, that's right." Jack winces. "We found out right after graduation. Everyone kept saying they must have had great chemistry."

"That they did. Hot and heavy apparently right through senior year," Mitch confirms. "I heard a rumor she had his kid and put it up for adoption."

"Wow," I say. "If Alicia was a victim, I would have wondered if it was the kid doing all this."

Nikki averts her eyes. "What would the kid care about a bunch of girls who went to school with their mother?"

“You’re right.” I think about it for a moment. “What about the chemistry teacher?”

“Dead,” Mitch says, “He passed a few years back. I processed his body myself. That was a mind-bender. If any of you should kick the bucket any time soon, I’ll gladly take care of you for a steeply discounted rate.”

“He’s a good one.” I wink over at Nikki.

“She already tapped that well,” Jack says.

My mouth rounds out and I practically mouth, “Did you sleep with him?”

Nikki slashes her finger across her neck and mouths back, “We’ll talk.”

Mitch is a looker and seems to be an all-around good guy, save for his dicey past with women. Although, one could argue that Jack was rubbing off on him.

“I guess that’s all the gossip I’ve got,” Mitch concludes. “The only other things that I ever heard about was who was cheating on who. Nothing short of your average high school drama and trauma. If I can think of anything else, I’ll let you know.”

“Sounds good.” Jack crumples a piece of paper and shoots it in the air.

“But hey, there was one girl who knew all the dirt,” Mitch starts up again. “Her name was Carrie Bigelow.”

“Carrie Bigs,” Jack howls with the memory, prompting both Nikki and me to glare at him. “What? That was her last name.”

We thank Mitch and he lets us know he’s looking forward to seeing us there Saturday night before he hangs up.

“Slut,” I say under my breath as I glance back at the screen. “Is that a man’s mindset or a woman’s?”

“Both,” Hale says. “But that knife thrust into the chest. It took some power to execute on both of those women. You’d need to be strong.”

“Or angry,” I add.

“Any footprints found at the scene?” Jack asks.

“CSI sent these over,” Hale says as he scans through several pictures of dusty prints that are smeared out in every direction.

“That’s their MO,” Jack says. “Smudge and fudge. Let’s superimpose them with the prints at the scenes from the murder and from the kidnapping.”

In seconds we’re treated to a trio of footprints and each halo of dirt and blood measures out to about the same size range.

“We’re looking at one perpetrator,” Nikki says. “The only thing that leaves a shadow of a doubt in my mind is the fact Brittney was kidnapped at a little after three in the afternoon. And the coroner put Robin’s time of death in roughly the same range.”

Jack nods. “It’s about a twenty-minute drive from Aspen Heights to Cedar Grove. I think it’s ambitious on the kidnapper’s part but doable.”

“If that’s true, I’m guessing the kidnapping would have happened first,” Hale says. “The murder was messy.”

“They could have had Brittney in the trunk,” Nikki says. “You think Robin’s murder was a kidnapping gone wrong?”

“I’m thinking not.” I shake my head at the thought. “They walked in with rage. They wanted her gone.”

“Just like they wanted Sophie gone.” Jack glances at the screen at his old friend and his expression falls this side of sorrow.

“But why take Brittney?” Nikki presses on. “And why take her with witnesses around?”

“Maybe they miscalculated?” I say, doubting my own words. “Not that I believe it. Something is up. I have a feeling the answer is staring us right in the face.”

“I’m wondering if we’ve been staring the killer in the face.” Jack motions for the laptop and Hale slides it over. “Baxter and I just had Derek Russell give us the grand tour of both his bar and his hovel last night. I’m going to input his name into the NCIC and see what comes up.”

“Good call.” I nod in agreement.

The National Crime Information Center is the FBI’s most powerful database that is made available to federal, state, and local law enforcement as well.

“Derek Russell, Aspen Heights, Derek Russell, Elmwood,” Jack mutters as his fingers fly across the keyboard. “And bingo. Here he is with his ugly mug. He had an arrest a few years back for racketeering charges.”

“Racketeering?” I lean in closer, intrigued by this new piece of the puzzle. “That’s serious. What was the angle?”

Jack’s eyes scan the text. “Looks like it was tied to an illegal gambling ring. He was caught up in organizing underground poker games, high stakes, lots of cash flowing

under the table. The kind of operation that catches our attention not just for the gambling, but for the potential laundering that usually tags along with it.”

“So, he did time for it?” Nikki asks and Buddy bobs his head this way as well, looking just as eager to glean the answer.

“Yeah.” Jack’s tone is grim. “Sentenced to a short stint, but it seems like he got off lighter than most. Only served six months before he was out again. Must have had a decent lawyer.” His fingers start to fly over the keyboard once again. “I’m checking to see if there’s any other property on record that he might hold the key to.”

“Look under the Penalty Box, too,” I suggest. “Although he might be incorporated and who knows what he’s calling himself in that case.”

“Nothing under his name or the Penalty Box.” Jack pauses to stare at the screen.

“What are you doing next?” Hale asks the three of us sternly and it has all the appeal of a pop quiz.

“I’ll keep digging through the socials and emails,” Nikki says.

“Same,” I say.

Jack nods. “I will, too. And in addition to that, I’m taking these two to my twenty-year prom. You want an invite?”

Hale looks mildly offended. “You feel free to dance the night away. Don’t wait for me to show up with a corsage, sweetie.”

“Oh.” Nikki perks up as she looks my way. “We should get new dresses. Something that brings out the wicked witch in our eyes,” she teases.

“And something that conceals our Glocks,” I suggest.

“I’ll be packing heat,” Jack says. “By way of having two beautiful women by my side. And, of course, I’ll have my gun.”

Hale chuckles. “You be careful about who you call beautiful. HR is only a hop and a skip away and I’ve seen people hauled in for less.”

“Duly noted.” Jack nods to Nikki and me. “How about we lay down arms and find ourselves a killer?”

“And Brittney Walker’s kidnapper,” I say. “That monster still has her.”

We take off for the night and Jack drives us back to Pine Ridge Falls, straight to Whispering Woods, and right to the doorstep of my cabin.

Jack helps me get Buddy to the door as the stars blanket the night.

“I meant what I said, Baxter.” He stuffs one hand into the front pocket of his jeans as he pins his gaze to mine.

“I’m too tired for another pop quiz,” I say. “Spell it out for me.”

“You’re beautiful.”

My mouth falls open as he takes off.

“I know where HR is,” I tease as he pulls out of the driveway and heads toward his place.

Beautiful.

I shake my head.

According to his history, Jack Stone thinks just about every woman is beautiful.

The killer has a word they like to use to describe women, too—and that word is slut.

I can't wait until we track that monster down.

There's another word that will proliferate their lexicon soon enough and that word is prison.

Evil

Here it is, the day I've been waiting for. It feels as if I've been waiting a lifetime, and in a lot of ways I have.

I linger at the doorway for a moment, clasping my hand over the knob. The profound silence stretching between my captive and me feels like a relief, but the reality is I need to hear her suffer. True relief won't be here until I've had my fill of her torment.

I give the door a light rattle, alerting her to my presence, and the sounds of Brittney's whimpering breaks through. A testament to the fear permeating through her. And what a rush it is to hear it.

Adrenaline courses through my veins and empowers me, assuring me that I'm making all the right moves.

I've dreamed of this, played it out in my mind as a fantasy for years, and here it is. I need to savor it, drink in all of her terror, and let it fuel me for what I need to do next.

"What do you want?" she cries out as if she were in pain. "Please, let me go," her voice trails off into a sob. The irony of her situation—the once Queen of Mean, now reduced to begging for mercy, doesn't escape me. "I won't say anything. I won't tell anyone what happened. Just—just take off these shackles, open the window, and I'll crawl out."

"Brittney, Brittney." My voice comes out deeper than I could ever hope to get it with the instrument I'm using to enhance it. I'll admit, it gave me chills just to hear it the

first time as well. It's perfect for our little game. "You know that can't happen. The next time you leave this room, it will be in pieces."

A scream rips from her and I can't help but chuckle once more.

"Please," she cries out as I open the door and step inside. I made certain her shackles wouldn't allow for her to reach the exit, and judging by the fact she's cowering in the corner of the bed, she has no plans to.

I'm covered from head to foot, clad in black, not one stitch of my flesh is visible. And I've got a megawatt flashlight shining right at her in the event she tries to get a good look at me regardless.

Her hands fly to her face and her eyes struggle to squint at the bright light. It's chronically dark in here, save for the weak nightlight, so this explosion of illumination can't feel too good.

Her hair is matted on one side, her clothes look disheveled, and her eyes are wild with fright.

Brittney Walker has officially gone feral and I couldn't be more pleased to have played a part. In truth, she's always been feral on the inside. I just helped the outside match for once.

Something squirms in her lap and I squint that way.

"What's going on?" I take another step toward her until I see exactly what's happening and groan at the sight. "I can't believe this. You've made pets of the rats. Of course, you have. You've always had the ability to manipulate anyone into loving you. It's your wicked gift. Finally, you have the friends you deserve. Although the friends you had in high school were no better."

“Is that what this is about?” Her head searches wildly in my direction to get a better look at me. “Is this about something I’ve done in the past? Oh, please forgive me! I’m not the same person. I don’t even talk to those people anymore. Or at least I try not to. I never liked anyone back then anyway. And that’s the truth.” She sobs as she cradles those rats as if she had given birth to them.

“Claiming change is convenient when you’re no longer causing the pain. This isn’t just about your past actions, Brittney.” I pause to savor the sound of my voice reverberating off the walls. “It’s deeper than that.” Although not by much. “It’s about what you represent. You and your friends became symbols of heartache and disdain to so many. You took our lives and stomped on them. Extinguishing our spirits as if you were putting out a kitchen fire. You did the work of the devil because you are the devil. And the devil always gets his comeuppance. But the world wasn’t going to give it. So it was up to me. I have to make sure you pay the price just like Robin and Sophie have already paid.”

Her eyes double in size. She all but stops breathing. I had already shared the news about Robin during our last little visit. I hope she’s been revisiting the past, remembering their commonalities. After all, it’s their commonalities that have landed them in peril.

“Wha-what happened to Sophie? Please not her.”

“That’s right. You haven’t heard the news, have you? I guess you’ve been a little tied up, haven’t you?” A dark laugh rumbles through me. “Sophie is dead now, too.”

A sickly scream evicts from her.

“I stabbed them both in the heart, just the way they stabbed me in the heart all those years ago. Nobody tears me to pieces and gets away with it. Sure, I’ve allowed some time to pass, but only because I gave the universe a chance to make things right. But

that didn't happen. Not one of you was punished. And that's exactly why I needed to step in." My speech is pressured and filled with rage. I need to get out of here before I jump the gun and slaughter her preemptively. "I wrote their names on their foreheads so the authorities would be able to identify them. I'll write your name on your forehead as well once I'm through with you."

She cowers and sobs uncontrollably as both rats scamper out of her lap.

"After the reunion, the full truth will emerge. You'll confront the aftermath of your cruelty, just as Robin and Sophie did. But for now, I've got a party to get to. All the star players will be there. Don't worry, Brittney. I plan on making them pay as well. Let's just say tonight is going to be a gas."

I step out of the room and bolt it shut once again.

"The game is nearing its conclusion," I whisper to myself as her whimpers grow from the other side of the door.

"Why? Why me?" she cries out and her voice trembles with the weight of her words.

That's funny. It's the same question I asked so many years ago when the shoe was on the other foot.

As I make my way out, the echo of her sobs follows me and I soak it all in.

Such a lovely, lovely melody.

The endgame is set and the final chapter is ready to be written by my hand.

The game is almost over indeed, but tonight's crescendo will echo far beyond this night. And it will be a testament to the lengths one will go to right the wrongs of the

past.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

As we step into the transformed gym of Aspen Heights High, it's hard not to be taken aback by the elegance that's taken over a space once dedicated to pep rallies and basketball games.

The music is loud, the men and women dressed to the nines are plentiful, it smells as if a cologne bomb has gone off, and there's a buffet against one wall where you can serve yourself all the shrimp you can eat.

We just signed in at the table out front, and each one of us has a nametag proudly displayed. Jack's includes his senior picture, a younger version who perfected the bad boy smirk.

"Would you look at this?" I muse as I take it all in. "They really went all out," I say, scanning the room adorned with enough twinkle lights to transport us into a fairytale—if that fairytale had bodies piling up.

Tables are set out with fine linens and flowers. The dance floor gleams from the chandeliers they've jury-rigged up above. It feels more like stepping into a scene from a high-end wedding than a high school reunion. At the back of the room, there's a large black and gold banner stretched across the expanse of the gym that reads, Aspen Heights High Twenty Year Reunion. Here's to twenty more!

"They did a number, all right," Jack says as we walk in a little deeper.

"It wouldn't be a reunion if they didn't go all out." Nikki steps in next to me as we

take in the scene.

The room might be nice, but Jack is certainly looking nice himself.

I'll admit, Jack Stone cleans up well. He's donned an inky dark suit, concealing the government-issued weapon strapped under his jacket. He's wearing a baby blue dress shirt along with a matching tie that brings out the devil may care in his eyes, and I'll admit, I may have sighed more than once after inspecting him.

He's left just enough of that facial scruff on his face to make the women here want to reach out and touch it. And although my fingers might be twitching in that direction, I wouldn't dare give him the satisfaction.

Nikki looks great in an electric blue number that cuts off just below her knees.

I managed to dig a little black dress out of my closet. It's formfitting and cuts off far above the knees, but I paired it with a matching loose cardigan so I could bring my own plus-one along, my Glock.

Nikki did the same.

"So what do you think?" I whisper while nudging Jack as we take in the crowd. "You think our killer is here?"

"They wouldn't miss it," he says with a shake of his head.

"With all these women here?" Nikki points out. "It's a veritable buffet of potential victims."

And sadly, she might be right.

“Hey, hey,” someone calls from behind and we turn around to see Mitch looking gussied up himself in a dark gray suit. And with his dark hair slicked back and his own facial scruff tamed, he looks more like a blood relation of Jack’s than Jet does. “Looks like the gang’s all here.” He howls out a laugh as he offers both Nikki and me an embrace at the very same time. “Looking good, ladies. Looking good.” He winks over at Jack. “You look like you’re auditioning for the next James Bond. I believe you left your martini at the bar.”

Nikki and I have a good laugh over that one. He’s not wrong.

“All right,” Jack says, craning his neck into the crowd just as another song enlivens the room. Another favorite from back in the day, I’m presuming, as the screams of delight grow louder.

“Ooh,” Nikki says, jumping next to Mitch and taking up his hands. “I love this song. Dance with me.”

“What about your boy toy?” He hitches his head toward Jack. “I’ve seen him cut a guy for trying to steal his chick. I can’t risk having him rearrange my features. The man spent time in Quantico. He knows how to get rid of a body.”

“I did my time at Quantico, too. And I’m not his chick,” she says with a growl. “That’s Baxter’s fate tonight. I’m just here as a guest, with no one to shake what my mama gave me out on the dance floor. Come on. Think of it as a charity effort.”

“Well, if it’s for charity.” He laughs as she begins to haul him away. “I’m forever the giver.”

“He’s a giver, all right,” Jack muses as they melt into the crowd. “He was a pro at giving his mother headaches. He’s still pretty good at it.”

A light laugh rumbles through me. “You and Jet really lucked out with the Deckers.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I was a bigger handful than Jet in the beginning. And a little after high school, too. I was still trying to get my bearings. Some days I still am.”

A hand falls over his shoulder and we turn around to see none other than Derek Russell himself.

“Glad you both could make it.” He sheds a power smile as he shakes Jack’s hand then mine. He’s dressed down in jeans and a corduroy blazer but has on enough cologne to choke anyone in this crowd.

“Couldn’t, wouldn’t miss it,” Jack says.

“So, you ready to remind these ladies what they’ve been missing?” He belts out a laugh before his attention gets hijacked and the smile glides right off his face. “Excuse me, I think I need to hit the bar.”

He takes off and both Jack and I glance in the direction he was looking at, only to see Alicia Adams and Vanessa Copeland having what looks to be a strained conversation.

Alicia shudders in her glowing pink gown and raises a finger to Vanessa in her red frock before storming into the crowd.

Vanessa gives a quick glance around the room as if to assess if anyone is watching and thankfully avoids the two of us in the process.

I step in front of Jack so that my back is to her.

“Derek seemed chipper until he saw something that dampened his mood,” I say low

enough for Jack's ears only.

Jack gives a sober nod. "Makes me wonder if it's his next victim."

I lean in close and practically whisper right in his ear, "You still think he did this?" My torso rubs over his and an entire electrical field pulses through my stomach.

I've never been a fan of hormones or what they can do, especially not now. Not around Jack. Not when he's dressed to the nines and making my heart race as if a killer were after me. Personally, I'd prefer the killer.

Jack's lips nearly touch my cheek as he whispers right back, "He has the strength and stamina to subdue his victims, to drive that hunting knife in through the sternum, as well as pull off a kidnapping and murder back to back. Yes, he's still my number one pick."

"Seeing that we don't have a number two, that's probably wise," I muse. "This is the night we start following him."

Jack nods. "I'll get a team to help."

The laughter from the crowd swells around us as people begin to mingle aggressively, and as we scan the crowd, Jack does a double take to his left.

"She's here."

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Who’s here?” I ask, doing my best to peer in the direction he’s gawking. The bodies are teeming on this, the night of Jack’s storied twentieth high school reunion.

“There she is,” he says, pulling me close with one arm. “See the blonde with the pink dress hanging out by the chocolate fountain?”

“She’s hard to miss.” The dress is more of a magenta hue, and the woman is dripping with either rhinestones or diamonds. My money is on diamonds. If ever there was a time to flaunt what you’ve got, it’s at your twenty-year reunion. “Who am I looking at?”

“Carrie Bigelow. Twice divorced, four kids, two from each husband, loves her golden retriever, and never misses an episode of *The Bachelor*. She’s also known for her uncanny ability to pick up the dirt regarding just about anyone. It’s basically a God-given talent at this point.” His shoulders bounce my way. “I did a little digging.”

“Digging, huh? Interested in being baby daddy number three?”

“No.” He frowns hard at the thought and looks that much more cutthroat when he does it. That scruff on his cheeks catches my eye and my fingers start to twitch again.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this,” I say, striding off toward the chocolate fountain where Carrie stands contemplating the culinary choices before her. And seeing that there’s a wide assortment of goodies already attached to a skewer, ready to run under molten chocolate, I can’t blame her for being stymied where to begin.

I, however, do not hesitate. Instead, I reach for a skewer with a giant marshmallow attached.

“Excuse me,” I say as I lean slightly past her to run my sweet treat under the fountain before picking up a small plate and landing it home.

“Oh, sorry.” She laughs. “That does look good. I think I’ll start there,” she says, doing the same. She looks friendly enough. She has one of those faces that looks vaguely familiar as well, and I bet a lot of people ask if they went to high school with her. Although, let’s be honest, the men probably use it as a pick-up line.

“Are you a plus-one here, too?” I ask, careful not to dip my gaze to her nametag which would answer the question for me.

“Not me.” She ticks her head wistfully. “I’m an OG. In fact, I was born and bred in Aspen Heights. Who are you here with?” There’s a glint in her eye that’s just begging for some drama.

“Jack Stone,” I say, nodding into the crowd. “But it looks as if I lost him.”

“No way,” she screeches. “You’re here with Jackie?” She belts out a laugh that pretty much says everything I already know. “Oh wow, I bet he’s twice as hot as he was back then. We had a little thing going—him and me. But don’t worry. Jackie had a thing going with every last one of us. I think he was on a conquest or something back then. But it’s all good, right? I mean, he sowed his wild oats and all that good stuff. So, are you the wife?”

“Girlfriend,” I say without hesitating and bite down hard on my lip to keep from laughing myself.

“So what’s he doing now?”

Shoot. I hadn't thought of a comeback that didn't include the FBI. But luckily, my hesitation allows for Derek to waltz on by.

"I'm sorry." I lean her way. "But do you know who that guy is?" I point right at the corduroy jacket making his way to a group of men to the left, and in his wake, there's the slight waft of rotten eggs. Geez. They've got a bathroom for that kind of stuff. "He's been hitting on me from the second we walked through the door."

Carrie gasps with delight at the thought. "Oh hon, he's just trying to indoctrinate you into the club."

"So he was a playboy just like Jack, huh?"

Her smile wavers. "Yes and no. At least Jackie was honest about it. A lot of the guys were players, and a lot of the girls were more than happy to play right along. But with Derek"—she cringes his way—"he had this girlfriend at the time. A real sweet thing, too. Anyway, some of the girls made a game out of taking him to bed and he didn't exactly put up a fight."

"Wow, that's terrible," I say and genuinely mean it. "First, it's pretty crappy that those girls would try to make him cheat, and it's extra crappy that he did it."

"I'll say." She shakes her head at him. "It's like I told my ex-husbands, if you're going to cheat, please get out of this relationship first. And you know what? They did!" She hoots out a laugh and I'm slow to join her. "But don't feel bad. The feeling was mutual."

Alicia Adams steps in our line of vision.

"What about her?" I ask, touching my shoulder to Carrie's as if we were conspiring together.

“That’s Alicia, class president, and Ms. Goody Two-Shoes, or at least we thought, right up until she got knocked up by our chemistry teacher.”

“No.” I gasp as I say it. Although I already knew that. “You know, I thought something was bothering her. Earlier I saw her speaking to”—I crane my neck into the crowd—“oh, that girl right there, the one with the light brown curls, red dress.”

“Ooh”—she’s back to wincing—“that’s Nessa. Yeah, they work together. Don’t tell Jackie I said so, but Alicia let me know that Nessa has something on her. They both work here at the school. Alicia teaches English and Nessa is the art instructor.”

“What do you think Nessa has over her?” I inch back, trying to take it in. “I mean, you don’t think it has anything to do with that chemistry teacher, do you?”

“Oh no, we’ve all moved long past that.” She cranes her neck back in Alicia’s direction as she’s chatting away with a couple of women. “Alicia alluded to the fact it had something to do with a paper she wrote. I think it was plagiarized to the hilt, or something like that. Of course, she didn’t come out and say it, but she did use the words heavily borrowed. As it turns out, both Alicia and Vanessa were gunning for administrative roles at the school, and I think our little Nessa finally grew a backbone and told Alicia to pack it in. She was a shoo-in for the job, but Alicia pulled out of the running. Now Nessa is getting the promotion. In fact, she already has the keys so to speak. She’s the one who let the committee in tonight. And from what I hear, Alicia is still running scared of Nessa. Nessa has got a backbone of steel these days—people think twice about messing with her now.”

“Huh.” I shake my head, trying to process it. “I met Nessa, too. You’re right. She is sweet. I wouldn’t have pegged her to do something like that.”

“I, for one, am happy for her,” she’s quick to confess. “You know that little ditty I just told you about that involved Derek cheating on his sweet little girlfriend? That’s

the girlfriend.”

My entire body stiffens.

“I know it’s terrible,” she coos. “But that’s what those girls did back then. They found a little mouse like Nessa and they toyed with her via her bad-to-the-bone boyfriend. Unfortunately for Nessa, they toyed with her heart when they took turns seducing him. But as you can see, it was good for her after all. I mean, she’s got a spine of steel now.” Someone shouts for Carrie and she gives an ear-piercing squeal of delight right back. “Please, excuse me,” she says, putting down her plate. “And tell Jackie I’m going to hunt him down before he leaves!”

She trots off, half dancing to the music, and I make a beeline toward the entry where Jack quickly excuses himself from the men he’s speaking with.

“Well?” he says as he meets me halfway.

I lift a finger as a thousand thoughts sail through my mind at once.

“Luminol,” I say.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

“Luminol?” Jack says it low as he pulls me close by the waist as if we were a real couple right here in the depths of his old high school gym and I don’t protest. In fact, my heart gives a few unnatural thumps being so close to him and my skin drinks down the warmth from his body. “What do we need luminol for? I don’t have any on me,” he teases.

His dimples dig in for a moment as he inches his face close to mine, and for a split second, I think he’s going to kiss me. Terrifyingly enough, I’m not sure I’ll stop him.

“It’s just a hunch.” I glance back at the dance floor and spot Vanessa speaking to a couple of women as they watch the others rock the night away. A leopard may not change his spots, but neither does a wallflower. “I’ve got some with me,” I pant, suddenly thankful I drove. “Come on. We need to hurry.”

The air outside is perfumed with the surrounding pines, a welcome reprieve compared to what amounts to the cologne counter at the mall.

I quickly fill Jack in on everything Carrie told me and he grabs a hold of my hand a few feet from my truck and stops cold.

“Wait a minute.” He glances out at the woods as he tries to process it all. “That’s right. Nessa and Derek were together for a time. I didn’t think it was serious, though.”

“Apparently, it was,” I say, clicking my key fob as my truck chirps to life. “It sounds

as if the so-called Queens took particular pleasure in tormenting her, too.” I open my trunk and begin riffling for the little black bag I’m looking for.

“So maybe Derek did this because he’s angry things never worked out with Nessa.”

I turn around abruptly to look at him. “Are you awake? Try maybe Nessa did it because they ruined the future she was trying to build with the bad boy of her dreams.” I shake my head. “I’m trying to think like a melodramatic teenage girl.” I reach blinding back into my trunk and come up triumphantly with what I’m looking for. “Ah—and here it is.”

“Here’s what?” Jack inches in to try to get a look at it.

“It’s the kit Hale gave me when I showed up at the field office that first day.”

“What kit?”

“You know, the kit,” I say as I start to dig through it. “At first, I thought it was more of a gag gift. But anyway, it was part of the welcome package right after he issued me my laptop and phone.”

“I didn’t get a kit,” he says, mostly amused. “What’s in it?”

“This, for starters,” I say, holding up a small aerosol can. “Luminol.”

“And what are you going to do with that?”

“See if I can’t scratch an itch.” I glance past him to make sure there’s not a soul around. “The other day when we were here, the paint she was mixing, she said it was red for the flowers. But I thought it looked brown. In fact, I thought it looked a lot like dried blood.”

Jack closes his eyes. “Okay. I thought it looked closer to brown, too. And so, what’s happening here? You think she took the blood of her victims in an effort to turn it into a work of art?”

“She did say we had no idea how much blood, sweat, and tears went into this. And that gave me the shivers.” I close the trunk and speed in the direction of that mural. “After I gave her my sister’s card, Nessa mentioned that her mother had other properties nearby that she needed help with, too.”

“That means she has a place to hold Brittney hostage if she’s still alive.”

“Exactly that,” I pant as we come close to running. “Something we haven’t discovered yet with Derek. She has a motive, and according to Carrie, she’s got a backbone of steel that has people thinking twice about messing with her now.”

“All right,” he says as he takes me by the hand and flies us to the outdoor hall just outside the English building. “There it is,” he says as we slow down to a stop.

I shake the can in my hand. Luminol is a common chemical used in forensics that reacts with the iron content in blood. Once it hits hemoglobin, the protein in blood that carries oxygen, it lights up with a blue glow. The process is swift, but the area needs to be dark. And as dark as it is out here, it’s still not dark enough.

Jack takes off his jacket as if reading my mind. “Pick a poppy,” he says, nodding to the clustered flowers painted onto the wall. “And you’re right. They look far too dark for my liking. You’d think as an art teacher she’d want to emulate the look a little more realistically.”

“I think she’s bringing reality into this, all right. Reality—and if we’re right, revenge.”

I lead us to the cluster of poppies as the two of us lean close to the wall. Jack quickly encapsulates us with his jacket and pins it to the mural, enshrining us in darkness, and I spray the area down.

Like magic, each one of those poppies glows a violent shade of blue.

Special Agent Jack Stone

The gym is filled to capacity as Fallon and I push through the crowd.

The music is so loud it thumps through my chest, bodies are gyrating every which way, and every few seconds earth-shattering laughter threatens to blow out an eardrum.

“I don’t see her,” Fallon says as we slow down just this side of the buffet.

“I don’t either,” I mutter, mostly to myself. I don’t feel like shouting. I feel dejected just knowing one of my classmates was capable of something so horrific. I knew Nessa way back when, and yet I was blind to the fact she was hurting.

The faint smell of something unpleasant whiffs by and I pull Fallon along deeper into the gym rather than stand by and subject ourselves to it. Someone out there is taking the term cutting loose a little too literally.

“There’s Nikki.” Fallon points straight ahead and we speed that way.

I don’t hesitate to pull Nikki in close and streamline everything we’ve just gleaned right into her ear.

Nikki’s eyes widen a notch as Fallon nods her way.

“We need to find out where those other properties are located,” she tells her.

“I’m on it,” Nikki says, pulling out her phone and huddling up next to the wall.

The crowd begins to murmur and the bodies on the dance floor begin to slow. A few dozen people begin to cough and Fallon and I exchange a glance.

“I smell it.” She holds a hand to her nose.

“It’s gas,” I say, looking around. “And judging by how strong it’s coming at us, I say we’ve got one hell of a leak.” I take a few steps into the crowd. “Everyone out of the building, now,” I bellow.

The crowd disperses from the center of the room to the two main exits and yet no one seems to be going anywhere. The crowd simply bottlenecks at the doorway.

“What’s going on?” I shout as I head that way and Fallon and Nikki are right by my side. Fallon and I just came in that way and now the doors are sealed shut.

“The doors are locked,” someone shouts. “They’re dead bolted! We need a key to get out!”

“They’re locked on this side, too,” someone shouts from the far end of the gym.

Seemingly all at once everyone is shouting for a key as the smell of gas pours in thick and heavy.

“She has it,” Fallon pants. “Carrie told me Vanessa has the key.”

Before I can process the thought, the music cuts out and the squeal of a microphone goes off.

“Attention esteemed graduates of Aspen Heights High,” a female voice chimes and

we look over to the makeshift stage where Vanessa holds a microphone. She sets something down near her leg and it looks like a hammer. “I can’t seem to find the key, and unfortunately, that means none of us are getting out alive.”

“I called 911!” someone shouts. “They’re on the way!”

“I did, too,” Nikki pants. “And they’re working with the gas company to shut off the stream.”

“Good,” I say. Even though deep down I know it’s far too late.

A few women collapse to the floor, and a thicket of people sit down around them.

“Nobody moves,” Vanessa bellows while holding something small and silver in her hand. “I’ve got a lighter and I’m about to send the entire lot of you to Hell right along with me. We’ll all be dead before anyone can get to us.”

A few expletives go off as the crowd begins to rumble and moan.

“You did this to yourselves,” she shouts at the stunned faces. “You took my life and you made a sport of watching it unravel. Well, tonight I take my life back and make a sport of watching you die.”

She lifts the lighter another notch just as someone tackles her from behind and the lighter goes sailing.

“I’ll get her,” Fallon shouts. “You bust that door open, use the table if you have to!”

A group of us wastes no time in doing just that. We knock over the buffet table, just enough to clear it, and send the chocolate fountain spilling to the floor before charging our way to the door with it.

“We can’t cause a spark,” I shout as Mitch comes alongside me and about twenty of us do our best to bang that door open.

“I always thought I’d go out in a blaze of glory,” Mitch grunts as we knock the table into the doors with all our might. “But this isn’t exactly how I envisioned it.”

The sound of sirens wails from the other side just as we hit the doors once again, and this time we burst on through.

Bodies flood out the door all at once, causing mass panic as the entry grows congested.

“Slow down,” I shout. “Easy, no trampling,” I say, helping to excavate the people that are trapped and streamline the process all at once.

Nikki and I help a few of the women who are too dizzy to make it out on their own. I run back in and make sure no one is in the kitchen, and I check to make sure the bathrooms are empty as well and the smell of gas only grows thicker.

The gym has cleared out in record time and I glance around at the aftermath for signs of Vanessa or Fallon, but there isn’t one.

The back door to the facility has magically opened, and I’m betting Vanessa used her key to let herself out.

I’m also betting Fallon followed her out as well.

“Stone,” Nikki shouts from the main entry. “I want you out, now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, choking on the dense smell of gas which is thick as sin.

I head out and the fire department ushers us a good one hundred feet from the facility.

“Where’s Fallon?” Nikki shouts over the screams and cries of my classmates.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I think she went out the back with Vanessa. I checked that whole gym, there’s not a soul left in there.”

A loud roar erupts just as the building goes up in a ball of fire.

My heart jackhammers as I look back at the gym in horror.

“Fallon,” I thunder.

She had better have gotten the hell out.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

The world swims back into focus, a blurry mess of darkness and confusion.

“What?” I moan as my eyes struggle to open.

My head throbs with a piercing ache, and then I remember it’s the aftermath of the sharp object that greeted my temple.

A gasp evicts from me.

My eyes spring open as I struggle to see.

Darkness surrounds me.

I’m moving; it’s moving.

It takes less than a second to register that I’m in the trunk of a car.

Panic seizes me as I realize my hands are zip-tied behind my back, the plastic biting into my skin.

With a surge of desperation, I contort my body, managing to slip my bound hands beneath my feet and bringing them to the front. It’s a small victory, but it grants me a sliver of control in a situation that’s spiraled way the hell out of my grasp.

The car hits a bump and my body jumps hard, causing me to groan.

The confines of the trunk feel like a coffin, suffocating with the air tinged with the scent of metal and gasoline.

I rub my elbow against the left side of my ribs, only to discover my gun is missing.

It all comes back to me. The reunion. Chasing down Vanessa. Standing in front of the car she was about to jump into, and then the building blowing up, then the whack to the side of my head.

I'm shocked she didn't leave me there to die.

Why would she take me?

It was one heck of a spontaneous decision on her part, I'll give her that.

I'm guessing she had the zip ties handy. And tossing me into the trunk was no easy feat, but a good adrenaline rush could move a mountain. And perhaps cause you to kidnap someone and then go out and kill someone else in the same afternoon.

A thought comes to me.

I must be leverage of some kind.

I shake my head, still unable to piece together the logic. She confessed to everyone in that building, even if they had no idea what she was trying to say. Jack and I saw those poppies light up under the luminol as if they were hardwired to glow into the night.

There's no doubt she's guilty.

There is certainly no doubt she's a killer.

I pat my cardigan down and there's no sign of my phone either. I can only hope she has it with her in the front. Jack and Nikki can track me down that way. That is, if they're looking for me at all.

That ball of fire comes back to mind and I squeeze my eyes shut.

This is all Erin's fault.

I burn with anger at the thought. If my sister wasn't selfish enough to run off, then I wouldn't have joined the FBI, and I certainly wouldn't be locked in the trunk of a car while a lunatic speeds me off to who knows where.

Our bumpy journey continues for another ten minutes or so before we stop abruptly, sending me rolling toward the front a few feet and landing my face into the felt interior.

The sound of a car door slams and then nothing.

It's a waiting game now. Waiting for her to open the trunk. Waiting to see if my own gun will be aimed right at me. Waiting to see just how long Vanessa Copeland thinks I should live.

A dull laugh thumps through me. She has no idea who she's messing with. A part of me died a long time ago along with my father, along with my sister who took it upon herself to turn into a ghost.

A decent spate of time has gone by, so I feel for the emergency release latch and the trunk springs open as if it were innocent of ever holding me hostage.

Unfortunately, not a lot of people know that since 2001 the release latch has been a mandatory staple in the trunk of every car. If the manufacturers would do more to

educate the general public, then more tragedies could be averted. Brittney might have had a fighting chance at an escape for all we know.

The cool night air welcomes me and I look past the pines to see the dark tapestry of the night sky, speckled with a plethora of stars.

Wherever we are, we're nowhere near city life. The stars don't shine this bright in Pine Ridge Falls either and that's saying a lot.

I tumble out onto the ground, taking a moment to feel the cool earth as I assess my surroundings.

The woods.

No signs of life.

No signs of anything, save for the silhouette of the cabin before me. Its shape looks ominous in the night, and yet I know deep down that there's a chance Brittney might be in there someplace.

It's a two-story wonder of a log cabin. It has a luxurious feel even from this foreboding vantage point. I glance down to the left and a chill runs down my spine as I notice the boarded-up basement windows. And just like that, it confirms my fears.

I place my hands on the ground and try to separate them out as much as possible before stepping onto the plastic binding them together until I hear a satisfying snap as it breaks in two.

My wrists are raw, but I quickly rub the feeling out of them as I try to find the best entry point into that hellhole.

My gun is usually my lifeline in situations like these, but Vanessa decided to throw an obstacle my way.

Challenge accepted.

Adrenaline courses through me as I make my way toward the cabin with every step cautious and measured.

The night is oddly silent, and it's the kind of silence that has the power to suffocate you, broken up only by the occasional rustle of leaves or the distant call of an owl.

My heart hammers against my chest as I slink onto the porch, adhere my body to the wall, and peer in through the window.

The lights are on.

The living room is quaint and cozy, no signs of life, so I try the door and, sure enough, it's unlocked.

I let myself in and proceed with caution, hoping against hope there's not a dog around to give away my presence.

Buddy comes to mind. Buddy who was lucky enough to stay home and watch animals running wild on television while I sauntered off to a slaughter with a true beast.

Lucky me.

But then again, the fact I run toward a slaughter is the reason we're keeping the lights on and his kibble bowl brimming with goodness.

The sound of shouting comes from below and I quickly locate a set of stairs near the kitchen and head on down.

“You should have seen their faces,” a female riots. “It was a thing of beauty. For a second, I thought I might just die along with them. It seemed almost poetic. But the winds of fortune were blowing my way and I made it back to you. I can finally finish you off just the way I dreamed. It’s time to close your eyes forever, Brittney. It’s time for you to join your friends, the other rats. Say hello to Robin and Sophie for me.”

It’s dimly lit in the room. Most of the light seems to be flooding from one location near the floor, a nightlight I’m guessing.

I peer in just in time to see the faint image of Vanessa pointing a gun at a woman shivering on a bed and I leap onto Vanessa’s back as the gun goes off with a blast.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

A scream echoes around the room as I do my best to pin Vanessa down, but she spins around and butts her head to mine with violent force. The dark room we're in spins and wobbles as my vision goes in and out.

She reaches over and clamps her hand over the gun and I squeeze my eyes shut a moment, trying to gain my bearings as the room continues to spin like a top. I'm still dizzy from the first blow to the head, the second felt just about lethal.

Vanessa clamps her hand around the handle of my Glock, and just like that, she has the upper hand once again.

"Get over there," she pants as she wags the gun for me to join Brittney on the bed and I stagger in that direction, seeing double all the way. "You had to muck things up. You and Jackie. I was sort of hoping I dealt you a fatal blow. I couldn't think of a better way to break Jackie's heart than by having his girlfriend rot away in the trunk of my mother's car."

"You did all this for Derek?" I shake my head as I land next to Brittney with a thud.

"Shocking, isn't it?" Brittney snips and I shoot her a look. Although it's my fault. I shouldn't have started with the Derek bashing.

"I loved him for as long as I could remember," Vanessa shouts, gripping the gun with both hands. "We were going to get married. He said he loved me! But you and those little slut friends of yours had to go and ruin everything." She points the barrel

shakily at Brittney. “You did this to me. You took the man who would have been my husband away. You took our children away. You took the happy life we would have had together and you stomped on it for nothing. I never did anything to any of you. I didn’t deserve this.”

“You’re right,” Brittney says, her frame looks emaciated even in this frail light. “We did it. Robin led the charge and we followed like a bunch of cold-hearted lemmings. I’m sorry, Nessa. I really am.”

“Why did you wait so long?” I ask a little too sharply. I really need to work on that, especially considering the fact she has me staring down the barrel of my own gun.

Vanessa’s chest bucks with a silent laugh. “I waited for Derek. I waited for him to come home from prison. I even helped him come up with that lame story about working construction with his uncle out East. I told him I’d take him back. I went to his bar night after night, trying to convince him that we were good together. That I forgave him and that we needed to have our moment, build our family. But he wouldn’t have it. He said our time came and went in high school. Then my mother died. She was the only person who really cared about me. That’s when I truly lost everything.” Her voice breaks. “Then when I got the invitation to the reunion, I had all of these revenge fantasies playing out on a loop. And then one night, I thought why not? Why not make all of my dreams come true? After all, I have nothing to lose. I had already lost all the things I wanted.”

The floorboards creak above us.

Vanessa looks up and I don’t hesitate to pounce on her once again, this time binding her wrists over her head as my gun goes flying. I flip her over onto her belly and jam her arms down over her back until she howls in pain.

“Everybody freeze,” a deep voice thunders and I look up to see Jack with his weapon

positioned.

Nikki drops in behind him, beaming a light this way, and soon Vanessa Copeland is in handcuffs.

Within minutes, the place is swarmed with Hale and the rest of the team, the sheriff's department, and a rash of EMTs and firetrucks.

Nikki and I sit with Brittney while the fire department helps free her from her chains.

"There's Freddy," she cries as she points to the corner. "Can you get him for me?"

Nikki shines the light from her phone that way and all we see is a fat, hairy rat.

"Geez." I jump to the bed and Nikki and a few of the firefighters have a good laugh. "It just stunned me, that's all."

"That's one of the cuties that Nessa threw in the room to scare me." Brittney sighs as one of the firefighters scoops it up and brings it to her. "Hey there, little guy." She pats the furry creature on his little head. "I would offer to bring you home and keep you and Melvin forever, but I sort of know what it feels like to be locked up against your will. I think we'll part ways here. Thanks for keeping me company."

The firefighter offers a solemn nod. "How about I free him out in the woods? Does that sound good?"

"That sounds perfect," she says.

"I got the other one," someone shouts, and soon both rats are on their way to freedom.

A gurney is rolled in and Nikki and I take that as our cue.

“Wait.” Brittney holds her hands out to me. “Can I hug you? I’ll never forget the way you stormed in here. It’s nice to know someone actually cared.”

“We both cared,” I tell her as she pulls me and then Nikki in for a group embrace. “Everybody cared.”

Nikki and I make our way out of the cabin and the lights from the patrol cars cut into the night with a blue and red seizure.

We spot Jack over by one of the sheriff’s vehicles with Vanessa sitting inside of it and head that way.

Jack pulls me in tight without hesitation and rubs his cheek against mine hard. His hot breath scorches my neck, and for a second his lips graze over my temple.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve got a wild headache.” A dull laugh bounces through me. “But I’ll live.”

“We’re getting you checked out,” Nikki insists. “We need a medic!”

I lean into the car for a moment. “How did you do it? How did you manage to kidnap Brittney and kill Robin in one afternoon? You never grazed yourself with a bullet either. That’s why those sisters never heard a third gunshot. There wasn’t one. Everything was a setup from start to finish.”

The execution was poor, but we all have that to be thankful for.

Vanessa gives a sorrowful attempt at a laugh. “I thought maybe you might think the

two cases were unrelated. I wanted to splice your resources, send you in two different directions, and point both arrows at Derek. I guess I did a lousy job.”

“Not true,” Jack says. “We just did better.” He pulls me back to him, gentler this time, and the tip of his nose touches mine and we linger there for a moment. His heart pounds against my chest, keeping in time to mine. “Let’s get you into one of these ambulances. I’ll hop in with you. I sort of enjoy the ride.”

Jack rides with me all the way to Aspen Heights Memorial, and all the way there he holds my hand.

I don’t fight him on it, so clearly I have a concussion.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:07 am

Special Agent Fallon Baxter

Buddy races along the shoreline of Pine Ridge Lake and his joyful barks cut through the quiet of the early afternoon. I walk along the damp sand barefoot while wrapped in a reflective silence.

The lake is filled with the last vestiges of summer as adults and children alike scream and splash their way into the crystal blue water. It's the other side of the lake that's teeming with life. That's where the plethora of tourist traps lie, where the summer camps hold their participants hostage.

An entire fleet of boats careen around the middle of the lake, from fishing pontoons to families catching some rays, and a handful of those boats are hauling inflatables on their back end as the occupants scream with delight.

The side of the lake that sits below Whispering Woods is tranquil for the most part, and I suppose we have the marsh that eats up most of the shoreline to thank for that. The sun is warm on my back, warming up the oil from the pines as well as they release their sweet scent into the air.

I soak it all in.

I know soon enough fall will be here, then winter, and I'll be dreaming of doing this right here, just praying for the warmth of the sun to transport me to summer one more time.

I think I'll rent a kayak.

Heck, I should see about picking up a used one and taking it out whenever I like. It's too nice of a day not to be out on the lake. And I bet Buddy would love it, too.

He comes back with a glossy wet stick and I throw it as far as I can before he's on the chase again.

It's been a week since Vanessa Copeland's arrest, a week since the chaos of the reunion gave way to a semblance of peace.

The lake, with its gentle waves lapping at the shore, seems a world away from the chaos we faced.

Nikki did a little research after I disappeared from the gym and discovered that Vanessa's mother did, in fact, own a few more properties. One was a retail space in downtown Denver, another was a condo, and the third was a secluded lodge out in the middle of nowhere. Thankfully, that's where Jack and Nikki decided to begin their search. My phone was found in the parking lot of the school, so that wouldn't have helped in pinning down my location.

It turned out, Vanessa gave me one heck of a concussion. The hospital kept me overnight just to make sure my brain didn't decide to bleed out. Jack insisted on staying by my side, holding vigil all night long despite the fact I told him to go away.

He didn't.

Instead, he held my hand the entire time and I didn't protest. That's because I didn't mind. It scares me a little how I seem to not mind him more and more as time goes by.

That's not the plan here.

The plan is to track down my sister and bring her back to Pine Ridge Falls, kicking

and screaming if I have to.

At one point during my brief hospital stay, my head pounded so hard I thought I'd vomit out my brain. It was Jack who rallied on my behalf and made sure I had the best that modern medicine could provide. I think he just liked seeing me high and off my rocker for a bit. I hope I didn't say anything stupid. In fact, I'm sure I did.

I bite down on a smile. Somewhere in that drugged haze, I distinctly remember telling him that he had kissable lips. Here's hoping he's forgotten. Although I'm not sure why I can't seem to.

Before I was released to go home, Derek Russell stopped by. He wanted to personally thank me for Vanessa's arrest. He thanked Jack, too, and invited us both back to the Penalty Box for a free steak dinner on him. Now that's an offer neither of us can refuse.

And while the families of Robin Hanson and Sophie Clarke did get some closure, justice is never truly enough when it doesn't bring your loved one back from the grave.

That's the hard part about this job. All of what we do is after the fact, when it's too late for someone to make a real difference. But we do what we can. That's all we can do.

Buddy brings back the stick, and I give his vanilla fur coat a few quick pats for the effort.

"You're a good boy, Buddy. I'm glad you're mine."

"Baxter," someone calls out from a distance and both Buddy and I turn toward the cabin, only to find two figures standing on my back porch.

Buddy gives a firm bark as he bolts in that direction and I follow suit, albeit a little slower and minus the bark.

It's Jack and Nikki, already making themselves at home at the small table I have set out. And by the looks of it, there's a pizza box between them.

Jack doles out the first slice to Buddy just as I reach them.

"I didn't know we were having a party," I tease as I fall into the seat between them.

"How are you feeling?" Jack asks while sliding a cold bottle of iced tea my way. He's got on shorts and a T-shirt. A baseball cap shields his eyes from the sun, and that dark scruff makes his blue eyes shine, but I try not to stare too much. Nikki looks as if she just finished one of her Pilates sessions with her hair tossed up into a messy bun, clad in mint green yoga wear.

I'm glad the three of us get along so well. I knew they'd be my coworkers, I didn't realize they'd be my friends.

"I'm feeling much better, especially now. And thank you," I say, lifting my drink to the two of them. "To what do I owe the honors?"

Jack scratches his chin while nodding over at Nikki as if giving her the go-ahead on something.

"We have news," she says, pulling her laptop out of her bag and quickly clicking onto the keyboard.

Jack nods my way. "Your sister was spotted in Clearwater Springs."

"That's near Castle Rock." I spike straight up in my seat as my heart does its best to punch its way out of my chest, mostly from relief. "That's less than a half hour away.

Where is she? Who is she with?" My body jerks as if it were ready to jump into my truck.

"She was here," Nikki says, turning her laptop my way and I'm treated to what looks like security footage from the interior of a grocery store. "Jack and I found some old pictures of Erin and shot them through the database. This one came up. The store had a theft a few weeks back and the feed from the security footage is still on file. Is that her?" She zooms in on a redhead, dark hair coming in at the roots. She has on a flower printed dress that reaches the floor, and she seems to be speaking with a man. He's tall, broad shoulders, elongated features, wearing a suit, and looks to be in his sixties.

I zoom in on the woman's face and my entire body starts to thump with a heartbeat of its own.

"That's her," I say, pointing to the screen. "You did it. You found Erin." A tiny laugh reverberates through my chest. "And it looks as if she's helping someone find something. That's just like her."

"That's no random stranger," Jack says, staring sternly at the screen. "The footage shows them meeting up at the front of the store. They do a little shopping. He pays for her goods and he gives her what looks to be a wad of cash as they head into the parking lot."

My heart races again, this time with terror.

"We ran his face," Jack says it low as if the news wouldn't be good. Silently, I'm praying that's not some pimp. Although that might make both of them easy to track down. "His name is Marco Rossi. He's a henchman for the Moretti crime family. They're stationed mostly right here out of Denver."

"What the heck?" I shake my head at the screen. "What could she possibly have to do

with him?”

“I don’t know.” Jack reaches over and clasps his hand over mine. “But we’re going to find out.”

“Thank you,” I say, gripping onto him with a death squeeze. “Thank you both. Now let’s eat pizza,” I say, trying to sound jovial despite the fact I’m worried sick over what my sister might be getting herself into.

You don’t mess with the mob, but then you shouldn’t mess with a cult either. And for all the smarts my sister once possessed, I’m starting to wonder if she set them on fire along the way.

Buddy gives a happy bark and we all toss him a piece of our crust.

But before we can finish our meals, our phones go off with a message from Hale.

Jack groans as he glances at his screen. “Bodies discovered out at a cabin in Sugar Pine Lake. Two dead, one injured, one missing from the scene. He says it was a writers’ retreat gone wrong.”

“Just found a headline,” Nikki says, staring at her phone. “Mystery authors looking for respite find murder.”

“Let’s get going,” Jack says as the three of us jump from our seats.

I nod his way. “It’s time to write our own ending to this story.”

The end