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Killing Ways

Written by Alex Barclay

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ALEX BARCLAY

Killing Ways

HARPER

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To Moira Reilly,
Thank you for being your warm, wise, and wonderful self.
With you here, the book begins on the perfect note.

It was a beautiful ninety-degree morning in Denver: the landfill site sweltered under the same sun that was giving everyone else's day a glorious start. Ren was sitting in the passenger seat of her Jeep.

This cannot be my life.

Outside, the rest of Safe Streets were already dressed in white Tyvek suits, Kevlar gloves, and black half-face masks, sharing a range of looks that covered misery, repulsion, sorrow, and panic.

The panic was flickering in the eyes of Janine Hooks, Ren's closest friend, and ex-Jefferson County cold case detective. Janine had joined Safe Streets three months earlier. She was a brilliant, thorough investigator with a sharp, wise mind and a heart of gold. Ren was certain Janine had an eating disorder, but had never dared to raise it.

It breaks my heart how tiny you look inside your suit.

Janine was staring down at her feet, lining the tips of her boots up.

Terrified about wearing a mask. Or shy around Robbie.

Robbie Truax was ex-Aurora PD, with Safe Streets from

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the beginning. Janine had met him first through Ren, and was comfortable liking him from afar, a little less so now that they were up-close colleagues.

Everett came into Ren's line of vision, walking her way. He pulled open the door of the Jeep.

'How's my girl?'

'Seriously,' said Ren, 'I have zero idea how I got into the apartment I did not remember I lived in.'

'Too much grammar in that sentence . . .'

'But you look fine – that's not fair,' said Ren. 'I don't think I can go through with this.'

'You can. You can always puke into the mask.'

'Jesus Christ. Thanks. My ultimate nightmare.'

Fifteen minutes and one fake urgent phone call later, Ren was suited up with the others.

I made it.

They stood in a group, still apart from the other searchers.

'OK,' said Ren. 'Let's go through the hand signals again . . .'

Everyone looked at her. She pushed her hand into the circle, low down, and raised her middle finger. 'Fuck. This.'

The others smiled.

And fuck this heat.

Ren surveyed the landscape ahead of them: rotting food, filthy diapers, decaying animals . . . *stop the inventory of this hellhole.*

'Stretched out before us,' said Ren, 'is a landscape that looks like how my mouth feels. There may be a cadaver in both. May your masks serve and protect you.'

She walked toward the rest of the searchers: Denver PD detectives, Sheriff's Office investigators, landfill site workers, and volunteers.

Volunteers, you extraordinary people. Have you no place else to be? God bless you all.

They moved in and began the search. It was as hot, foul and arduous as they expected. Two days later, they were back. Four days. Five. On day six, the body of Hope Coulson, hanging from black plastic coming undone, was hoisted from a stinking mound of life's waste and set on the ground at the feet of the Safe Streets' team. Janine Hooks' eagle eye had spotted the bag, the Duck tape wrapped around it at each end with extra at the center.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Everett, Janine and four DPD detectives stayed with the body until the coroner arrived. Ren called for Robbie and they moved quickly toward her Jeep. They stripped out of their filthy Tyvek suits, balled them into a bag in the back, and hopped in.

You have gained quite a bit of weight, Robbie Truax, which I feel mean noticing.

'So, how've you been?' he said, as he strapped himself in.

Ren looked at him. *We're together almost every day . . .*

She started the engine, and drove.

'I mean – we only see each other at work these days,' said Robbie.

'I know,' said Ren. 'It's been crazy. And you've missed some nights out. A lot of nights out. Is everything OK?'

They both understood the silence that followed. Robbie, the blond, fresh-faced, boy-scout Mormon, was in treatment for porn addiction, a problem that had been going on for months before he finally told Ren, the sole guardian of his secret.

He shrugged. 'I . . . was wondering if you were so . . . horrified by what I told you, that . . . you were trying to create distance.'

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'Oh my God,' said Ren. 'Please tell me you don't mean that. Did I seem horrified to you? Jesus – I'd have no friends if I distanced myself from people with porn and promiscuity issues. And how could I distance myself from myself?'

Robbie smiled. 'I guess I just miss hanging out, you coming over, or staying around after work. Just having pizza or whatever.'

But not drinking. Which isn't seeming like fun to me right now. Sorry!

'You and Everett,' said Robbie, 'you're—'

Ren's heart sank.

And now we have hit the real problem. You think I have abandoned you for Everett.

After three months, Robbie was struggling to get along with Everett, and it was making for some awkward moments.

But, you're right. I have abandoned you. Everett is more fun. Everett drinks. He dances. I can't hurt Everett. I could hurt you, sensitive man.

Robbie had once admitted to Ren that he loved her, and she had told him that she saw him more as a brother. Their friendship was strong, they had recovered from it, but Ren couldn't help feeling that a responsibility had come with the admission: if he loves you, if he ever did, you could still hurt him.

I never want to hurt you, Robbie Truax. You mean too much to me.

'I'm sorry if you feel like I haven't been around,' said Ren. 'You're right. I've just been party, party, party. I think it's moving into the apartment, everything . . . I can't settle. I feel like I'm jumping out of my skin.'

'That's how I feel when I'm . . .' He stared out the window. 'Treatment is hard.'

'I didn't want to ask,' said Ren. 'It's so *personal*.'

He turned to her, his eyes bright with sincerity. 'But you're the only person in the world I can talk to about personal things.'

Ren reached out and squeezed his forearm. 'I love you, Robbie Truax. I'm so sorry. Please talk to me. I know it's probably like—'

'Trying to catch a wild horse?'

'Blindfolded.'

Robbie raised a hand in mock-defiance. 'His eyes filled, nevertheless, with hope . . .'

Ren pictured the smiling face of Hope Coulson.

Jonathan Briar, here we come. And this time, we have Hope.

When Jonathan Briar heard that his fiancée's body had been found, his knees buckled, and he cried out with such force, Ren was startled. She had been standing with Robbie in the living room of the apartment Jonathan and Hope had shared for the previous two years. Ren caught Jonathan as he went down. Now she was on her knees, and he was limp and weeping in her arms.

This was not my vision.

Ren glanced up at Robbie, who had been temporarily immobilized. Eventually, he kicked into action and helped Jonathan Briar onto the sofa. Ren took a seat opposite and looked around the room. It was her first time there.

This is a beautiful place. Cozy and cute. Seems like the home of two people in love. This is . . . so strange. There is nothing cold here. No sense of death or darkness.

'How could this happen?' wailed Jonathan. 'How? I thought she was alive! She's . . . Hope isn't someone . . . just she wouldn't be murdered. By anyone! She was in the garbage, just like that? She didn't belong there. Jesus Christ! I just thought she was alive!'

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'Where did you think she was?' said Ren. *Seriously. It's been almost five weeks.*

Jonathan stopped sobbing. 'I couldn't even bring myself to think about that.' His hair was standing on end. 'I just couldn't go there. Where did I think she was? I was thinking nothing. I was thinking nothing bad. I was—'

In shock. All this time. You weren't an emotionless asshole. You were resisting being forced to think of a horrific ending. It was the last thing you wanted to think of for your sweet, beautiful, caring Hope.

Jonathan Briar locked eyes with Ren.

The pain. You can't fake that. That agony cannot be faked. Can it?

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Hope Coulson's autopsy revealed that she had been strangled, and it likely happened not long after she had gone missing. She had been raped with something green and ceramic that had broken, and left shards behind, one of which had a partial fingerprint that matched Jonathan Briar's. Her father identified her body. Jonathan Briar identified the shards as parts of a tall green ceramic sculpture – an engagement gift they had been given – that he had failed to notice was missing from their living room.

'Well, being raped with one of your engagement gifts would be a serious fuck-you if you cheated on your fiancé,' said Ren. She was sitting at the edge of her desk in the bullpen, where most of the squad was gathered. 'Yet no one in all the interviews has suggested that Briar was anything other than kind and loving toward her. But, of course, behind closed doors . . . who knows. However, if he raped her with that in the apartment and it broke, which it clearly did, there should be more blood there. And it's highly unlikely there would be no evidence of the sculpture. Unless he raped her on something that he took away and destroyed. His car was clean. Nothing was

found with her in the landfill. The black plastic used has no connection to any product found in their home, which doesn't mean much. Then there's the issue – if we are to believe he was the rapist and it didn't happen in their home – he would've had to have taken her somewhere to carry it out, and he would also have had to carefully package up the sculpture and bring it with them. Would someone do that? I don't think so.'

'Who gave them the gift?' said Everett. 'That could be significant.'

'If that guy's innocent, I would be amazed,' said Gary.

'Prepare to be amazed,' said Ren.

Gary stared at her. As Gary often did.

'We also have to consider the fact that she was raped with a foreign object,' said Ren. 'That's typically carried out by a man with sexual problems, which, again, there is no evidence of in Briar's case.'

'That doesn't mean anything,' said Gary. 'He could have had a problem for months not being able to get it up. He's a young guy, too embarrassed to go to the doctor, she's too embarrassed to mention it to anyone, thinks it's her fault . . . and, maybe, she goes elsewhere to get what she's not getting at home . . .'

He has made up his mind.

'Can you really see a kindergarten teacher having that attitude?' Ren paused. 'You should go talk to Briar . . .'

Open your mind.

They stared each other down.

'How about we go through the night of her disappearance again?' said Ren. 'And how Briar was at work for the entire evening—'

'And out making deliveries,' said Gary.

'All of which he appeared to have made in a reasonable time frame,' said Ren. 'Unless he has a cape somewhere . . .'

'That entire shift was made up of his dope-smoking, mouth-breather friends,' said Gary.

'And we have video to back up most of his comings and goings,' said Ren.

'Most,' said Gary. 'And they're in over-sized jackets and baseball caps, faces not very clear . . .'

Grrrrr.

The meeting broke up, and everyone returned to their desks through the haze of tension. Ren fired up her computer. A rubber band flew through the air and whipped her hair off her face. She looked up. Robbie was standing in the center of the room with a wooden gun. Ren laughed.

'Beautiful shot.'

'Thank you,' said Robbie, blowing imaginary smoke from the top of the barrel.

'But you do know you are now dead,' said Ren. 'There's a price on your head. Fifty per cent off.' She slid open her drawer to take her own wooden gun out.

No ammo. Shit.

Ren's email pinged. She glanced at it. Gary.

Subject: BP support

Oh, here we go . . .

Tonight. Henderson Hotel.

Control explosion.

Ren went to Gary's office. Her fist was poised to knock on the door, until she heard his rising voice.

'Nothing!' said Gary. 'Nothing is wrong, Karen! Jesus Christ, I'm going to record it on a loop.'

Gary Dettling was calm, cool, rational, in control. He could

rein in any emotion . . . until it came to his wife. He loved that she was crazy, he hated that she was crazy, she *made* him crazy.

But Ren knew that in some small way, Karen Dettling was bound to have made Gary more sympathetic to Ren's own brand of crazy.

'No, good. Go ahead!' said Gary. He slammed the phone down hard.

Ren let out the breath she had been holding.

Fuckity fuck.

She knocked.

'Yes!' said Gary.

Ren opened the door and walked in. 'Do you have any rubber bands?'

Gary frowned. 'Yes.'

Ren walked over to his stash. 'Can I just say I hate these passive-aggressive emails about meetings and appointments?'

'They're active-aggressive,' said Gary. 'And I can get even more active . . .'

Ren grabbed a fistful of rubber bands and walked out.

Why do you even keep them in here? You asshole.

When Ren went back to the bullpen, Janine and Everett were huddled together. They looked up.

'Was he shouting at *you*?' said Everett.

'You could hear that out here?' said Ren. 'No – it wasn't me. For once.'

'Are you coming out tonight?' said Janine.

'No,' said Everett, 'she's checking into a facility . . .'

'You may be right,' said Ren. 'No, Janine. I was out last night, and the night before. I think even I need a break every now and then.'

'Well, I'm ready to strap on my drinking boots,' said Janine.

'As am I,' said Everett.

'Damn you both!' said Ren. 'Well, if you're going, Janine, would you like to stay in my place? Save your drinking money.'

'Even better, thank you,' said Janine.

'I will try not to be bitter,' said Ren.

'Robbie's going to come too,' said Janine.

D'oh! Everett's face . . .

Only Ren noticed. And only she could see the sparkle in Janine's eyes.

Ren sat at her desk and thought about Hope Coulson – how she hadn't driven home, how that likely meant that she had met with someone unexpectedly, that something had changed her plans.

'I think someone was watching Hope Coulson,' said Ren. 'I think she was taken from right outside the church.'

'Like she was bundled into the back of a van?' said Everett.

'I don't know,' said Ren. 'Who knew where she was going to be? Was it someone close enough to her that they knew her routine? Was it a member of the congregation? Someone who was served Meals on Wheels by her? A relative of one of the elderly people she visited? Maybe one of the fathers whose kids go to her school. Maybe someone she trusted . . .'

'Maybe some creepy guy who had a thing for her,' said Everett. 'Or maybe it was an opportunistic thing – some guy who lived near the church?'

'There are ten registered sex offenders in the area,' said Janine. 'According to DPD's notes, they were all cleared.'

'Every sex offender was, once upon a time, unregistered,' said Ren. 'And every killer had a clean record before their fairy tale ended.'

After work, Ren took the five-minute walk to the River North Arts District, RiNo, where her boxing gym defiantly stood – fierce and battered, like a prizefighter – between two shiny rookies: a pristine artisan coffee shop, and a crafts store/ceramics studio. The area was slowly regenerating, with warehouses being renovated and new buildings going up in what were once abandoned, overgrown lots.

The filthy man-gym was scattered with bulked-up men working on bags, sparring in the four rings. Ren went to the token lady area, and got changed into black shorts and a black tank. She put in her EarPods, cranked up her beat-the-shit-out-of-people playlist. She strapped up her hands, put on her gloves and got to work.

Jab. Jab. Hook. Hook. Uppercut. Uppercut. Jab. Jab. Hook. Hook. Uppercut. Uppercut. Rinse. Repeat.

She moved over to the speed bag, did ten minutes on that, left, hot and sweaty, and took a shower in the quiet after-work calm of a hushed Safe Streets.

* * *

Ren drove home, walked into the hallway of the apartment building, went over to the wall of mailboxes and took out her mail.

Bill. Bill. Bill. Store card. Bill. Bill. Store card. Bill.

A woman wheeling a mountain bike came in behind her. She looked like the type who described herself as 'wacky' in her online dating profile. Thirtyish, hair in pigtails, a tie-dyed T-shirt, full lips, blaring red lipstick, XL plaid shirt as a cover-up.

I have zero interest in meeting bikes in the hallway when I get home from work. Or wacky people. I am maladjusting to apartment living.

'Hi,' said the girl. 'I'm Lorrie, are you new?'

'Hi, Lorrie,' said Ren. 'Yes. I'm Ren. Nice to meet you.'

I have dead-body photos in a folder under my arm right now. Be on your way.

Ren had moved in two months earlier, just days before Annie Lowell returned from her travels. She had clung to the hope that Annie would extend her trip as she had done before. The move was painful, and sad, and already blocked out. Annie's house was a home. The apartment was a base. It never drew her in in the same way. Instead, mania and the night drew her out, bars and bright, shiny things. Bright shiny people.

Ren had decided not to rush into renting somewhere she didn't adore. So she sucked it up, even though it meant handing over her beloved black-and-white border collie, Misty, to her dog-walker, Devin, to look after until she found a proper place for both of them. If only she had the time to look. Devin was a smart and bubbly young student who lived across the street from Annie, and adored Misty as much as Ren and Janine did.

'If you need anything, just ring my bell,' said Lorrie. 'I'm 28A.'

'Oh,' said Ren. 'Thank you.'

Never gonna happen.

Ren took the elevator alone to the fifth floor. She unlocked the door to her apartment, and went in, hit with the smell of paint.

At least I have fresh new walls. There are positives.

She dropped her briefcase in the hallway and went to the kitchen. She took out a St Émilion red, uncorked it, poured a glass. She opened the refrigerator. There was a bag of arugula, a block of parmesan, some fillet steak.

Not hungry enough to make great effort.

She threw together a salad of arugula and parmesan, cracked some black pepper over it, soaked it in balsamic vinegar and a dash of olive oil and sat back on the sofa to eat.

Her phone beeped with a text from her boyfriend. She had been going out with Ben Rader for ten months. He was an FBI Agent in D.C., keen to make a bigger commitment than Ren was willing to. She had deflected his offer to look for a transfer to Denver so they could move in together. He hadn't even made the suggestion that she move to D.C. But she loved him, and he loved her. It was only the lying about the meds that stood between them. One giant pharmaceutical wall.

Ren ate half the salad before she set it aside. She pulled a bright red cushion onto her lap, set her laptop on it and opened Hope Coulson's Facebook account. She spent over an hour going through it. She was struck by one thing: Hope always posted photos from her nights out, throughout the night, and always commented on the event the following day: Blast in XYZ bar with m'girls! or Me&J in XYZ's. Except for one Friday night, two weeks before she went missing.

Hmm. Why the deviation?

That day, Facebook showed that Hope Coulson went for a late lunch with her girlfriends for one of their birthdays, and posted photos over the course of the afternoon. The next photo uploaded was at 7 p.m., taken in a sports bar – a loved-up selfie with Jonathan. The next photo, in a different bar, was taken at 10 p.m. and was just of Jonathan. And that was it; no comment on the night the following day. And the next post was on Monday afternoon, when she had finished work.

Something about that isn't right. She was drinking at lunch, kept going when she went to meet Jonathan, didn't appear in a photo herself. Because she was too drunk? She had a kindergarten-teacher reputation to uphold. Or maybe something happened. Did they have a fight? Maybe whatever happened that night sent her into hiding the following day. Maybe the night was not a night worth writing about for whatever reason . . .

Ren put down the glass of wine.

She texted Janine. FOMO. *Fear of Missing Out.*

She got a text right back: You know where to find me. Robbie left early on. Everett just gone . . .

Four hours later, Ren was leaning into the mirror in the ladies' room of Gaffney's, her makeup bag open on the wet tiles.

Why can't there be raised shelves away from the sinks? How hard can that be, people?

Janine arrived, passing two girls who had been taking selfies together before they left.

'I'm so old,' said Ren. 'The idea of constantly updating social media when I'm trying to get hammered is hellish. I hate even being around people who do that. Relax, everyone. And get the fuck out of my face.'

'I know,' said Janine. 'But at least it helps us do our job . . . suckers!'

‘Speaking of which – Hope Coulson was out two weeks before she went missing, then thirty-six hours disappeared into a black social media hole, which was not her style. I’m just wondering, did something happen? And we know I don’t like to wonder for too long. I like to go out there and find the fuck out.’ She ran her finger under each eye to tidy up her mascara. ‘I need to speak with Briar again.’

‘You heard he’s lawyered up, though . . .’

Ren turned to her.

‘Oh, I know that face,’ said Janine. ‘Don’t go there without the lawyer.’

‘I just have a couple of tiny questions . . .’

‘Oh, they’re cool with the tiny ones . . . phew.’

‘But I don’t think he’s a suspect,’ said Ren.

‘Not the point. Don’t risk it. Gary will go apeshit. And speaking of risking shit, whatever you’re about to do here, don’t.’

‘I was about to put some lip gloss on,’ said Ren. She raised her eyebrows and smiled.

‘You know what I mean,’ said Janine. ‘I don’t know what’s going on with you and that guy out there, but . . .’

‘I’m fine,’ said Ren. ‘Don’t worry. I have zero interest in him.’

‘Hmm. I’m not sure he feels the same way.’

‘That’s his problem.’

Janine studied her in the mirror.

‘Honestly, I’m fine,’ said Ren. ‘The guy’s not even drinking.’

‘I don’t think a man needs to be drinking to make a move on you,’ said Janine. She paused. ‘Anyhoo, I think I’m about ready to call it a night.’

‘Noooo,’ said Ren.

Janine nodded. ‘I’m exhausted. Do you mind?’

‘No, but I’m wiiiide awake – do you mind if I stay?’

‘Not at all,’ said Janine. ‘I’ll see you back at the ranch.’

ALEX BARCLAY

She hugged Ren, and pulled back. 'I know Gary's not actually here, but you seem to be in his crosshairs. I'm not sure it's to do with all this partying, but—'

'Fuck Gary!'