

A movie poster for the film 'A Formidable Foe'. The background is a dark, atmospheric night scene in a park, with a street lamp casting a glow and trees in the background. In the foreground, a woman with long, light-colored hair, identified as Kim McMahon, is shown from the chest up. She is wearing a black, sleeveless, draped top and has a concerned or intense expression, looking off to the right. The title 'A FORMIDABLE FOE' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the bottom half of the image. Below the title, the text '[A RISKY RESEARCH PREQUEL]' is written in smaller, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The name 'KIM MCMAHILL' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters at the top of the poster.

KIM MCMAHILL

**A
FORMIDABLE
FOE** [A RISKY RESEARCH
PREQUEL]

A Formidable Foe

A Risky Research Prequel

Kim McMahon

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

A Formidable Foe

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ONE

The man sat on a bench near the pond watching all the pretty young co-eds walk by. Laughing and talking, they were oblivious to the dangers that lurked in the shadows. He loathed them all. Ever since he could remember, girls like them had either ignored him or made fun of the birthmark running down the side of his face.

As an adult, he kept his hair long to cover the mark, but until he graduated from high school his mother had shaved his head, which accentuated the mark. She claimed that dealing with the taunts and bullying would make him stronger.

It had.

This wasn't his first visit to campus, though he had never actually attended college here or anywhere else, for that matter. *Some people just aren't college material*, his mother had often told him. He'd bet all these lovely young co-eds had mothers who assured them their futures were bright and full of endless possibilities. Ha! Each semester he infused a bit of reality into the unsuspecting privileged few.

So far, he had targeted women who left campus at night and lived alone. These offered him far more opportunities as they traveled to and from campus. Often days elapsed before his handiwork was discovered.

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On the downside, it had taken a considerable amount of surveillance to identify individuals with these desirable qualities, and patience had never been one of his virtues. In fact, his mother would claim he had no virtues at all.

Despite his success, the naïvety of the local police and the citizens of this fine city bothered him. He never aspired to fame, but he was a little insulted that his activities barely made the news.

No details were provided about the woman found at the state park. The police claimed her assailant was likely a transient—no doubt to squelch any fears of possibly having a killer in their community.

The woman hanging from her loft balcony was reported as a suicide. The fact that both attended this institution of learning was apparently lost on the authorities. This time he would make sure they didn't gloss over the common denominator.

The sound of laughter jolted him out of his reverie. He looked up in time to see four dark-haired women walk by. Despite being fall and cool enough for a light jacket, all four wore tank tops to make sure everyone could see their tattoo-covered arms. He shook his head, not what he was looking for. He was in the mood for a clean-cut all-American girl. His last two victims were brunettes and a tad rough around the edges. This time he wanted to mix it up a bit.

As the laughter faded, two blondes approached. One was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt sporting the school's mascot. Her straight dishwater-blonde hair was gathered in a high ponytail. She was tall, but not too tall; thin, but not too thin. She carried her athletic build with confidence, and her expression revealed a no-nonsense personality. Something about her

intimidated him a little. She didn't seem like the type to go down without a fight.

The other woman was perfect, just what he'd been looking for. Her hair was a blonde color that can only be obtained out of a box. She was of average height and weight. Her round cheeks were rosy, and her smile warm and captivating—just the kind of girl you'd want to take home to Mama, if you had a mama who didn't bring low-lifes into the apartment who would ogle the girl and try to grope her.

As the women passed by, he slowly stood and fell in behind them. After several minutes, the taller one turned and glared at him. Had she realized he was following them? He veered off the path and headed toward the nearest building, but continued to watch from behind the cover of a thick tree. They headed toward the student housing area. A smile eased across his lips. They lived on campus. He had found the one.

If he watched this path at this time of day and the housing area, it would be only a matter of time before he caught her alone.

TWO

Before Devyn Nash swiped her student identification card across the entry-pad of the dormitory building, she glanced over her shoulder. The tall, thin, shaggy-haired man she had spotted earlier was nowhere in sight.

"I think some guy was following us for a while as we passed the pond. After I gave him the eye, he left," Devyn said to her roommate and best friend, Amanda Hewitt.

"Don't be paranoid. Even if you're right about the connection between those two poor girls, nothing has happened on this campus," Amanda replied.

"Yet," Devyn hissed under her breath. "If my hunch is correct that they were targeted based on being students here, the murderer has been, or maybe still be, on campus or maybe visits now and again looking for another target."

Devyn pushed the up arrow on the elevator and it arrived almost immediately. Three other students rushed over and slipped in before the door slid shut, ending their conversation for the moment.

She didn't want to scare Amanda, but she wanted her to be careful. Her best friend tended to be a bit naïve and trusting, always assuming the best in

everyone. Devyn wished she could be more like Amanda sometimes, but her upbringing had shaped her into almost the complete opposite.

Growing up in four different countries, some of which weren't the safest places on the planet, had made Devyn cautious. She had developed an acute sense of situational awareness, which had served her well and kept her out of trouble even when outside her comfort zone. She had matured quickly living in brutal and corrupt counties and had become a student of human behavior.

Her father retired from Army Intelligence and soon thereafter, he and her mother were out sailing off the coast of Maine and they died in a boating "accident." At least, that's what the papers reported. The Army investigator indicated he wasn't convinced. After her father survived a career living in some of the world's hottest spots for terrorism and then died while out sailing off the coast of Maine, Devyn was well aware that bad things could happen anywhere, anytime, and to anyone.

The doors opened on the fourth floor. Devyn and Amanda stepped out and made their way to their room at the end of the hall.

"Did you go talk to the police again today?" Amanda asked.

"Yes, and the police investigator practically patted me on the head and told me to quit reading romantic suspense novels. Of all the sexist, condescending things. I would have decked that skinny runt, but figured with so many witnesses there in the police station they would have had no choice but to throw me in jail."

Amanda giggled. "I would have paid money to

see that. Everyone thinks if you're blonde you're not that tough. After watching you take down that two-hundred-pound football player with three moves after he grabbed your posterior at that frat party, I know that's a completely false stereotype."

"That was fun, but I'm sorry we don't get invited to any parties anymore."

Devyn threw her backpack on the couch and walked over to their tiny dorm fridge. She pulled out two sodas and handed one to Amanda.

"That's OK. Most of the guys there were big jerks. Don't think another thing about it. I've kind of got my eye on Kevin from my astronomy class anyway, and he's not the partying type."

"He seems like a nice guy, but I thought you were just good friends?"

"That's my strategy. Get him close and then pounce. Enough about Kevin, what are you going to do now? I know you don't like to give up."

"I'm not sure if there is anything else I can do. It just doesn't feel right," Devyn fumed as she paced their tiny room.

When Devyn was twelve, she'd watched a car bomb go off outside a supermarket in Iran. She'd sensed something was wrong as she watched two men get out of a parked car, their eyes darting up and down the street nervously for a brief moment before taking off, nearly at a run. The man in the driver's seat stared straight ahead. His spine straight, his jaw clenched, and his hands gripping the steering wheel, despite the engine being turned off.

Her mother was always nervous when they were in the city running errands without her father, so she yanked Devyn by the arm and pulled her into the

store.

"The man in the parked car is up to no good," Devyn whispered to her mother."

"Did you see something?" her mother asked as she quickly ushered Devyn toward the back of the store away from the windows.

"Two guys scrambled out of the car and took off real fast, but the third guy stayed. He looks scared and nervous."

Her mother grabbed her hand and they quickly walked through the door leading to the back of the store just as the bomb went off, sending glass flying and the roof collapsing as people screamed and ran for cover.

Devyn stopped pacing. The deafening blast of the bomb and the terrified screams of mothers and children brought vivid memories of that day back to her in a frightening torrent. She clenched the can in her hand so tightly that the soda oozed out of the top and down her arm. She began to shake as she squeezed the can even tighter.

"Devyn, are you OK?" Amanda gently shook Devyn's shoulder.

It took a moment to remember where she was, but as cool sticky liquid trickled down her arm Devyn's focus returned to the present.

"I'm fine, I was just thinking of another time when I was certain something bad was going to happen. There was nothing I could do to stop it. If there is anything I can do this time, I have to try, but I just keep hitting brick walls everywhere I turn."

"I take it you didn't have any better luck with the Dean or the campus police?"

"The Dean's condescending reaction didn't really

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surprise me. Heaven forbid anyone think this campus might not be the safe, secure haven of learning the university would like the parents of incoming freshman to believe. You would think, though, that the police would at least consider my arguments and put a few extra patrols in place for a while or install more lights or cameras.”

Devyn had heard whispers around campus, especially among her fellow criminal justice majors, confirming she wasn't alone in her belief that something evil lurked on the fringes of their academic world. Most students tried to act like they weren't worried, but fear sizzled just beneath the surface of campus life.

“I guess all we can do is be extra careful,” Amanda said. “But, we got to keep living. We can't let the fear of something we're uncertain will ever happen ruin our college experience. This is supposed to be some of the best times of our life.”

Devyn nodded as she sat at her desk in front of her computer. She pulled up the news report of a brutal murder last fall. The body of a freshman from one of the school's sororities was found eleven miles away from campus in the woods on state land. She had been beaten and strangled. The community was afraid, and the school grieved, but life slowly got back to normal. During this spring semester a sophomore was found hanging in her apartment, the authorities ruled it suicide.

Was some sicko targeting one student each semester? Would the next one be a junior like she and Amanda? Devyn would like to believe there was no connection and nothing would happen, but with a new school year starting, she feared that another victim

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would be targeted. Unfortunately, no one shared her concern.

THREE

Figuring out the daily routine of the blonde woman was difficult. She was always with her observant and cagey friend. The taller one, constantly looking over her shoulder, seemed to be aware of his presence, even if she couldn't see him. Normally he would have tired of her interference and killed her, but he was beginning to enjoy the challenge. She was a formidable foe. When he did get to the woman's friend, which he knew he would, the success would be all the sweeter.

It had taken him a month, but he had figured both their class schedules and where they lived. The tall one had a car, so neither ever took public transportation. Despite enjoying the hunt, he'd have to find a way to make a move soon. As inept as the campus police seemed to be, eventually someone might figure out that he didn't belong.

The library was quiet as usual and held many private nooks in which to keep away from prying eyes. He found a secluded place and logged onto a computer. One by one, he pulled up the descriptions of both women's classes. As he read through the public syllabus of the astronomy class his target attended, a smile eased across his lips. The class included two

nighttime outdoor field trips to view the night skies. All he had to do was find out when the next field trip would take place and where. Unless the tall one decided to show up, he had found the perfect time to strike.

For now, he could quit following the women, which was a good thing since he risked being discovered every time he tracked them. He knew the time and location of the astronomy class, so he would find a gullible student to slip him the date and time he needed. It wouldn't be difficult. This time he'd target a young male; they weren't nearly as wary of strangers as the females. He'd single out the most avid sky-watcher and it wouldn't take much to coax out the information.

He left the library, pulled the campus map out of his back pocket, and confirmed which building held the astronomy classrooms. Yes, he'd been there before while following the blondes. They didn't both attend the same class, but broke off in different directions before they reached the old building's stately doors.

Safe in the knowledge that the cagey one had no reason to enter the building, he followed a student inside. He walked to the bulletin board and read through the official notices posted.

"Are you looking for something specific," a young man wearing glasses asked.

"I was hoping they had posted information on the astronomy class night-sky field trip. I know I wrote it down, but I can't find my note."

"They always do those on Fridays since it keeps us out a little late. Next one is tomorrow. Just be here at nine o'clock. A bunch of us are walking over to the facilities plant together."

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“Thanks, that will save me some embarrassment.” He slapped the student on the back and strolled out of the building.

He smiled. That had been much easier than he’d hoped. It didn’t leave a lot of time to plan, but he was confident that by Saturday morning his tall foe would be wondering if the man she’d glimpsed several times was the one who had taken her friend. Would she blame herself? Would she try to find him or give his description to the authorities? The possibilities made him giddy with excitement.

FOUR

Devyn was glad Amanda was going out with her astronomy class before the night-sky event later in the evening. Amanda would be with a large group, so Devyn wouldn't have to worry about her friend's safety. And having their dorm room to herself would give her the opportunity to examine her ill-gotten booty.

One of her criminal justice classmates, Brad Jacobs, worked at the campus police station. While inputting reports on parking tickets, vandalism, and other minor violations, he came across the police report on the two incidents that had been keeping Devyn up at night. Apparently, the local police hadn't totally disregarded her theory that the sophomore wasn't a suicide and there might be a collegiate connection between the two young women. Otherwise, they wouldn't have shared the reports with the campus police.

Knowing she was convinced that students were being targeted, Brad printed a copy of the reports for her. In return, she'd promised to go out on a date with him. Dinner and a movie with the tech nerd was a small price to pay to satisfy her curiosity after he risked his job for her. Besides, it wasn't as if she had a multitude of guys knocking down her door for dates.

Amanda said most were probably afraid of her after word got out about the football player. And, she actually had a soft spot for guys like Brad—those who were probably bullied in high school, but would eventually have those same bullies mowing his lawn.

Devyn zapped a frozen burrito in the microwave and made a pot of coffee. It probably wasn't the most nutritious dinner she could have come up with, but she was anxious to start digging through the pages in her backpack.

Sitting at her desk, she pulled out the two reports and opened up a blank document on her computer. She made a quick table with two columns, one for each case. She typed in "State Park Strangling" in the first column and "Apartment hanging" in the second.

As she went through the reports, she noted the similarities and the differences. Both women were enrolled at the same university and lived off campus. One incident happened in the spring, the other in the fall. A thorough autopsy was done on the woman who was battered by an apparently very careful assailant, since no unaccounted for DNA was identified. The other woman had few external wounds, so no indication that she had help hanging herself. A toxicology report was done which revealed no drugs or alcohol was in her system, but the report made no mention of an autopsy. Devyn didn't know if this was an omission in the report or if one had not been done.

Devyn moved onto the crime scene photos. She wished she had the digital copies of the reports rather than black and white printed pages so she could enhance the images. Nonetheless, she couldn't quit staring at the hanging victim, something in the photograph wasn't right. After several moments it

dawned on her.

Grabbing her cell phone, she typed a quick text to Brad asking if he would get a break anytime soon. He responded that he was due in fifteen minutes and could meet her at the coffee shop around the corner from the campus police station.

Devyn confirmed she'd be there, put the copy of the photograph in her jacket pocket and darted out of her room.

FIVE

Despite Devyn being her best friend and roommate, Amanda was happy to be out with her astronomy classmates, who had no obsession about potential serial killers. The group gathered around six tables they had pushed together, and enjoyed pizza and discussing the endless prospects of undiscovered life that awaited in the vast universe.

Amanda wasn't an astronomy major, but had taken the class to fulfill her science requirements in the most interesting way she could think of. If she'd known three years ago what she knew now, maybe she would have pursued a career studying the stars. The subject was interesting, her fellow classmates were passionate, and there was something about contemplating the universe that soothed the soul and opened the mind to all possibilities.

The excitement surrounding the evening's field trip was palpable. It was a welcome diversion from the classroom and the opportunity to use some amazing and very expensive telescopes to view the night skies had them all abuzz.

"A little less chatter and a little more eating," one of the seniors ordered. "We need to start walking in less than an hour, and there is no point in wasting all

this food.”

Amanda grabbed another slice of pepperoni pizza as the chatter continued. She glanced out the window as the sun slowly set, casting a dim light over the beautiful campus. She had only been out a few times at night all semester because of Devyn’s paranoia. Amanda appreciated her friend’s caution and concern, but it had put a serious damper on her social life. She was kind of surprised that Kevin had been allowed to walk her to the pizza parlor without Devyn accompanying them both.

“How’s the pizza,” Kevin asked, breaking into Amanda’s thoughts.

“Great.” She returned his warm smile and didn’t pull away when he reached over and squeezed her hand. There was no way Amanda would let her friend ruin any opportunity to spend time with Kevin. If he asked her out, Devyn would just have to put her crazy ideas aside. In this case three would definitely be a crowd.