

Prologue

“You’ve got to stop this.”

Her husband’s voice reached her slowly, as if from a great distance, even though she knew he was standing at the doorway to her daughter’s room. Instead of turning, Linda Varner continued methodically pulling things out from underneath Haley’s unmade bed.

A red-and-white cheerleading pom-pom. A bright pink sweatshirt Haley wore over everything. A stack of glossy magazines, dedicated to the things a teenage girl worried about, like how to know if a boy had a crush on her.

Linda suppressed a sob before it passed her lips. Still, she felt her body shudder and knew her husband had seen it.

“This won’t bring her home,” Pete said softly, in the kind of careful, muted tone usually reserved for funeral homes and grave sites.

Linda squeezed her eyes tight, bringing the sweatshirt up to her nose. She inhaled, hoping to breathe in some of the too-sweet vanilla scent her daughter loved to wear, but there was only a slight musty smell.

How could Haley’s perfume have faded so quickly?

Linda sat there, the sweatshirt crumpled against her nose, her body hunched protectively, until she heard her husband sigh and walk away. Only then did she open her eyes and look around Haley’s room. Everything seemed so *untouched*. The police had been careful not to disturb anything, wearing their sterile gloves and their solemn expressions as they’d searched for some hint of where Haley could be.

Linda glanced back at the doorway. It was empty.

Pete would be back later. They did this routine every night. He’d give her another hour, then he’d coax her to bed. Some days she’d stand and follow him willingly; when she felt glued to the floor, he’d carry her. Then he’d hand her a glass of water and those pills her doctor had prescribed and she’d dutifully swallow two, let the blackness consume her.

Pete had stood by her. She knew it hadn’t been easy—that *she* hadn’t been easy to live with lately. But he could only share so much of the loss. He loved his stepdaughter, but he’d only been in her life for a few years.

“Where are you, Haley?” Linda whispered into the stillness.

Today marked exactly a month since her daughter had gone missing. Since Haley’s boyfriend, Jordan, had dropped her off at school for cheerleading practice. Since her best friend, Marissa, had waved to her from the field on that unusually warm day, watched her walk into the school, presumably to change before joining Marissa at practice.

She’d never walked out again.

When she hadn't reappeared, Marissa had been sent to the locker room to get her. Only she hadn't been there. A search of the school hadn't turned her up. Now, thirty days later, they still hadn't found her.

How did a teenage girl go missing from *inside* her high school? No one could answer that for Linda. As time went by, the cops seemed to have fewer answers and more questions.

But Linda *knew*. She knew with some deep part of her she could only explain as mother's intuition that Haley was out there somewhere. And not buried in an unmarked grave, as she'd overheard two cops speculating when day after day passed with no more clues. Haley was still alive. Linda knew it. She was alive, and just waiting for someone to bring her home.

So every day, Linda forced herself out of bed, dressed in her most professional clothes and a heavy layer of makeup to hide the haggard signs of grief and went to the police station for an update. When she finished there, she talked to the news channels, begged them to do another feature or even a small mention of Haley, so she wouldn't be forgotten. So people would keep searching for her.

Then she moved on to social media, the places her daughter had visited and which she'd never had any interest in until now. Each day, she posted two new messages. One requesting any information about her daughter's whereabouts, which was shared thousands of times because of all the press. And one directly to her daughter, letting Haley know she'd never give up, never stop looking.

Only at night, after she'd shown the world how strong she could be, did she come here, and indulge her weakness. Her fears.

Why wasn't there more information? Why hadn't anyone spotted her and come forward? How could a seventeen-year-old girl just disappear?

Linda clutched the sweatshirt tighter, feeling the sobs well up again. She fell against Haley's bed, trying to hold them in, and the mattress slid away from her, hard enough to move the box spring.

Linda slipped, too. Swearing, she sat up, then froze as the edge of a tiny black notebook caught her attention.

The book was jammed between the box spring and the bed frame. The cops must have missed it, because she'd seen them peer underneath Haley's mattress when they'd looked through the room, assessing her daughter's things so matter-of-factly.

Linda's pulse skyrocketed as she yanked it out. She didn't recognize the notebook, but when she opened the cover, there was no mistaking her daughter's girly handwriting. And the words...

She dropped the notebook, practically flung it away from her in her desire to get rid of it, to un-see it. She didn't realize she'd started screaming until her husband ran into the room and wrapped his arms around her.

"What? What is it?" he kept asking, but all she could do was sob and point a shaking hand at the notebook, lying open to the first page, and Haley's distinctive scrawl.

If you're reading this, I'm already dead.

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Kyle McKenzie leaned across the table in the tiny Italian restaurant with the dim, romantic lighting, and said in a too-calm voice, “I start my new job at the Washington Field Office tomorrow.”

Evelyn Baine felt the same surge of regret she always felt when this topic came up. “I’m glad they had a spot open up for you there.”

They both worked for the FBI, her as a profiler in the Behavioral Analysis Unit, and Kyle, up until a month ago, as an operator for the Hostage Rescue Team. He’d been off work since taking a bullet on a mission. She’d known how risky the mission was and couldn’t help but think she hadn’t pushed hard enough to stop HRT from going in. Now here they were. Kyle pretending he was okay with leaving the job he’d loved. And her pretending she didn’t feel guilty as hell over it.

He shrugged his good shoulder, the one that hadn’t been torn up by a bullet. “Yeah. I’m surprised I got it, but I wanted to stay close. To you, of course, and...”

He trailed off, but she knew the rest, anyway. He wanted to be close to his old team. The FBI’s Washington Field Office was only a forty-five minute drive—with a siren—from Quantico, where HRT was located.

Evelyn worked in Aquia, the town right beside Quantico, herself. The entire time she’d been at the BAU, she’d gotten used to Kyle making the eight and a half-mile drive to see her at her office. He’d pretended he wasn’t coming to see her. But everyone around him had seen through it. Eventually, so had she, and she’d decided to act on it. Now, they’d been dating for six months, and even though she saw him more often, she’d missed seeing him at work, missed their old office banter, over the past month.

He missed the team. She knew it, even if he wasn’t saying it out loud. As an HRT agent, he got sent out on critical missions—everything from stopping a prison riot to rescuing hostages from inside a survivalist compound to assisting with overseas rescues in war zones. The rest of the time was spent training for those missions. It was completely different from being a regular Special Agent.

She wasn’t sure if he’d be able to return to that life. She couldn’t imagine doing it herself, even though she’d worked in a Violent Crimes Major Offenders squad for six years before coming over to the BAU.

She stared across the candlelit table at him now, seeing the tension he was trying to hide. Maybe he could go back to HRT someday. But more likely, his career was going to head in a different direction.

She fiddled with her napkin, reflexively looking at the door of the near-empty restaurant as it opened. Until very recently, she and Kyle had hidden their relationship. It felt strange to be out in public, in Virginia, where someone from the FBI might see them.

Ironically, they'd only been able to officially tell the FBI because he no longer worked in the Critical Incident Response Group, which included both the BAU and HRT. He'd wanted to announce it from the start. She'd been sure that would mean reassignment for one of them. And she didn't have quite two years in at the BAU—where she hoped to stay until mandatory retirement, which was still twenty-seven years away.

She gave him an embarrassed smile when she realized it was just another patron that had drawn her attention to the door. Some habits were hard to break. "This feels weird."

He smiled back at her, making crinkles fan out from his ocean-blue eyes, and the slightest hint of dimples dent his cheeks. "Maybe you enjoy your secrets a little too much."

Maybe he was right. She'd always been a private person, and in an office full of profilers, keeping anything to yourself wasn't easy. It was ingrained in them the same way it was in her: assess everyone you meet, try to see through the mask to what was underneath. Dig up those secrets.

She tried to relax, unbuttoning the loose-fitting suit jacket she'd worn straight from the office. It hid the SIG Sauer she always kept strapped to her hip, but didn't exactly scream "date clothes."

When the restaurant door squeaked open again, and she instantly looked over, Kyle twined his fingers through hers across the table, and the light contact brought her attention back to him.

"What do you say we get dinner to go?"

His big, calloused hand seemed even paler wrapped around her tiny, darker one. So different, just like their personalities—but somehow they worked.

She nodded, but before she could add, "Let's go," her phone buzzed from her pocket.

She pulled it out, but the instant she saw Dan Moore's name pop up, she regretted grabbing it. Her boss calling her at nine at night meant a new case had come in, one that couldn't wait.

Six months ago, she'd been his go-to agent for urgent cases, because she didn't mind the late-night calls. Hell, she lived for the job.

But right now? With Kyle McKenzie's deep blue eyes staring back at her? "This better be good," she muttered before answering, "Dan? What's up?"

"Remember the case file that made the rounds in the office last month?" Dan replied without preamble. "The missing teenager?"

"Right," she said slowly. She'd been through fifty cases since then, but that one stuck out.

A seventeen-year-old girl last seen walking into her high school had gone missing, no signs of foul play. The BAU had passed the police file around the room, but there hadn't been enough to go on to give a solid profile, and they hadn't been able to spare a profiler for more in-depth involvement.

"Did they find her?" Evelyn asked.

"Would I be calling you if they had?" Dan snapped, then said, "Sorry. Look, we told the police department this was probably a stranger abduction since no body had turned up, and the noncustodial parent hadn't run. But now they have a note, suggesting the kidnapper was someone in the girl's life, after all."

"Okay," Evelyn said slowly as Kyle unthreaded his hand from hers and walked over to the waiter. Undoubtedly he was ordering food to go, knowing their evening had just ended.

"So, if it's someone in her life, shouldn't—"

“Yeah, normally that would make it more of a straightforward police matter. But we can spare a profiler for a week or so, and the note was disturbing. The girl left it herself. She predicted her own death.”

Evelyn let the words sink in. “They have a body?”

“No. Still no sign of the girl. But the mom is hysterical, and she’s gotten close with the local news stations. The police need help getting in front of this.”

“If she predicted her death, there’s more to the case than it seemed.”

“You got it,” Dan agreed. “Detective Sophia Lopez is expecting you.” He hung up, as details of Haley Cooke’s missing-persons case came back to Evelyn.

“Nice talking to you, too,” Evelyn muttered. Her boss was usually terse—at least with her—but lately he’d been abrupt with everyone. She tucked her phone into her jacket as Kyle returned with to-go bags of food.

“Duty calls?” Kyle guessed, glancing around the still-empty restaurant. “I guess our big debut night on the town will have to wait.”

She nodded ruefully. Apparently they weren’t the only ones who had been hiding something from the people around them.

So had Haley Cooke, the seventeen-year-old girl whose background had revealed a popular, straight-A student whose most dangerous pastime seemed to be standing on top of a cheerleading pyramid.

What had she gotten involved in that she thought would get her killed?

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