

PROLOGUE

Lindsey Keeble sang along to “Fun.” on the radio, trying to pretend she wasn’t freaked out by the dark. It was one in the morning and she hated driving this lonely stretch of highway between Greenville and Boden. Rain was threatening to turn to snow. The wind was gusting so forcefully that the tall trees looming high above her on the ridge made her swerve nervously toward the center line. The back tires slid on the asphalt and she slowed; no way did she want to wreck her precious little car.

She worked evenings at a gas station in Boden. It was quiet enough she usually got some studying done between customers. Tonight everyone and their dog were filling up ahead of a possible early winter storm. You’d think they’d never seen snow before.

A flash of red lights in her rearview had her heart squeezing. Dammit!

She hadn’t been speeding—she couldn’t afford a ticket and never drank alcohol. She signaled to pull over and stopped on the verge. Lindsey lived responsibly because she wanted a life bigger than her parochial hometown. She wasn’t some hillbilly. She wanted to travel and see the world—Paris, Greece, maybe the pyramids if the unrest settled down. She peered through the sleet drenched glass as a black SUV pulled in tight behind her.

A tall dark figure approached her vehicle. A cop’s gold shield tapped against the glass. Frigid damp air flooded the interior as she rolled down the window and she huddled into her jacket as rain spat at her.

“License and registration.” A low voice rumbled in that authoritative way cops had. He wore a dark slicker over black clothes. The gun on his hip glinted in the headlights of his vehicle. She didn’t recognize his face, but then she couldn’t really see his features with ice stinging her eyes.

“What’s this about?” Her teeth chattered. She found the documents in her glove box and purse, and handed them over. Her hands returned to grip the hard plastic of the steering wheel as she waited. “I wasn’t speeding.”

“There’s an alert out on a stolen red Neon so thought I’d check it out.”

“Well, this is my car and I’ve done nothing wrong.” She knew her rights. “You’ve got no reason to stop me.”

“You were driving erratically.” The voice got deeper and angrier. She winced. Never piss off a cop. “Plus, you’ve got a broken taillight. That gives me a reason.”

Lindsey’s worry was replaced by annoyance. She snapped off her seatbelt and applied the parking brake. She’d been shafted last year when another driver had sideswiped her in a parking lot and then

claimed she'd been at fault to the insurers. "It was fine when I left for work this afternoon. I haven't hit anything in the meantime." Goddamn it.

"Go take a look." The cop stood back. He had a nice face despite the hard mouth and even harder eyes. Maybe she could sweet talk him out of a ticket, not that she was real good at sweet talk. Her dad could fix the light in the morning but if she had to pay a ticket as well, every hour of work today would have been for nothing.

She pulled the hood of her slicker over her head and climbed out. The headlights of his SUV blinded her as she took a few steps. She shielded her gaze and frowned. "I don't see anything—"

A surge of fire shot through her back. Pain exploded in a shockwave of screeching agony that overwhelmed her from the tips of her ears to the gaps between her toes. She'd never experienced anything like it. Sweat bloomed on her skin, clashing with sleet as she hit the tarmac. Rough hands grabbed her around the middle and hoisted her into the air. She couldn't control her arms or legs. She was shifted onto a hip where something unyielding bit into her stomach. She fought the urge to vomit even as her brain whirled.

It took a moment to make sense of what was happening.

This man wasn't a cop.

Still reeling from the stun gun, she couldn't get enough purchase to kick him, but she flailed at his knees and tried to elbow him in the balls. It didn't make any difference and she found herself dumped into the cold confines of the rear of his SUV. He zapped her again until her fillings felt like they were going to fall out and her bladder released.

The world tilted and she was on her front, face pressed into a dirty rubber mat, arms yanked behind her as something metal bit into one wrist, then the other. Handcuffs. Oh, God. She was handcuffed. A sharp pain ripped through her chest—if she didn't calm down she was going to die of a heart attack.

A ripping sound rang out in the darkness. She was shoved onto her back, and a piece of duct tape slapped over her mouth. It tangled with her hair and was gonna hurt like a bitch when it came off.

Something told her that was the least of her worries.

There was no reason for him to kidnap her unless he was going to hurt her. Or kill her.

The realization made everything stop. Every movement. Every frantic breath. Her heart raced and bile burned her throat as she stared into those cold, pitiless eyes. With a grunt he slammed the trunk closed, plunging her into a vast and consuming darkness. Rain beat the metal around her like an

ominous drum. She was scared of the dark. Scared of monsters. Humiliated by the cold dampness between her legs. How could this have happened to her? One minute she was driving home, the next...

Where was her phone?

She rolled around, trying to feel it in her pockets. Shit. It was still in her purse in the passenger seat of her car. There was a crashing sound in the trees. She closed her eyes against the escalating panic. He'd gotten rid of her car. An elephant-sized lump threatened to choke her. She'd worked her ass off for that car, but finances and credit-ratings were moot if she didn't survive this ordeal. This man was going to hurt her. She wriggled backward so her fingers could scabble with the lock but there was nothing, and the panel above her head didn't budge even when she kicked it. How dare he do this to me? How dare he treat her as if she was nothing? She wanted to fight and rail against the injustice but as the SUV started up she was immobilized by terror. All her life she'd fought to make things better, fought for a future and this man, this bastard, wanted to rip it all away from her. It wasn't fair. There had to be a way out. There had to be a way to survive.

She didn't want to die. She especially didn't want to die in the dark with a stranger who had eyes as cold as death. Tears brimmed. It wasn't fair. This wasn't fair.

CHAPTER ONE

It was close to midnight and Alex Parker sat in darkness.

Edgar Paul Meacher had left three hours ago, driving the white panel van he kept for this purpose alone. Meacher would have switched plates along some quiet dirt road, before going on his own little hunting excursion.

Alex had searched the farmhouse—found enough evidence to confirm this guy was the real deal, but nothing else of interest. His chair was in the shadows, facing the doorway. The sound of an engine rumbled up the drive. He wasn't nervous. He hadn't been nervous since his first assignment back in two thousand-five.

The farmhouse was about a mile outside the small town of Fleet, North Carolina; the walls pervaded by the slight sulfurous odor of rotten cabbage from the fields surrounding the property. No neighbors close enough to witness the wild parties held at the Meacher residence. No passersby to complain about the screams either. It worked for Alex too.

He tapped his finger against the cold metal of the SIG P229 fitted with a threaded 9mm barrel and suppressor, listened to the sound of a door slamming, then another door opening. A grunt of physical exertion as something heavy was dragged and hoisted.

The back door opened. Alex aimed the pistol, ready to end this now. But Meacher trundled straight down to the basement, blind in his excitement to unwrap the latest present he carried in a dirty old blanket.

Alex climbed to his feet. Walked silently across the century-old farmhouse floors and glided down the stairs like a ghost.

The basement was dark and dusty, the faint odor of decay wafting through the air. Classic serial killer lair. A single bulb lit the corner where a camp bed was set up, all comfy and cozy except for the thick plastic sheet draped across it. The floor and walls were decorated in ubiquitous gray with flecks of rust-colored paint. Except it wasn't paint. It was blood. Blood of victims who ranged in age from nineteen to thirty-five. Women who'd done nothing more than wander into Meacher's field of vision. Ten that the FBI knew about; more the authorities didn't know about. Yet.

There was a conveniently placed drain in the middle of the floor. A bucket, a hose and a few big bottles of bleach—obviously bought in bulk. Several rolls of plastic were propped against the wall, and stacks of duct tape were stashed beside the furnace. Experienced and practical—the guy was an old pro at killing.

So was Alex.

Meacher was busy securing his latest victim to the bed. Handcuffs laid out in readiness, waiting for the next lucky recipient. The scumbag—a math teacher from the local high school—generally kept the women alive for about a week before putting them out of their misery.

Alex pushed thoughts of past victims out of his head. Dead was dead and thinking about them only added to his nightmares.

Meacher snapped on the cuffs, fitting them snug to the woman's wrists, the ratcheting sound loud in the otherwise deathly quiet of the basement. Having the woman incapacitated worked for Alex, so he let Meacher finish. He didn't want her mobile. He didn't want her getting in the line of fire.

The guy never turned, never looked away from the brunette. You'd think someone attuned to stalking prey might sense another predator in his lair.

Obviously not.

Meacher licked his lips and ripped open the woman's blouse. Buttons scattered and pinged across the basement floor. Alex's revulsion for the man grew with every despicable act.

"Edgar," he whispered softly.

Meacher turned, lips forming a surprised circle as he spotted Alex on the stairs. There was no time for the man to lunge or fight as Alex put another circle between his eyes. Double-tap. The so-called "Snatcher" crumpled to the floor, too dead to bleed out.

Despite the suppressor, the sound of the gunshot made Alex's ears pound but he ignored the discomfort. Headaches plagued him from his time in a Moroccan jail, but he'd been lucky to get out alive and figured they were part of his penance. This was the other part.

He picked up both shell casings with a handkerchief and placed them in a silicone pouch he'd had custom-made. He removed the suppressor and slipped the SIG into the shoulder holster. Then he walked over to where The Snatcher's last victim lay restrained on the camp bed. Her head lolled from side to side as the effects of ketamine—Meacher's abduction drug of choice—wore off. As much as Alex wanted to release the cuffs and set the woman free, the vibration in his pocket told him it was time to leave. Her knights in body armor were about to burst through the door.

He touched her hair and spoke gently. "The feds are coming. You're going to be OK." Then he was outside, melting into the darkness as vehicles raced down nearby roads.

The FBI had once estimated there were approximately two-hundred and fifty serial killers active in the US at any one time. Alex's job was whittling that number down, one murderous asshole at a time.

FBI Special Agent Mallory Rooney held her government-issue Glock 22 flush against her thigh—round in the chamber, finger off the trigger—and crouched between her fellow agents and law enforcement officers. Her Taser was on her belt, and back-up Glock 21 strapped to her ankle. The bulky flak jacket kept out some of the November chill and adrenaline did the rest. Her temple throbbed from an earlier altercation, but a couple of extra-strength Tylenol and judicious application of make-up had masked the problem well enough to get her on the team. No way in hell was she missing this because some gangbanger had smacked her in the face.

SWAT was tied up with another hostage rescue situation in Charlotte that was going downhill fast. She'd be lying if she said she was upset about that, given she now got to participate in this assault instead. They had some highly experienced agents and local cops with them. Sheriff's deputies manned the perimeter.

She was the only first office agent—FOA—on the team. Two take-downs in one day might be a record for a rookie.

Sweat trickled in a cold line down her back. Her heart hammered but she breathed steadily and forced her pulse to calm. She'd trained for this scenario a million times over; kicked some serious butt in Hogan's Alley. But going after a serial killer who'd butchered at least ten women meant she couldn't help the tiny trill of fear that laced her nerves. Not that she'd show fellow officers that weakness. Nor would she show them the fierce sense of determination that surged through her bloodstream, to take this guy down, whatever the personal cost.

Play it cool. Do the job.

She wiped her left palm surreptitiously down the leg of her black pants, every sense on high alert as to what was going on behind the unassuming farmhouse door. She was so close to the agent in front she could smell his laundry detergent. Her best friend and mentor, Special Agent Lucas Randall, crouched behind her—probably scenting apprehension that no amount of deodorant could hide. Another four law enforcement officers mirrored their actions at the front of the building.

They'd examined the blueprints and knew the basic layout. She and Lucas were to take the basement with two sheriff's deputies covering the storm doors. The external doors and locks were shitty but they had a breacher with a battering ram prepared to open it up just in case.

She didn't move. She concentrated instead. They were waiting for the signal to enter the house of suspected serial killer, Edgar P. Meacher. Dubbed "The Snatcher" by the media, this guy had eluded authorities for four long years, taking women not only off the streets, but also from their homes, instilling terror into the heart of every woman in the Carolinas and surrounding states.

Mallory understood that visceral fear better than most. She'd lived with it every day for the past eighteen years. Her whole life was shaped around the question of why someone had taken her sister but not her. What made one person a target and another safe? How did bad guys choose their victims?

But she didn't have time to think about that right now.

The Bureau's Behavioral Analysis Unit—part of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, NCVAC—based in Quantico, Virginia, had developed a sophisticated profile of The Snatcher. This guy, Meacher, fit it to a T.

An anonymous tip-off had been phoned in to their office just as she'd finished writing her FD 302 regarding this morning's arrests. A member of the public had informed her that the guy they were looking for was one Edgar Paul Meacher of Fleet, North Carolina. It didn't mean Meacher was their guy, but a woman matching this UNSUB's preferred victim profile had been abducted earlier this

evening, and they didn't have time to sit around debating the best course of appropriate action. They were going in. They had to.

Her fingers tightened on the butt of her pistol.

Supervisory Special Agent Petra Danbridge gave them the order to "go" over the radio. Adrenaline surged through her bloodstream. The breacher rammed the door and with a loud crash they all raced inside. Speed was of the essence because stealth had been blown out of the water when they'd smashed down the doors.

Mallory and Lucas took the stairs to the basement. Sweat formed on her brow despite the cool air flowing up the stairwell. She caught the aroma of blood and that faint echo of death. Mentally she braced herself for whatever lay ahead. Even so it shocked her.

Meacher lay crumpled in a small pool of his own blood. No weapon visible.

"Subject down, in the basement!" she yelled. Feet pounded the boards above them as the house was systematically searched.

She and Lucas cautiously approached the prone figure who sported a dime-size bullet-hole between his eyes. Mallory peered closer. There were actually two bullet holes, so close together as to be almost indistinguishable. Whoever killed him had either gotten lucky or was a hell of a marksman.

She held her gun on the suspect as Lucas reached down to check Meacher's pulse. Her gaze flickered to the victim who lay perfectly still on the bed. It was Janelle Ebert, the woman who'd been reported missing.

Alive, or were they too late?

"He's dead," Lucas confirmed.

Mallory walked swiftly over to the woman, touched two fingers to her neck, searching for a pulse. A huge swell of relief burst through her at the feel of warm flesh and a solid beat at the base of her throat. "She's alive. I don't see any obvious injuries." Her voice caught and she stumbled through her own nightmares. Put it away, Mal. She scanned the restraints. "She's also cuffed. Who the hell shot Meacher?"

They went back on high alert, she and Lucas moving in tandem to clear the rest of the basement. It wasn't big. There was a massive upright freezer—Mallory could wait a lifetime to go through that sucker. Steps to storm doors off to the right. There was also a small room built into the corner, with the door firmly closed. A furnace fired up, making them both jump. She and Lucas looked at each

other, nodded in silent communication, and stood on either side of the doorway to the small room. Lucas turned the knob and pulled the door outward. Mallory went in low, but there was no one there.

There were enough glossy photographs plastered to the wall that even if there hadn't been a woman handcuffed to a bed, Mallory would have no doubt Meacher was their UNSUB. Sweet Jesus. A choking sensation rose up in her throat but she forced it away. She quickly scanned the photos, searching for a sister she hadn't seen in eighteen years even as she told herself not to. Then she made herself stop. There were other things to deal with first.

SSA Danbridge came down the stairs; the woman's boots were lethal weapons but at least Mal always knew where her boss was.

"It's clear," Lucas shouted.

"Get the EMTs down here," Danbridge yelled behind her, stepping around Meacher's corpse and walking to where Mallory and Lucas stood staring into what had to be Meacher's trophy room. "I didn't hear a shot."

"He was already dead when we got here." Lucas looked disappointed as he holstered his weapon. "Which is a damn shame because I'd have loved to haul his ass off to jail."

The woman on the bed groaned and Mallory strode across to her, holstering her own weapon even though the creepy cellar made her scalp prickle. "Where are those EMTs? Can I take these cuffs off?"

Danbridge looked pissed but nodded, then, "Wait!" She pulled out her cell phone and took a series of photographs of the woman, the cuffs, the proximity of the bed in relation to the body. Meacher was a serial killer but he'd obviously been murdered. This was a crime scene on multiple levels but the safety and comfort of living victims always came first.

"Do you think he had a partner who tipped us off and then killed him?" asked Lucas.

"Meacher's only been dead a few minutes. You can still smell the gun powder." Mallory sniffed the air. "It would have been a hell of a risk to tip us off just before he killed him."

"I'll set up roadblocks and a search party." Danbridge spoke quickly into her radio.

"Someone might have set up Meacher to be the fall guy," Lucas offered.

"Maybe." Mallory grimaced. "But nothing about the profile suggested Meacher had a partner and those images"—she jerked her thumb over her shoulder—"only show one male subject in action. We should search for video footage. No way he'd be satisfied with just photographs."

EMTs arrived on the scene and pounded down the wooden steps. Danbridge herded them away from Meacher's body. "You don't need to worry about him." Tall and blond, Supervisory Special Agent Danbridge put the 'bitch' in ambitious. Mallory had a great deal of respect for her boss as an agent, but she wasn't an empathetic being. No warm and fuzzies in the girls' restroom back at the office. "Touch anything apart from the woman on the bed and I'll report your asses."

Yup. About as warm and cuddly as a tarantula.

Both EMTs rolled their eyes as Mallory unlocked the handcuffs using keys Meacher had left tauntingly close to the bed, just out of reach of the victim. The woman started to moan, then blink and frown in confusion.

"You're okay, Miss. Can you tell me your name?" the EMT asked, strapping a blood pressure cuff to her arm.

"Where am I? Was I in an accident?" Her voice was hoarse. "The man said I was going to be okay. Said the feds were coming. Why would the FBI be here?" She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead.

"Lie still," the medic admonished.

"I feel dizzy. God, I didn't have that much to drink."

"Who told you the FBI were coming?" Mallory asked, exchanging a glance with Lucas. The trouble with special-K was it could produce vivid hallucinations and often made witness statements not only inadmissible, but downright freaky. Still, right now they had nothing else to go on. Maybe she'd remember some detail about whoever shot Meacher. "Did you get a look at his face?"

"A really nice looking guy. Unless I was dreaming." Dark brown eyes focused and unfocused as she squinted at Mallory's face. "Are you with the FBI? What happened? Where am I?"

But before Mal could answer, the woman caught sight of Meacher's corpse lying on the floor, and seemed to become aware of her ripped blouse, the crinkle of plastic beneath her. She half sat up, looked around at the cold dank basement, and started to sob. Then she started to scream.

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