

# TAKEN

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# DEE HENDERSON



**BETHANYHOUSE**

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# 1

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Matthew Dane collected change from his pocket as the elevator settled into place on the sixth floor of the Bismarck Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia. The doors slid open to a quiet hallway. Most attendees at the conference were still in sessions on the main level. He stopped in the vending area and bought a cold soda.

He felt satisfied with how his presentation—*Best Practices in the Dialog Between the Police and Victim Families*—had gone. He thought his opening section had been too long, as most at this national law-enforcement symposium had heard him speak before and didn't need the background, but the overhead slides designed to lighten the tone had gotten spontaneous laughter from the audience. He'd made his points without beating anyone over the head with his advice. Now that his part was over, he could relax and enjoy the last two days as an attendee.

Married friends had invited him to join them for a late dinner. Inevitably, they would also invite a woman to make up the numbers. His friends were predictable that way. He'd need to spend part of the evening putting whoever she was at ease.

He'd deal with the situation with some grace—he just hoped she already knew his life story so he didn't have to tell it again over a meal. His wife, Jessica, had died young. He'd get married again—he knew Jessica would want him to—and he thought about it occasionally. But he'd be forty-two this year, and his life already had enough open chapters.

A young woman was sitting on the floor in the hallway outside his hotel room. She didn't rise when he drew near, just looked up at him. She looked . . . tired. And mildly curious. Her white shorts showed off long tanned legs, and the sandals revealed dainty feet with painted toenails. The contrasting pink top was remarkably sedate, blousy, and pretty. The look suited her and reminded him of his daughter. For that reason more than any other he simply offered a casual, "Looking for me?"

She opened an envelope, pulled out a newspaper clipping, and held it up. "Is this you?"

He accepted what she offered. The newspaper article with accompanying photo was old, well-worn, and crumbling at the fold. From the *Boston Globe*, he thought, recognizing the photo and knowing the date it had been taken. He was holding his daughter, her head lowered under the hood of a police sweatshirt, walking with her down the police station's steps. She had just turned sixteen—shy, scared, gangly, and thin. The photo had been snapped late on the day of her rescue as he was taking her home. It'd been the best day of his life since her disappearance when she was eight years old. "My daughter and I," he confirmed.

That image had captured the start for the two of them of a journey that had pushed them together into a father-daughter relationship that was to this day still hard to explain. Becky had been, in alternating waves, suicidal and angry, terrified and

manic, overjoyed with freedom, so determined to rebuild her life and push away what had happened in those missing eight years. He'd been there for his daughter, getting her through those years and beyond to something now remarkably healthy, happy, and if not whole, at least wise and wonderful and able to deal with the past in a sane way when others brought it up.

"She's finishing her first year in college," he mentioned, smiling as he said it, remembering Becky as she had been this last weekend, straddling a stool in the kitchen of their Boston home on a flying visit home from college to grab more clothes and different posters, munching on a carrot and arguing the fact he just *had* to get a haircut and please, please, *please* could he remember to lose the old leather jacket before he came to meet her new roommate's family? They already thought he was a Spenser-type tough guy with credentials as a licensed private investigator. Introducing himself as a retired cop would be okay, but a PI implied he liked to snoop.

He'd laughed at her request and fed her clam chowder that night, promising to be on his best behavior when he met the roommate's family, pleased that his daughter was moving from a single room to a double and acquiring a roommate. He had in fact done a bit of snooping. He knew more about her new roommate than the girl's parents probably did, and concluded his daughter would be safe with her. The roommate loved to party and be out and about town, but she refused to drink or do drugs and was exclusive in her relationship with her boyfriend. She was the extrovert to his daughter's more reserved nature and, Matthew thought, a very nice girl. One of the reasons he'd agreed to come speak at this Atlanta conference as a last-minute replacement was because his daughter had truly now settled at college, with plans to stay on campus to take summer classes.

Matthew took a final look at the article and photo, then refolded it. He wondered why this woman would have such an old clipping. He offered it back to her.

“Can I show you something else?”

“Sure.”

She pulled another clipping from the envelope. Tired of towe-  
ring over her, he hunkered down beside her, one arm resting  
casually on his knee, drink in hand. He took the second clip-  
ping. A missing-person case out of Chicago, picked up by the  
Associated Press, this also from the *Boston Globe*. Shannon  
Bliss, age sixteen, missing along with her car; she had not ar-  
rived home after visiting friends over the three-day Memorial  
Day weekend. A reward of twenty-five thousand was offered  
for information. The photo looked like it'd come from a high  
school yearbook. A pretty girl, he thought. He looked at the  
date on the clipping . . . this had happened eleven years ago.  
He studied the woman who had offered it. He could see a good  
resemblance.

He didn't work many missing-person cases anymore. Becky  
had asked him to give those up for a few years, to consider  
going back to being a cop working robberies, or teaching at the  
police academy—and let his company, Dane Investigations, be  
run by his staff, at least the day-to-day. A missing sister could  
explain why this woman had sought him out, and he did know  
some people in Chicago who might be able to help her. A few  
of them were at this conference, and he could make some calls  
and introductions on her behalf. “Your sister?” he asked.

“That's me.” Silence lingered after her quiet words. “I'd like  
to go home,” she whispered.

He watched her knuckles turn white where she gripped the  
envelope, her other hand flexed against the carpet. Her eyes

averted from his to stare down the empty hall. A stillness settled into his muscles. “Did you run away?”

She was quiet for so long he wasn’t sure she would answer.

“No.” More a breath than a word, but he heard it.

He felt his heart begin to crack on her behalf. The nuances mattered now, seeing them, hearing them, and he didn’t have history with this woman to fall back on to help him understand her. “What name do you go by now?”

“Shannon White.”

“Have you spoken with the police?”

She shook her head swiftly. He didn’t let himself show a reaction to that news, just absorbed it. There were things his job had taught him, experiences with his daughter, an awareness that came from so many he had talked with over the last decade, and it all coalesced and settled in his mind. He couldn’t afford to project or assume the wrong thing here. The odds she was in fact Shannon Bliss were small, but they were real enough to pursue. She looked as though she was telling him the truth as she knew it. *God, help me.* The quiet prayer went straight to his Father, and he took a deep breath, let it flow out. A hallway wasn’t the place for this conversation, but a pause would give her time to change her mind about talking with him, so he stayed where he was. There were things he had to know simply not to hurt her further, and he chose his next words with extreme care. “Eleven years is a long time. When did . . . ?”

Her hand settled very lightly, very carefully, on his arm as she shook her head. “Please don’t ask.”

Her gaze shifted back to hold his. He could literally see an enforced poise reasserting itself, see the strength of will it took on her part to slide that calm back in place. It would make his job particularly hard, having her choose silence rather than spill

out the details of what had occurred in an emotional wave—he needed that story. But she was coping, and she was giving him the first parameters that defined how she was coping. He had to respect that.

*She's learned to hide.* The thought settled deep into his consciousness with such a profound certainty that he suspected it had actually been God's comment to him. It rang true. What he was seeing was the image she wanted him to see, all of it deliberate, down to the painted toenails and the cute sandals. Something eased inside him as he realized that about her. He was seeing her internal strength. She'd need that, however this ultimately unfolded. "Come inside," he said, standing, "and let me make a few calls, push off a dinner meeting I was supposed to be at tonight. Or would you prefer to meet me at the restaurant downstairs? We can ask for a private table—"

"I'd rather not go downstairs."

His eyes narrowed at her quick response. Someone in the hotel she was worried about? He used his card to open the room door behind her, then stepped back from her in the hall. He didn't offer a hand to help her rise. His daughter had taught him a few things. She rose gracefully.

Probably five-foot-seven or -eight, he guessed. She looked healthy—her eyes were clear, her skin evenly tanned, the bones in her arms and legs not overtly visible as a sign she was too thin. If anything, the muscle tone in her arms and legs suggested she was a pretty good athlete. There were small scars under that tan—on the side of her leg, her knee, on her forearm, the back of her wrist, mirroring some of his own from years of activity on the water fishing, boating, hauling ropes, running on the beach, and climbing over piles of boulders that dotted the Massachusetts shoreline between stretches of open sand.

The fact there were not more visible scars, especially around her wrists and ankles, was a small sliver of good news.

She glanced around his hotel room. It was a pleasant if impersonal room divided into two parts: a seating area with a two-person couch, barrel chair, and small desk with a straight-back chair set across from a television, which could angle any direction in the room. His suitcase lay open on the second bed. Revised drafts of the conference talk were spread across the desk.

“Do you have a pocketknife with you?” she asked.

There was one on his key chain. He dug out his keys and slipped the knife free, offered it. She used a clean napkin from the beverage tray to wipe the knife blade, then pricked her finger and used another napkin to pressure the bleeding to stop. She folded that napkin over, offered it to him along with the pocketknife. “A DNA test will be necessary to prove who I am. Fingerprints. What should I use for those?”

He picked up two sheets of paper from the desk and the mug on the table, moved into the bathroom. He dumped the cold coffee he hadn’t finished that morning across a piece of paper held over the sink and shook off most of the liquid. He put the page on the counter, along with the other blank piece of paper. “Spread out your hands and press down on the wet page, then lift them and press down again on the clean sheet.”

She did as he said and then afterward rinsed her hands in the sink and took the hand towel he held out to her. Fingerprints showed on both pages and began to air-dry. Between the two sheets, there were enough ridge details present to generate a set of solid prints. They stepped back into the room.

“May I take a photo?” he asked.

She glanced toward the mirror over the dresser, and he could

almost see her mental debate with herself over how her hair looked and what about no makeup. He couldn't help but smile. "The software actually makes the age-progression match easier without makeup."

"Take your photo."

He made it fast and painless for her, pulling the phone out of his pocket and snapping off a series of photos in the next seconds. He showed her the images. "Which do you prefer?"

"The third."

He deleted the others. "You came to find me because of my daughter."

"Yes."

"Any particular reason other than that I've been down this road before?"

"What do you mean?"

"Were you in Boston?"

She gave a small smile and simply dodged the question. "No comment."

"That article makes you twenty-seven. When's your birthday?"

"May the eighth."

"Yeah? Mine's the tenth. Happy belated birthday." He picked up the pages, the one doused in coffee now beginning to curl as it dried, slid them into a folder, and carefully folded the napkin and slid it into his pocket. "I'm going to go down and use the business center to fax your prints to a friend, who can access the missing-persons registry database. Find the room service menu and order us something to eat—steak and potato for me, anything you like for yourself. Find something you'd like to watch on TV. I may be half an hour or more. I'll make calls and cancel evening plans while they're working on this."

“You’re going to leave me here with your laptop, your belongings?”

“Shannon . . . you and I are going to have to start trusting each other sometime. It might as well be now.”



“Ann.” Matthew caught the woman he hoped to find coming out of a session with the title *FBI Joint Jurisdiction Investigations* printed on a placard by the door. He knew her husband had been part of the panel answering questions.

“Hi, Matthew.” She stepped out of the flow of departing conferees so they could have a conversation.

“Can you pull a cold case for me from Chicago and give me a good summary look at it tonight?” She had retired as a cop when she married, but her contacts in Chicago and across the Midwest still went deeper than most.

His tone caught her attention as much as the request had, and her gaze sharpened with interest. “What case?”

“Shannon Bliss, age sixteen, who went missing over a Memorial Day weekend.” He gave her the date of the disappearance.

“Theo should have it; he catches most cold missing-person cases. I’ll make some calls.”

He wrote a direct number on the back of a business card. “I’m up late on this one.”

She tucked away the card. “Give me three hours. I’ll call when I’ve got details for you.”

And with that answer, that smile, he was reminded of a lot of good evenings shared with her. “Remind me sometime why I let Paul snag you first.”

She laughed. “Only Paul has the temperament to put up with me.”

“You two staying through the weekend?”

“We’re heading back to Chicago after the first session tomorrow.”

“I may need a conversation with Paul also.”

“I’ll give him a heads-up.” She still didn’t ask what this was about. The woman knew how to keep a secret and respect when details were not being shared. But she did tilt her head to ask, “Is this going to be interesting enough that I won’t regret skipping dinner to turn around your request in just a few hours?”

He knew the odds that the woman upstairs was Shannon Bliss were small, but he went with what his gut said. “You won’t regret it.” They were in the way of people coming in and out of the room, and he stepped away with a catch-you-later smile, only to have her reach out a hand. He paused.

Her curiosity had turned to sharp focus. “Matthew . . . you do recognize the surname, don’t you? The brother, Jeffery Bliss, is running for governor.”

“I’m not one to follow Illinois elections. A one-percent-of-the-vote kind of candidate, or is he likely to win?”

“I’m voting for him,” she answered mildly.

He buried a wince. “I almost wish you hadn’t told me that. Tear apart as much of the case as you can tonight. Call me. I’ll come to you.”

“You’ll hear from me in a couple of hours.”

“Thanks, Ann.”

Matthew headed back to the lobby. She’d get him the case info he needed. He had an idea of who could help move the next boulder he had to shift. Now, if he could just locate the man in this crowd . . . He thought a moment and turned toward the hotel bar.



“Tom.” Matthew slid onto the stool next to the sheriff hosting the conference. His friend looked to be sipping a carbonated soft drink and hoping it would taste different than it did. “Who owes you a favor at the lab?” Matthew asked.

“I’ve got a few names tucked away. Whaddya need?”

Matthew unfolded the napkin. “A DNA panel on this. Tonight.”

“This personal or professional?”

“Professional, but unofficial until it’s worth saying it’s official. No use stirring the pot without good reason.” The two went back more than a decade, and his answer was sufficient given the kind of work he often did.

Tom nodded. “As it so happens, the local FBI lab owes me a sizable favor.” He pulled a small notepad out of his shirt pocket, wrote something, tore off the sheet and folded it. He snapped his fingers and motioned to a deputy over by the door. “This is Collins,” the sheriff said as the man hurried over. “He’s good at moving bureaucracies.” He handed over his note and the napkin. “I want you to deliver that to Elizabeth Perkins at the FBI lab,” he told the deputy. “Then wait a few hours for her to hand you back a memory stick with the results.”

“Yes, sir.”

Matthew wrote a phone number on the back of a business card. “Please call me when you have that, Deputy, and I’ll send Elizabeth a DNA file for comparison. Ask her to then destroy the sample and the results. The memory stick itself needs to go into a safe with the sheriff’s name on it.”

The deputy accepted his business card and left.

“Anything else I can do for you?” Tom asked dryly.

Matthew slapped the sheriff on the shoulder as he slid off

the stool. “Get in touch before you leave the conference. I may have something for you to do in a couple of days.”

“An interesting something?”

“Have I ever laid something boring on you?” Matthew countered and got a laugh in reply. “Thanks, Tom.”

“Anytime. Elizabeth is good. You’ll have your data in about three hours.”

“I’ll let you know how it turns out.” Matthew headed back to the lobby to get directions to the hotel business center, two of his three pressing needs now in play.



The hotel business center was crowded with cops dealing with emergencies in their home jurisdictions. Matthew squeezed in access to the fax machine as his call to Gregory at the missing-persons registry was answered by a gruff hello. “I thought I’d catch you still at your desk.”

“You know me, Matthew. Friday night is when the mayhem happens. You’re in Atlanta, I see. What’s on your plate tonight?”

“I’m faxing you fingerprints.”

“Ah, I see the pages arriving now. Hold on.” The voice on the line disappeared for a moment. “What is this, coffee smears? Tea?”

“The moment required some creativity.”

“So I see. They’re . . . not bad. Decent enough to work with. I’ll have to remember that technique.”

Matthew stepped out of the busy business center, found a quiet alcove, flipped through the images on his phone. “I’m also sending you a photo.” He sent it to Gregory’s direct email account.

“Okay . . . got it. Who’s our pretty lady?”

“Why don’t you tell me if it’s Shannon Bliss, an old case out of Chicago.”

“Are you kidding?” Gregory’s voice rose in surprise. “You’re not kidding. The press gets in touch occasionally on this one because of the election. Okay, hold on. I can tell you something on the prints in a matter of minutes. The photo is going to take some time as it’s an old case.”

“Don’t let the photo and prints get logged into the database. This inquiry needs to stay unofficial and on your desk only, for now.”

“No problem. They’re doing a software upgrade right now, and I couldn’t get anything into the system even if I wanted to. I see this photo has a time stamp of less than an hour ago. She’s in Atlanta with you?”

“No comment.”

“One of those . . . All right, let’s see, prints are scanned and are being ridge-defined now. And the comparison matches tell us . . . I’m hoping you know how to get ahold of her again, because the woman is definitely Shannon Bliss. I’ve got a solid match for the entire ten-print card.”

Matthew felt the muscles in his back tighten with the stress of that affirmative answer. It was good news, but it also presented an acute sequence of next steps that had the risk of turning chaotic on him. “There’s no question on the prints?”

“None,” Gregory assured. “Give me two hours on the photo. What is it, eleven years? That’s a lot of aging cycles to complete. I’m looking in the file now . . . There are three comparison photos—one looks like a school yearbook photo, and two others like casual photos with friends. So I’ve got a good base to work from. Visually, I think it’s right, but she’s changed rather significantly in those eleven years.”

“Text me when you have the results. What’s the registry file look like?”

“Pages deep. I’ll text you the inquiry code so you can log on and read through the details. The *call on news* list has fourteen names. Chicago police, Midwest region FBI, family, what looks like two private investigators, and three cops inquiring because they’re working similar cases. You want a text with the call-list details?”

“Please.”

“I’m sending it now. Her current photo . . . she looks in good health. Was this a runaway situation?”

“I can’t comment yet. I’ll update you tomorrow and let you know if we’re ready to make this an official submission. It will likely stay *need to know* for a time.”

“My lips are sealed until you tell me otherwise.”

“Can you source me a DNA comparison file?”

“I just sent you the FTP code. We’ve got protocols in place with about every DNA testing facility in the country, so you can transfer a copy of the file straight to the lab of your choice.”

“Thanks. Listen . . . if this gets away from me, if the press gives you a call, or someone with the family or the cops—”

“I do a nice ‘what are you talking about?’ non-comment. If I get cornered on the data, I’ll say it came anonymously on the tip line, again until you tell me otherwise. I can see the public firestorm this will become. I’ll stay out of it, thank you. I like my quiet Friday nights working the desk.”

“Appreciate it, Gregory.”

“What are friends for if not this? I’m glad for you, Matthew. You needed a win.”

“Not one of my cases—it rather dropped in my lap.”

“Work them however they come. Take care of her.”

“I’m going to try.”

Matthew clicked off. Fingerprints were a match. The rest of the confirmation data was a necessary formality. She was Shannon Bliss. And his coming weekend had just ramped up several notches.

He rubbed the back of his neck and wished he had gotten more sleep last night rather than working on further revisions to his presentation. Shannon had seemed pretty collected when she had approached him, but that was likely a carefully constructed mirage. As her story became known, he’d see the layers under that calm. He couldn’t afford to lose focus because fatigue crept in. He knew, in many ways, he was going to be the one holding her together as this played out.

Matthew placed calls to his friends and canceled dinner plans, said only that a case needed his attention. He’d have to get Shannon through the coming days with some space to breathe or this experience was going to be as damaging to her as when she’d originally been abducted. Protecting her privacy as long as he could was critical. He couldn’t pull that off alone. He was going to need some carefully selected help. Ann and Paul Falcon—they’d have the Chicago connections and clout to buffer matters related to her family. The Falcons were returning to Chicago tomorrow and likely would be taking a private plane, since Ann was an experienced pilot—she’d paid for college by ferrying planes around. Maybe he could talk Shannon into traveling to Chicago with them.

He looked at the time. He had been away from the room for forty-seven minutes. That was too long. Get DNA results to confirm the fingerprints, then get the last pieces of this in motion. He headed to the elevator.

Shannon was going to remember this night for the next

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twenty years. It was on him to see it turned out as something that helped rather than hurt her. The thought crossed his mind that when God promised to use all things for good, even the tragedies of life, he was now living in one of those moments. He was seeing God pick up and use the tragedy of what had happened to his daughter Becky as the reason, the open door, for why Shannon had sought him out. Shannon would have the benefit of what he'd learned with Becky, and would have an easier time of this return to her life because of that experience. *Okay, game on.* He'd get this done right.