



*Will Feather find
Mia... alive?*

THE MISSING

MELANIE FLORENCE

The police won't investigate the missing Native girls – so who will?

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After a girl she knows from school goes missing and is found dead in the Red River, Feather is shocked that the police write it off as a suicide. Then, it's Feather's best friend, Mia, who vanishes. Everyone knows that Native girls are disappearing and being killed, but no one is connecting the dots.

Mia's mom and abusive stepfather paint Mia as a frequent runaway, so Feather knows that it's up to her to find out what is happening. What she doesn't know is that the serial killer who is taking and killing girls has become obsessed with Feather, and her investigation into their deaths is leading her into terrible danger.

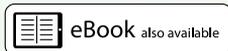
Set in Winnipeg against the real-life background of unsolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, this fictional thriller explores one teenager's response to a system that has long denied and misrepresented the problem.

MELANIE FLORENCE is a full-time writer based in Toronto. She is the author of *Righting Canada's Wrongs: Residential Schools*, the SideStreets novel *One Night* and the Recordbooks title *Jordin Tootoo: The Highs and Lows in the Journey of the First Inuk to Play in the NHL*, which was chosen as an Honor Book by The American Indian Library Association. Melanie is of Plains Cree and Scottish descent.

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All blackbird chapter titles are quotes from songs, poems and nursery rhymes including Lynyrd Skynyrd, Peggy Lee, The Beatles, Alfred Tennyson, Wallace Stevens, and “Sing a Song of Sixpence.”

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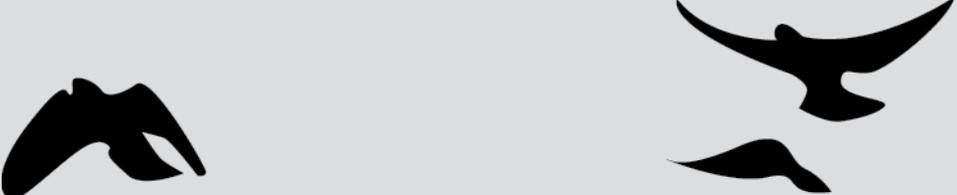
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For my family — Chris, Josh and Taylor



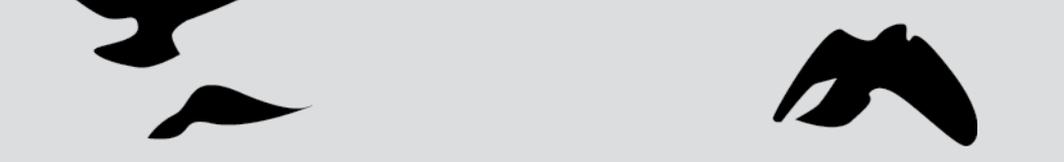
PROLOGUE

WHERE SOMEBODY WAITS . . .

He was always surprised at how quiet it got by the water at night. Further down, junkies were getting high on whatever they could find to get them through another night on the streets. Beyond them, prostitutes looked for one more date. But in his little spot on the riverbank, he couldn't hear the street noises or the other people escaping their lives for the night. The shadows hid him. Lost in the darkness. Waiting.

He stood close enough to her to smell her perfume. To hear her breathe. Cloaked in shadow, he could observe her without her noticing.

He watched as she checked her phone. She tossed it into her bag when she didn't find what she was hoping for. She sighed, picking her phone up again and typing out a message before putting it back. She closed her eyes and leaned against the cold concrete wall.



Despite the chill in the air and the dampness that seeped into his own bones, he saw her starting to doze off, her long, jet-black hair falling forward and hiding her face. Silly little black-bird, he thought. This is no place to sleep.

He shifted his weight and then took a step towards her. Somewhere in the depths of her exhaustion, she registered the sound of footsteps, dully echoing off the concrete. He cleared his throat and watched her eyes open wide. She pressed her back against the wall, slid down and pulled her knees up against her chest, wrapping her thin arms tightly around them. The street lights didn't even begin to pierce the shadows down here. He stopped just outside of her line of vision and watched as she held her breath, trying not to make a sound. Trying not to move. He could almost hear her heart beating furiously in her chest like a bird's wings.

He flipped open his lighter and lit his cigarette, smiling as she jumped at the sudden burst of light. She tried to shrink further away from him and search for a weapon of some kind. She wouldn't find one. He had already checked. He drew on the cigarette, the end flaring bright orange and illuminating his face for a moment. She breathed a sigh of relief as she recognized him.



He stepped towards her, smiling. "I was hoping I might find you here."

CHAPTER 1

GIRL GONE

I heard the buzz of excited chatter following me up the hallway before I was even halfway to my locker. Kids were standing in groups, their heads together over their phones, basically climbing over each other to see what was probably some lame recap of a WB show. Not surprising — it was high school after all. But there was something different about the buzz this time. There was a desperate excitement to it. I was half-listening and half-wishing I had stopped for a mochaccino on my way to school, so I managed to catch only bits and pieces of conversation through my usual Monday morning haze.

“Did you hear?”

“Oh my God! Yes!”

“Do you know her?”

“Yes she’s in my gym class . . .”

“We were really good friends in grade seven . . .”

“What do you think happened to her?”

I made my way to my locker, dropped my backpack on the floor and reached for my lock. I swung the locker door open just as Mia strode up and leaned heavily onto the locker beside me.

“Did you hear?” she asked, picking up the backpack.

I took it from her and started unpacking my books. “Hear what?”

Mia stared at me, her mouth hanging open. “You can’t be serious? Everyone’s talking about it!”

“About what?” I was searching my locker for my English book and only half-listening.

Mia grabbed the books out of my hand. “Feather! Get your head out of your ass!”

I shuddered. “I hate that saying, Mia!”

“Oh my God.” Mia shook her head. “Would you listen? Carli’s missing.”

I looked up sharply. “What? What do you mean by missing? Is that what everyone’s talking about?”

“Yeah. She was supposed to meet Ben on Saturday. They were going to a movie and she didn’t show up. Turns out Ben was the last one who talked to her the night before. He tried to reach her all weekend but she didn’t answer.” She paused and took a breath, then plunged on. “So Ben goes over to Carli’s place and her foster mom said she was with a friend . . . who doesn’t exist!”

“What do you mean, doesn’t exist?” I asked.

“Ben has no clue who she could have been with. He thought she was at the rec centre. No one has heard from her since.”

I stopped and stared at her, dumbstruck. Carli and I had grown up together. We weren’t as close as we used to be; she hadn’t spent a Saturday night at my house in awhile, but I still considered her a friend.

“So no one has heard from her?” I asked. Mia shook her head.

“Not since Friday night. And the police aren’t doing anything.”

I was outraged — and terrified for Carli. But given the history of the police with the Aboriginal community, I wasn't that surprised. Carli was a foster kid. We all knew to the police that equalled a high-risk, unwanted kid who got what she deserved. It made me sick. I watched the news. Aboriginal women were going missing or being killed across the country and the police just ignored it and turned a blind eye.

A group of girls passed us in the hallway, talking loudly.

"I heard she was giving blow jobs for twenty bucks down by the riverbank," one girl said, smirking.

"Well, I heard she went down to that rec centre to score drugs. Probably got a bad batch of meth or something," a tall blonde with a pixie cut cackled to her friends. "Aren't all those Indians on drugs?" My face coloured and I grabbed Mia's arm as she lunged towards them.

"We're not all on drugs, bitch. But we do all know how to hunt. Remember that," Mia yelled at the retreating group.

"I don't know how to hunt," I commented dryly.

Mia grunted at me, pushing the hair out of her face and glaring down the hallway at the girls.

"Do you know how to hunt?" I asked Mia, trying to distract her.

Mia glanced back at me and smirked. "Oh shut up. Of course not. I was born in St. Boniface and grew up in Osborne Village. I don't get back to the rez too often."

I closed my locker and nudged my friend as the bell rang.

"Come on, Mia. We're going to be late for English."

"Oh shit." Mia looked at me sideways as she linked her arm through mine. "So what's this book about? Just a quick summary. We've got three minutes."

I managed to give Mia enough info on the reading

assignment to fake her way through class and even answer a question fairly intelligently. But watching Mia bullshit her way through English wasn't enough to distract me from Carli's disappearance. I found myself watching the clock, counting the minutes until class ended and I could meet up with Jake.

The lunch bell rang shrilly, followed by the chaos of hundreds of students barrelling down the hall towards the cafeteria and the promise of greasy french fries and cheesy pizza. I had listened to my classmates speculate about Carli's disappearance all morning. Even kids who knew Carli, and should have known better, talked about her as if she was some drug-addled, alcohol-fuelled hooker who got what she deserved. Even worse were the whispers about Carli's boyfriend, Ben. People said Ben was responsible for her disappearance. Or murder, depending who you talked to.

Skipping the crowded lunch line, I wove through the tables to where Jake was sitting, completely immersed in a book. I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"What are you reading?" I asked, smiling at the familiar frown my boyfriend always wore when he was reading. He glanced up with a smile.

"*Silence of the Lambs*. I can't believe I never got around to reading this before." He studied me as I sat down. "So you heard about Carli?" he asked gently, pushing his blond hair out of his eyes. He always seemed to need a haircut, I thought fondly.

"Yeah. I don't know what's true, though," I admitted, sighing deeply. "Everyone has a different story. She's missing. She's dead. Ben had something to do with it. What actually happened?"

A flash of anger passed over my boyfriend's handsome

face. "I've known Ben since kindergarten. He loves Carli. He'd never do anything to hurt her. He cried when we had to dissect frogs in grade seven!" I smiled at that. "I called him earlier. He said she's definitely missing but that's all he knows. I guess she was down by the Riverwalk again."

I nodded. It was a well-known fact that Carli liked to escape down to the river when it got too loud at her foster home. She had a spot in Bonnycastle Park where she liked to sit and read. Or she'd hang out with other kids by the Midtown Bridge; some of them homeless, some just taking a break like her. Then she'd usually get a hot meal and a bed at the rec centre at night.

"Did the cops say anything to Ben about what they think happened?" I asked.

Jake shook his head. "They're not being very helpful. They said she's a habitual runaway even though everyone told them that she's never run away before. She just goes down to the rec centre for a break. She always comes back. And the longest she's ever been gone is two days." He brushed his hair back again. "This is the third day she's been gone. She's not answering her phone, and Ben says even when she's down by the river, she always answers her phone. He doesn't know what happened to her but he's freaking out."

"Yeah, I bet," I replied, rubbing Jake's arm.

"She's my lab partner this year, you know," Jake told me absently, his face pale.

"I didn't know that. I'm sure she's fine, Jake." I laced my fingers through his on top of the table.

He looked at me, his face serious. "Are you? Because Carli isn't the first girl in this city to go missing, you know."

I did know.

“The first Aboriginal girl, you mean?” I asked pointedly.

Jake nodded. “Yeah. She’s not the first Aboriginal girl to go missing.” He sighed. “She’s been in how many foster homes? You’d think she’d have gained some street smarts.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, bristling.

“Nothing,” he responded. “Except, what exactly was she doing on the Riverwalk at night?”

“What are you getting at?”

“Nothing,” he repeated. “It’s just . . . usually it’s a certain kind of person who hangs out down there at night.”

I gaped at him. “What? Are you saying you think she was asking for something to happen to her?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then don’t say things like that!” I was furious. He held his hands up.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I’ve been down there at night and it’s not safe.”

“I know,” I said. “But still.” Jake enveloped me in a hug.

“Sorry, Feather. I am. I like Carli. I hope she’s okay.”

“Yeah,” I told him, taking a fry off his plate. “Me too.” I paused for a second. “Wait, what were you doing on the Riverwalk at night?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Jake said. He didn’t meet my eyes as he opened his book again.

I thought the conversation was over when he looked up at me. “Just promise me you’ll be careful, Feather,” he begged. “Promise you won’t go anywhere alone. At least until they catch whoever took Carli.”