

## Already Gone Excerpt

New Hope, South Carolina.

Population 6,129.

I know every soul represented in that number. Not a single one of them drives the shiny red Mercedes that just went speeding by.

Seventy-five in a forty-five.

I flick on my lights and press on the gas, sending my cruiser flying past the city limit sign and the godawful billboard that sits directly behind it; the one declaring New Hope home to country music superstar, Scarlett Kincaid.

It wouldn't be a big deal if this were actually her home. It's not. Scarlett may have been born here, but her fancy boots haven't landed on this soil in over a decade.

All it took was one call from a hotshot music executive to send her packing before the ink was dry on her high school diploma. Scarlett flew from this town fast enough to leave our heads spinning. Before any of us could process what had happened, little Scarlett Kincaid—the same girl who used to build forts with me in my living room while my mama made us mac 'n' cheese—had a hit single sitting at number one on the Billboard charts.

She went from homecoming queen and most likely to marry a rich spouse in our senior yearbook, to the queen of country music.

The country loves her. Hell, the whole world loves her.

New Hope...not so much. And it's high time that fucking sign comes down.

But first, I have to deal with this speed demon in the sexy red car.

I sound the sirens, and the car pulls to the side of the road and waits while I walk to the driver's side window. It's still up, the heavy tint preventing me from seeing inside. With a

hand on my holster—because you never know what you’re going to walk up on—I knock on the window.

The dark glass lowers.

My first thought: *this woman is absolutely gorgeous*. Long, dark hair. Pouty lips. And a tiny pink dress. Her eyes are covered by oversized aviators, but I’m sure they’re as pretty as the rest of her.

My second thought: *what crazy excuse is she going to come up with to try and get out of this ticket?* It never ceases to amaze me the things women are willing to do to keep from getting into trouble. I’ve been offered everything from a blowjob to a pay-off to marriage.

“Do you know why I pulled you over today, ma’am?”

“Tucker?” The woman smiles, then pushes her sunglasses to the top of her head. And that’s when I see the brown eyes I’ve spent more than a decade trying to forget. “Tucker Andrews, is that you?”

I step back and square my shoulders. “You can call me Officer Andrews. Do you know why I pulled you over today, ma’am?”

“Tucker.” The woman laughs and shakes her head. “It’s me, Scarlett.”

At the mention of her name, I’m met with an onslaught of flashbacks. Running hand and hand through the neighborhood with her, laughing and playing, only to have her ignore me the second we got to school. The popular crowd versus the nerds who desperately tried to fit in. She the former, me the latter, and the pain it caused every time she acted as though she didn’t know my name. For years, I pretended it didn’t bother me because I knew that when I got home, Scarlett would meet me at the fence, and the awkwardness from the day would dissipate as though it never happened.

But it did. Day after day after day. I was a glutton for punishment. There was nothing in the world I loved more than Scarlett Kincaid, and it didn't matter how badly she hurt me, I was always willing to forgive her.

Her smile and laugh might've gotten to me in middle school and high school, but I refuse to let it affect me now.

"I know who you are."

Her smile falters.