



CHAPTER ONE

“I’d suggest you just drive,” the very bored man behind the airline counter tells me.

His level of interest in my plight is subzero, and my temper intensifies in inverse proportion to his apathy. I consider jumping the counter. Or—more realistically and less likely to alert Homeland Security—I could simply rely on my rapier wit, which is equally damaging.

My brother gives me a sharp warning glare before looking back down at his phone. Not just my older-by-three-minutes brother, but a lawyer to boot, he’s gotten me out of a small “temper tantrum” or two.

But he’s in no mood to help me out of anything right now.

This obviously makes counter jumping all the more tempting. He’s turned his attention to his phone and I can see he’s mapping the distance to our destination from Des Moines International—because somehow, yes, I, Lexi Darling, am in Des Moines.

As in *Iowa*.

One of those flat parts of the country I fly *over*, not *to*.

None of this is exactly on my bucket list. Particularly not Midas, Iowa, where we would never be going if someone hadn't died.

That someone being the grandmother we never met, whose funeral we weren't invited to, who our father has never mentioned.

Who also, oddly, named us in her will.

Logan looks up from his phone and fixes the airline attendant with a look of astonishment. "It's *four hours* to Midas from here."

Because there were no direct flights to Midas, or even the closest airport in Dubuque—places I'd never heard of before this strange debacle—we had to book a flight into Des Moines and catch a connection into Dubuque.

A connection we missed. Admittedly, this is *slightly* my fault, because I slept on the plane, and when I sleep, I sleep *hard*. I wasn't exactly moving at the speed of light when our flight from New York deplaned.

Logan has already *pointedly* not mentioned it about fifty times.

This is far more annoying than if he had.

"Four hours, give or take," the airplane attendant agrees. "That's why I'd just drive. There's not another flight to Dubuque until tomorrow. Then you gotta drive to Midas anyway." The guy shrugs. "I can refund your ticket. Then you can get yourself a rental car and get it over with. Cheaper to drive anyway."

I'm not sure what part of us screams that *cheaper* is our preferred option. Logan is glaring in New York City lawyer. I am frowning in Prada.

He must sense we are waiting for another option. "Or I can rebook you in two days."

"You said the next flight is tomorrow," Logan points out.

"Yeah, but it's full."

Full? We are in the middle of *nowhere*. "Are you always this—"

Logan steps between me and my first Midwestern road trip "tantrum." I suspect it will not be my last.

"We'll take the refund and directions to where we can get a rental car," he tells the guy, sounding much calmer than I think he really is.

But I decide to let Logan handle it. I'm very good at letting people handle things. Particularly things I want nothing to do with.

Like every single person in this godforsaken airport and the idea of driving *four hours* to still be in *Iowa*.

I put my earbuds in to drown out the din of the flatlands. I try to center myself, a goal I have pursued for years yet never achieved. I want to give myself the best possible chance at not committing murder.

I let Logan lead the way as I become one with a folklorian cabin.

When he finally leads me outside the airport, into a frigid drizzling rain that looks even worse out here in all this *vast emptiness*, it's with car keys in hand. Apparently, we have to go hunt down the car we rented.

This must be how the hunter-gatherers felt, scrabbling about outside their caves, in between skirmishes with woolly mammoths.

I'm so overwrought by our retreat back into the prehistoric that I take my earbuds out.

"I am *not* driving," I tell him, shivering against the assault of the cold with no taxi in sight.

"You're just going to passenger-princess it?"

I smile at him. Sweetly. "As an officer of the court, do you really want me driving without a license?"

He knows, but likes to forget, that I don't have one. The only native New Yorkers who go through the hassle of getting driving licenses—and Logan and I are close enough to native, having lived there since we were less than a year old—use them to drive to their second homes out of the city. Otherwise, why bother? You don't need a car in New York.

Unless you're my brother, who likes his flashy toys.

"Besides," I say, hunching into my puffy winter coat as we trudge across what I can only assume is the *literal tundra* of Iowa. Or, you know, a parking lot. "I'm only here because you said I *had* to be, to figure out this ridiculous will. That means you've got to look out for your baby sister."

I try to radiate innocence, a wasted gesture because he's not looking at me.

"Baby pit viper who can't control her venom, maybe," he mutters before stopping at a car I assume must be ours.

I roll my overstuffed suitcase over to him when he pops the trunk. "What a fascinating factoid about *snakes*." I continue with the innocent, wide eyes. "When did you become a zoologist?"

He says nothing to this—a rare occurrence—and tosses our luggage into the trunk.

I wrinkle my nose as I slide into the passenger seat. It all smells faintly of mildew and something sharper underneath that I'm glad I can't identify. Logan climbs into the driver's seat, having to adjust it way back before he can even begin to fold his long frame into the car, and I have a sudden, more pressing, concern.

"Wait. When was the last time *you* actually drove?"

"Now you're worried," he mutters, sticking the keys into the ignition and studying the dash as if acquainting himself with all the buttons and levers. Like he's an engineer in his spare time.

But this is golden sunshine boy Logan Darling. Everyone's hero. Everything works out for him, and so with the ease of

someone in their own car and maybe also in their hometown, he drives away from this dreary airport and the surrounding so-called city out into what can only be described as a flat, if occasionally colorful, wasteland.

Field after field. A slight undulation in the otherwise dead straight road. The intermittent red barns that remind me of idyllic visions of the Midwest in the generic calendars my orthodontist stepmother hangs in her office. But mostly it's old houses, fraying at the edges. Empty, empty fields that would seem deserted if not for the neat rows of dried-out cornstalks.

"I thought grandmothers were supposed to love their grandchildren," I say as much to the endless fields as to Logan. "Even the ones they never met. Why are we being punished?"

"She left us her effects, her house, and her business." Logan spares me a look, and it's not like there's a lot of *traffic* out here in the hinterland, so I don't scold him for taking his eyes off the road. Or scream at him to keep his eyes on the road before he kills us both. "And it's not like you don't have a vested interest in yarn."

I scowl a bit. I can't pretend that I'm not at least a teeny tiny bit curious about the knitting shop she's left us.

Mind you, a "knitting shop" can be anything. Piles of sad, ugly yarn in janky cardboard boxes in some dingy warehouse, an aspirational trip through a tactile paradise—with colors and textures to make a person swoon—or really anything in between.

"We'll be lucky to arrive and find any standing buildings at all," I say as we pass an empty, yawning field with a crumbling barn or some sort of *agricultural structure* in the middle of it. I remind myself that as a textile designer I can spin gold out of *any* yarn stash or fiber, though realistically, there's no way that some Podunk small-town knitting shop is going to offer me anything that New York doesn't.

The tiny kernel of hope inside me that whispers that *maybe*

I'll be pleasantly surprised fades as we pass nothing. For miles. Just fields upon fields upon fields of brown emptiness or faded husks of something that might have once been green. Occasionally, a clutch of trees appears on some rise, giving off an autumnal burst of rust orange and shockingly bright yellow.

We drive. Forever. Logan plugs in his phone and tries to listen to some interminable bro podcast about finance before I start writhing in pain—sure, it's not a real physical pain, but listening to *men* yammer *is* a psychic assault. Such is the fruit of the patriarchy.

He is not sympathetic. "You don't control the music if I'm driving."

This is fair, tragically. And I don't *love* being fair, particularly where Logan is concerned, because annoying him is my true calling. But we have hours and hours of this, so I *suppose* I can put my earbuds in and turn up the music to drown out all those self-congratulatory male opinions, always presented as unassailable fact.

I stare at the landscape that stretches out. And out. And out. It's nothing but farms in all directions, and a quickly setting October sun. I can practically feel the chill creeping in the lower it sinks. I'd close my eyes and try to take a nap despite the emptiness of it all, but I have a very careful sleep routine. If I don't follow it to the letter, complete with sleeping pill, I pay the price.

Case in point: our missed flight.

There are also nightmares, usually, and I don't need to beg for trouble when these barren, eerie miles are giving me a worming feeling of dread. Like the emptiness fills itself with all the creepy things in my head. This is why I live in a city made of buildings piled on top of each other and endless noise.

I don't know how many interminable miles and hours we've gone when Logan pulls off the highway and into the parking lot of a decrepit, sparsely lit gas station.

I pull one of the earbuds out of my ear. "We don't need gas."
"No, but I can't seem to get a good read on the directions to the house." I know this because he keeps scowling at his phone.
"Maybe it's the signal. Maybe this place doesn't actually exist."

"Wow, Logan, that's a comforting thought this many hundreds of miles from literally anything."

"Plus, I'm starving."

I glance dubiously at the small, squat building that looks like at least five decades of dirt and grime have built up on the outside. It just *looks* sticky. "And you imagine this is an establishment that offers a selection of delicacies, do you?"

He shrugs. We both understand that he will now, upon pain of death, come back to this car with the most revolting road food item he can find and eat it merrily, like he doesn't get takeout from the City's world-famous restaurants delivered to his desk in the law firm nightly. We love nothing more than behaving like we're still ten, not twenty-eight. "You want something?"

"Do I want E. coli with a side of hepatitis and a smattering of botulism? I think I'll pass."

I win points in our eternal game of one-upmanship because he cracks a smile at that. "Your loss."

Logan gets out of the car and goes inside. I sit there, one earbud in, one earbud out, as I watch Logan move through the interior of the convenience store. I watch as he strikes up a friendly conversation with someone I can't see from my vantage point.

Because Logan Darling has the inexplicable ability to find someone to talk to no matter where he goes, even this outer borough of hell. I sink deeper into my seat, feeling sorry for myself.

Something I usually excel at, but right now I feel an alarming prickle at the back of my neck. I rub at it, but it only gets

stronger. I hit the power lock button on my door. Then, neck still prickling, I sneak a look around the dim parking lot.

There's no one else here, save one vehicle at the lone gas pump. I call it a *vehicle* because I honestly couldn't tell you what it is. Definitely not a tractor—not that I'm some great expert in farm equipment. But it doesn't look like any photograph I've seen of the *heartland*. It's got four big wheels, but also handlebars that look like they belong on a motorbike of some kind.

As I'm looking over, a man—presumably its driver—looms up out of nowhere.

I make a squeaking noise, despite myself, even as my mind catches up and tells me he was likely on the far side of one of the battered-looking pumps. Right before he climbs up into the contraption, he spits a stream of brown liquid right onto the concrete below. His jeans look like they've been on his body for approximately a decade, and the tattered T-shirt he's wearing is about as brown as that liquid, though I have the queasy feeling that it was originally white. His hair is chin length and scraggly, a man in desperate need of a shower.

He happens to glance up, and we make unfortunate eye contact. He brings his fingers up to his forehead in a kind of salute I think is meant to be friendly, but he smiles and for a moment—just the strangest split second—it looks like a forked tongue sneaks out between the missing teeth in his smile.

I blink and it's gone. Then he roars away and I am left breathing over hard in this suddenly hot rental car. My stomach lurches, and I breathe through it, reminding myself this is just for a few days.

How delightful that I've been out of my routine for less than twenty-four hours and I'm already cracking up.

Almost cracking up, I correct myself.

Just because it's crazy inside doesn't mean I have to act crazy on the outside. That might not sound like a mantra to you, but

it's gotten me this far. I repeat it a few times and try to settle myself down.

I have nightmares some have called *night terrors* and I see things sometimes. There are clinical names for that, *conditions* that get discussed in grave tones by unlikable doctors, but I prefer a less clinical approach. The sanitarium option has always seemed less than desirable.

Not really the vibe.

So I tell myself that this Midwest road-trip shit is new, that's all. I'll probably settle. And if not, well, I can handle a few days.

Probably.

Excerpted from *Some Kind of Haunted* by Hazel Beck. © 2026 by Hazel Beck, used with permission from MIRA, an imprint of HarperCollins.