



Somebody I Used to Know

By David Bell



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The next morning the police arrive at Nick’s house and show him a photo of the woman from the store. She’s been found dead, murdered in a local motel, with Nick’s name and address on a piece of paper in her pocket.

Convinced there's a connection between the two women, Nick enlists the help of his college friend Laurel Davidson to investigate the events leading up to the night of Marissa’s death. But the young woman’s murder is only the beginning...and the truths Nick uncovers may make him wish he never doubted the lies.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Somebody I Used to Know*

“Distinctive characters and a smartly crafted plot.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Filled with twists and turns that will have you forgetting everything you are supposed to do until you reach the very last page...David Bell sure knows how to rope the reader in.”—Fresh Fiction

“A well-written, well-timed, steady-paced mystery.”—Shelf Addiction

“Bell has a knack for writing suspenseful crime fiction with strong emotional, human elements, and his latest, *Somebody I Used to Know*, is no exception...A perfect read for fans of dark mysteries and crime thrillers mixed with poignant family drama.”—Book of Secrets

More Praise for David Bell

“One of the brightest and best crime fiction writers of our time.”—*Suspense Magazine*

“A natural storyteller and a superb writer.”—#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author Nelson DeMille

“David Bell writes spellbinding and gripping thrillers that get under your skin and refuse to let go.”—*New York Times* Bestselling Author Linwood Barclay

About the Author

David Bell is a bestselling and award-winning author whose work has been translated into six languages. He's currently an associate professor of English at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. He received an MA in creative writing from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and a PhD in American literature and creative writing from the University of Cincinnati. His novels include *Bring Her Home*, *Since She Went Away*, *Somebody I Used to Know*, *The Forgotten Girl*, *Never Come Back*, *The Hiding Place*, and *Cemetery Girl*.

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Praise for the Novels of David Bell

ALSO BY DAVID BELL

For Molly

CHAPTER ONE

When I saw the girl in the grocery store, my heart stopped.

I had turned the corner into the dairy aisle, carrying a basket with just a few items in it. Cereal. Crackers. Spaghetti. Beer. I lived alone, worked a lot, and rarely cooked. I was checking a price when I almost ran into the girl. I stopped immediately and studied her in profile, her hand raised to her mouth while she examined products through the glass door of the dairy cooler.

I felt like I was seeing a ghost.

She looked exactly like my college girlfriend, Marissa Minor, the only woman I had ever really loved. Probably the only woman who had ever really loved me.

The girl didn't see me right away. She continued to examine the items in front of her, slowly walking away from me, her hand still raised to her mouth as though that helped her think.

The gesture really got me. It made my insides go cold. Not with fear, but with shock. With feelings I hadn't felt in years.

Marissa used to do the very same thing. When she was thinking, she'd place her right hand on her lips, sometimes pinching them between her index finger and thumb. Marissa's lips were always bright red—without lipstick—and full, and that gesture, that lip-twisting, thoughtful gesture, drove me wild with love and, yes, desire.

I was eighteen when I met her. Desire was always close at hand.

But it wasn't just the gesture that this girl shared with Marissa. Her hair, thick and deep red, matched Marissa's exactly, even the length of it, just below her shoulders. From the side, the girl's nose came to a slightly rounded point, one that Marissa always said looked like a lightbulb. Both the girl and Marissa had brown eyes, and long, slender bodies. This girl, the one in the store, looked shorter than Marissa by a few inches, and she wore tight jeans and knee-high boots, clothes that weren't in style when I attended college.

But other than that, they could have been twins. They really could have been.

And as the girl walked away, making a left at the end of the aisle and leaving my sight, I remained rooted to my spot, my silly little grocery basket dangling from my right hand. The lights above were bright, painfully so, and other shoppers came past with their carts and their kids and their lives. It was close to dinnertime, and people had places to go. Families to feed.

But I stood there.

I felt tears rising in my eyes, my vision starting to blur.

She looked so much like Marissa. So much.

But Marissa had been dead for just over twenty years.

* * *

Finally, I snapped out of it.

I reached up with my free hand and wiped my eyes.

No one seemed to notice that I was having an emotional moment in the middle of the grocery store, in the milk aisle. I probably looked like a normal guy. Forty years old. Clean-cut. Professional. I had my problems. I was divorced. My ex-wife didn't let me see her son as much as I wanted. He wasn't my kid, but we'd grown close. My job as a caseworker for the housing authority in Eastland, Ohio, didn't pay enough, but who ever felt like they were paid enough? I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed helping people. I tended to pour myself into it.

Outside of work, I spent my life like a lot of single people do. I socialized with friends, even though most of them were married and had kids. I played in a recreational basketball league. When I had the time and motivation, I volunteered at our local animal shelter, walking dogs or making fund-raising calls.

Like I said, I probably looked like a regular guy.

I decided I needed to talk to that girl. I started down the aisle, my basket swinging at my side. I figured she had to be a relative of Marissa's, right? A cousin or something. I turned the corner in the direction she had gone, deftly dodging between my fellow shoppers.

I looked up the next aisle and didn't see her. Then I went to another one, the last aisle in the store. At first, I didn't see the girl there either. It was crowded, and a family of four—two parents, two kids—blocked my view. One of the kids was screaming because her mom wouldn't buy her the ice cream she wanted.

But then they moved, and I saw the girl. She was halfway down the aisle, opening the door of another cooler, but not removing anything. She lifted her hand to her mouth. That gesture. She looked just like Marissa.

I felt the tears again and fought back against them.

I walked up to her. She looked so small. And young. I guessed she was about twenty, probably a student at my alma mater, Eastland University. I felt ridiculous, but I had to ask who she was. I wiped at my eyes again and cleared my throat.

"Excuse me," I said.

She whipped her head around in my direction. She seemed startled that anyone had spoken to her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

But I really wasn't. In that moment, I saw her head-on instead of in profile, and the resemblance to Marissa became more pronounced. Her forehead was a little wider than Marissa's. And her chin came to a sharper point. But the spray of freckles, the shape of her eyes . . . all of it was Marissa.

If I believed in ghosts . . .

Ghosts from a happy time in my past . . .

"I'm sorry," I said again.

The girl just looked at me. Her eyes moved across my body, sizing me up. Taking me in. She looked guarded.

"I was wondering if you were related to the Minor family," I said. "They lived in Hanfort, Ohio. It's been

about twenty years since I've seen them. I know it's a long shot—"

The girl had been holding a box of Cheerios and a carton of organic milk. When I said the name "Minor," she let them both go, and they fell to the floor at my feet. The milk was in a cardboard carton, but the force of it hitting the floor caused it to split open. Milk leaked onto the cruddy linoleum, flowing toward my shoes.

"Careful," I said, reaching out for her.

But the girl took off. She made an abrupt turn and started walking away briskly, her bootheels clacking against the linoleum. She didn't look back. And when she reached the far end of the aisle, the end closest to the cash registers, she started running.

I took one step in that direction, lifting my hand. I wanted to say something. Apologize. Call her back. Let her know that I hadn't meant any harm.

But she was gone.

Just like Marissa, she was gone.

Then the family of four, the one I had seen earlier with the child screaming for ice cream, came abreast of me. The child appeared to have calmed down. She clutched a carton of Rocky Road, the tears on her face drying. The father pointed to the mess on the floor, the leaking milk and the cereal.

"Something wrong with her?" he asked.

My hands were shaking. I felt off-balance. Above my head, the cloying Muzak played, indifferent to my little drama with the girl who looked so much like Marissa.

"I have no idea," I said. "I don't even know who she was."

CHAPTER TWO

I thought of Marissa all evening. It's safe to say I was feeling a little sorry for myself. Indulging in nostalgia, which can be enjoyable up to a point.

I drank beer on the couch in my apartment while a basketball game I didn't care about played on the TV. A pile of work waited in my briefcase, but I ignored it. I never did that, but after seeing the girl in the store, I did. I ate some cheese and crackers but gave up on my plan to cook the spaghetti I'd bought. My only company that night was Riley, the aging mutt I'd rescued from the local humane society shortly after my divorce two years earlier. I volunteered there to keep myself busy and to give something back. Eventually, they convinced me to take a dog home. He looked to be a mixture of German shepherd and retriever, and the humane society had estimated his age to be at least eight when I adopted him, maybe older.

The humane society didn't know much about Riley's life before he was abandoned to their care, but they suspected he'd suffered some neglect or abuse, because he was so passive and skittish when I adopted him. He used to jump and cower at every noise, and he rarely if ever barked or growled. He'd grown slowly more comfortable and confident over the previous couple of years, and I'd grown used to having him around. As I lounged on the couch, brooding, he sat at my feet, hoping for cracker crumbs.

Marissa and I had met during our freshman year at Eastland University. When I thought of who I was when I

arrived at college, I realized I was just an awkward man-boy who only dreamed of meeting his soul mate. Marissa was beautiful, confident, outgoing, determined. Meeting her unlocked things in me that might never have been unlocked otherwise. She got me like no one ever had. And no one has since. We understood each other without words. I felt my connection to her in the deepest core of my being. How many people meet someone like that in their lives? Not many, but I did. And then, two years later, she was taken away from me in a house fire on a warm fall weekend.

That was why seeing the girl in the grocery store shook me to the core. I had managed to get on with my life. I had managed to tell myself I'd gotten over losing Marissa.

But I hadn't.

I went into my bedroom and dug around in the bottom of my closet. I kept a shoebox there full of items from my time in college, mostly things from my relationship with Marissa. Letters, notes, ticket stubs. And the multiple-time-zone watch she gave me on my twentieth birthday.

We were supposed to travel after college, which explained the need for a multiple-time-zone watch. We never got to take those trips, and I never wore the watch again after Marissa died. But I kept it, and from time to time I'd take it out of the box. When the battery died every few years, I'd take the watch to the jewelry store and have it replaced. I liked to think about that watch being there, close by me, and always running like a beating heart.

I brought it back to the couch with me and slumped down into the cushions, opening another beer. I was supposed to play in my basketball league, but I just didn't feel like it. I never drank very much, never more than one a day, if that, but when I came home from the grocery store that night, I threw back three and then four and opened a fifth, staring at my watch and wondering who that girl was. And why she'd acted so damn spooked when I simply spoke to her.

* * *

I fell asleep on the couch, the TV still playing, the open but unfinished fifth beer on the coffee table before me. My neck felt like hell from sleeping at an odd angle, and a trail of drool ran down my chin.

I slept until something started beating against my apartment door.

Someone was there, pounding on the outside. Each heavy knock caused a miniature earthquake in my skull. I winced. A hangover at my age. Pathetic. I vowed never to have more than one beer again. I vowed to stop thinking about Marissa.

I probably would have agreed to anything to get the pounding on the door to stop. But it didn't.

I turned my head to the right, looking at the watch Marissa gave me. 6:53 a.m. 12:53 a.m. the next day in New Zealand, as if I needed to know that.

I normally woke up around eight. Made it to the office by nine. But I felt like shit. I needed a shower. Coffee. Food. I stood up, feeling a little wobbly. I looked down at Riley. He hadn't barked despite the pounding on the door. He never barked.

"Nothing?" I said to him. "Not even a growl?"

His tail thumped against the floor, and he yawned.

“One of these days I’m really going to need your help,” I said. “I hope you’re ready.”

Riley walked off toward the kitchen, which meant he was hungry.

I was still wearing my work clothes from the day before. My tie and my shoes were off, and I needed to pee. But whoever was outside the door really wanted to talk to me. The person beat on the door again, shaking my brain like dice in a cup.

“Stop,” I said. “Jesus.”

I thought about calling the apartment complex security guard and asking him to find out who was making the endless racket. But he was an elderly man, the owner’s uncle, and he usually didn’t arrive until late morning and was gone by five. The noise wasn’t the knock of a friend or someone selling something. It sounded urgent, determined. But my desire to make it stop overwhelmed any fears I had about who was out there. I stumbled to the door and looked through the peephole.

It took a moment for the scene outside to make sense to me, but when it did, my heart started racing.

I understood immediately why the knock was so heavy.

Through the peephole I saw two uniformed police officers and a detective I already knew.

“Mr. Hansen,” the detective said. “It’s the Eastland Police. We know you’re in there. Open up.”

“Damn,” I said.

An already rough morning became totally shitty.

CHAPTER THREE

The morning sun nearly killed me.

It poured in when I opened the door, its rays penetrating my eyeballs like knitting needles. I took a step back, feeling as if I were a man under siege.

“Can we come in?” the detective said.

I didn’t have to answer. He was already stepping across the threshold with the two uniformed officers right behind him.

“You can do anything you want if it means you’ll stop knocking,” I said.

Detective Reece stood about five-nine, a few inches shorter than me, but he was powerfully and compactly built. I suspected he’d wrestled in high school. Or maybe played nose tackle at a small college. He looked like that kind of guy. He didn’t offer to shake my hand, but I’d shaken it before, the last time he and I had encountered each other. I remembered he possessed a strong grip, and I always pictured him sitting at his desk, endlessly squeezing one of those hand strengtheners.

Reece saw the beer cans on the coffee table, and he raised his eyebrows. He was probably a few years younger than me, and his hair was thinning. He wore it cropped close to his head, and his suit coat looked

too small for him.

“It’s recycling day,” I said.

“Think green, right?”

“Exactly,” I said.

He pointed at Riley. “Does the dog bite?”

“Only his food,” I said, trying to keep the mood light.

But Reece wasn’t smiling. He looked around the room, taking it all in. The TV still played with the sound down, showing highlights of a hockey game from the night before. There were dirty dishes in my sink, discarded gym clothes on the floor. I needed to pick up, and I would have if I’d only known the police were going to show up.

“Have you seen your ex-wife lately?” Reece asked.

“Not in six weeks,” I said. “Not since . . . that night you and I met.”

“The night of the late unpleasantness,” Reece said.

“I wasn’t stalking her.”

Reece turned to one of the uniformed officers. “He says he wasn’t stalking her. The ex-wife says he was. Who would you believe?”

The young uniformed cop didn’t answer. He wasn’t supposed to.

“I was trying to see Andrew,” I said. “I told you that then.”

“This is the ex-wife’s son from a previous relationship,” Reece said to the cop again. He stopped looking around and turned to face me. The two uniformed officers stayed near the front door, serving as Reece’s audience. “Kid’s not even his son.”

“Gina and I were married for five years, and Andrew and I became close, and I just want to see him from time to time. It’s not unusual. I just wanted to see the kid.”

“But she didn’t want you there, and you showed up anyway. You’ve been divorced almost two years. Maybe you need to move on.” He turned to the uniformed cops again. “What do you guys think? Is it time to move on?”

“Is that what this is about?” I asked. “Is Gina pressing charges? That was six weeks ago. I thought it was over.”

Reece gestured toward the cluttered dining room table. “Why don’t we sit down and talk, Mr. Hansen?” He waited for me to move, and when I didn’t, he spoke again. “Please?”

He was acting like we were in his apartment and I was the guest. He’d reversed the situation and taken over my turf. I couldn’t say anything to stop him, so I sat down. Reece took the seat across from me, and after he did, he reached out with his hand and brushed some old crumbs off the table and onto the floor. Then he took

out his phone and started scrolling through it. I waited. For all I knew, he was checking his Twitter feed or looking up movie times.

“Can I ask—”

“Where were you last night, Mr. Hansen?” Reece asked.

I looked over at the beer cans on the coffee table, the deep indentation in the couch where I’d slept without a pillow or a blanket.

“I was here,” I said.

“All night?”

“All night.”

“Were you alone?” he asked.

“Yes. I live alone. I work a lot. I’m single.” Then I glanced at the dog. “Riley was here.”

“What time did you get home from work?” Reece asked.

“About five thirty. I stopped at the grocery store first.”

Reece nodded. He peeked at his phone, tapped it a few times, and then looked back up at me. “I’m going to show you a photograph of someone. I want you to tell me if you know this person, and if you do know them, I want you to tell me how you know them.”

“Okay.”

He turned the phone around so that I could see the photo. I should have guessed who it was going to be before he even handed it to me.

It was a photo of the girl from the grocery store.

CHAPTER FOUR

It looked like a driver’s license photo. Not many people look good in those, but the girl did. Her hair was piled on top of her head in a loosely seductive way, and she wore a friendly smile, a far cry from the look of fear she’d flashed at me when I spoke to her the previous evening.

“Do you know her?” Reece asked.

A little of the emotion from the grocery store welled up in me again.

“I think I know what this is about,” I said.

“You do?” Reece looked surprised.

“Yes,” I said. “After what happened with Gina, and then the way this girl acted in the grocery store when I spoke to her, you’re thinking I’m some kind of serious creep. Someone who stalks strangers now and not just

my ex-wife.”

“What happened in the grocery store?” Reece asked.

“If you just let me apologize to her, I will,” I said. “I’ll call her or write a note—”

Reece interrupted. “The grocery store. What happened?”

I took a deep breath. I told him I’d seen the girl in the store the night before and she reminded me very much of someone I once knew. When I told Detective Reece she reminded me of my college girlfriend, his eyebrows rose again, even higher than when he’d noticed the beer cans. I said I just wanted to talk to the girl, to ask if she might be related to Marissa or her family, but when I approached her, she took off, dropping her groceries at my feet.

Reece took this all in, and when I was finished, he asked, “Did she say anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Not a word?”

“Not a word. She acted like I was Attila the Hun. She ran off. Maybe she’d had a bad experience with a man before. Maybe she’s just really shy and gets skittish around strangers. I don’t know.”

“Who did you think this girl was related to? Your ex-girlfriend?”

“My girlfriend from college. I guess technically she was my ex-girlfriend. She did break up with me right before . . .” I couldn’t bring myself to say it. I held the image of the girl in my mind, and I could see Marissa’s face there as well, the two of them as vivid and three-dimensional as real life. A piercing stab of nostalgia traversed my chest, striking every major organ and even some minor ones along the way. I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“Before what?” Reece asked.

“Before she died,” I said. “She died in a house fire when we were twenty. Right here near campus. She and her three roommates were killed. But right before the fire, a couple of days before, I guess, she broke up with me.”

“She broke your heart,” Reece said. It wasn’t a question. He must have read something on my face or in my voice. I knew I couldn’t hide my feelings for Marissa, then or any other time.

“She did,” I said. “Completely.”

“And what was her last name?” Reece asked. “The ex-girlfriend or girlfriend. Whatever she was. What was her last name and where was she from?”

“Her name was Marissa Minor. Her family lived in Hanfort, Ohio. It’s about an hour from here.”

“I know it.” Reece wrote something down in a little notebook he had pulled from his jacket pocket. His fingers were stubby, the nails bitten. “And you thought maybe this girl in the grocery store was related to your ex-girlfriend, and so you wanted to talk to her? But instead, you spooked her.”

“It all sounds far-fetched and ridiculous, I know. At least, you’re making it sound that way.”

“I’m not making it sound any way. It sounds the way it sounds.”

“Look, Detective, I have to get to work. I had a shitty, embarrassing night last night. And I’m sorry if I bothered that girl in the store. If you just give me her name or something, I’ll apologize. I know you’ve checked my record, and you know I’ve never been arrested and never hurt anybody. I’d just like to make this go away if I can.”

“And you think an apology will make it go away?” Reece asked.

“It seems like the gentlemanly thing to do,” I said. “I apologized to Gina after she called you.”

Reece put his notebook away. He looked around the apartment again, his eyes passing over the clutter, the beer cans, even the impassive officers who still stood by the door. One of their radios crackled, but the officer ignored it. He pressed a button, silencing the sound.

“You can’t apologize to this girl,” Reece said, staring at me with more intensity. “This girl from the grocery store.”

“What do you want me to do, then?” I asked. “You can’t charge me with anything. It’s not a crime to talk to someone in a store.”

Reece kept his eyes on me. “You can’t apologize to her because she’s dead. Her body was found in a shitty motel out on Highway Six last night.”

I studied Reece’s face, looking for some sign that he was joking, that he was trying to scare me by saying something so patently ridiculous and absurd. But he wasn’t joking. I could tell by the stony, stolid expression on his face. And the news hit me like a blast of cold air. My body tensed, locked up. I felt a pain at the base of my skull and realized I was clenching my teeth as tightly as I could.

That girl, that beautiful young girl couldn’t just be gone. Extinguished like a snuffed candle.

“What happened to her?” I asked. The question sounded dumb to my own ears, insufficient to the gravity of the situation. But there was nothing else I wanted to know. *What happened?*

Reece continued to study me, as though I were a specimen in his lab. He reached up and rubbed his chin, his thumb and forefinger easing over his freshly shaved skin. He seemed to have decided something.

“She was murdered,” he said. “Most likely strangled, although we’ll wait to hear from the medical examiner’s office for the official word.”

Then I felt cold inside, as though the bitter wind that had first buffeted me had been internalized. I shivered, my torso shaking involuntarily.

“Murdered?” I said, sounding dumb again.

Reece nodded. “Are you sure you don’t know this girl? I mean, outside of chatting her up in the grocery store.”

“I don’t know her,” I said. “I’d never seen her before yesterday. Never.” But then some things started to come together in my mind. I *was* telling the truth—I had never seen the girl before. And when I spoke to her, I didn’t say my name or identify myself in any way. So if I didn’t know who she was, how had the police ended up at my apartment—

“You didn’t know her,” Reece said. “But she seemed to know you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why are you here?”

“This young woman you talked to in the grocery store, this woman you say you didn’t know? She had a slip of paper in her pocket when she died, a slip of paper with your name and address written on it.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Detective Reece said he wanted me to come to the police station with him. He said it was simple—I could agree to give a DNA sample and be fingerprinted and then they’d let me go. He told me I could feed Riley before we left, and he also made sure to tell me I could call an attorney at any time if I wanted, and while we rode downtown—me sitting in the passenger seat of his dark sedan, him driving and not saying anything else while pulsating jazz played on the radio—I considered doing just that.

But I hadn’t done anything to that girl, except try to speak to her in the grocery store. As I rode to the station, I tried to understand how anyone could hurt a girl like that. Who would want to violently end such a young life? And for what reason? A rape? A robbery? A lovers’ quarrel?

Other things came back to me during the brief car ride as well, things having to do with Marissa. We met during our freshman year of college when the dorm I lived in threw a mixer. I went with a few of my friends, not intending to stay long, but then a girl walked in wearing jeans that fit her body perfectly, her red hair cascading over her shoulders like a ruby waterfall. I’d seen her on campus a couple of times—walking on the quad, standing in line in the cafeteria—but we’d never spoken. She always seemed to be laughing or gesturing, always seemed to have some inner glow spilling out of her as though her body couldn’t contain it.

If my life had been a cartoon, the illustrator would have drawn my tongue hanging out until it reached the floor.

But the crowd swallowed her up. I caught occasional glimpses of her dancing, her body swinging to the music, her hair—that rich, wild hair—flipping across her face and then back as she moved. I remembered the song she danced to. “Seether” by Veruca Salt.

I was transfixed.

When my friends wanted to leave for another party, I told them to go on without me, that I’d catch up later. But I never did.

I circled the edges of the party, dancing sometimes, talking to other friends, but with one eye always looking for that wild redhead. I never came close, and eventually I lost sight of her altogether and assumed she’d moved on, like my friends had. Why wouldn’t she? I couldn’t imagine a girl like that would have only a lame freshman mixer to attend in a dorm on a Friday night. I imagined she had parties and invitations and adventures awaiting her, as many as she wanted.

I went down a short hallway, searching for the bathroom. The redhead emerged from the ladies’ room right in front of me. I almost froze in my tracks. We made eye contact, and I managed to say, “Hey.”

“Hey,” she said, smiling.

But I didn’t stop. I went right on into the men’s room, where I stood alone in the middle of the floor, the

sweat from the crowded room and dancing cooling on my back. I saw myself in the mirror. Thick brown hair. Bright blue eyes. Thin and fit. A young guy in all his glory. In his prime, right? Why not?

I turned around and went back out to the party. And there she stood at the end of the hallway. Her red hair was piled on top of her head now, and she fanned herself with her right hand. When I came closer, I saw hair plastered to the back of her neck by sweat, a spray of freckles across her skin.

She looked over at me. "It's fucking hot."

"It is."

"Do you know what would be funny?" she asked.

I hesitated just a moment, a heartbeat that changed the rest of my life. I said, "It would be funny if you and I ended up married and having children, and we could always tell them we met outside the men's room at a lame freshman mixer."

It was her turn to hesitate. Everything hung in the balance between us. I figured she'd call me a creep or a weirdo. I wouldn't have blamed her one bit. I didn't know where my statement had come from or why those words had tumbled out of my mouth. I simply felt bold. I felt that only bold words could work for a girl like the one standing before me.

"I was going to say wouldn't it be funny if you were some super-Christian guy and within the first three words I ever spoke to you I dropped the f-bomb." She smiled. "But your answer kind of surprised me, I have to admit."

"No offense taken by the f-bomb," I said. "I kind of liked it."

That was Marissa. There was nothing predictable or conventional about her.

We left the mixer together and walked around campus that night. We told each other about our families, our lives in high school, our hopes and dreams. I was majoring in philosophy and thinking about grad school or maybe a job as some kind of social worker. Marissa wanted to travel, to take photographs and write, and maybe someday turn her experiences into a book.

I remembered our first kiss. Late that night, we walked beneath the falling leaves on the quad, and our hands found each other as though they possessed minds of their own. Once our bodies touched that way, it was over. At least for me, it was over. I belonged to her. And that scared me, as I was sure it scared her. Young guys always got nervous when the feelings grew that deep. I'd dated other girls, sure, but I always felt in control with them. I always believed I could come and go from the relationship if I wanted. No harm, no foul. I knew that wouldn't be the case with Marissa.

And on that fall night, we came together. We stopped in a darkened patch between the gas lamps that lit the campus walkways. We turned to each other and kissed, and it was one of the few moments in my life when I completely lost myself. The world around us disappeared. The buildings, the students, the night sky.

When our lips parted, I ran my hand through her thick hair, my fingers disappearing in the deep red waves.

"Are you ready for this?" she asked.

"For what?" I asked. "For you?"

“For everything,” she said. “For this great adventure.”

I told the truth. I couldn’t tell her anything else.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I’m ready.”

And I was. For two years, it was the greatest ride of my life.

And I also remembered what it felt like when she broke up with me, just two days before she died. She didn’t just end our relationship. She told me she didn’t want to be my friend either. She told me she wasn’t sure she ever wanted to see me again.

She didn’t just break my heart. She steamrolled it.

And then two days later, she was dead.

The fire swept through the house she shared with three other girls on a Friday night in October, killing them all. An accident. A candle left burning unattended, possibly because the four of them had been out drinking. It could have happened to any young, careless kids. In this case, it happened to my favorite person.

I tried to convince myself over the years that it was all for the best, that Marissa and I wouldn’t have spent our lives together. We would have broken up late in college or shortly after, like most couples, and we both would have gone on to find other partners, other lives.

But I didn’t really believe any of that.

Marissa and I often talked about life after college and our fears about ending up stumbling through the kind of conventional lives our parents lived. One night a few weeks after we started dating we hopped into her car and drove off to Columbus, an hour away, to eat at a dumpy little diner called Heywood’s. Marissa was always hearing about places like Heywood’s and insisting that we try them. After eating hamburgers and sharing a milk shake, we sat across from each other, letting the conversation go wherever we wanted.

“We should run off somewhere,” she said.

“We just did. Heywood’s.”

“I mean after college,” she said. “Someplace no one would expect.”

“Disneyland?”

“A real place. Far away. New Zealand.”

“New Zealand?” I asked. “Do you know anything about New Zealand?”

“No,” she said. “That’s why we should go. Are you in?”

“Okay,” I said, humoring her but also appreciating her boldness. “After graduation, we’re going to New Zealand.”

“Don’t say it if you don’t mean it.”

“I mean it,” I said.

She poked at the ice cubes in her water glass with her straw. “I don’t want to end up like my parents.”

“Old? With kids? What?”

“It’s not those things.” She kept poking the ice. “I don’t want to be . . . complacent. I don’t want to just . . . exist. You know? Moving from one day to the other as though I was just running out the clock.”

“Sure. My parents can seem the same way. They exist. They don’t live.”

“I don’t even know if my parents love each other,” she said. “My dad dictates everything. My mom goes along. I love them, but I don’t want to be like them when I get married.”

“I hear that,” I said. “My parents . . . they don’t even act like they like each other anymore. They can go days without really talking to each other.”

“Okay,” she said. “It’s decided. We both want more. We won’t settle. Ever.”

In some ways, it felt weird to be making postgraduation plans when we were still freshmen and had been dating for only a few weeks. But I loved her already. I knew that. And I also knew I shouldn’t be thinking about the future so much and assuming the two of us would be together. I didn’t want to get married young. I didn’t want to think too soon about settling down. Wasn’t that why we wanted to run off somewhere and avoid the traps of a conventional life?

“You never know,” Marissa said, as casual as could be. “Maybe the two of us will end up getting married someday.”

I can’t describe the feelings that raced through my body. Electricity. Electric charges sharp and pleasurable filled every cell. Was it possible this girl in front of me was really thinking about marrying me? About spending the rest of her life with me?

“Sure,” I said, “but isn’t that all a long way off? I mean, you don’t want to rush into anything, do you?”

Marissa looked up at me. She held my gaze for a long, steady moment, and our eyes locked into place, joined together as if by a magnetic force. Then she shrugged. Casually. Almost too casually.

“Yeah,” she said, looking away. “There’s time for all of that in the future.”

What I wouldn’t give to have that moment back.

I never met anyone else like her. I hadn’t loved anyone the same way since then, not even Gina, the woman I’d married seven years ago.

When Marissa died, it was like a giant steel door slammed shut on one part of my life, the part in which I could have been happy, truly happy sharing my life with someone else. For just a moment in the grocery store, I felt as if Marissa were alive again, that some piece of her was back.

Was it crazy to say that the death of that girl—the girl whose name I still didn’t know—hit me with the same force that Marissa’s death had? Was it crazy to say I felt like I’d lost Marissa all over again?

* * *

My fingerprints were already on file with the city. Not because of my previous run-in with the law, but

because of my job as a caseworker. In order to make sure landlords didn't violate the rights of their tenants, I went into a lot of homes and apartments, so they fingerprinted me when I was hired and did an extensive background check.

When the fingerprint technician at the police station took my hand in hers and told me to just relax, I'd been through it before. I wasn't relaxed, but I knew the procedure, so I tried to make my mind a blank while she rolled my hand around on the ink pad and then the card stock.

The DNA test was similar to going to the doctor's office to get checked for strep. The same technician pulled out a giant Q-tip thing and ran it around the inside of my cheek. She was about as gentle as someone trying to scrape rust off a boat hull. When that was finished, she led me to Detective Reece's empty desk and told me to sit and wait.

No one seemed concerned about me running off. Sure, the room was full of cops, but none of them paid any attention to me. Phones rang, printers printed, radios crackled. I called work from my phone and told them I was running late. I didn't say why, and they didn't ask. I worked on my own a lot, out in the field, so things were pretty flexible.

My head felt better. Not normal, but better. The pain from my moderate hangover had subsided, but I was hungry, and I knew I wouldn't feel one hundred percent until I ate something substantial.

Reece came back twenty minutes later. He sat at his desk without looking at me and started shuffling through some papers. I knew enough to suspect it was a strategy, one designed to make me feel uncomfortable, nervous. I refused to give in, so I sat back in my chair and waited for him to speak.

Finally, he said, "Is there anything else you need to tell me, Mr. Hansen?"

"No," I said.

"You've had time to think. Maybe something else has crossed your mind. Maybe you remember something that is relevant to this investigation."

"I have a question," I said. "What is the girl's name? Can you at least tell me that?"

"Why do you want to know her name?" Reece asked. "Assuming you don't already know it."

"I don't know it. And I don't like calling her 'the girl' as though she's not a real person. And I'm wondering, still, if she might be related to my ex-girlfriend. I knew her family pretty well."

Reece considered me for a moment, and then he said, "I had a girlfriend in college who dumped me. You know what I did?" He waited a beat for a response, and when I didn't say anything he went on. "I said to myself, 'Easy come, easy go.' Why would I want to be with someone who doesn't want to be with me? Am I right? Too many fish in the sea and all that. Especially for young guys in their prime."

I had the feeling he was trying to help me, that he really believed he was sharing some piece of profound wisdom with me.

"I hear you," I said.

"I don't think you do." He shuffled some more papers around on his desk. "The victim's identity will be made public pending notification of her next of kin. It should be in the afternoon paper."

The victim. It sounded so cold. Her identity was slowly being stripped away.

“Can I go, then?” I asked.

Reece considered me again. “You don’t have any plans to travel, do you?”

“No.”

“Don’t make any. I want to be able to find you anytime I want.”

“You know where I live.”

Reece looked at something behind me, tracking it with his eyes. I waited for a moment, assuming he’d turn back to me, but he didn’t. He followed the progress of something—likely *someone*—who was moving through the room.

I turned in my chair and saw what he saw. A man and a woman, escorted by another detective, were led into a private room on the far side of the station. The couple’s heads were bent low, so I couldn’t see their faces, but they seemed to be carrying a heavy burden. The detective with them, a woman, gently placed her hand on each of their backs as they passed her and entered the room. The woman had reddish hair, but from a distance I couldn’t tell if it was her natural color.

When the door closed, I turned to face Reece again, and he looked at me.

“Who was that?” I asked.

His mouth pressed into a tight line. “Them?” he said, his voice distant. “They’re the parents of the murdered girl, the one with your address in her pocket. They just came back from the morgue, where they had to identify the body of their child.”

I felt my heart drop, a heavy stone plummeting through my chest cavity.

“We’ll see you soon, Mr. Hansen,” Reece said. “We’ll be in touch.”

CHAPTER SIX

I tried to forget about it all.

For a short time, I almost convinced myself I could.

I spent a busy day at work, out in the field. I visited four different housing units and took reports on a variety of violations that ranged from the ridiculous—someone complaining that his landlord wouldn’t go to the grocery store for him—to the poignant: an elderly woman who couldn’t afford her heat. I ate lunch with a coworker around noon and resisted the impulse to go home and take out my old photos from college, the ones that showed Marissa and me together at a homecoming dance, an end-of-the-year party, a trip to a lake by her house during summer break. In that way, the day passed as so many days passed. Fast, almost blurred, a race to get to . . . what? Riley and the TV?

Then, on my way home, at the corner of Eleventh and Main, I saw the word through the cracked glass of a newspaper box. “Murder.” Even from my car, I saw her face and a headline. “Murder.” Eastland wasn’t a big

town, only about twenty-five thousand people, so a homicide commanded a lot of attention.

I pulled over, slipped some coins into the slot, and grabbed a copy of the *Eastland Daily News*. I stood on the street, staring at that face again. People walked past me, and jangly guitar music leaked out of a coffee shop up the block. Then I read the caption. It gave the girl a name. Emily Joy Russell. Age twenty.

Twenty. The same age Marissa was when she died.

I scanned the article, looking for more information.

It said Emily was a student at the University of Kentucky, several hours south, and no one—not even the girl’s parents—knew what she was doing in Eastland, Ohio, an hour west of Columbus. She didn’t have any family in Eastland, or any friends that anyone knew of. Her parents, the people I had seen at the police station earlier that day, lived in Richmond, Kentucky, where Emily grew up. She had a younger sister, too. The cause of death was being withheld. And, mercifully, the story did not mention me or the note found in Emily’s pocket.

There was no obvious connection to Marissa or her family. At least none I could see.

I took the paper back to my car and read the article all over again. I wasn’t sure what I expected to find the second time through. Or the third. I tossed it aside and took out my phone. I needed to talk to someone, someone who might understand what I was thinking and feeling. Someone who remembered the same things I remembered.

Someone who could answer some questions.

I sent a text, received the reply I wanted, and drove off.

* * *

Heather Aubrey and I dated briefly during our first year of college, right before I met Marissa. We split up mutually, and then when Marissa and I started dating, we all remained friends. We traveled in the same larger social circle, and there were times—notably during a couple of summers—when Marissa and Heather were very close. A few months after Marissa died, Heather and I dated again for about a month. But the relationship quickly grew weird for me. It felt like I was cheating on Marissa, even though she was dead, and it seemed awkward to be with someone who knew Marissa so well. I broke it off, which didn’t make Heather happy, but I couldn’t do anything else.

Heather and I kept in touch sporadically over the years. We both settled in Eastland after college. Heather married, had kids, divorced. When Gina and I split up, Heather and I dated briefly again. Very briefly. She seemed to want to move quickly toward something permanent: a solid commitment if not engagement and marriage, which didn’t surprise me. Heather was practical, more practical than Marissa or I. Heather even told me once that Marissa and I had been dreamers with our heads in the clouds. Heather majored in business in college and worked briefly as a sales rep before getting married and having kids. She liked to set goals and move toward them, but her practicality masked a surprisingly emotional side. When those goals weren’t met, or even weren’t met quickly enough, Heather could become intensely unhappy.

When I sensed her desire for a stronger commitment from me during our postdivorce reunion and decided to break things off, she told me, forcefully, never to speak to her again. And for close to a year I didn’t. She’d issued the same threat when we broke up after Marissa’s death. Over time, she eased back into my life. An occasional text. A Facebook message. And then we were acting like there’d never been a problem between

us.

So we'd been cool for a while lately and even got together for a platonic drink or coffee now and then. She lived in a newer subdivision with her two teenage children and seemed to work only when she felt like it. Her ex-husband had a lot of money—he was a dentist who had once given me a crown—and in the wake of their divorce, Heather focused as much of her energy as possible on raising her kids. She looked like an upper-middle-class suburban mom. Fit, tan, cheery.

The evening I saw the headline about Emily's murder, Heather greeted me at her door with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and I won't lie and say it didn't feel good to have a woman in my arms again. Did anything feel better than that?

"Well, you look great, don't you?" she said.

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "I'm tired, slightly hungover, and sliding into middle age. You're just being nice."

"I'm not," she said, patting my cheek. "Have you seen what most men our age look like? You've got your hair. You're trim." She rubbed my upper arm. "You always were handsome."

She led me into a bright, clean kitchen. I accepted her offer of a glass of water, and then we were sitting across from each other.

"The kids are off at soccer practice and chess club," she said. "Do you still see Andrew? How old is he now?"

"I don't see him as much as I'd like. And he's nine."

"That's too bad." Some of her cheer slipped, and she became a little guarded, cautious. It was always chancy opening communication with an ex. "I was pleasantly surprised when you texted today."

"How long has it been since we've seen each other?" I asked. "A couple of weeks?"

"More than that. We said we'd be friends, but you're not much of one."

"I'm sorry about that. I work a lot. And I started playing in a basketball league."

"Really? Basketball?"

"It's an over-forty league. It keeps me active. We go out for beers after the games. There are some good guys in the group." I wondered if I'd made a mistake calling her, but I wanted her opinion. She knew Marissa well. Very well. "I came over because I need your help with something."

I held the afternoon paper folded under my arm. Heather nodded toward it.

"Did you get a paper route?" she asked.

"I wanted to show you something."

"Is it something good?"

I unfolded the paper and placed it in front of her, smoothing out the centerfold so she could see Emily's

picture. I didn't say anything or prompt her in any way.

Heather reached over and picked up a pair of reading glasses. She slipped them on and studied the paper.

"Mmmm," she said, shaking her head. "I heard about this on the radio, but I haven't seen a picture of the girl." She scanned the story, still shaking her head. "This is awful. Her parents . . . My Amanda is sixteen, not much younger than this girl."

"Is that it?" I asked.

"Is what it?"

"Is that your only reaction to the photo?"

Heather slipped her glasses off. "I don't understand what you're asking me."

I tapped the paper. "Does that girl look familiar?"

Without looking back at the paper, Heather said, "I've never seen her before. And I don't know her name. It says she's from Lexington or someplace like that."

"Doesn't she look just like Marissa?" I asked.

Heather's face changed even further. All the cheeriness left, slipping into a look I imagined she showed to her children when they begged for a pony or clung stubbornly to a belief in the Tooth Fairy. She pitied me. But she also humored me by putting the glasses back on and studying the picture one more time.

She heaved a sigh.

"Sure, I see a resemblance," she said.

"Thank you."

"A general resemblance. Lots of girls have red hair and . . . maybe she has brown eyes. It's hard to tell in the paper. But lots of young girls are this pretty. Amanda brings her friends around, and I feel like Grandma Moses, they're all so beautiful. It's easy to feel a little intoxicated around them."

"You didn't see this girl like I did," I said, tapping the paper. "I saw her gestures, her walk. I can't believe you're not seeing it in this photo."

"Saw her where?" she asked.

"In the grocery store. Last night, right before she died."

Heather slipped the glasses off again. She reached over and patted my hand.

"Oh, Nick. You never got over Marissa, did you? All these years later, you're still chasing her ghost."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Heather poured more water for me, and then she sat down at the table again.

“I understand why you feel that way about Marissa. Even among a group of young people, she stood out,” she said. “Her energy. Her laugh. And she was kind, too. A good friend. She just had . . . something.” She sounded a little resentful when she said, “Hell, everybody loved Marissa.”

“And you two got pretty close,” I said, “especially during that summer you were both living in Eastland.”

Heather looked out the window at the backyard. The grass was slightly yellow, just starting to recover from the cold of winter. The trees were barren, leafless.

“She had closer friends than me, I suppose,” Heather said. “I kind of felt a rivalry with her. You know how girls are. Always trying to outdress or outshine the one right next to them.” Heather looked back over at me. “And she got you.”

“Were you angry about that?” I asked.

Her features sharpened. “My life worked out well. Pretty well.” She gestured into the air, perhaps indicating the house, the yard, her life. “I know Marissa hurt you right before she died.”

“What do you know about that?” I asked. “About why she broke up with me?”

A look of disbelief crossed Heather’s face. “My God. You *are* on a ghost hunt. Did seeing this girl really send you this far into the past?”

“Yes, it has me thinking about all of that stuff. Chasing ghosts, as you say. I just want to understand, and I’ve never really talked about it with our college friends. Not since then. You and I didn’t even talk about it, and we started dating right after she died.”

“We were helping each other grieve,” she said. “It’s normal for friends to do that.”

“I suppose.”

“What do you want to know?” Heather asked, her voice a little colder.

The sun slipped away outside, the horizon slowly turning orange. The furnace clicked on and pushed warm air through the vents.

“Did she say anything to you about why she wanted to split up with me?” I asked. I really was chasing a ghost, one that had long ago fled from our lives.

“I thought she told you everything you needed to know.”

“She told me she was unworthy of me, and that I needed to be done with her,” I said. “Not just as a boyfriend, but also as a friend. She said she was thinking of withdrawing from school, which seemed crazy. She was a great student.”

“And she told a lot of us that her parents were having financial problems,” Heather said.

“Yeah, she kind of hinted at that.”

“She said they couldn’t afford to send her to Eastland anymore, so she had to say good-bye to her life here. You probably just got folded into that.” Her voice lowered. “And then . . . the fire . . .”

She stared straight ahead, her eyes a bit vacant. She must have been imagining the flames, the horror of the heat and smoke.

I gently asked another question. “Did you know her parents?”

“I met them a time or two when they came to visit. I didn’t know them well.”

“I did,” I said. “They weren’t the kind of people to have financial problems. Quite the opposite. They had a nice house, nice cars. They belonged to a country club.”

“Look at all those bankers and Wall Street guys who lived the high life, and then, beneath the surface, nothing.” Her hand fluttered in the air to punctuate her comment. “All built on lies. How do you know her dad wasn’t like that? Living beyond his means?”

“I guess I don’t really know,” I said.

“I always figured her dad got in too deep with something,” she said, “and Marissa would have to leave school and go back home to Hanfort for a while. Maybe work, save money, take classes at a community college, and then bounce back. She’d land on her feet. I believed that. She always did. Things didn’t get her down or derail her for too long. She had a brightness that never dimmed.”

“That’s just it, though,” I said. “When she broke up with me, she seemed so defeated. So down. It wasn’t like her.”

“How would you feel if you found out your parents weren’t what you thought they were? That would throw you for a loop, wouldn’t it? Make you reevaluate everything? Every relationship and event in your life?” Heather leaned closer to me, and up close I saw the gold flecks in her blue irises. “She was young, and she broke your heart. We’ve all been there. Besides, Marissa could be so . . . bold sometimes, you know? So tough and cut-and-dried when she needed to be. Sure, she was a dreamer, but she was a fearless dreamer. She knew her mind. She went for things if she wanted them. If it hadn’t been for . . .” Her voice trailed off. She bit down on her lower lip with her top teeth. “I don’t like to think about that fire. It’s too awful.”

“I know.”

I reached over and pulled the paper toward me. I studied the girl’s face again. *Emily Russell’s face*. Even if she was related to Marissa’s family, which it didn’t appear she was, then what did that matter to me? Marissa’s family had moved on with their lives long ago. I knew they moved away from Hanfort shortly after the funeral. I assumed it was just too painful to see all the places that reminded them of their daughter—playgrounds, schools, parks, friends. I couldn’t blame them.

But then why did the girl have my name and address in her pocket? What was I supposed to do with that?

I doubted Heather could tell me.

“It’s jealousy, too,” Heather said.

“What is?”

“These feelings you have now. The fact that you’re hung up on Marissa after all these years. She was just your college love, but you’re stuck on her because she rejected you for someone else.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “She didn’t have—”

“My husband cheated on me,” Heather said, her face growing somber. “A younger girl.” She forced a laugh, and it sounded thin and brittle. “I know I’ve told you about this. What a stupid cliché he was. Some twenty-year-old who worked in his office, probably couldn’t even walk and chew gum at the same time, the little brat. And he turned me into a cliché as well. The bitter, spurned middle-aged mom who is left taking care of the kids.”

“I’m sorry, Heather. But what are you talking about with Marissa? She didn’t have anyone else. She broke up with me, and then she died. That was it.”

Yes, it had been twenty years, but I still felt a tangled knot of jealousy swelling in my gut. It felt like a living thing, a rapidly growing organism.

“I thought you knew,” she said.

“Knew what?” I asked.

“Oh, Nick. I fear this is just going to rip you wide-open again—”

“What?”

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