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Published by Zaffre

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EYES LIKE MINE

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ZAFFRE

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by

Zaffre Publishing
80-81 Wimpole Street, London W1G 9RE
www.zaffrebooks.co.uk
First published in the United States of America in 2017 by
William Morrow & Co, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
195 Broadway, New York, NY 10007

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The term "red market" used on pages XXXX was coined
by Scott Carney in his book The Red Market,
published in 2011 by William Morrow & Co.

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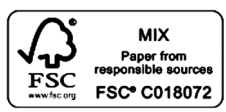
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978-1-78-576256-7
Export trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-78-576255-0
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-78-576254-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Zaffre Publishing is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk

Dedication
TK

EYES LIKE MINE

PART I

1

The call comes in just after five in the morning.

I am immediately on guard because everyone knows that nothing good ever happens this early. Not with a phone call, anyway. You never get word that a wealthy relative has passed and is leaving you his inheritance before 9 A.M. It's fortunate, then, that I'm already awake and on my second cup of coffee, so I'm at least moderately prepared.

I've just come back from my walk, where I leaned over the edge of the seawall and contemplated water that is calm and gray, just like the city itself at this time of year. As usual, I had tried to see the warm, dark current that flows from Japan and turns into the North Pacific, tempering the cold and spreading its tepid fingers to the coastline. And, as usual, it refused me the pleasure.

Vancouver. Some people say it's beautiful here, but they've never idled in the spaces that I call home. They've never been down to Hastings Street, filled with its needles and junkies. They've never considered the gray sky and the gray water for months on end as rain pours down in an unsuccessful attempt at cleansing. Then comes summer and it is so hot that you can roast marshmallows on the fires that burn through the forests in the province. Summer right on the coast is nice enough, but still several months away when my phone rings.

I stare at the unfamiliar number on my call display and, after a moment of hesitation, decline to take it. Several seconds later, it rings again. I'm intrigued. I answer, if only because I've always admired persistence in a caller.

"Hello?"

There's a long pause after the person on the other end explains in a hoarse voice why he is calling. The pause becomes awkward. I can tell the caller is fighting himself, wanting to say more but knowing this is a bad idea. No one wants to talk to a rambler over the phone. Especially one you've never met before. I imagine the caller sweating on the other end. Maybe his hands have gone clammy. The phone slips from his grasp and I hear it clatter on the ground. He swears for a full thirty seconds as he struggles to pick it back up and regain his composure.

"You still there? Did you hear what I said?" he asks.

"Yeah, I heard," I say, when the silence has become excruciating. "I'll be there." Then I hang up.

I've never heard the name Everett Walsh before, but according to him I may know something about a missing girl. He does not tell me what, though. I consider not meeting him but he sounds desperate and if there's one thing that draws me more than persistence, it's desperation.

Even though finding people is part of what I do for a living, what would I possibly know about a missing girl to warrant a call at this hour?

His desperation is so fresh and raw I can almost taste it.

2

It's a brisk winter morning in Vancouver. I would have said wet, but that's implied when you're talking about the west coast at this time of year. In this city, when in doubt, err on the side of precipitation. I sit at a bus shelter across the street for an hour before the meeting, even though my ancient, beat-up Corolla is parked in the lot. People in cars tend to avert their eyes from those waiting at bus stops, unless the light is red and they have nowhere else to look. Since there is no traffic light here, I feel invisible. From my perch, I can see the café and the parking lot clearly. The café is brightly lit at the counter, but dim everywhere else. So this is to be a clandestine rendezvous. Fine with me. I can do clandestine with the best of them. But can this Everett Walsh?

The bus pulls up and I wave the driver away. He moves off with a grunt and the bus belches exhaust fumes into my face as it leaves.

Just off the busy Kingsway, the café is a cross between a coffee shop and a diner, surrounded by auto mechanic outfits and fast food joints. Out of all the dives he could choose from between his Kerrisdale home and the seedier side of Vancouver that I live in, he decided on one that has a pretty red canopy and fading yellow trim. Something in between. Maybe he is hoping to make both of us comfortable.

I can tell that the coffee here is terrible, but the muffins are not too bad. People exiting with takeout cups in their hands peel back the lid, gulp, and then grimace. Those with muffins never bat an eye. They shrug and move on, seeing the muffins as money well spent.

Twenty minutes before go time, a sporty dark Audi circles the parking lot. A well-groomed couple, both wearing sunglasses, peer into the shop. They don't see who they're looking for and start to bicker. The Audi tears away from the lot and returns five minutes later.

They park near the door and the man gets out, sans sunglasses, and makes his way into the shop. He is short and square with a thick neck. A baseball cap covers thinning brown hair. He wears a dark jacket and his shoulders beneath it are hunched with defeat. The woman gets out, flipping her long red hair over her shoulder, and follows him inside. She doesn't care who sees her. She's beautiful and used to being looked at. She does, however, keep her sunglasses on because it adds to her air of mystery and sex appeal. It's very effective. The middle-aged man at the counter ogles her casually as he pours her coffee. He doesn't look at the man beside her, except to take his money.

Then they wait. Both in their forties, nicely groomed, well dressed. They don't speak to each other, but the silence between them is not comfortable. If there was once chemistry between these two, years of marriage have completely eroded it. The man is still interested, but the woman ignores all of his attempts to catch her attention and stares out the window to the entrance of the parking lot. They both sip at the coffee with no outward reaction. Either they're not paying attention or their taste buds are in shock.

I study them for the remaining time left on the clock. They are obviously not a couple that goes for coffee together. They wouldn't be here if they didn't have to be, so the situation must be bad. I have a terrible feeling about this, but I have to admit that I'm curious, too. From a web search earlier this morning, I know that they are both architects but work for different firms. They seem innocent enough so I make my way around the back and through the side door. They were not expecting this and are surprised when I appear in front of their table, muffin in hand.

The woman stares at my worn jeans and oversize cardigan with the pulled threads exposed. The man, however, is arrested by my face. My skin that is not light or dark, just something muddy and in between. High cheekbones. Stubborn chin. What he seems most taken with are my eyes. This is not unusual for those who bother

to look. I am unremarkable without them factored in. They are so dark that pupil and iris are virtually indistinguishable, fringed by long lashes that might make them pretty until you take a closer look, and then you will see that they absorb all the light around them and refuse to budge an inch. When looking into them, if you ever do, you will suddenly remember appointments that you should be making and previous engagements that you've forgotten to put in your calendar.

"Everett Walsh?" I pull up a chair next to their table and sit. I look only at the man. The woman needs a bit more time to get over my entrance.

"What? Oh, yes. I am. That's, um, me." He wipes a bead of sweat under his cap and then discards the cap entirely. The woman frowns at him in disgust. "This is my wife, Lynn."

"Pleasure," she says, her cool, clear voice indicating that it's anything but. They don't recognize me from the bus shelter and were probably not aware that there had been a bus shelter at all. These are not people accustomed to searching out public transportation. Lucky them. Public transportation in Vancouver is best described as a clusterfuck, to be avoided at all costs unless you're poor or your luxury vehicle is in the shop.

Seeing that Lynn has decided to be unhelpful, Everett takes over. "Thank you for coming. I mean, I know this is out of the blue and you don't know us, but . . ."

"Who referred you to me?" Somebody must have for them to have my phone number.

Everett blinks. "What? Nobody. We hired someone to find you."

Now it's my turn to be confused. It's usually the other way around. "What are you talking about?"

"Our daughter is missing," Lynn says.

Everett glances over at her. "I told her that on the phone, honey."

Lynn turns to him. Years of history pass between them in the look that they share now. "*Her* daughter is missing. Did you tell her that?"

I stare at her with my mouth hanging slightly open. This is the bomb that she expects it to be. For a brief moment, all of the air is sucked out of the room and an unexpected tension arises. Lynn gives me her full attention now and even though she doesn't smile, I can tell that behind the sunglasses, she's pleased with herself.

Everett clears his throat. Opens his mouth to speak, then closes it. We gawp at each other, him and me, until he musters up the courage to try again. "She means the baby you put up for adoption fifteen years ago." He's concerned about my reaction, which up until this point has been a blank expression. Now I'm tempted to check if there's a floor underneath me or if I have, as I suspect, fallen down some kind of nightmarish rabbit hole.

He pulls a photograph from his wallet and sets it in front of me.

A chubby teenage girl with golden skin stares back at me. Though the eyes in the photograph are deeper set and upturned at the edges, there is no denying that they are mine. Almost black, and fathomless. She has dark hair that falls to her shoulders, darker than mine, and an adorable dimple on her chin. I look past the cataloging of her features to get a sense of what's underneath. What she's hiding. After a moment, I see that she is smiling with her mouth, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes. She is lying to the camera, pretending that she's happy.

"This is Bonnie. Bronwyn, actually, but we just call her Bonnie." There is pride in Everett's voice. Love, too.

I glance at Lynn. She refuses to look at the picture. I munch on my muffin, gathering thoughts that have slipped through the creases in the wooden table and scattered on the floor.

Everett can't read my expression, but now that he has started he can't stop. "She went missing almost two weeks ago. We thought she'd gone camping with friends, but—"

"But she lied and stole all the money we keep in the house. She also stole my bank card and withdrew a thousand dollars before I realized it and deactivated the card." Lynn removes her sunglasses

and I see shadows under her bloodshot eyes. I begin to understand what is happening here. Lynn is at the end of her rope. The child she'd jumped through hoops in order to adopt has turned into a teenager and she is looking for the receipt in order to return to sender. "She's done this twice before, but never for this long."

"The police have been no help at all," Everett interjects. "They've put out an alert but because she took the money, they assume she wanted to have stayed away this long. They've stopped looking. I don't know if they ever started. I think one of them talked to some of her teachers at school, but got nowhere. She's a good kid—"

Lynn scoffs. "They're calling her a chronic runaway or something like that, Everett. She stole from us."

"She is a good kid!" Everett insists. "But she's been a handful lately," he concedes. "New friends. Staying out late. Been hanging out with these hip-hop dance people. We think she's been drinking and doing drugs. Yes, she has run away before this, but she always came back! Just not . . . not this time. Why? Why wouldn't she have come back home by now?" Emotion overwhelms him. He covers his face with his hands. It's a sad thing to see a grown man cry, but I refuse to look away. It is in these moments that you can see whether someone is being genuine. Fake tears are easy to spot, so to go that route, it is best to be committed. He is. This is a man in pain.

Lynn stares at Everett for a few moments, then turns back to me. No hand on shoulder. No there, there, honey. "On her computer we found some search history. She knew that we were against it but she was looking for her biological parents online. Through those . . . what do you call them?"

She looks at me like I should have the answer ready. I shrug.

Lynn's expression does not waver. "Those sites that reunite adopted children with their biological parents. She's a minor so she can't sign up for the official ones, but we've heard there are other unsanctioned sites out there. Online communities of people looking

for each other. We're hoping that she hasn't contacted you, for her own sake, but if she has . . ."

Everett collects himself long enough to send Lynn an annoyed glance. "Please excuse my wife. We just want to know where our daughter is."

It's easy to read between the lines. What they mean is that I'm a bad influence, even though I've only met the child once and she couldn't possibly remember making my acquaintance. I see now that they blame me for her dabbling in alcohol and drugs. That in their minds, she has somehow tossed away their nurture and made a beeline for my nature; she has run off to be with her true family and together we will live a wasteful, booze-soaked life. That we will laugh at them from over the tops of our forties.

There is nothing more demeaning than having decent people look down on you. I don't dare let this show, though, and take small comfort in the evidence that their lives seem to be unraveling quicker than mine. I see now why Everett was so desperate to meet with me.

I'm his last resort.

"A few years ago she was obsessed with finding her biological parents. She used to talk to her friends about it, then she stopped and we thought she was over it. But we realized that she found the adoption papers. Her birth certificate. You're a hard woman to find; we had to hire an investigator to help, but we thought maybe Bonnie was able to get in touch somehow."

I frown at him. "That doesn't make any sense. Legally you're supposed to get an amended birth certificate. My name isn't supposed to be anywhere near it."

"We know," Everett replies. "There was a mix-up and we were given the wrong one. We got the amended certificate after and were asked to destroy the original."

Lynn does not look at Everett, but her next words are directed at him. "But Everett kept it."

"I'm sorry," he says. "Okay? How many times do I have to say it? I'm so very sorry."

"I haven't heard from her," I tell them, after a minute. The muffin is almost gone and both the front and side doors are looking mighty inviting right about now. In the end, my curiosity gets the better of me. "What happened the day she went missing?"

Lynn shrugs. "She said she was going camping."

"Yes, I heard that. Where were you?"

An exchange of glances. They're not comfortable with their own parenting abilities put under scrutiny. "We were working," Lynn tells me. Her eyes narrow and her voice is several decibels louder than she intended. A few café patrons glance over at us before returning to their terrible coffee.

"Maybe she's been in touch with her biological father?" Everett says, attempting to resume control of the conversation. He smiles apologetically for Lynn. This is something he appears to be quite used to.

Fat chance of that. I shake my head. "Can't help you there." I get up and leave the table, my departure as abrupt as my arrival. It occurs to me to apologize, but I've never understood the Canadian impulse to say sorry when you've done nothing wrong.

As I head for the door, I hear Lynn hiss, "Great idea, Ev. Just brilliant."

There are footsteps behind me as I cross the parking lot. I tense as they close in. It's Everett. He shoves the photograph into my hands. "Nora? That didn't go the way I wanted it to. Lynn . . . She's under a lot of strain at work right now and things have been difficult between her and Bonnie for quite some time."

Again, his expression is apologetic. He expects me to say, There, there. It's all right. But, like Lynn, I ignore his blatant plea for comfort and understanding. He stiffens and a flush grows from his collar and spreads up his neck. I try to return the photo but he steps just out of reach.

"Keep it. But, please, if you hear from her call us. I wrote our contact information on the back of the picture. She's . . . she's a good kid. Despite everything. I just want her to come back home."

This is the second time he's said that. He is trying desperately to believe it. A good kid. I wonder what he means by that. She sounds wretched. "Why did you hire a PI to look for me and not her?" I ask. And then the answer occurs to me. "Because you thought she came to me, so I'm your starting point."

"Our end point, too," he says, turning away. "She's gotten pretty good at running away by now. She's left us with nothing else to go with."

As I walk to my rusty Corolla, I try to fight the panic rising inside me. Everett Walsh has gone out of his way to contact the biological mother of his missing daughter, even though there is no evidence that points to me being in touch with the child I gave up all those years ago. She has been looking for me, but so what? Many children look for their biological parents, with no luck. It's not uncommon. He gives me a photo, even though I haven't requested one. He tries to impress me with her worthiness. He's not lying, but his attempts at manipulation are becoming clear. Her history as a runaway has jeopardized any serious investigation into her disappearance and he is grasping at straws.

That he's managed to find me is not a stretch. My name is on her original birth papers, clear as day. But how the hell does he know that I help look for missing people for a living?

And does he know that his wife was lying about where she was the day their daughter went missing?

3

The girl sits on the rocks and contemplates her next steps. She thinks she has a concussion but does not know how to tell for sure. She is bleeding from her head, her arms, her wrists. There is a dull pain at the back of her hip, but she cannot remember ever being struck there. Her ears are full of the sound of waves crashing on the rocks, threatening to sweep her out into the ocean. She is so lightheaded that she knows she wouldn't be able to fight it. The water has a power of its own, a power that scares her.

She must get moving.

Soon they will think she is dead and stop searching for her. She holds on to this thought like a talisman and huddles deeper into herself. The salt in the air bites at her eyes. She flicks her tongue to catch a droplet of seawater on her face and realizes that it is a tear.