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All the Missing Girls

Written by Megan Miranda

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ALL THE MISSING GIRLS

MEGAN MIRANDA



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For my parents

PART 1

Going Home

Man . . . cannot learn to forget, but hangs on the past: however far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

It started with a phone call, deceptively simple and easy to ignore. The buzzing on Everett's nightstand, the glow of the display—too bright in the bedroom he kept so dark, with the light-blocking shades pulled to the sill and the tinted windows a second line of defense against the glare of the sun and the city. Seeing the name, hitting the mute, turning my phone facedown beside the clock.

But then. Lying awake, wondering why my brother would call so early on a Sunday. Running through the possibilities: Dad; the baby; Laura.

I felt my way through the dark, my hands brushing the sharp corners of furniture until I found the light switch in the bathroom. My bare feet pressed into the cold tile floor as I sat on the toilet lid with the phone held to my ear, goose bumps forming on my legs.

Daniel's message echoed in the silence: "The money's almost gone. We need to sell the house. Dad won't sign the papers, though." A pause. "He's in bad shape, Nic."

Not asking for my help, because that would be too direct. Too unlike us.

I hit delete, slipped back under the sheets before Everett woke, felt for him beside me to be sure.

But later that day, back at my place, I flipped through the previous day's mail and found the letter—*Nic Farrell,* written in familiar handwriting, in blue ink; the address filled in by someone else, with a different, darker pen.

Dad didn't call anymore. Phones made him feel even more disoriented, too far removed from the person he was trying to place. Even if he remembered whom he'd been dialing, we'd slip from his mind when we answered, nothing more than disembodied voices in the ether.

I unfolded the letter—a lined journal page with jagged edges, his handwriting stretching beyond the lines, veering slightly to the left, as if he'd been racing to get the thoughts down before they slipped from his grasp.

No greeting.

I need to talk to you. That girl. I saw that girl.

No closing.

I called Daniel back, the letter still trembling in my hand. "Just got your message," I said. "I'm coming home. Tell me what's going on."

DAY 1

I ***took inventory of the*** apartment one last time before loading up my car: suitcases waiting beside the door; key in an envelope on the kitchen counter; an open box half full of the last-minute things I'd packed up the night before. I could see every angle of the apartment from the galley kitchen—exposed and empty—but still, I had the lingering feeling that I was forgetting something.

I'd gotten everything together in a rush, finishing out the last few weeks of the school year while fielding calls from Daniel and finding someone to sublet my place for the summer—no time to pause, to take in the fact that I was actually doing this. Going back. Going *there.* Daniel didn't know about the letter. He knew only that I was coming to help, that I had two months before I needed to return to my life here.

Now the apartment was practically bare. An industrial box, stripped of all warmth, awaiting the moderately responsible-looking grad student who would be staying through August. I'd

left him the dishes, because they were a pain to pack. I'd left him the futon, because he'd asked, and because he threw in an extra fifty dollars.

The rest of it—the things that wouldn't fit in my car, at least—was in a storage unit a few blocks away. My entire life in a sealed rectangular cube, stacked full of painted furniture and winter clothes.

The sound of someone knocking echoed off the empty walls, made me jump. The new tenant wasn't due to arrive for another few hours, when I'd be on the road. It was way too early for anyone else.

I crossed the narrow room and opened the front door.

"Surprise," Everett said. "I was hoping to catch you before you left." He was dressed for work—clean and sleek—and he bent down to kiss me, one arm tucked behind his back. He smelled like coffee and toothpaste; starch and leather; professionalism and efficiency. He pulled a steaming Styrofoam cup from behind his back. "Brought you this. For the road."

I inhaled deeply. "The way to my heart." I leaned against the counter, took a deep sip.

He checked his watch and winced. "I hate to do this, but I have to run. Early meeting on the other side of town."

We met halfway for one last kiss. I grabbed his elbow as he pulled away. "Thank you," I said.

He rested his forehead against mine. "It'll go fast. You'll see."

I watched him go—his steps crisp and measured, his dark hair brushing his collar—until he reached the elevator at the end of the hall. He turned back just as the doors slid open. I leaned against the doorframe, and he smiled.

"Drive safe, Nicolette."

I let the door fall shut, and the reality of the day suddenly made my limbs heavy, my fingertips tingle.

The red numbers on the microwave clock ticked forward, and I cringed.

It's a nine-hour drive from Philadelphia to Cooley Ridge, not counting traffic, lunch break, gas and restroom stops, depending. And since I was leaving twenty minutes after I said I would, I could already picture Daniel sitting on the front porch, tapping his foot, as I pulled into the unpaved driveway.

I sent him a text as I propped the front door open with a suitcase: *On my way, but more like 3:30.*

It took two trips to drag the luggage and remaining boxes down to the car, which was parked around the block, behind the building. I heard the beginnings of rush-hour traffic in the distance, a steady hum on the highway, the occasional honk. A familiar harmony.

I started the car, waited for the air to kick in. *Okay, okay,* I thought. I rested my phone in the cup holder and saw a response from Daniel: *Dad's expecting you for dinner. Don't miss it.*

Like I might be three hours later than I'd claimed. That was one of Daniel's more impressive accomplishments: He had perfected the art of the passive-aggressive text message. He'd been practicing for years.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I used to believe I could see the future. This was probably my father's fault, filling my childhood with platitudes from his philosophy lectures, letting me believe in things that could not be. I'd close my eyes and will it to appear, in tiny, beautiful glimpses. I'd see Daniel in a cap and gown. My mother smiling beside him through the lens of my camera as I motioned for them to get closer. *Put your arm around her. Pretend you like each other! Perfect.* I'd see me and Tyler, years later, throwing our bags into the back of his mud-stained pickup truck, leaving for college. Leaving for good.

It was impossible to understand back then that getting out wouldn't be an event in a pickup truck but a ten-year process of excision. Miles and years, slowly padding the distance. Not to mention Tyler never left Cooley Ridge. Daniel never graduated. And our mother wouldn't have lived to see it, anyway.

If my life were a ladder, then Cooley Ridge was the bottom—an unassuming town tucked into the edge of the Smoky Mountains, the very definition of Small Town, America, but without the charm. Everywhere else—anywhere else—was a higher rung that I'd reach steadily with time. College two hundred miles to the east, grad school one state north, an internship in a city where I planted my feet and refused to leave. An apartment in my own name and a nameplate on my own desk and Cooley Ridge, always the thing I was moving farther away from.

But here's the thing I've learned about leaving—you can't really go back. I don't know what to do with Cooley Ridge anymore, and Cooley Ridge doesn't know what to do with me, either. The distance only increases with the years.

Most times, if I tried to shift it back into focus—*Tell me about home, tell me about growing up, tell me about your family,* Everett would say—all I'd see was a caricature of it in my mind: a miniature town set up on entryway tables around the holidays, everything frozen in time. So I gave him surface answers, flat and nonspecific: *My mom died when I was sixteen; it's a small town at the edge of the forest; I have an older brother.*

Even to me, even as I answered, it looked like nothing. A Polaroid fading from the edges in, the colors bled out; the outline of a ghost town full of ghosts.

But one call from Daniel—"We have to sell the house"—and I felt the give of the floorboards beneath my feet. "I'm coming home," I said, and the edges rippled, the colors burned: My mother pressed her cheek against my forehead; Corinne rocked our cart

gently back and forth at the top of the Ferris wheel; Tyler balanced on the fallen tree angled across the river, stretching between us.

That girl, my dad wrote, and her laughter rattled my heart.

I NEED TO TALK *to you. That girl. I saw that girl.*

An hour later, a *moment* later, and he'd probably forgotten—setting aside the sealed envelope until someone found it abandoned on his dresser or under his pillow and pulled my address from his file. But there must've been a trigger. A memory. An idea lost in the synapses of his brain; the firing of a thought with nowhere else to go.

The torn page, the slanted print, my name on the envelope—

And now something sharp and wild had been set loose inside my head. Her name, bouncing around like an echo.

Corinne Prescott.

Dad's letter had been folded up inside my purse for the last few weeks, lingering just under the surface of my mind. I'd be reaching for my wallet or the car keys and feel a sliver of the edge, the jab of the corner, and there she would be all over again: long bronze hair falling over her shoulders, the scent of spearmint gum, her whisper in my ear.

That girl. She was always *that girl.* What other girl could it be?

The last time I'd driven home was a little over a year ago—when Daniel called and said we had to get Dad into a facility, and I couldn't justify the cost of a last-minute flight. It had rained almost the entire trip, both ways.

Today, on the other hand, was the perfect driving day. No rain, overcast but not dark. Light but not bright. I'd made it through three states without stopping, towns and exits blurring by as I sped past—the embodiment of everything I loved about living up north. I loved the pace, how you could fill the day with a to-do list, take charge of the hours and bend them to your will. And the impatience

of the clerk inside the convenience store on the corner near my apartment, the way he never looked up from his crossword, never made eye contact. I loved the anonymity of it all. Of a sidewalk full of strangers and endless possibilities.

Driving through these states was like that, too. But the beginning of the drive always goes much faster than the end. Farther south, the exits grow sparser, the landscape just sameness, filled with things you're sure you've passed a thousand times.

I was somewhere in Virginia when my phone rang from its spot in the cup holder. I fumbled for the hands-free device in my purse, keeping one hand steady on the wheel, but eventually gave up and hit speaker to answer the call. "Hello?" I called.

"Hey, can you hear me?" Everett's voice crackled, and I wasn't sure if it was the speakerphone or the reception.

"Yes, what's up?"

He said something indecipherable, his words cutting in and out.

"Sorry, you're breaking up. What?" I was practically shouting.

"Grabbing a quick bite," he said through the static. "Just checking in. How are the tires holding up this time?" I heard the smile in his voice.

"Better than the cell reception," I said.

He laughed. "I'll probably be in meetings the rest of the day, but call me when you get there so I know you made it."

I thought about stopping for lunch, but there was nothing except pavement and field for miles and miles and miles.

I'D MET EVERETT A year ago, the night after moving my dad. I'd driven home, tense and uneasy, gotten a flat tire five hours into the drive, and had to change it myself underneath a steady drizzle.

By the time I'd gotten to my apartment, I was hovering on the edge of tears. I had come home with my bag slung over my

shoulder, my hand shaking as I tried to jam the key into the door. Eventually, I'd rested my head against the solid wooden door to steady myself. To make matters worse, the guy in 4A had gotten off the elevator at the same time, and I'd felt him staring at me, possibly waiting for the impending meltdown.

Apartment 4A. This was all I'd known of him: He played his music too loud, and he had too many guests, and he kept nontraditional hours. There was a man beside him—polished, where he was not. Smooth, where he was rough. Sober, where he was drunk.

The guy in 4A sometimes smiled at me as we passed in the hall in the evening, and one time he held the elevator for me, but this was a city. People came and went. Faces blurred.

"Hey, 4C," he'd slurred, unsteady on his feet.

"Nicolette," I said.

"Nicolette," he repeated. "Trevor." The man beside him looked embarrassed on his behalf. "And this is Everett. You look like you need a drink. Come on, be neighborly."

I thought the neighborly thing would've been to learn my name a year ago, when I moved in, but I wanted that drink. I wanted to feel the distance between *there* and *here*; I needed space from the nine-hour car ride home.

Trevor pushed open his door as I walked toward them. The man beside him stuck out his hand and said, "Everett," as if Trevor's introduction hadn't counted.

By the time I left, I'd told Everett about moving my dad, and he'd said it was the right thing. Had told him about the flat and the rain and everything I wanted to do over the summer, while I was off. By the time I stopped talking, I felt lighter, more at ease—which could've been the vodka, but I liked to think it was Everett—and Trevor was passed out on the sofa beside us.

"Oh. I should go," I'd said.

"Let me walk you back," Everett had said.

My head was light as we walked in silence, and then my hand was on the doorknob and he was still nearby, and what were the grown-up rules for this? "Want to come in?"

He didn't answer, but he followed me in. Froze in the galley kitchen, which looked out into the rest of my studio loft, one room with high windows and sheer curtains hanging from the exposed pipes, segregating my bedroom. But I could see my bed through them—unmade, inviting—and I knew he could, too.

"Wow," he said. It was the furniture, I was sure. Pieces I'd mined from thrift stores and flea markets and had stripped down and repainted in bold colors to match. "I feel like I'm Alice in Wonderland."

I slid off my shoes, leaned against the kitchen counter. "Ten bucks says you've never read it."

He smiled and opened my refrigerator, pulling out a bottle of water. "Drink me," he said, and I laughed.

Then he pulled out a business card, placed it on the counter, leaned forward, and brushed his lips against mine before backing away. "Call me," he said.

And I did.

—

THE DRIVE THROUGH VIRGINIA had turned endless, with its white farmhouses in the hills and the bales of hay dotting the surrounding grass. Then the pass through the mountains—guardrails and signs issuing warnings to turn on the fog lights—and the static as the radio stations cut in and out. The longer I drove, the slower I seemed to go. *Relativity,* I thought.

The pace was different back home. People didn't move as fast, didn't change too much over the course of the decade. Cooley Ridge, holding you to the person you'd always been. When I pulled off the highway, went down the ramp, and hit the main drag, I bet

I'd still find Charlie Higgins or someone like him leaning against the beat-up side of the CVS. Bet I'd still find Christy Pote pining for my brother, and my brother pretending not to notice, even though they went ahead and got married to other people.

Maybe it was because of the humidity and the way we had to fight our way through it, like syrup sticking to the bottom of our feet, sweet and viscous. Maybe it was from living so close to the mountains—a thousand years in the making, the slow shift of plates under the earth, the trees that have been here since I was born and would be here when I was gone.

Maybe it's the fact that you can't see anything beyond here when you're in it. Just mountains and forest and you. That's it.

One decade later, a hundred miles away, and I cross the state line—*Welcome to North Carolina!*—and the trees grow thicker, and the air goes heavy, and I'm back.

The blurred edges shifting back into focus, my own mind resettling, remembering. The ghosts of us gaining substance: Corinne running down the side of the road in front of me, holding out her thumb, her legs shiny from sweat, her skirt blowing up when a car passes too close. Bailey hanging off my shoulder, her breath hot with vodka. Or maybe that was mine.

My fingers uncurled from the wheel. I wanted to reach out and touch them. Have Corinne turn around and say, "Pull your shit together, Bailey," catch my eye, and smile. But they faded too fast, like everything else, and all that remained was the sharp pang of missing her.

One decade, twenty miles away, and I can see my house. The front door. The overgrown path and the weeds pushing through the gravel of the driveway. I hear that screen door creak open, and Tyler's voice: *Nic?* And it sounds a little deeper than my memory, a little closer.

Almost home now.

Down the exit, left at the stoplight, the pavement cracked and gray.

A sign freshly staked into the ground at the corner, the bottom streaked with dried mud—the county fair, back in town—and something flutters in my chest.

There's the CVS with the group of teenage boys loitering at the side of the lot, like Charlie Higgins used to do. There's the strip of stores, different letters stenciled in the windows from when I was a kid, except for Kelly's Pub, which was as close to a landmark as we had. There's the elementary school and, across the street, the police station, with Corinne's case file stored in some back closet, gathering dust. I imagined all the evidence boxed away and tucked in a corner, because there was no place else to put her. Lost in the shuffle, forgotten with time.

The electrical cables strung above us on the roadside, the church that most everyone went to, whether you were Protestant or not. And beside it, the cemetery. Corinne used to make us hold our breath as we drove past. Hands on the ceiling over the railroad tracks, a kiss when the church bells chimed twelve, and no breathing around the dead. She made us do it even after my mother died. Like death was a superstition, something we could outwit by throwing salt over our shoulders, crossing our fingers behind our backs.

I took my phone out at the stoplight and called Everett. I got his voicemail, like I knew I would. "Made it," I said. "I'm here."

THE HOUSE WAS EVERYTHING I imagined those last nine hours. The path from the driveway to the front porch now overtaken by the yard, Daniel's car pulled all the way to the side of the carport beside the garage to leave space for mine, the weeds scratching my bare ankles as I walked from smooth stepping-stone to smooth

stepping-stone, my legs stretching by memory. The ivory siding, darker in places, bleached from the sun in others, so I had to squint to look directly at it. I stood halfway between my car and the house, forming a list in my head: *Borrow a pressure washer, find a kid with a riding mower, get a few pots of colored flowers for the porch . . .*

I was still squinting, my hand shielding my eyes, as Daniel rounded the corner of the house.

"Thought I heard your car," he said. His hair was longer than I remembered, at his chin—same length mine was before I left here for good. He used to keep it buzzed short, because the one time he let it grow out, people said he looked like me.

It seemed lighter all grown out—more blond than not blond—whereas mine had turned darker over the years. He was still pale like me, and his bare shoulders were already turning bright red. But he'd gotten thinner, the hard lines of his face more pronounced. We could barely pass for siblings now.

His chest was streaked with dirt, and his hands were coated in soil. He wiped his palms against the sides of his jeans as he walked toward me.

"And before three-thirty," I said, which was ridiculous. Of the two of us, he was always the responsible one. He was the one who'd dropped out of school to help with our mom. He was the one who'd said we needed to get our dad some help. He was the one now keeping an eye on the money. My being relatively on time was not going to impress him.

He laughed and wiped the backs of his hands against the sides of his jeans again. "Nice to see you, too, Nic."

"Sorry," I said, throwing myself into a hug, which was too much. I always did this. Tried to compensate by going to the other extreme. He was stiff in my embrace, and I knew I was getting dirt all over my clothes. "How's the job, how's Laura, how are you?"

"Busy. As irritable as she is pregnant. Glad you're here."

I smiled, then ducked back in the car for my purse. I wasn't good with niceties from him. Never knew what to do with them, what he meant by them. He was, as my father was fond of saying, hard to read. His expression just naturally looked disapproving, so I always felt on the defensive, that I had something to prove.

"Oh," I said, opening the back door to my car, shifting boxes around. "I have something for her. For you both. For the baby." Where the hell was it? It was in one of those gift bags with a rattle on the front, with glitter inside that shifted every time it moved. "It's here somewhere," I mumbled. And the tissue paper had tiny diapers with pins, which I didn't really understand, but it seemed like a Laura thing.

"Nic," he said, his long fingers curled on top of the open car door, "it can wait. Her shower's next weekend. I mean, if you're not busy. If you want to go." He cleared his throat. Uncurled his fingers from the door. "She'd want you to go."

"Okay," I said, standing upright. "Sure. Of course." I shut the door and started walking toward the house, Daniel falling into stride beside me. "How bad is it?" I asked.

I hadn't seen the house since last summer, when we moved our dad to Grand Pines. Back then there was a chance that it was a temporary move. That's what we'd told him. *Just for now, Dad. Just till you're better. Just for a little bit.* It was clear now that he wasn't going to get better, that it wasn't going to be for just a little bit. His mind was a mess. His finances were messier, a disaster that defied all logic. But at least he had the house. *We* had the house.

"I called to have the utilities turned back on yesterday, but something's wrong with the AC."

I felt my long hair sticking to the back of my neck, my sundress clinging to my skin, the sweat on my bare legs, and I hadn't even been here five minutes. My knees buckled as I stepped onto the splintered wooden porch. "Where's the breeze?" I asked.

"It's been like this all month," he said. "I brought over some fans. There's nothing structural other than the AC. Needs paint, lightbulbs, a good cleaning, and we need to decide what to do with everything inside, obviously. It would save a lot of money if we can sell it ourselves," he added with a pointed look in my direction. This was where I came in. In addition to my dealing with Dad's paperwork, Daniel wanted me to sell the house. He had a job, a baby on the way, a whole life here.

I had two months off. An apartment I was subletting for the extra cash. A ring on my hand and a fiancé who worked sixty-hour weeks. And now a name—Corinne Prescott—bouncing around in my skull like a ghost.

He pulled the screen door open, and the familiar creak cut straight to my gut. It always did. Welcome back, Nic.

DANIEL HELPED UNLOAD MY car, carrying my luggage to the second-floor hall, stacking my personal items on the kitchen table. He swiped his arm across the counter, and particles of dust hung in the air, suspended in a beam of sunlight cutting through the window. He coughed, his arm across his face. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't get to the inside yet. But I got the supplies." He gestured toward a cardboard box on the counter.

"That's why I'm here," I said.

I figured if I planned to live here for the duration, I should start in my room, so I had a place to sleep. I passed my suitcase at the top of the stairs and carried the box of cleaning supplies, balanced on my hip, toward my old room. The floorboards squeaked in the hall, a step before my door, like always. The light from the windows cut through the curtains, and everything in the room looked half there in the muted glow. I flipped the switch, but nothing happened, so I left the box in the middle of the floor and pulled back the curtains,