THE PERFECT STRANGER

ALSO BY MEGAN MIRANDA

All the Missing Girls

The Safest Lies

Soulprint

Vengeance

Hysteria

Fracture

THE PERFECT STRANGER

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For Luis

THE PERFECT STRANGER

PROLOGUE

The cat under the front porch was at it again. Scratching at the slab of wood that echoed through the hardwood floors of my bedroom. Sharpening its claws, marking its territory—relentless in the dead of night.

I sat on the edge of the bed, stomped my feet on the wood, thought, *Please let me sleep,* which had become my repeated plea to all things living and nonliving out here, whatever piece of nature was at work each particular night.

The scratching stopped, and I eased back under the sheets.

Other sounds, more familiar now: the creak of the old mattress, crickets, a howl as the wind funneled through the valley. All of it orienting me to my new life—the bed I slept in, the valley I lived in, a whisper in the night: *You are here.*

I had been raised and built for city life, had grown accustomed to the sound of people on the street below, the car horns, the train running on the track until midnight. Had come to expect

footsteps overhead, doors slamming shut, water in the pipes running through my walls. I could sleep through all of it.

The silence in this house, at times, was unsettling. But it was better than the animals.

Emmy, I could get used to. She slipped right in, the sputtering engine of her car in the driveway a comfort, her footsteps in the hallway lulling me to sleep. But the cat, the crickets, the owls, and the coyote—these took time.

Four months, and it was finally shifting, like the season.

—

WE HAD ARRIVED IN the summer—Emmy first; me, a few weeks later. We slept with our doors closed and the air turned on high, directly across the hall from each other. Back in July, when I first heard the cry in the middle of the night, I bolted upright in bed and thought, *Emmy*.

It was a muffled, low moan, like something was dying, and my mind was already filling in the blanks: Emmy struggling, grasping at her throat, or keeled over on the dusty floor. I'd raced across the hall and had my hand on her doorknob (locked) when she'd torn it open, staring back at me with wide eyes. She looked for a moment like she had when we'd first met, both of us barely out of school. But that was just the dark playing tricks on me.

"Did you hear that?" she'd whispered.

"I thought it was you."

Her fingers circled my wrist, and the moonlight from the uncovered windows illuminated the whites of her eyes.

"What was it?" I asked. Emmy had lived in the wild, had spent years in the Peace Corps, had grown accustomed to the unfamiliar.

Another cry, and Emmy jumped—the sound had been directly below us. "I don't know."

She was roughly my size but skinnier. Eight years earlier, it

had been the other way around, but she'd lost the curves and give in the years since she'd been gone. I felt I needed to be the one to protect her now. To shield her from the danger, because there was nothing to Emmy these days but sharp angles and pale skin.

But she moved first, noiselessly walking down the hall, her heels barely making contact with the floor. I followed, keeping my steps light, my breathing shallow.

I put my hand on the phone, which was corded and hooked to the kitchen wall, just in case. But Emmy had other plans. She grabbed a flashlight from the kitchen drawer, slid the front doors slowly open, and stepped out onto the wooden porch. The moonlight softened her, the breeze moving her dark hair. She arced the light across the tree line and started down the steps.

"Emmy, wait," I'd said, but she'd eased herself onto her stomach in the dirt, ignoring me. She shone the light under the porch, and something cried again. I gripped the wooden railing as Emmy rolled onto her back, faintly shaking with laughter before it made its way from her gut, tearing through the night sky.

A hiss, a streak of fur darting from under the house straight into the woods, and another following behind. Emmy pushed herself to sitting, her shoulders still shaking.

"We're living on top of a cat brothel," she'd said.

The smile caught on my lips, a stark relief. "No wonder the price was so good," I'd said.

Her laughter slowly died, something else pulling her focus. "Oh, look," she'd said, a skinny arm pointing to the sky behind me.

A full moon. No, a supermoon. That's what it was called. Yellow and too close, like it could affect the pull of gravity. Make us go mad. Make cats go crazy.

"We can put up cinder blocks," I'd said, "to keep out the animals."

"Right," she'd said.

But, of course, we never did.

EMMY LIKED THE IDEA of the cats. Emmy liked the idea of old wood cabins and a porch with rockers; also: vodka, throwing darts at maps while drinking vodka, fate.

She was big on that last one.

It's why she was so sure moving here together was the right thing to do, no second thoughts or second guesses. Fate leading us back together, our paths intersecting in a poorly lit barroom eight years since the last time we'd seen each other. "It's a sign," she'd said, and since I'd been drunk it made perfect sense, my thoughts slurring together with hers, wires crossing.

The cats were probably a sign, too—of what, I wasn't sure. But also: the supermoon, the fireflies flashing in time to her laughter, the air thick with humidity, as if it were engulfing us.

Any time we'd hear a noise after that, any time I'd jolt alert from the worn brown sofa or from my seat at the vinyl kitchen table, Emmy would shrug and say, "Just the cats, Leah."

But for weeks, I dreamed of bigger things living underneath us. Took the steps in one big leap when I left each day, like a kid. Pictured things coiled up or crouched down in the dark, in the dirt, nothing but yellow eyes staring back. Snakes. Raccoons. Stray and rabid dogs.

Just yesterday one of the other teachers said there was a bear in his yard. Just that: a bear in his yard. Like it was a thing one might or might not notice in passing. Graffiti on the overpass, a burnt-out streetlight. Just a bear.

"Don't like bears, Ms. Stevens?" he'd said, toothy grin. He was older and soft, the skin around his wedding band ballooning from either side in protest, taught history and seemed to prefer it to reality.

"Who likes bears?" I'd said, trying to skirt him in the hall.

"You should probably like bears if you're moving to bear country." His voice was louder than necessary. "This is their home you all keep building right up on. Where else should they be?"

The neighbor's dog started barking, and I stared at the gap between the window curtains, waiting for the first signs of light.

On mornings like this, despite my initial hope—the scent of nature, the charm of wood cabins with rockers, the promise of a fresh start—I still craved the city. Craved it like the coffee hitting my bloodstream in the morning, the chase of a story, the high of my name in print.

When I first arrived in the summer, there had been a period of long calm when the stretch of days welcomed me with a blissful absence of thought. When I'd woken in the morning and poured a cup of coffee and walked down the wooden front steps, feeling, for a moment, so close to the earth, in touch with some element I had previously been missing: my feet planted directly on the dirt surrounding our porch, slivers of grass poking up between my toes, as if the place itself were taking me in.

But other days, the calm could shift to an absence instead, and I'd feel something stir inside of me, like muscle memory.

Sometimes I dreamed that some nefarious hack had taken down the entire Internet, had wiped us all clean, and I could go back. Could start over. Be the Leah Stevens I had planned to be.

CHAPTER 1

Character, Emmy called it, the quirks that came with the house: the nonexistent water pressure in the shower; the illogical layout. From the front porch, our house had large sliding glass doors that led directly to the living room and kitchen, a hallway beyond with two bedrooms and a bathroom to share. The main door was at the other end of the hall and faced the woods, like the house had been laid down with the right dimensions but the wrong orientation.

Probably the nicest thing I can say about the house was that it's mine. But even that's not exactly true. It's my name on the lease, my food in the refrigerator, my glass cleanser that wipes the pollen residue from the sliding glass doors.

The house still belongs to someone else, though. The furniture, too. I didn't bring much with me when I left my last place. Wasn't much, once I got down to it, that was mine to take from the one-bedroom in the Prudential Center of Boston. Bar stools that

wouldn't fit under a standard table. Two dressers, a couch, and a bed, which would cost more to move than to replace.

Sometimes I wondered if it was just my mother's words in my head, making me see this place, and my choice to be here, as something less than.

Before leaving Boston, I'd tried to spin the story for my mother, slanting this major life change as an active decision, opting to appeal to her sense of charity and decency—both for my benefit and for hers. I once heard her introduce me and my sister to her friends: "Rebecca helps the ones who can be saved, and Leah gives a voice to those who cannot." So I imagined how she might frame this for her friends: *My daughter is taking a sabbatical. To help children in need.* If anyone could sell it, she could.

I made it seem like my idea to begin with, not that I had latched myself on to someone else's plan because I had nowhere else to go. Not because the longer I stood still, the more I felt the net closing in.

Emmy and I had already sent in our deposit, and I'd been floating through the weeks, imagining this new version of the world waiting for me. But even then, I'd steeled myself for the call. Timed it so I knew my mother would be on her way to her standing coffee date with The Girls. Practiced my narrative, preemptively preparing counterpoints: *I quit my job, and I'm leaving Boston. I'm going to teach high school, already have a position lined up. Western Pennsylvania. You know there are whole areas of the country right here in America that are in need, right? No, I won't be alone. Remember Emmy? My roommate while I was interning after college? She's coming with me.*

The first thing my mother said was: "I don't remember any Emmy." As if this were the most important fact. But that was how she worked, picking at the details until the foundation finally gave, from nowhere. And yet her method of inquiry was also how we knew we had a secure base, that we weren't basing our plans on a dream that would inevitably crumble under pressure.

I moved the phone to my other shoulder. "I lived with her after college."

A pause, but I could hear her thoughts in the silence: *You mean after you didn't get the job you thought you'd have after graduation, took an unpaid internship instead, and had no place to live?*

"I thought you were staying with . . . what was her name again? The girl with the red hair? Your roommate from college?"

"Paige," I said, picturing not only her but Aaron, as I always did. "And that was just for a little while."

"I see," she said slowly.

"I'm not asking for your permission, Ma."

Except I kind of was. She knew it. I knew it.

"Come home, Leah. Come home and let's talk about it."

Her guidance had kept my sister and me on a high-achieving track since middle school. She had used her own missteps in life to protect us. She had raised two independently successful daughters. A status I now seemed to be putting in jeopardy.

"So, what," she said, changing the angle of approach, "you just walked in one day and quit?"

"Yes," I said.

"And you're doing this *why*?"

I closed my eyes and imagined for a moment that we were different people who could say things like *Because I'm in trouble, so much trouble,* before straightening my spine and giving her my speech. "Because I want to make a difference. Not just take facts and report them. I'm not doing anything at the paper but stroking my own ego. There's a shortage of teachers, Mom. I could really make an impact."

"Yes, but in western Pennsylvania?"

The way she said it told me everything I needed to know. When Emmy suggested it, western Pennsylvania seemed like a different version of the world I knew, with a different version of

myself—which, at the time, was exactly what I needed. But my mother's world was in the shape of a horseshoe. It stretched from New York City to Boston, swooping up all of Massachusetts inside the arch (but bypassing Connecticut entirely). She was the epicenter in western Massachusetts, and she'd successfully sent a daughter to the edge of each arch, and the world was right and complete. Any place else, in contrast, would be seen as a varying degree of failure.

My family was really only one generation out from a life that looked like this: a rental house with shitty plumbing, a roommate out of necessity, a town with a forgettable name, a job but no career. When my father left us, I wasn't really old enough to appreciate the impact. But I knew there existed a time when we were unprepared and at the whim of the generosity of those around us. Those were the limbo years—the ones she never talked about, a time she now pretends never existed.

To her, this probably sounded a lot like sliding backward.

"Great teachers are needed everywhere," I said.

She paused, then seemed to concede with a slow and drawn-out "Yes."

I hung up, vindicated, then felt the twinge. She was not conceding. *Great teachers are needed everywhere, yes, but you are not that.*

She didn't mean it as an insult, exactly. My sister and I were both valedictorians, both National Merit Scholars, both early admissions to the college of our respective choice. It wasn't unreasonable that she would question this decision—especially coming out of thin air.

I quit, I had told her. This was not a lie, but a technicality—the truth being that it was the safest option, for both the paper and me. The truth was, I had no job in the only thing I'd trained in, no foreseeable one, and no chance of one. The truth was I was glad she had given me the blandest name, the type of name I'd hated

growing up. A girl who could blend in and never stand out. A name in a roster anywhere.

EMMY'S CAR STILL WASN'T back when I was ready to leave for school. This was not too unusual. She worked the night shift, and she'd been seeing some guy named Jim—who sounded, on the phone, like he had smoke perpetually coating his lungs. I thought he wasn't nearly good enough for Emmy; that she was sliding backward in some intangible way, like me. But I cut her some slack because I understood how it could be out here, how the calm could instead feel like an absence—and that sometimes you just wanted someone to see you.

Other than weekends, we could miss each other for days at a time. But it was Thursday, and I needed to pay the rent. She usually left me money on the table, underneath the painted stone garden gnome that she'd found and used as a centerpiece. I lifted the gnome by his red hat just to double-check, revealing nothing but a few stray crumbs.

Her lateness on the rent was also not too unusual.

I left her a sticky note beside the corded phone, our designated spot. I wrote RENT DUE in large print, stuck it on the wood-paneled wall. She'd taken all the other notes from earlier in the week—the SEE ELECTRIC BILL, the MICROWAVE BROKEN, the MICROWAVE FIXED.

I opened the sliding doors, hit the lights at the entrance, rummaged in my bag for my car keys—and realized I'd forgotten my cell. A gust of wind came in through the door as I turned around, and I watched the yellow slip of paper—RENT DUE—flutter down and slip behind the wood stand where we stacked the mail.

I crouched down and saw the accumulated mess underneath. A pile of sticky notes. CALL JIM right side up but half covered by

another square. A few others, facedown. Not taken by Emmy after all but lost between the wall and the furniture during the passing weeks.

Emmy didn't have a cell because her old one was still with her ex, on his phone plan, and she didn't want an easy way for him to trace her. The idea of not owning a cell phone left me feeling almost naked, but she said it was nice not to be at anyone's beck and call. It had seemed *so Emmy* at the time—quirky and endearing—but now seemed both irrational and selfish.

I left the notes on the kitchen table instead. Propped them up against the garden gnome. Tried to think of how many days it had been since I'd last seen her.

I added another note: CALL ME.

Decided to throw out the rest, so it wouldn't get lost in the shuffle.

CHAPTER 2

There was a roadblock set up on the way to school, at the end of the main road that cut back to the lake. A car flashing red and blue, an officer directing traffic past the turn. I eased my foot off the gas, felt my heart do a familiar flip.

As a reporter, I had grown accustomed to certain signs of a trauma scene, besides the emergency vehicles: the barricading of an area, the set of onlookers' jaws, strangers standing too close together with their heads tipped down in respect. But more than that, there's a crackle in the air. Something you can feel, like static electricity.

It drew me, that crackle.

Drive on past, Leah. Keep going.

But this was only a couple miles from our house, and Emmy hadn't gotten home yet. If she'd been in an accident, would they know whom to call? How to reach me? Could she be at a hospital right now, all alone?

I passed the officer in the street and pulled my car over at the next turn, left it unlocked in the parking lot of the unfinished lake clubhouse in my rush, and backtracked toward the roadblock. As I walked, I kept to the trees, staying out of the traffic cop's way so he couldn't turn me back.

The land sloped down where the water line met mud and tall grass. At the bottom of the incline, I could see a handful of people standing stock-still. They were all focused on a point in the grass beyond. No car, though. No accident.

I slid down the embankment, mud caking my shoes, moving faster.

The scene came into focus, despite the adrenaline, the undercurrent of dread, as I pictured all the things that could've happened here.

I'd had to practice detachment early on, when the shock of blood was too sharp, when I felt too deeply, when I saw a thousand other possibilities in the slack face of a stranger. Now I couldn't shake it—it was one of my top skills.

It was the only way to survive in real crime: the raw blood and bone, the psychology of violence. But too much emotion in an article and all a reader sees is you. *You* need to be invisible. *You* need to be the eyes and ears, the mechanism of the story. The facts, the terrible, horrible, blistering facts, have to become compartmentalized. And then you have to keep moving, on to the next, before it all catches up with you.

It was muscle memory now. Emmy became fragments, a list of facts, as I made my way through the tall grass: four years in the Peace Corps; moved here over the summer to escape a relationship turned sour; worked nights at a motel lobby, occasional days cleaning houses. Unmarried female, five-five, slight build, dark hair cut blunt to her collarbone.

Light slanted through the trees, reflecting off the still surface

of the water beyond. The police were picking their way through the vegetation in the distance, but a single officer stood nearby with his back to the group of spectators, keeping them from getting any closer.

I made my way to the edge of the group. Nobody even looked. The woman beside me wore a bathrobe and slippers, her graying hair escaping the clip holding it away from her face.

I followed their singular, focused gaze—a smear of dried blood in the weeds beside the cop, marked off with an orange flag. The gnats settling over it in the morning light. A circle of cones beyond, nothing but flattened empty space inside.

"What's happening?" I asked, surprised by the shake in my own voice. The woman barely looked at me, arms still crossed, fingers digging in to her skin.

Interview people after a tragedy and they say: *It all happened so fast*.

They say: *It's all a big blur.*

They pick pieces, let us fill in the gaps. They forget. They misremember. If you get to them soon enough, there's a tremble to them still.

These people were like that now. Holding on to their elbows, their arms folded up into their stomachs.

But put me on a scene and everything slows, simmers, pops. I will remember the gnats over the weeds. The spot of blood. The downtrodden grass. Mostly, it's the people I see.

"Bethany Jarvitz," she said, and the tightness in my chest subsided. Not Emmy, then. Not Emmy. "Someone hit her pretty good, left her here."

I nodded, pretending I knew who that was.

"Some kids found her while they were playing at the bus stop." She nodded toward the road I'd just come from. No kids playing any longer. "If they hadn't . . ." She pressed her lips together, the

color draining. "She lives alone. How long until someone noticed she was missing?" And then the shudder. "There was just so much blood." She looked down at her slippers, and I did the same. The edges stained rust brown, as if she had walked right through it.

I looked away, back toward the road. Heard the static of a radio, the voice of a cop issuing orders. This had nothing to do with Emmy or with me. I had to leave before I became a part of it, a member of the crowd the police would inevitably take a closer look at. My name tied to a string of events that I was desperate to leave behind. A restraining order, the threat of a lawsuit, my boss's voice dropping low as the color drained from his neck: *My God, Leah, what did you do?*

I took a step back. Another. Turned to make my way back to my car, embarrassed by the mud on my shoes.

Halfway to my car, I heard a rustle behind me. I spun around, nerves on high alert—and caught a faint whiff of sweat.

A bird took flight, its wings beating in the silence, but I saw nothing else.

I thought of the noise in the dead of night. The dog barking. The timing.

An animal, Leah.

A bear.

Just the cats.

BY THE TIME I made it to school, I was bordering on late. School hadn't started yet, but I was supposed to arrive before the warning bell. There was a backlog of student cars lined up at the main entrance, so I sneaked in through the bus lot (frowned upon but not against the rules), parked in a faculty spot behind my wing, and used a key to let myself in through the fire entrance (also frowned upon, also not against the rules).

The teachers were clustered just inside the classroom doorways, whispering. They must've gotten wind of the woman down by the lake. This wasn't like life in a city, where there was a new violent crime each day, where the sirens were background noise and mere proximity meant nothing. I wouldn't have been able to get a decent story about a woman found on the shore of a lake in the paper there—not one who'd lived.