

**Almost
Missed
You**



Jessica Strawser

1

AUGUST 2016

Violet couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so at peace. She almost felt guilty admitting this to herself since there had been so many moments to treasure in the three years since Bear was born. Becoming a mother had been many things—often indescribably rewarding, occasionally stupefying, sometimes even terrifying in the intensity of the love she felt for someone so small and vulnerable and dependent upon her—but relaxing was not one of them.

Every moment of it had led up to this, though: The blue-green southern Florida ocean sparkling before her, the gentle waves breaking, the pelicans diving into the water, and her sitting here taking it all in, a book in one hand, a piña colada in the other, and a rare and blissful stillness around her in the hour since Finn had taken Bear up to the hotel room for his nap. She smiled at the memory of Bear building sand castles earlier, making crashing noises as he plowed his dump truck through the mounds of sand he'd carefully sculpted just moments before, and of the way Finn looked at her when he offered to handle the nap today—a mixture of tenderness and something she couldn't put her finger on, as if he hadn't wanted to look away. He felt it too, the collective release of their first vacation in

years. Tonight, after Bear was in bed, they would take that fresh bottle of pinot grigio out to the balcony, and she'd lay her head on that perfect-fit spot on his shoulder as they settled in to watch the moonlight sparkle on the rolling water.

Life was good.

She couldn't help thinking of the day she'd met Finn. It had been on this very stretch of beach, right on the other side of the pier. They'd had that kind of instant electric connection that happens only once in a lifetime, and yet by the time she'd flopped her suitcase onto her bed back at home, she'd had the sinking feeling she'd never see him again. It had left her with a desperate empty sensation, and feeling a little foolish for pining so earnestly for someone she'd only met. She wished she could reach back in time and tell her former self not to worry. It would all work out in the end.

Dominoes. It was that intricate chain reaction of tiny movements that came to mind whenever anyone asked how they finally ended up together. There had been years of radio silence between their first and second meetings, no doubt filled with unrealized opportunities, untaken chances, unspoken words, missed connections. Even as children, they had passed each another like ships in the night. Their coupling was a story that people demanded they tell again and again. They'd be introduced at parties—"And this is Violet and her husband, Finn. Don't let them get away from you until they've told you the story of how they met. It's a bestseller!"—they'd oblige, and then would come the response: That it must have been fate. Meant to be. Kismet.

Violet wasn't sure their story was so different from any other. Ask any couple about their meeting, and you'd discover how many things had to have gone exactly right—or exactly wrong—for them to have gotten together. If so and so had been on time, and so and so hadn't been feeling sick that day, and so and so had come through with that concert ticket slash ride slash twenty dollars, and cell phones had been invented back then, and any number of

other against-the-odds occurrences or nonoccurrences had or had not transpired in the hours, days, weeks, even years up until their crossing paths again and again until one time everything finally aligned, they never would have ended up together.

Fate, people liked to call it.

But Violet pictured it as dominoes.

Somehow, they'd been positioned perfectly. And at the end of the line was Finn.

Sometimes she couldn't believe her luck.

Because not only was Finn *Finn*, but Finn had given her their Bear Cub. Her most precious thing. Motherhood had wrapped its chubby little baby-lotion-scented arms around her and would not let go, in spite of the fact that Bear's birth involved no perfect culmination of events—in fact, his was one of those stories that made people gasp in horror. There had been a postpartum hemorrhage, but not until a few hours after they'd welcomed Bear to their little world, and the doctors almost didn't catch the bleeding. She'd very nearly died.

What a marvel to wake up the next morning and see how pale Finn was, how stoic, how shaken to the core. "I'm perfectly okay," she told him in a hoity-toity imitation of her gram that usually made him laugh. But he just entwined his fingers with hers and lowered his forehead to their clasped hands, and she was overcome with emotion. To be loved the way Finn loved her. To have been gifted this beautiful baby boy, and to have survived his birth after all. To finally have a family of her own, something she hadn't known since her parents' accident when she was a child. Her heart had never felt so full.

Bear and Finn were her whole life now. Once Bear grew into a full-fledged toddler, Violet quit her job, a bold move she'd never imagined herself making. Her days became overrun with adventures to find exciting new leaves and rocks, with the constant challenge of trying to get him to eat anything but string cheese and

chicken nuggets, with sippy cups that never had all the right parts clean, with tiny cars that always seemed to be underfoot. She brought just enough order to the chaos not to irk Finn with a complete mess when he got home from work. But mostly, she just enjoyed Bear. Sometimes after Finn had left for his morning commute, as she and Bear shared the tiny kitchen table, eating frozen waffles and watching PBS Kids, she'd look down at her pajamas and slippers and think that there was absolutely nowhere she would rather be.

Except the beach. She *did* occasionally fantasize about some time alone on the beach, a piña colada in hand, the only cries she could hear coming from the seagulls overhead.

And now here she was, right there in her fantasy, with some rare time to herself, and all she could think about was Bear.

It was useless trying to convince herself she needed more time alone. She wondered if she should be bothered by the fact that she seemed to have lost her ability to shut off her mom mode. But the thing was, the mode suited her. She *had* needed a *little* break—but really she'd been reveling in the novelty of the idea of these stolen hours far more than in the reality of their emptiness.

She was overcome by an urge to go up to the room in time to be the one to rouse Bear from his nap, to dish him up a big bowl of ice cream—something he was almost never allowed at home—and to sit on the balcony next to him watching the airplanes fly by, their banners advertising all-you-can eat seafood buffets and two-for-one water park tickets stretching out behind them like toddler siren songs. Finn had pointed out that the tackier the advertisement on the airplane, the more Bear loved it.

“That’s what it’s all about, right?” she’d said, light-headed with giddiness at their first day here as a family. “This is why we have kids!”

“I know, I know—to see the world through their eyes, with child-like innocence and wonder.”

“No. To embrace the tacky.”

It was a lame joke, but it made Finn laugh. He'd seemed a little quiet yesterday—tired, probably. He'd drunk so much coffee at the airport and on their subsequent crawl through the North Miami traffic here to Sunny Isles that he'd tossed and turned for half the night, and it had felt like a triumph to make him smile.

Now, at the sight of a giant pink flamingo banner waving behind a dangerously small red plane droning overhead, she got to her feet and stretched. She shook the sand off her decadent new Ralph Lauren beach towel, a gift from Gram for the trip, and slipped her book and empty cup into the outside pocket of the coordinating beach bag. She attempted to fold her beach chair, wrestled with the stubborn arms of the thing, and decided to just leave it—they'd be back down later anyway, and even if they decided Bear had had enough sun, Finn wouldn't mind coming to get it. He was good-natured about doing husbandly things.

Dry, hot sand puffed out behind her feet as she made her way to the resort's gated pool area. She could already picture Bear's face covered in chocolate ice cream, his adorable little dimpled grin sticky cheek to cheek.

When the elevator deposited her on the ninth floor with a ding, she paused outside their door to listen. All quiet. She smiled. He was still asleep—she hadn't missed a thing. She slipped her key-card into the slot, which for once worked on the first try, and bounded in, eyes bright.

For a second, she thought that her card had somehow worked on the wrong room. She was about to call out a horrified apology to anyone who might be in the suite. This one had barely been checked into. It had none of the open suitcases and discarded T-shirts and flip-flops and drying swimsuits and sunscreen bottles and magazines and snacks and toys that had already overtaken their room.

But then, from her spot in the front hallway, she realized that the purse on the table was hers.

She stepped farther into the room and glanced into the bathroom on the right. Her toiletries were there, lined up neatly on the marble sink top, but they were all alone. Absent was the chaos of Finn's shaving gear and contacts and solution and glasses, of Bear's bubblegum-flavored toothpaste and prescription eczema cream and Lightning McQueen comb.

"Hello?"

Baffled, she walked into the combined living and sleeping area, and it was the same. Her things were just as she'd left them. But all traces of her husband and son were gone. As if they'd never been there at all. As if they'd been figments of her imagination all along.

2

AUGUST 2010

Camp *Pickiwicki*?”

Violet didn't register the words at first. She'd moved her chair up as close to the waterline as she could without risking dousing the beach bag at her side. For a while, she'd watched, entranced, as the foam crept closer and closer to her freshly manicured toes. But then she'd been pulled back into her novel. She hadn't noticed the man walking barefoot in the surf, hadn't seen him start to pass her and then back up, doing such an obvious double take at her that there really was nothing left to do but speak.

She looked down at her faded mustard yellow T-shirt, then up at the man. He seemed to be about her age, but he was wearing mirrored sunglasses, and she couldn't see his expression. *Like a cop*, she thought. *No. A nark.*

“Camp *Pickiwicki*,” she said, in a tone of total agreement. You could barely make out the black letters—they'd disintegrated over hundreds of washes—but the circular logo sprawled across her shirt was still recognizable, the way the C tucked into the tree that formed the P.

“You went there?” He sounded more than just disbelieving. Suspicious.

“Picki-picki-wicki-wicki-yay!” she chanted halfheartedly. For two weeks during the summer she’d turned twelve, she and her fellow campers had been cajoled into yelling the rallying cry at daybreak, before meals, after canoe races, when it was time to leave the fire circle and go to bed. If you’d been there once, it was ingrained in your mind forever.

He laughed. “And your T-shirt still fits. Astonishing. I outgrew mine well over a decade ago.”

“Oh—this is my gram’s. My grandmother’s. She volunteered on the special event nights.”

“And do you often wear your grandmother’s clothes to the beach?” He gave her a big white-toothed smile, and Violet could just see the arches of his raised eyebrows peeking out above his sunglasses.

“I do not,” she replied coolly. “But then I thought, what if someone else here went to Camp Pickiwicki? I mean, the place was only open for one summer, and hardly anyone signed up even then, and it’s also in Western Pennsylvania and here we are in beautiful Sunny Isles Beach, conveniently located about a zillion miles south of the campgrounds, so you never know.”

“Indeed. I like to keep an eye out for fellow Pickiwickians everywhere I go.”

“Look out!”

A teenager on an out-of-control skimboard came barreling onto the sand, and the man leaped out of his way, knocking into Violet’s beach umbrella. She grabbed the pole to hold it steady.

“Sorry!”

“Perhaps you should keep an eye out for rogue *skimboarders* wherever you go,” she suggested.

He laughed. “Not challenging enough. They’re everywhere.”

The man got to his knees in the circle of shade at Violet’s side

and started mounding wet sand around the pole to hold it in place. His sunglasses slid down his nose, and he pushed them up on top of his head. It hadn't been a trick of the mirrored lenses—he was good-looking. Somewhere between rugged and clean-cut, as if he'd be just as comfortable strumming an acoustic guitar as wearing a suit. *Hello, handsome stranger*. She'd be starting to get nervous right about now if her flight weren't leaving first thing in the morning. She had a tendency to get tongue-tied and ruin these sorts of things. Not that these sorts of things ever happened to her.

"It really is an odd coincidence, though, isn't it?" he said, giving the mound of sand a last pat and flopping down beside her chair. "I've never met *anyone* who went there, let alone all these years later and a thousand miles away. I loved that place. That was, like, my favorite summer as a kid. Ever."

"I know. I wonder if we were there at the same time? I mean, I *think* I would recognize you . . ."

He shook his head. "We couldn't have been. There were no girls during the session my parents signed me up for. Wasn't supposed to be that way, but that's how it worked out. Or so I was told. You can imagine my disappointment."

She laughed. "Well, then, I am sorry to tell you that you did not get the full Camp Pickiwicki experience. No sneaking out after dark to make out down by the docks?"

"Surely not a good girl like you who wears her grandmother's clothes to the beach."

"Surely so."

"Well, then it's finally clear to me what must have happened. You juvenile delinquents early in the summer ruined it for the rest of us by the time August rolled around. I *knew* the odds of no coeds enrolling that session were slim!"

She shrugged. "That claim is unsubstantiated."

"I can't believe my parents actually lied to me about what happened."

“About what *allegedly* happened.”

“I feel as though you owe me an apology.”

“I owe you no such thing.”

“The least you could do is make it up to me after dark tonight.”

Violet flushed, and the man’s face fell. “That was it, wasn’t it?”

“That was what?”

“The line. I’m always crossing it without meaning to. Please. Forget I said that. I was just trying to be clever.”

“No offense taken. I’d probably still be sore about it too, if I could trace my lingering virginity back to having missed out on my first tongue kiss at summer camp.”

He cocked one eyebrow at her. “I’ve been accused of a lot of things in my adult life, but being a virgin is not one of them.”

“And here you were acting shocked that I was not the Goody Two-shoes little camper you assumed me to be.”

“Well, in my defense, you *are* wearing your grandmother’s Camp Pickiwicki T-shirt. At the beach. On an adult vacation with . . . who are you with?”

“Myself.”

“You came on vacation alone?” He looked more impressed than surprised. “Really?”

“My boyfriend unceremoniously dumped me a few weeks ago. I’ve been working an insane amount of overtime at the office. I realized that I’d never spent my tax refund. So, I just booked it.”

“And how’s it been?”

“Honestly?”

He nodded, and she could tell he was waiting for her to say it had been unexpectedly lonely, there were couples everywhere, there were kids everywhere, she didn’t know what she’d been thinking. She’d half expected to feel that way too, before she’d gotten here.

“It’s been pretty damn great,” she said, shrugging. “I’m actually a little embarrassed at how much it suits me. I don’t want to turn

into one of those people who get too used to living alone, you know? But then again, maybe I just really needed a vacation.”

It was not this particular breakup that upset her as much as the fact that it was one in a long line of them in the years since she'd graduated college. Every time her phone rang and it was a friend she hadn't heard from in a while, she knew even before answering that it was another call to announce an engagement. Violet would manage the customary squeals over the proposal stories and summon genuine enough happiness as she wished them well, but she couldn't do it without mentally tallying her list of engaged friends versus those whose boyfriends were getting serious. And then there was Violet, alone in the “completely single” column, where every prospect turned out to be a false hope just a few months in. She had never been one to feel she *needed* a boyfriend, or a fiancé, or a husband to be happy, but it was enough to give anyone a complex.

“I admire that,” he said, and she braced herself for the setup of another joke. But none came. “Independence. Half of my friends still go on vacation with their parents. Their parents! They meet a girl and you think they'll go on some couple's trip instead, but nope, they *all* go to the time-share in Marco Island together.”

She laughed. “And who are you here with?”

“A bachelor party, actually. This guy George is marrying my good friend Caitlin. I'm more of a male bridesmaid than a groomsman, but he invited me along.”

“Let me guess. You've got eight guys crammed into a room with two double beds at the closest hotel you could find to the booze cruise dock.”

“That would be a good guess if we were on my budget. This particular guy is loaded. I mean, his family is. It's more of a penthouse. With a booze cruise in the form of its own yacht.”

Violet had seen the over-the-top Trump hotel down the strip and wondered if he was staying there. Then again, there was no shortage

of luxury accommodations this close to Miami. She'd been eyeing them all week in spite of herself. "Lucky you," she said.

"Lucky *Caitlin*. It's actually a little awkward for me. I don't really know anybody there very well."

Violet wondered what the Caitlins of the world were doing right that she was missing.

"Well, cheer up. I'm sure next time, you'll vacation someplace far less gilded. You know, with your parents."

She could see that she'd picked the wrong joke. He looked away from her, out to sea.

"My parents died a few years back. A heart attack and an aneurysm, respectively. I'm afraid I don't have very good genes."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She touched his arm gently. "I shouldn't have said that. I was raised by my grandmother—I should know better than to assume."

"Don't be sorry. I set myself up for it with that joke about everyone else's parents. It *may* be that part of my annoyance with everyone else and their family vacations is that I'm a little bit jealous." He gave her a shy grin, and she relaxed a little.

"I'm not usually too discriminating with my vacation envy," Violet said. "I mean, I'm *on* vacation right now, and I'm still envying your penthouse and your yacht."

He laughed. "It wouldn't matter if I *was* in a run-down motel—in the moment, I always think every vacation I'm on is the best ever. I go home plotting to move to wherever I just visited."

"Ah, a dreamer."

"Do dreamers go so far as to look at job openings and check rental prices?"

"At a minimum."

"Guilty."

"And then what happens?"

"What do you mean?"

"What makes you decide not to move? Ties back home?"

He blinked, as if surprised by the question. “No. Nothing. I have no idea. I just get caught back up in regular life, I guess.”

Violet thought of what might be seen as her own lack of ambition. She’d always been so eager to please Gram, to not be a bother to anyone, to do the responsible and expected thing. She’d never really arrived at a logical point to pause and think about what she might want beyond any of that. In truth, she was happy enough with her duplex town house adjoining Gram’s, her stable and decent-paying job, her respectably sized group of respectably close friends.

“I may be the living definition of being caught up in regular life,” she admitted, and a moment of not uncomfortable silence descended between them.

Finally, he broke it with a little laugh. “I have no idea why I told you any of that,” he said. “I must like you, Pickiwicki. What are you doing later?”

She felt the color rush into her cheeks and was glad of the absurdly giant sunglasses that concealed no less than a third of her face, even though Gram had rolled her eyes when she’d bought them. “I am unable to fathom,” Gram had told her, “how such a ridiculous trend from my own youth is back again.”

“I . . . I should tell you I’m flying home in the morning. I don’t want you to waste your time with me.”

She thought she saw a beat of disappointment flash across his face, but he concealed it well. “This is the best conversation I’ve had since I got here. I don’t see how that can be a waste of time. Where’s home?”

“Cincinnati, actually. Pickiwicki was a bit of a haul for summer camp—Gram only sent me there because a friend of hers knew the owners. You still in Pennsylvania?”

He squinted at her. “Are you pulling my chain?”

“Um. I don’t think so.”

“I live in Cincinnati now, too.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do. I went to college there, and then I stayed.”

“Prove it.”

“Well, I don’t carry my license in my swim trunks.”

“Where do—”

A child’s high-pitched scream from just behind them made Violet startle in her seat. Something in the tone indicated that this person was *not* playing, and she jumped to her feet. A few beach towel lengths behind her, a boy was standing with tears running down his face. “Help, please,” he sobbed, looking frantically around. His eyes settled on Violet’s. “Help!”

Her handsome stranger was on his feet now too, and together they rushed toward the child. “What’s wrong?” Violet called, trying to sound calm. “Are you hurt?”

“My mommy. My mommy,” he sobbed, and that’s when Violet saw the woman behind him in the pop-up beach tent. She was lying on her side, writhing and wheezing, her face and lips almost cartoonishly swollen.

Violet looked at her companion in horror. “Shit,” the man said. “A seizure? No—some kind of allergic reaction?” Then he snapped into action. “I’ll get the lifeguard!” he yelled, and took off running.

Violet fell to her knees beside the woman. “Ma’am? Can you speak?” The woman just looked at her with pleading eyes. Violet turned and took the little boy gently by the arms.

“Did your mommy just eat something?” she asked him. He was wailing now, his teary eyes wide with primal fear. “Think hard,” she said kindly. “Maybe something that she doesn’t usually eat? Or drink? It will help the doctors fix her if you can tell me.”

The boy pointed at a hollowed-out pineapple resting in the corner of the tent. It was one of the frozen drinks being sold from pushcarts, and it looked to have only a few sips out of it. Her brain registered a vendor walking a short distance away, and she dove for the pineapple. “Hey!” she screamed at the vendor. He kept walking. “Hey!” He turned.

“This drink. What’s in it? Is there some kind of nut or something in here?”

He thought for a second, then nodded. “Almond liqueur.”

Violet put her hand to her forehead and looked back down at the child. “Is that a nut?” the boy sobbed. “Mommy can’t have nuts.”

But here was her handsome stranger, running back through the sand with a lifeguard. “Everything will be okay,” Violet told the boy, hoping it was true. “Nuts!” she calls to the lifeguard. “This vendor says there’s almond liqueur in this drink, and I think she’s allergic to nuts. Do you have an EpiPen? Benadryl? *Something?*” Her co-worker Katie had once had a reaction to salad dressing at a business lunch, and Violet remembered the company memo that had gone out afterward, about what allergic employees should always have on hand in case of emergency. She lunged for the woman’s beach bag to see if she’d brought provisions.

“Nine-one-one is on the way, just sit tight,” the lifeguard told the woman. He knelt and started rifling through his first aid kit.

“Is your daddy here?” Violet’s handsome stranger got down to the boy’s level and smiled encouragingly.

There was nothing of any use in this beach bag. Only sunscreen and sand toys.

The boy sniffled and nodded. “At the pool.”

“And what’s your daddy’s name?”

“Dave.”

“And your last name?”

“Smithers.”

“Dave Smithers?” The boy nodded. “Good boy. Which pool—which hotel?”

The boy pointed, and then this remarkably in-control man was off running again. The first wails of approaching sirens sounded in the distance.

“Shit,” the lifeguard muttered. “Shit, shit, shit. I must have used the last one on that wasp sting yesterday. I’m in for it now.”

The woman's eyes had closed, her brow furrowed as if she were concentrating very hard. She was turning blue. Something in Violet snapped just then, and she felt the weak façade she'd been putting up for the little boy crumbling. "Please," she pleaded to the lifeguard. "This is this boy's *mother*. You have to do something." The boy had returned to his mother's side and was clutching her thigh with his tiny splayed hands.

"Help is coming," the lifeguard said, sounding unconvinced even as the sirens did grow louder. *Jesus*, Violet thought, taking him in for the first time, his sideways baseball cap and his lean, hairless chest. *He's practically a kid himself.*

"Ma'am, can you hear me?" he said loudly, lowering his face to the woman's. She didn't respond, and he put his ear to her chest. "It's labored, but she's breathing," he told Violet. He sat up and stared down at the woman, frozen. Whatever training he had, it had clearly gone right out of his mind.

Then, finally, three paramedics were running toward them, yelling for people to get back and give them room. Violet wrapped her arms around the crying child and stepped backward, gently guiding him out of the way. She scanned the beach for her handsome stranger, for some sign of the boy's father, but all she saw was a growing circle of concerned strangers. *Looky-loos*, Gram would have called them.

It all happened so fast. The lifeguard snapped back to life and filled in the paramedics, they administered the EpiPen, loaded the woman onto the stretcher, strapped oxygen to her face, bagged a sample from her drink. All the while the boy whimpered and clung to Violet's legs.

"We have to go. Now," the lead paramedic barked at the lifeguard. "You said someone was getting the husband?"

"The boy pointed out the hotel, but I don't see them yet."

"Tell him to come to Aventura Hospital as soon as he gets here." He looked at Violet. "Can you stay with the boy?"

Violet blanched. “I don’t know him . . . I only—”

“Can you stay with him?”

The boy hurled himself at the stretcher, nearing hysterics again. “Mommy! I want to go with Mommy!”

Violet’s heart broke for him. “Can he ride along?” she begged the paramedic. “If I ride with him?”

“We’re not really supposed to—”

The boy let out a heart-stopping wail.

“*Please*. I’ll keep him out of your way. I’m really not comfortable separating them.”

The paramedic conceded with a brusque nod and turned back to the lifeguard. “Dave Smithers. If that guy doesn’t show back up with him, go to the hotel yourself. Have him paged. Ring his room. Whatever it takes.”

The woman made it, just, thank God. The frantic husband did show up eventually. He’d left the pool area after agreeing to be the fifth in a pickup game in the basketball courts around the side of the resort, so he hadn’t been easy to find. He didn’t know the name of the man who’d come yelling for him, and though he wished he could thank him again, he didn’t know what had become of him.

And as she took one last reluctant look over her shoulder the next morning, slinging one leg into the taxi that would take her to the airport, neither did Violet.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ALMOST MISSED YOU. Copyright © 2017 by Jessica Strawser. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-250-10760-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-10762-6 (e-book)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: March 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1