

# A Bend in the Road



# Prologue

*Where does a story truly begin? In life, there are seldom clear-cut beginnings, those moments when we can, in looking back, say that everything started. Yet there are moments when fate intersects with our daily lives, setting in motion a sequence of events whose outcome we could never have foreseen.*

*It's nearly two A.M., and I'm wide awake. Earlier, after crawling into bed, I tossed and turned for almost an hour before I finally gave up. Now I'm sitting at my desk, pen in hand, wondering about my own intersection with fate. This is not unusual for me. Lately, it seems it's all I can think about.*

*Aside from the steady ticking of a clock that sits on the bookshelf, it's quiet in the house. My wife is asleep upstairs, and as I stare at the lines on the yellow legal pad before me, I realize that I don't know where to start. Not because I'm unsure of my story, but because I'm not sure why I feel compelled to tell it in the first place. What can be achieved by unearthing the past? After all, the events I'm about to describe happened thirteen years ago, and I suppose a case can be made that they really began two long years before that. But as I sit, I know I must try to tell it, if for no other reason than to finally put this all behind me.*

*My memories of this period are aided by a few things: a diary I've kept since I was a boy, a folder of yellowed newspaper articles, my own investigation, and, of course, public records. There's also the fact that I've relived the events of this particular story hundreds of times in my mind; they are seared in my memory. But framed simply by those things, this story would be incomplete. There were others involved, and though I was a witness to some of the events, I was not present for all of them. I realize that it's impossible to re-create every feeling or every thought in another person's life, but for better or for worse, that's what I will attempt to do.*

*This is, above all, a love story, and like so many love stories, the love story of Miles Ryan and Sarah Andrews is rooted in tragedy. At the same time, it is also a story of forgiveness, and when you're finished, I hope you'll understand the challenges that Miles Ryan and Sarah Andrews faced. I hope you'll understand the decisions they made, both good and bad, just as I hope you will eventually understand mine.*

*But let me be clear: This isn't simply the story of Sarah Andrews and Miles Ryan. If there is a beginning to this story, it lies with Missy Ryan, high school sweetheart of a deputy sheriff in a small southern town.*

*Missy Ryan, like her husband, Miles, grew up in New Bern. From all accounts, she was both charming and kind, and Miles had loved her for all of his adult life. She had dark brown hair and even darker eyes, and I've been told she spoke with an accent that made men from other parts of the country go weak in the knees. She laughed easily, listened with interest, and often touched the arm of whomever she was talking to, as if issuing an invitation to be part of her world. And, like most southern women, her will was stronger than was noticeable at first. She, not Miles, ran the household; as a general rule, Miles's friends were the husbands of Missy's friends, and their life was centered around their family.*

*In high school, Missy was a cheerleader. As a sophomore, she was both popular and lovely, and although she knew of Miles Ryan, he was a year older than she and they hadn't had any classes together. It didn't matter. Introduced by friends, they began meeting during lunch break and talking after football games, and eventually made arrangements to meet at a party during homecoming weekend. Soon they were inseparable, and by the time he asked her to the prom a few months later, they were in love.*

*There are those, I know, who scoff at the idea that real love can exist at such a young age. For Miles and Missy, however, it did, and it was in some ways more powerful than love experienced by older people, since it wasn't tempered by the realities of life. They dated throughout Miles's junior and senior years, and when he went off to college at North Carolina State, they remained faithful to each other while Missy moved toward her own graduation. She joined him at NCSU the following year, and when he proposed over dinner three years later, she cried and said yes and spent the next hour on the phone calling her family and telling them the good news, while Miles ate the rest of his meal alone. Miles stayed in Raleigh until Missy completed her degree, and their wedding in New Bern filled the church.*

*Missy took a job as a loan officer at Wachovia Bank, and Miles began his training to become a deputy sheriff. She was two months pregnant when Miles started working for Craven County, patrolling the streets that had always been their home. Like many young couples, they bought their first home, and when their son, Jonah, was born in January 1981, Missy took one look at the bundled newborn and knew motherhood was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Though Jonah didn't sleep through the night until he was six months old and there were times she wanted to scream at him the same way he was screaming at her, Missy loved him more than she'd ever imagined possible.*

*She was a wonderful mother. She quit her job to stay home with Jonah full-time, read him stories, played with him, and took him to*

*play groups. She could spend hours simply watching him. By the time he was five, Missy realized she wanted another baby, and she and Miles began trying again. The seven years they were married were the happiest years of both their lives.*

*But in August of 1986, when she was twenty-nine years old, Missy Ryan was killed.*

*Her death dimmed the light in Jonah's eyes; it haunted Miles for two years. It paved the way for all that was to come next.*

*So, as I said, this is Missy's story, just as it is the story of Miles and Sarah. And it is my story as well.*

*I, too, played a role in all that happened.*

# Chapter 1



**O**n the morning of August 29, 1988, a little more than two years after his wife had passed away, Miles Ryan stood on the back porch of his house, smoking a cigarette, watching as the rising sun slowly changed the morning sky from dusky gray to orange. Spread before him was the Trent River, its brackish waters partially hidden by the cypress trees clustered at the water's edge.

The smoke from Miles's cigarette swirled upward and he could feel the humidity rising, thickening the air. In time, the birds began their morning songs, the trill whistles filling the air. A small bass boat passed by, the fisherman waved, and Miles acknowledged the gesture with a slight nod. It was all the energy he could summon.

He needed a cup of coffee. A little java and he'd feel ready enough to face the day—getting Jonah off to school, keeping rein on the locals who flouted the law, posting eviction notices throughout the county, as well as handling whatever else inevitably cropped up, like meeting with Jonah's teacher later in the afternoon. And that was just for starters. The evenings, if anything, seemed even busier. There was always so much to do, simply to keep the household running smoothly: paying the bills,

shopping, cleaning, repairing things around the house. Even in those rare moments when Miles found himself with a little free time on his hands, he felt as if he had to take advantage of it right away or he'd lose the opportunity. Quick, find something to read. Hurry up, there's only a few minutes to relax. Close your eyes, in a little while there won't be any time. It was enough to wear anyone down for a while, but what could he do about it?

He really needed the coffee. The nicotine wasn't cutting it anymore, and he thought about throwing the cigarettes out, but then it didn't matter whether he did or not. In his mind, he didn't really smoke. Sure, he had a few cigarettes during the course of the day, but that wasn't real smoking. It wasn't as though he burned through a pack a day, and it wasn't as if he'd been doing it his whole life, either; he'd started after Missy had died, and he could stop anytime he wanted. But why bother? Hell, his lungs were in good shape—just last week, he'd had to run after a shoplifter and had no trouble catching the kid. A *smoker* couldn't do that.

Then again, it hadn't been as easy as it was when he'd been twenty-two. But that was ten years ago, and even if thirty-two didn't mean it was time to start looking into nursing homes, he was getting older. And he could feel it, too—there was a time during college when he and his friends would start their evenings at eleven o'clock and proceed to stay out the rest of the night. In the last few years, except for those times he was working, eleven o'clock was *late*, and if he had trouble falling asleep, he went to bed anyway. He couldn't imagine any reason strong enough to make him want to stay up. Exhaustion had become a permanent fixture in his life. Even on those nights when Jonah didn't have his nightmares—he'd been having them on and off since Missy died—Miles still awoke feeling . . . tired. Unfocused. Sluggish, as if he were moving around underwater. Most of the time, he attributed this to the hectic life he lived; but sometimes he won-

dered if there wasn't something more seriously wrong with him. He'd read once that one of the symptoms of clinical depression was "undue lethargy, without reason or cause." Of course, he did have cause. . . .

What he really needed was some quiet time at a little beachfront cottage down in Key West, a place where he could fish for turbot or simply relax in a gently swaying hammock while drinking a cold beer, without facing any decision more major than whether or not to wear sandals as he walked on the beach with a nice woman at his side.

That was part of it, too. Loneliness. He was tired of being alone, of waking up in an empty bed, though the feeling still surprised him. He hadn't felt that way until recently. In the first year after Missy's death, Miles couldn't even begin to imagine loving another woman again. Ever. It was as if the urge for female companionship didn't exist at all, as if desire and lust and love were nothing more than theoretical possibilities that had no bearing on the real world. Even after he'd weathered shock and grief strong enough to make him cry every night, his life just felt *wrong* somehow—as if it were temporarily off track but would soon right itself again, so there wasn't any reason to get too worked up about anything.

Most things, after all, hadn't changed after the funeral. Bills kept coming, Jonah needed to eat, the grass needed to be mowed. He still had a job. Once, after too many beers, Charlie, his best friend and boss, had asked him what it was like to lose a wife, and Miles had told him that it didn't seem as if Missy were really gone. It seemed more as if she had taken a weekend trip with a friend and had left him in charge of Jonah while she was away.

Time passed and so eventually did the numbness he'd grown accustomed to. In its place, reality settled in. As much as he tried to move on, Miles still found his thoughts drawn to Missy. Everything, it seemed, reminded him of her. Especially Jonah, who

looked more like her the older he got. Sometimes, when Miles stood in the doorway after tucking Jonah in, he could see his wife in the small features of his son's face, and he would have to turn away before Jonah could see the tears. But the image would stay with him for hours; he loved the way Missy had looked as she'd slept, her long brown hair spread across the pillow, one arm always resting above her head, her lips slightly parted, the subtle rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. And her smell—that was something Miles would never forget. On the first Christmas morning after her death, while sitting in church, he'd caught a trace of the perfume that Missy used to wear and he'd held on to the ache like a drowning man grasping a life preserver until long after the service was over.

He held on to other things as well. When they were first married, he and Missy used to have lunch at Fred & Clara's, a small restaurant just down the street from the bank where she worked. It was out of the way, quiet, and somehow its cozy embrace made them both feel as if nothing would ever change between them. They hadn't gone much once Jonah had been born, but Miles started going again once she was gone, as if hoping to find some remnant of those feelings still lingering on the paneled walls. At home, too, he ran his life according to what she used to do. Since Missy had gone to the grocery store on Thursday evenings, that's when Miles went, too. Because Missy liked to grow tomatoes along the side of the house, Miles grew them, too. Missy had thought Lysol the best all-purpose kitchen cleaner, so he saw no reason to use anything else. Missy was always there, in everything he did.

But sometime last spring, that feeling began to change. It came without warning, and Miles sensed it as soon as it happened. While driving downtown, he caught himself staring at a young couple walking hand in hand as they moved down the sidewalk. And for just a moment, Miles imagined himself as the man, and

that the woman was with him. Or if not her, then *someone* . . . someone who would love not only him, but Jonah as well. Someone who could make him laugh, someone to share a bottle of wine with over a leisurely dinner, someone to hold and touch and to whisper quietly with after the lights had been turned off. Someone like Missy, he thought to himself, and her image immediately conjured up feelings of guilt and betrayal overwhelming enough for him to banish the young couple from his mind forever.

Or so he assumed.

Later that night, right after crawling into bed, he found himself thinking about them again. And though the feelings of guilt and betrayal were still there, they weren't as powerful as they had been earlier that day. And in that moment, Miles knew he'd taken the first step, albeit a small one, toward finally coming to terms with his loss.

He began to justify his new reality by telling himself that he was a widower now, that it was okay to have these feelings, and he knew no one would disagree with him. No one expected him to live the rest of his life alone; in the past few months, friends had even offered to set him up with a couple of dates. Besides, he knew that Missy would have wanted him to marry again. She'd said as much to him more than once—like most couples, they'd played the “what if” game, and though neither of them had ever expected anything terrible to happen, both had been in agreement that it wouldn't be right for Jonah to grow up with only a single parent. It wouldn't be right for the surviving spouse. Still, it seemed a little too soon.

As the summer wore on, the thoughts about finding someone new began to surface more frequently and with more intensity. Missy was still there, Missy would always be there . . . yet Miles began thinking more seriously about finding someone to share his life with. Late at night, while comforting Jonah in the rocking

chair out back—it was the only thing that seemed to help with the nightmares—these thoughts seemed strongest and always followed the same pattern. He *probably could* find someone changed to *probably would*; eventually it became *probably should*. At this point, however—no matter how much he wanted it to be otherwise—his thoughts still reverted back to *probably won't*.

The reason was in his bedroom.

On his shelf, in a bulging manila envelope, sat the file concerning Missy's death, the one he'd made for himself in the months following her funeral. He kept it with him so he wouldn't forget what happened, he kept it to remind him of the work he still had to do.

He kept it to remind him of his failure.

A few minutes later, after stubbing out the cigarette on the railing and heading inside, Miles poured the coffee he needed and headed down the hall. Jonah was still asleep when he pushed open the door and peeked in. Good, he still had a little time. He headed to the bathroom.

After he turned the faucet, the shower groaned and hissed for a moment before the water finally came. He showered and shaved and brushed his teeth. He ran a comb through his hair, noticing again that there seemed to be less of it now than there used to be. He hurriedly donned his sheriff's uniform; next he took down his holster from the lockbox above the bedroom door and put that on as well. From the hallway, he heard Jonah rustling in his room. This time, Jonah looked up with puffy eyes as soon as Miles came in to check on him. He was still sitting in bed, his hair disheveled. He hadn't been awake for more than a few minutes.

Miles smiled. "Good morning, champ."

Jonah looked up from his bed, almost as if in slow motion. "Hey, Dad."

“You ready for some breakfast?”

He stretched his arms out to the side, groaning slightly. “Can I have pancakes?”

“How about some waffles instead? We’re running a little late.”

Jonah bent over and grabbed his pants. Miles had laid them out the night before. “You say that every morning.”

Miles shrugged. “You’re late every morning.”

“Then wake me up sooner.”

“I have a better idea—why don’t you go to sleep when I tell you to?”

“I’m not tired then. I’m only tired in the mornings.”

“Join the club.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind,” Miles answered. He pointed to the bathroom. “Don’t forget to brush your hair after you get dressed.”

“I won’t,” Jonah said.

Most mornings followed the same routine. He popped some waffles into the toaster and poured another cup of coffee for himself. By the time Jonah had dressed himself and made it to the kitchen, his waffle was waiting on his plate, a glass of milk beside it. Miles had already spread the butter, but Jonah liked to add the syrup himself. Miles started in on his own waffle, and for a minute, neither of them said anything. Jonah still looked as if he were in his own little world, and though Miles needed to talk to him, he wanted him to at least seem coherent.

After a few minutes of companionable silence, Miles finally cleared his throat.

“So, how’s school going?” he asked.

Jonah shrugged. “Fine, I guess.”

This question too, was part of the routine. Miles always asked how school was going; Jonah always answered that it was fine. But earlier that morning, while getting Jonah’s backpack ready, Miles had found a note from Jonah’s teacher, asking him if it was

possible to meet today. Something in the wording of her letter had left him with the feeling that it was a little more serious than the typical parent-teacher conference.

“You doing okay in class?”

Jonah shrugged. “Uh-huh.”

“Do you like your teacher?”

Jonah nodded in between bites. “Uh-huh,” he answered again.

Miles waited to see if Jonah would add anything more, but he didn’t. Miles leaned a little closer.

“Then why didn’t you tell me about the note your teacher sent home?”

“What note?” he asked innocently.

“The note in your backpack—the one your teacher wanted me to read.”

Jonah shrugged again, his shoulders popping up and down like the waffles in the toaster. “I guess I just forgot.”

“How could you forget something like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know why she wants to see me?”

“No . . .” Jonah hesitated, and Miles knew immediately that he wasn’t telling the truth.

“Son, are you in trouble at school?”

At this, Jonah blinked and looked up. His father didn’t call him “son” unless he’d done something wrong. “No, Dad. I don’t ever act up. I promise.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Think about it.”

Jonah squirmed in his seat, knowing he’d reached the limit of his father’s patience. “Well, I guess I might be having a little trouble with some of the work.”

“I thought you said school was going okay.”

“School is going okay. Miss Andrews is really nice and all, and

I like it there.” He paused. “It’s just that sometimes I don’t understand everything that’s going on in class.”

“That’s why you go to school. So you can learn.”

“I know,” he answered, “but she’s not like Mrs. Hayes was last year. The work she assigns is *hard*. I just can’t do some of it.”

Jonah looked scared and embarrassed at exactly the same time. Miles reached out and put his hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were having trouble?”

It took a long time for Jonah to answer.

“Because,” he said finally, “I didn’t want you to be mad at me.”

After breakfast, after making sure Jonah was ready to go, Miles helped him with his backpack and led him to the front door. Jonah hadn’t said much since breakfast. Squatting down, Miles kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t worry about this afternoon. It’s gonna be all right, okay?”

“Okay,” Jonah mumbled.

“And don’t forget that I’ll be picking you up, so don’t get on the bus.”

“Okay,” he said again.

“I love you, champ.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

Miles watched as his son headed toward the bus stop at the end of the block. Missy, he knew, wouldn’t have been surprised by what had happened this morning, as he had been. Missy would have already known that Jonah was having trouble at school. Missy had taken care of things like this.

Missy had taken care of everything.