

The First Time

I Saw Him

a novel

Laura Dave

#1 New York Times bestselling author of
The Last Thing He Told Me

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The First Time I Saw Him

A sequel to *The Last Thing He Told Me*

Laura Dave

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*For Josh,
The first time I saw you I knew*

Maybe, one day,
we'll bump into each other,
in a checkout line or a quiet
car lot,
and we'll smile like we didn't
shatter each other once—
like we didn't make an unholy
mess of love.

—Harriet Selina

Prologue

I'm at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles, participating in a First Look exhibition, with twenty-one other artisans and producers. I'm debuting a new collection of white oak pieces (mostly furniture, a few bowls and smaller pieces) in the showroom they've provided.

These exhibitions are great for exposure to potential clients, but they are also like a reunion of sorts—and, like most reunions, somewhat of a grind. Several architects and colleagues stop by to say hello, catch up. I have done my best with the small talk, but I'm starting to feel tired. And, as the clock winds toward 6 p.m., I feel myself looking past people as opposed to at them.

Bailey is supposed to meet me for dinner, so I'm mostly on the lookout for her, excited to have the excuse to shut it all down for the day. She is bringing a guy she recently started dating, a hedge funder named Shep (two points against him), but she swears I'll like him. *He's not like that*, she says.

I'm not sure if she is referring to him working in finance or having the name Shep. Either way, he seems like a reaction to her last boyfriend, who had a less irritating name (John) and was unemployed. So it is, dating in your twenties, and I'm grateful that these are the things she's thinking about.

She lives in Los Angeles now. I live here too, not too far from the ocean—and not too far from her.

I sold the floating house as soon as Bailey graduated high school. I don't harbor any illusions that this means I've avoided them keeping tabs on us—the shadowy figures waiting to pounce should Owen ever return. I'm sure they are still watching on the off chance he risks it and comes back to see us. I operate as if they are always watching, whether or not he does.

Sometimes I think I see them, in an airport lounge or outside a restaurant, but of course I don't know who they are. I profile anyone who looks at me a

second too long. It stops me from letting too many people get close to me, which isn't a bad thing. I have who I need.

Minus one.

He walks into the showroom, casually, a backpack over his shoulders. His shaggy hair is buzz cut short and darker, and his nose is crooked, like it's been broken. He wears a button-down shirt, rolled up, revealing a sleeve of tattoos, crawling out to his hand, to his fingers, like a spider.

This is when I clock his wedding ring, which he is still wearing. The ring I made for him. Its slim oak finish is perhaps unnoticeable to anyone else. I know it cold though. He couldn't look less like himself. There is that too. But maybe this is what you do when you need to hide from people in plain sight. I wonder. Then I wonder if it isn't him, after all.

It isn't the first time I think I see him. I think I see him everywhere.

I'm so flustered that I drop the papers I'm holding, everything falling to the floor.

He bends over to help me. He doesn't smile, which would give him away. He doesn't so much as touch my hand. It would be too much, probably, for both of us.

He hands me the papers.

I try and thank him. Do I say it out loud? I don't know.

Maybe. Because he nods.

Then he stands up and starts to head out, the way he came. And it's then that he says the one thing that only he would say to me.

"The could have been boys still love you," Owen says. He isn't looking at me when he says it, his voice low.

The way you say hello.

The way you say goodbye.

My skin starts burning, my cheeks flaring red. But I don't say anything. There's no time to say anything. He shrugs and shifts his backpack higher on his shoulder. Then he disappears into the crowd. And that's that. He is just another design junkie, on his way to another booth.

I don't dare watch him go. I don't dare look in his direction.

I keep my eyes down, pretending to organize the papers, but the heat coming off me is tangible—that fierce red lingering on my skin, on my face, if anyone is paying close enough attention in that moment. I pray they are not.

I make myself count to a hundred, then to a hundred and fifty.

When I finally allow myself to look up, it's Bailey that I see. It cools me out immediately, centers me. She is walking toward me from the same direction Owen has gone. She's in her gray sweater dress and high-top Converse, her long, brown hair running halfway down her back. Did Owen pass her? Did he get to see for himself how beautiful she has become? How sure of herself? I hope so. I hope so at the same time I hope not. Which way, after all, spares him?

I take a deep breath and take her in. She walks hand in hand with Shep, the new boyfriend. He gives me a salute, which I'm sure he thinks is cute. It isn't.

But I smile as they walk up. How can I not? Bailey is smiling too. She is smiling at me.

"Mom," she says.

Part I

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
It's always ourselves we find in the sea

—e. e. cummings

If You Can Forgive Me...

On the way out of the Pacific Design Center, Owen passes her.

This is the first time he has laid eyes on his daughter in person in more than five years. Five years, ten months, and twenty-four days—to be exact. Five birthdays and five Christmases and eight performances (*Wicked* and *Carousel* and *Spring Awakening* and *Dear Evan Hanson* and *Waitress* and *Beautiful* and *Chicago* and *Carousel* again) and two graduations (one high school, one college) and three new addresses and a summer in Williamstown, Massachusetts, and the start of her first job. All these things between sixteen and twenty-two that mark it up, the start of a life.

Bailey's hair is longer, her arms too thin. But, at the moment he passes her—he doesn't turn to take a longer look; he won't allow himself that luxury—it's her skin that gets him.

Bailey is tan, if her skin were capable of tanning, her skin freckled and reddish, perhaps from the daily toll of life in Southern California, perhaps from spending too many days at the beach. How is this possible? Hadn't she always avoided the beach? It nearly breaks him, such a small and obvious difference in who his daughter has become.

Seeing Bailey online didn't give this away. Seeing Bailey online was a completely different thing.

Her social media account is now public, which Owen tells himself she's done for his benefit. He wouldn't allow her to ever post photos before, but the rules are different now. Owen imagines that Bailey knows this. There is no asking her. Either way, he likes to believe the posts are a way of keeping them in conversation. All he needs is a public computer and her handle and he can go to her page with no record of having gone there. Her smile (how he loved every single thing about his kid's smile) knocks the wind out of him, each and every

time. It's almost like it's directed at him: *Look, Dad, I'm okay. Look, Dad, you're not here. Look, Dad, I'll never forgive you.*

Owen walks through the design center lobby, out the revolving doors, and onto Melrose. There is a line of taxis idling. The driver in the first taxi shakes his head, still in the middle of a dinner break. So Owen gets into the second cab and asks the driver to take him to the airport. They are fighting early-evening Los Angeles traffic and it takes longer than expected to get there. It doesn't matter. He is plenty early for his flight and heads to the first-class lounge, flashes his mobile boarding pass, and goes into a single bathroom, where he locks the door.

He stares at himself in the mirror, takes his first deep breath. Steadies himself. Then he starts to take his clothes off. He strips off the button-down shirt he was wearing, puts on a plain T-shirt and leather jacket, swaps his combat boots for a pair of Converse sneakers. Just like his kid's.

On the way to the lounge's bar, he sees a janitor with her large garbage bin and tosses his old clothes inside. Then he takes a seat on the corner barstool, the farthest stool from anyone else, taking out a novel he has no intention of reading.

The bartender puts a wine list down in front of Owen. "What can I get you to drink?" he asks.

"Whatever red you're pouring is fine."

"That's a mistake," a woman says.

Owen looks up, sees the woman at the other end of the bar, smiling at him. She is pretty, with a short pixie cut, tortoiseshell glasses.

"Sorry?" he says.

"The wine. It's a mistake. My flight's delayed. Very delayed. So I've been working my way down the list of wines by the glass. They're all bad."

He opens his novel, tries to close off whatever conversation she wants to have.

But she moves down the bar, so she's two stools away from him. "So where are you headed?"

"Business trip," he says.

"International?"

He's not surprised she guesses international. His New Zealand passport is sticking out of his book, complete with a name that doesn't belong to him.

The bartender puts down the glass of wine in front of him along with a bowl of salty nuts. Owen nods a thank-you, takes a sip.

“Awful, isn’t it?”

“It’ll do.”

He offers a quick smile, turns back to his book.

“Should we try our luck at a bottle instead?”

“The thing is...” he says. “I’m married.”

She looks down at his hand, eyes his wedding band. “And what does that have to do with splitting a bottle of wine?”

But then she shrugs, as if to say she knows exactly what that has to do with it.

“Just trying to avoid any confusion,” Owen says.

“Lucky woman then. Your wife.”

He thinks of Hannah. He hasn’t allowed himself to think of her, not since leaving the design center. Not since he was bending down next to her on the floor, helping pick up those scattered papers. Her hand so near to his hand. Her hair against his face. Her eyes giving her away, like they always had. There was anger there. And confusion. And love. Was there still love beneath the rest?

He smiles. “Not sure that she would say that.”

“What would she say? Your wife?”

“I ask myself that all the time.”

~

Here’s the thing.

You don’t know what you will do until you do it. You pick up the phone at work and it’s your wife’s best friend and she tells you to go someplace where no one else can hear you and you close the conference room door and she starts to speak (*The FBI is on the way, The Shop is being raided*) and your whole world changes.

Just like that.

It’s been five years. More than five years. Owen can’t recall—not with exact accuracy—what he said to Jules on that call, or how he got off the phone with her.

He just remembers the movement, which started immediately. The only goal was to get out of there before the FBI arrived. To get far away from there before anyone could attempt to ID him. There was a yellow legal pad on his desk. He picked it up and tossed it into his messenger bag and headed out of the office.

Early lunch? the receptionist asked. Owen nodded. He knows that he nodded. He knows that he hid his urgency the best that he could. His urgency, his fear. *I'll be back in a little while*, he said. *See you later...*

Then he was out the front doors and racing through the parking lot and keying the lock to his car.

He got in and drove to the bank in Corte Madera, to the oldest bank in Corte Madera, which housed an underground vault with three bottom-row safe-deposit boxes under a numbered account.

He took a duffel bag and a messenger bag out of his trunk—the two bags he'd kept stored in his trunk precisely for this moment—and brought them inside the bank with him. Inside the vault.

Two safe-deposit boxes held the money. He filled up the duffel bag with all of it. The third deposit box had a Canadian passport, two drivers' licenses, an iPhone with an encrypted phone app already downloaded and connected, and a key to a storage unit in Vancouver. These he put into his messenger bag.

Before he walked out, on the floor of that vault, he wrote his daughter a note and put it in the duffel bag.

Then, he wrote his wife a note and put it in his back pocket.

He didn't go to the docks. There was no time to go to the docks. And even if there were, he wouldn't go. If he saw Hannah, he wouldn't have been able to leave without telling her everything. He couldn't tell her everything, not if he wanted to keep her safe. He couldn't tell her anything. He needed to be in Vancouver by the next day.

He drove through the night. He drove for thirteen hours straight, stopping only twice. Fifteen minutes per stop—once at a rest stop in Astoria, Oregon, the second time at Lumen Field in Seattle, where he left his car at the rear of the eight-story parking structure. He walked from Lumen Field to the nearby Greyhound bus station, where he hopped a bus to take him the rest of the way over the border into Canada.

But first he went to his daughter's school and put the duffel bag in her locker, and found a girl leaving soccer practice, and handed her the note for Hannah. First, he said a prayer that they wouldn't hate him for this. Not his daughter, not his wife.

But it was the wrong prayer. The right prayer was closer to the second one he made as he crossed the border into Canada: He prayed they'd understand.

They'd understand that he did have an escape hatch ready—for years he had it ready—one that included them.

But he'd planned it when Bailey was still a child, before his daughter became so specifically herself that to ask her to run felt more selfish than safe. It was before Owen understood what it would do to his wife, how it would blow an impossible hole through the center of her life.

And it was certainly before he picked up his phone and Jules told him he was out of time, and he knew (somewhere inside hadn't he always known, even if he didn't want to know?) that the only thing for him to do was to get as far away from both of them as quickly as he could. No warnings, no explanations. Just *away*.

What can he say about that now? What can he say about any of this? Anything bad anyone wants to think about what he did, he gets it.

Anything bad anyone wants to think about him, he already thinks it about himself.



Owen lands in Austin a little before midnight.

When he steps off the jetway, it's hot and muggy, the Texas air thick even this late at night. He takes off his leather jacket, slings it over his backpack. Then he heads toward ground transportation and the parking lot that houses the rental cars, his reservation paid for in advance, his membership to the rental car's gold club helping him avoid talking with anyone in person. Hopefully.

It's not easy renting a car with a New Zealand driver's license. It sets off alarms. He's prepared for this. He has prepared for all of this.

The computer sends him to spot 85, where a small SUV is waiting. He gets in, turns the key that is already in the ignition, and heads out of the airport

parking lot and onto the familiar highway toward downtown.

Five years, ten months, and twenty-four days ago, time stopped.

He hadn't called Bailey, even when he made it to Vancouver. Even though it nearly killed him not to.

He'd forced himself to put sixty-eight hours and eight thousand miles between them before he dared to call his daughter—even on an encrypted app—to even put into the world that amount of risk.

When Bailey picked up, Owen had told her that he didn't have much time to explain. And she told him she knew about her mother, Kate. She knew about her mother and (more urgently) she knew about Kate's father, Nicholas. Bailey's grandfather, Nicholas.

Does she even remember telling Owen that? She was so upset, her tears coming through the phone, so he doesn't know. But he'll never forget.

Five years, ten months, and twenty-one days ago, Owen stood on a street corner in Wellington, New Zealand, and, from the other side of the world, he heard his daughter's tears and he heard her say the name Nicholas Bell. And a new kind of clock started.

This was the moment he started to plan.



Through the car windows, downtown Austin comes into view.

South Congress Avenue is busy, even after midnight—a concert letting out at the Moody Theater, people waiting for their rideshares in front of the Paramount, the patio at Lamberts still overflowing with late-night barbecue.

Owen takes a left and drives up to the condominium on Second Street—the renovated firehouse, now coveted loft apartments.

He finds a parking spot and approaches the front doors. He doesn't recognize the doorman standing there. He is new. Or, at least, newer than fifteen years.

"How can I help you?" the doorman asks him.

"Eight D."

The doorman tilts his head, takes Owen in. "Pretty late for a visitor," he says. "Is he expecting you?"

Owen hikes his backpack higher on his shoulder. He doesn't answer.

“Who should I say is here?”
“Tell him it’s his son-in-law.”