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True Believer

Nicholas Sparks

One

Jeremy Marsh sat with the rest of the live studio audience, feeling unusually conspicuous. He was one of only half a dozen men in attendance on that mid-December afternoon. He'd dressed in black, of course, and with his dark wavy hair, light blue eyes, and fashionable stubble, he looked every bit the New Yorker that he was. While studying the guest onstage, he managed to surreptitiously watch the attractive blonde three rows up. His profession often demanded effective multitasking. He was an investigative journalist in pursuit of a story, and the blonde was just another member of the audience; still, the professional observer in him couldn't help noticing how attractive she looked in her halter top and jeans. Journalistically speaking, that is.

Clearing his mind, he tried to focus his attention on the guest again. This guy was beyond ridiculous. In the glare of television lights, Jeremy thought the spirit guide looked constipated as he claimed to hear voices from beyond the grave. He had assumed a false intimacy, acting as if he were everyone's brother or best friend, and it seemed that the vast majority of the awestruck audience – including the attractive blonde and the woman the guest was addressing – considered him a gift from heaven itself. Which made sense, Jeremy thought, since that was always where the lost loved ones ended up. Spirits from beyond the grave were always surrounded by bright angelic light and enveloped in an aura of peace and tranquillity. Never once had Jeremy heard of a spirit guide channeling from the other, hotter place. A lost loved one never mentioned that he was being roasted on a spit or boiled in a cauldron of motor oil, for instance. But Jeremy knew he was being cynical. And besides, he had to admit, it was a pretty good show. Timothy Clausen was good – far better than most of the quacks Jeremy had written about over the years.

"I know it's hard," Clausen said into the microphone, "but Frank is telling you that it's time to let him go now."

The woman he was addressing with oh-so-much empathy looked as if she was about to faint. Fiftyish, she wore a green-striped blouse, her curly red hair sprouting and

spiraling in every direction. Her hands were clasped so tightly at chest level that her fingers were white from the pressure.

Clausen paused and brought his hand to his forehead, drawing once more on “the world beyond,” as he put it. In the silence, the crowd collectively leaned forward in their seats. Everyone knew what was coming next; this was the third audience member Clausen had chosen today. Not surprisingly, Clausen was the only featured guest on the popular talk show.

“Do you remember the letter he sent you?” Clausen asked. “Before he died?”

The woman gasped. The crewman beside her held the microphone even closer so that everyone watching on television would be able to hear her clearly.

“Yes, but how could you know about—?” she stammered.

Clausen didn’t let her finish. “Do you remember what it said?” he asked.

“Yes,” the woman croaked.

Clausen nodded, as if he’d read the letter himself. “It was about forgiveness, wasn’t it?”

On the couch, the hostess of the show, the most popular afternoon talk show in America, swiveled her gaze from Clausen to the woman and back again. She looked both amazed and satisfied. Spirit guides were always good for ratings.

As the woman in the audience nodded, Jeremy noticed mascara beginning to stream down her cheeks. The cameras zoomed in to show it more clearly. Daytime television at its dramatic best.

“But how could you . . . ?” the woman repeated.

“He was talking about your sister, too,” Clausen murmured. “Not just himself.”

The woman stared at Clausen transfixed.

“Your sister Ellen,” Clausen added, and with that revelation, the woman finally let loose a raspy cry. Tears burst forth like an automated sprinkler. Clausen—tan and trim in his black suit with nary a hair out of place—continued to nod like one of those bobbing dogs you stick on your dashboard. The audience gazed at the woman in utter silence.

“Frank left something else for you, didn’t he? Something from your past.”

In spite of the hot studio lights, the woman actually seemed to pale. In the corner of the set, beyond the general viewing area, Jeremy saw the producer rotating an upraised finger in a helicopter pattern. It was getting close to the commercial break. Clausen glanced almost imperceptibly in that direction. No one but Jeremy seemed

to notice, and he often wondered why viewers never questioned how channeling from the spirit world could be timed so perfectly to fit with commercial breaks.

Clausen went on. "That no one else could know about. A key of some sort, is that right?"

The sobs continued as the woman nodded.

"You never thought he'd save it, did you?"

Okay, here's the clincher, Jeremy thought. Another true believer on the way.

"It's from the hotel where you stayed on your honeymoon. He put it there so that when you found it, you would remember the happy times you spent together. He doesn't want you to remember him with pain, because he loves you."

"Ooohhhhhhh . . .," the woman cried.

Or something like that. A moan perhaps. From where he was sitting Jeremy couldn't be certain, because the cry was interrupted by sudden, enthusiastic applause. All at once, the microphone was pulled away. Cameras zoomed out. Her moment in the sun completed, the woman from the audience collapsed in her seat. On cue, the hostess stood from the couch and faced the camera.

"Remember that what you're seeing is real. None of these people have ever met with Timothy Clausen." She smiled. "We'll be back with one more reading after this."

More applause as the show broke for commercials, and Jeremy leaned back in his seat.

As an investigative journalist known for his interest in science, he'd made a career out of writing about people like this. Most of the time, he enjoyed what he did and took pride in his work as a valuable public service, in a profession so special as to have its rights enumerated in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. For his regular column in *Scientific American*, he'd interviewed Nobel laureates, explained the theories of Stephen Hawking and Einstein in lay terms, and had once been credited with sparking the groundswell of public opinion that led the FDA to remove a dangerous antidepressant from the market. He'd written extensively about the Cassini project, the faulty mirror on the lens of the Hubble spacecraft, and had been one of the first to publicly decry the Utah cold fusion experiment as a fraud.

Unfortunately, as impressive as it sounded, his column didn't pay much. It was the freelance work that paid most of his bills, and like all freelancers, he was always hustling to come up with stories that would interest magazine or newspaper editors. His niche had broadened to include "anything unusual," and in the past fifteen years, he'd researched and investigated psychics, spirit guides, faith healers, and mediums. He'd exposed frauds, hoaxes, and forgeries. He'd visited haunted houses, searched for mystical creatures, and hunted for the origins of urban legends.

Skeptical by nature, he also had the rare ability to explain difficult scientific concepts in a way the average reader could understand, and his articles had appeared in hundreds of newspapers and magazines around the world. Scientific debunking, he felt, was both noble and important, even if the public didn't always appreciate it. Frequently, the mail he received after publishing his freelance articles was peppered with words like "idiot," "moron," and his personal favorite, "government flunky."

Investigative journalism, he'd come to learn, was a thankless business.

Reflecting on this with a frown, he observed the audience chatting eagerly, wondering who would be chosen next. Jeremy stole another glance at the blonde, who was examining her lipstick in a hand mirror.

Jeremy already knew that the people chosen by Clausen weren't officially part of the act, even though Clausen's appearance was announced in advance and people had fought wildly for tickets to the show. Which meant, of course, that the audience was loaded with life-after-death believers. To them, Clausen was legitimate. How else could he know such personal things about strangers, unless he talked to spirits? But like any good magician who had his repertoire down pat, the illusion was still an illusion, and right before the show, Jeremy not only had figured out how he was pulling it off, but had the photographic evidence to prove it.

Bringing down Clausen would be Jeremy's biggest coup to date, and it served the guy right. Clausen was the worst kind of con man. And yet the pragmatic side of Jeremy also realized that this was the kind of story that rarely came along, and he wanted to make the most of it. Clausen, after all, was on the cusp of enormous celebrity, and in America, celebrity was all that mattered. Though he knew the odds were utterly improbable, he fantasized about what would happen if Clausen actually picked him next. He didn't expect it; being chosen was akin to winning the trifecta at Santa Anita; and even if it didn't happen, Jeremy knew he'd still have a quality story. But quality and extraordinary were often separated by simple twists of fate, and as the commercial break ended, he felt the slightest twinge of unjustified hope that somehow Clausen would zero in on him.

And, as if God himself wasn't exactly thrilled with what Clausen was doing, either, that was exactly what happened.

Three weeks later, winter in Manhattan was bearing down hard. A front from Canada had moved in, dropping temperatures to nearly zero, and plumes of steam rose steadily from the sewer grates before settling over the icy sidewalks. Not that anyone seemed to mind. New York's hardy citizens displayed their usual indifference to all things weather-related, and Friday nights were not to be wasted under any circumstance. People worked too hard during the week to waste an evening out, especially when there was reason to celebrate. Nate Johnson and Alvin Bernstein had already been celebrating for an hour, as had a couple of dozen friends and journalists – some from Scientific American – who'd assembled in Jeremy's honor. Most were well into the buzz phase of the evening and enjoying themselves immensely, mostly because journalists tended to be budget-conscious and Nate was picking up the tab.

Nate was Jeremy's agent. Alvin, a freelance cameraman, was Jeremy's best friend, and they'd gathered at the trendy bar on the Upper West Side to celebrate Jeremy's appearance on ABC's Primetime Live. Commercials for Primetime Live had been airing that week – most of them featuring Jeremy front and center and the promise of a major exposé – and interview requests were pouring into Nate's office from around the country. Earlier that afternoon, People magazine had called, and an interview was scheduled for the following Monday morning.

There hadn't been enough time to organize a private room for the get-together, but no one seemed to mind. With its long granite bar and dramatic lighting, the packed facility was yuppieville. While the journalists from Scientific American tended to wear tweed sport jackets with pocket protectors and were crowded into one corner of the room discussing photons, most of the other patrons looked as if they'd dropped by after finishing up at work on Wall Street or Madison Avenue: Italian suit jackets slung over the backs of chairs, Hermès ties loosened, men who seemed to want to do nothing more than to scope out the women in attendance while flashing their Rolexes. Women straight from work in publishing and advertising were dressed in designer skirts and impossibly high heels, sipping flavored martinis while pretending to ignore the men. Jeremy himself had his eye on a tall redhead standing at the other end of the bar who appeared to be glancing his way. He wondered if she recognized him from the television ads, or whether she just wanted some company. She turned away, apparently uninterested, but then looked his way again. With her gaze lingering just a little longer this time, Jeremy raised his glass.

"C'mon, Jeremy, pay attention," Nate said, nudging him with his elbow. "You're on TV! Don't you want to see how you did?"

Jeremy turned from the redhead. Glancing up at the screen, he saw himself sitting opposite Diane Sawyer. Strange, he thought, like being in two places at once. It still didn't seem quite real. Nothing in the past three weeks had seemed real, despite his years in media.

On-screen, Diane was describing him as "America's most esteemed scientific journalist." Not only had the story turned out to be everything he'd wanted, but Nate was even talking to Primetime Live about Jeremy doing regular stories for them with a possibility of additional features on Good Morning America. Though many journalists believed television was less important than other, more serious forms of reporting, it didn't stop most of them from secretly viewing television as the Holy Grail, by which they meant big money. Despite the congratulations, envy was in the air, a sensation as foreign to Jeremy as space travel. After all, journalists of his stripe weren't exactly at the top of the media pecking order – until today.

"Did she just call you esteemed?" Alvin asked. "You write about Bigfoot and the legend of Atlantis!"

"Shh," Nate said, his eyes glued to the television. "I'm trying to hear this. It could be important for Jeremy's career." As Jeremy's agent, Nate was forever promoting events that "could be important for Jeremy's career," for the simple reason that freelancing wasn't all that lucrative. Years earlier, when Nate was starting out,

Jeremy had pitched a book proposal, and they'd been working together ever since, simply because they'd become friends.

"Whatever," Alvin said, dismissing the scolding.

Meanwhile, flickering on the screen behind Diane Sawyer and Jeremy were the final moments of Jeremy's performance on the daytime television show, in which Jeremy had pretended to be a man grieving the boyhood death of his brother, a boy Clausen claimed to be channeling for Jeremy's benefit.

"He's with me," Clausen could be heard announcing. "He wants you to let him go, Thad." The picture shifted to capture Jeremy's rendition of an anguished guest, his face contorted. Clausen nodded in the background, either oozing sympathy or looking constipated, depending on the perspective.

"Your mother never changed his room—the room you shared with him. She insisted that it be kept unchanged, and you still had to sleep there," Clausen went on.

"Yes," Jeremy gasped.

"But you were frightened in there, and in your anger, you took something of his, something very personal, and buried it in the backyard."

"Yes," Jeremy managed again, as if too emotional to say more.

"His retainer!"

"Oooooohhhhhhhhh," Jeremy cried, bringing his hands to his face.

"He loves you, but you have to realize that he's at peace now. He has no anger toward you . . ."

"Oooooohhhhhhh!" Jeremy wailed again, contorting his face even more.

In the bar, Nate watched the clips in silent concentration. Alvin, on the other hand, was laughing as he raised his beer high.

"Give that man an Oscar!" he shouted.

"It was rather impressive, wasn't it?" Jeremy said, grinning.

"I mean it, you two," Nate said, not hiding his irritation. "Talk during the commercials."

"Whatever," Alvin said again. "Whatever" had always been Alvin's favorite word.

On Primetime Live, the videotape faded to black and the camera focused on Diane Sawyer and Jeremy, sitting across from each other once again.

“So nothing Timothy Clausen said was true?” Diane asked.

“Not a thing,” Jeremy said. “As you already know, my name isn’t Thad, and while I do have five brothers, they’re all alive and well.”

Diane held a pen over a pad of paper, as if she was about to take notes. “So how did Clausen do this?”

“Well, Diane,” Jeremy began.

In the bar, Alvin’s pierced eyebrow rose. He leaned toward Jeremy. “Did you just call her Diane? Like you’re friends?”

“Could you please!” Nate said, growing more exasperated by the moment.

On-screen, Jeremy was going on. “What Clausen does is simply a variation on what people have been doing for hundreds of years. First of all, he’s good at reading people, and he’s an expert at making vague, emotionally charged associations and responding to audience members’ cues.”

“Yes, but he was so specific. Not only with you, but with the other guests. He had names. How does he do that?”

Jeremy shrugged. “He heard me talking about my brother Marcus before the show. I simply made up an imaginary life and broadcast it loud and clear.”

“How did it actually reach Clausen’s ears?”

“Con men like Clausen have been known to use a variety of tricks, including microphones and paid ‘listeners’ who circulate in the waiting area before the show. Before I was seated, I made sure to move around and strike up conversations with lots of audience members, watching to see if anyone exhibited unusual interest in my story. And sure enough, one man seemed particularly concerned.”

Behind them, the videotape was replaced by an enlarged photograph that Jeremy had taken with a small camera hidden in his watch, a high-tech spy toy he’d promptly expensed to Scientific American. Jeremy loved high-tech toys almost as much as he loved expensing them to others.

“What are we looking at here?” Diane asked.

Jeremy pointed. “This man was mingling with the studio audience, posing as a visitor from Peoria. I took this photograph right before the show while we were talking. Zoom in further, please.”

On-screen, the photograph was enlarged and Jeremy motioned toward it.

“Do you see the small USA pin on his lapel? That’s not just for decoration. It’s actually a miniature transmitter that broadcasts to a recording device backstage.”

Diane frowned. "How do you know this?"

"Because," Jeremy said, raising an eyebrow, "I happen to have one just like it."

On cue, Jeremy reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out what appeared to be the same USA pin, attached to a long, threadlike wire and transmitter.

"This particular model is manufactured in Israel" – Jeremy's voice could be heard over the camera close-up of the gadget – "and it's very high-end. I've heard it's used by the CIA, but, of course, I can't confirm that. What I can tell you is that the technology is very advanced – this little microphone can pick up conversations from across a noisy, crowded room and, with the right filtering systems, can even isolate them."

Diane inspected the pin with apparent fascination. "And you're certain that this was indeed a microphone and not just a pin?"

"Well, as you know, I've been looking into Clausen's past for a long time now, and a week after the show, I managed to obtain some more photographs."

A new photograph flashed on the screen. Though a bit grainy, it was a picture of the same man who'd been wearing the USA pin.

"This photo was taken in Florida, outside Clausen's office. As you can see, the man is heading inside. His name is Rex Moore, and he's actually an employee of Clausen's. He's worked with Clausen for two years."

"Ooohhhhh!" Alvin shouted, and the rest of the broadcast, which was winding down, anyway, was drowned out as others, jealous or not, joined in with hoots and hollers. The free booze had worked its magic, and Jeremy was deluged with congratulations after the show had ended.

"You were fantastic," Nate said. At forty-three, Nate was short and balding and had a tendency to wear suits that were just a bit too tight in the waist. No matter, the man was energy incarnate and, like most agents, positively buzzed with fervent optimism.

"Thanks," Jeremy said, downing the remainder of his beer.

"This is going to be big for your career," Nate went on. "It's your ticket to a regular television gig. No more scrambling for lousy freelance magazine work, no more chasing UFO stories. I've always said that with your looks, you were made for TV."

"You have always said that," Jeremy conceded with the eye-rolling manner of someone reciting an oft-given lecture.

"I mean it. The producers from Primetime Live and GMA keep calling, talking about using you as a regular contributor on their shows. You know, 'what this late-breaking science news means for you' and all that. A big leap for a science reporter."

"I'm a journalist," Jeremy sniffed, "not a reporter."

"Whatever," Nate said, making a motion as if brushing away a fly. "Like I've always said, your looks are made for television."

"I'd have to say Nate's right," Alvin added with a wink. "I mean, how else could you be more popular than me with the ladies, despite having zero personality?" For years, Alvin and Jeremy had frequented bars together, trolling for dates.

Jeremy laughed. Alvin Bernstein, whose name conjured up a clean-cut, bespectacled accountant – one of the countless professionals who wore Florsheim shoes and carried a briefcase to work – didn't look like an Alvin Bernstein. As a teenager, he'd seen Eddie Murphy in *Delirious* and had decided to make the full-leather style his own, a wardrobe that horrified his Florsheim-wearing, briefcase-carrying father, Melvin. Fortunately, leather seemed to go well with his tattoos. Alvin considered tattoos to be a reflection of his unique aesthetic, and he was uniquely aesthetic on both his arms, right up to his shoulder blades. All of which complemented Alvin's multiply pierced ears.

"So are you still planning a trip down south to investigate that ghost story?" Nate pressed. Jeremy could fairly see the wheels clicking and clacking away in his brain. "After your interview with *People*, I mean."

Jeremy brushed his dark hair out of his eyes and signaled the bartender for another beer. "Yeah, I guess so. Primetime or no Primetime, I still have bills to pay, and I was thinking I could use this for my column."

"But you'll be in contact, right? Not like when you went undercover with the Righteous and Holy?" He was referring to a six-thousand-word piece Jeremy had done for *Vanity Fair* about a religious cult; in that instance, Jeremy had essentially severed all communication for a period of three months.

"I'll be in contact," Jeremy said. "This story isn't like that. I should be out of there in less than a week. 'Mysterious lights in the cemetery.' No big deal."

"Hey, you need a cameraman by any chance?" Alvin piped in.

Jeremy looked over at him. "Why? Do you want to go?"

"Hell yeah. Head south for the winter, maybe meet me a nice southern belle while you pick up the tab. I hear the women down there will drive you crazy, but in a good way. It'll be like an exotic vacation."

"Aren't you supposed to be shooting something for *Law & Order* next week?"

As strange as Alvin looked, his reputation was impeccable, and his services were usually in high demand.

“Yeah, but I’ll be clear toward the end of the week,” Alvin said. “And look, if you’re serious about this television thing like Nate says you should be, it might be important to get some decent footage of these mysterious lights.”

“That’s assuming there are even any lights to film.”

“You do the advance work and let me know. I’ll keep my calendar open.”

“Even if there are lights, it’s a small story,” Jeremy warned. “No one in television will be interested in it.”

“Not last month, maybe,” Alvin said. “But after seeing you tonight, they’ll be interested. You know how it is in television – all those producers chasing their own tails, trying to find the next big thing. If GMA is suddenly hot to trot, then you know the Today show will be calling soon and Dateline will be knocking at the door. No producer wants to be left out. That’s how they get fired. The last thing they want to do is to have to explain to the executives why they missed the boat. Believe me – I work in television. I know these people.”

“He’s right,” Nate said, interrupting them. “You never know what’ll happen next, and it might be a good idea to plan ahead. You had definite presence tonight. Don’t kid yourself. And if you can get some actual footage of the lights, it might be just the thing that GMA or Primetime needs to make their decision.”

Jeremy squinted at his agent. “You serious about this? It’s a nothing story. The reason I decided to do it at all was because I needed a break after Clausen. That story took four months of my life.”

“And look what it got you,” Nate said, putting a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “This may be a fluff piece, but with sensational footage and a good backstory, who knows what television will think?”

Jeremy was silent for a moment before finally shrugging. “Fine,” he said. He glanced at Alvin. “I’m leaving on Tuesday. See if you can get there by next Friday. I’ll call you before then with the details.”

Alvin reached for his beer and took a drink. “Well, golly,” he said, mimicking Gomer Pyle, “I’m off to the land of grits and chitlins. And I promise my bill won’t be too high.”

Jeremy laughed. “You ever been down south?”

“Nope. You?”

“I’ve visited New Orleans and Atlanta,” Jeremy admitted. “But those are cities, and cities are pretty much the same everywhere. For this story, we’re heading to the real South. It’s a little town in North Carolina, a place called Boone Creek. You should see the town’s Web site. It talks about the azaleas and dogwoods that bloom in April,

and proudly displays a picture of the town's most prominent citizen. A guy named Norwood Jefferson."

"Who?" Alvin asked.

"A politician. He served in the North Carolina State Senate from 1907 to 1916."

"Who cares?"

"Exactly," Jeremy said with a nod. Glancing across the bar, he noticed with disappointment that the redhead was gone.

"Where is this place exactly?"

"Right between the middle of nowhere and 'where are we exactly?' I'm staying at a place called Greenleaf Cottages, which the Chamber of Commerce describes as scenic and rustic yet modern. Whatever that means."

Alvin laughed. "Sounds like an adventure."

"Don't worry about it. You'll fit right in down there, I'm sure."

"You think so?"

Jeremy noted the leather, tattoos, and piercings.

"Oh, absolutely," Jeremy said. "They'll probably want to adopt you."