



# Through Hazel Eyes

A Novel

Heather Hummel



*Honorable Mention  
New York Book Festival*

# THROUGH HAZEL EYES

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Heather Hummel resides in Charlottesville, Virginia.

*Through Hazel Eyes* was inspired by her former  
high school English students.

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**\*\*\* To Kristin \*\*\***



ONE

Television offered little entertainment on a night when most people were in bars, at parties, or catching a movie on the downtown mall in Charlottesville, Virginia. Freshly-washed flannel sheets warmed Madison as she tucked herself under the covers. She fluffed her pillows and curled up with her latest read, *Travels with Charley*. Reading often distracted her, but some nights the words on the page became secondary to her thoughts of leaving Rick. Her head still carried vivid images of that hot summer day in Colorado.

With covers pulled over her head in yet another attempt to hide, Madison well knew that it would not prevent the visions. The darkness failed to allay the combination of fear and wonderment that settled in when she faced the four walls of her bedroom. She considered painting them a different color than pale yellow, the landlord's choice, but browsing color swatches had been overwhelming. Almond Pinched Panache, Café Summer Twist, and Mango Blossom.

"They may as well be ice cream parlor flavors," she told the pimpled face teen working the paint section. She left the hardware store that day hungry and paintless, much like the day she left Colorado.

Madison's relationship with Rick ended when she informed him that she accepted a job outside of

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Colorado. She didn't emphasize that it was a teaching position; he'd know that.

On a hot mid-summer morning she broached the issue. Rick had been sitting on the front porch scanning over the blueprints of the old ranch house that sat high on a hill just outside the town limits. It was his biggest remodeling job since they moved to Colorado. The owner of the early 1890s ranch wanted Rick to retain the historical exterior while updating the interior and retiling the dilapidated roof. The job would take up the majority of the summer, and it had kept Rick busy each day from early in the morning until late in the evening. Madison's summer break from school was well underway, but her break only heightened Rick's insecurities.

"What are you doing today?" he'd ask each morning putting his coffee to lips and an eye on her over the rim of his mug.

Her answers were variations on a theme: "Taking Seth for a walk, reading, errands. The usual."

Rick not only worked long hours on the ranch house, but he also had meetings to attend with city officials regarding the historical aspect of the project. Living in rural Carbondale made it difficult to find specific materials for a historical house.

Madison loved the beauty of the area and all that it offered a nature lover and athlete, and she felt relieved that Rick had to travel, often several hours, to find just the right materials needed for the job. He would return well after dark to find her sound asleep, or so he thought, sometimes in their bed, sometimes on the futon in her office, books sprawled across the floor and

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a lightweight throw draped over her shoulders. He never woke her up verbally, but his heavy footsteps on the porch shook her awake every time. She kept her eyes closed and positioned her head away from sight before he climbed the steps to the loft where their bedroom and her office neighbored each other.

"G'night, Seth," she'd hear Rick say to his black and white Border Collie mix, who usually lay at the bottom of the stairs until Rick came home. After that Seth would move and lie down within a few feet of wherever Madison was sleeping.

On this day, Seth sat at Rick's feet on the front porch steps, just one step below, when Madison approached them. As a mutt, Seth's features were unique; his fur was shorter and his chest broader than a purebred Border Collie. Most of all, his black face was cleanly accented—a wide white stripe down the bridge of his nose, creating an almost perfect symmetrical split on the tip of his left ear was a spot of stark white fur shaped somewhat like a teardrop that stood out against the midnight-black fur. When his ears were tucked or flipped back, the teardrop wasn't visible, but when they were flopped forward it was evident.

Rick wore faded jeans, despite the heat, and a worn-out blue t-shirt with "Colorado Contracting Services" on the pocket sporting his contracting company. His long, muscular arms and hands, slightly scarred from a variety of job related cuts, emerged from the short sleeves. Two days of stubbled growth shadowed his taugt, angular face.

Deep in concentration, Rick didn't look up when Madison sat down on the bottom step. He was home



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for lunch and to pick up additional tools from the shed. Madison clenched her tiny hands together in her lap, creating a round fearful fist. Sweat stuck her favorite floral sundress to the curves of her body. The seam of the dress hugged her kneecaps, exposing only her well defined calves. Loose curls framed her forehead; the rest of her hair had been bundled in a high, tight ponytail. Her toes poked through the straps of the brown leather sandals, faded from long walks in the western sun. The same rays now beat directly on her tanned face as she attempted to begin the familiar discussion she had begun so often with little success.

"Rick, I need to talk to you." Looking up at his blank stare, Madison continued, "I'm taking a new job. Out of state." She paused to gain another round of courage. "I'm leaving to start a new life...alone."

Her hands remained clenched, but eerily Rick remained calm.

"I figured this was coming again, Madison. But don't think it's over."

When she began to reply, he held one hand up. His tone remained steady and clear. "Don't."

His voice, however, had not matched the look in his steel-gray eyes as he sauntered inside for his keys. He returned to his truck and slowly made his way down the driveway, never once looking back.

Madison flew inside, tears streaming, dripping off her jaw. She grabbed her already-packed bags from under the bed and in the closet, and started for the door. On the way out, she stuck her head in the door of her office to bid a silent goodbye to her grandmother's

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secretary desk. Once she was settled in Virginia, a friend would arrange to ship it to her.

Now, nestled under her flannel covers in Charlottesville, Madison curled her body into a tight ball, the steely look in Rick's eyes lingering in her mind. Even deep under her down comforter two thousand miles away, she was still frightened, still checked the house when she came home, and still wondered when he would find her. The Rick she knew would keep his promise to never let it end. And she wondered if letting her go the way he had was the ultimate act of his emotional abuse toward her—there were days when the wonder and fear was worse than facing him again.

The phone rang, startling Madison out of restless sleep where she had drifted into a slew of nightmares. In the first one, Rick hid in the bushes outside her house. All she saw were his gray eyes through the twigs. In the second she was walking down a crowded city street where the back of every head resembled Rick's. She wasn't sure of the city, just that it held a sense of cold, of lonely. The third placed her on a small rowboat in the middle of a frigid ocean, or was it a large lake? Rick's head bobbed atop the small currents behind the boat, drawing closer and closer.

It was during this dream that she was awakened. She swam her way out from under the covers, catching it on the last ring before it rolled to voicemail. In a deep, sleepy voice, she managed, "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

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"Olivia?" Madison rubbed her eyes and sat up in bed. "I thought you were out with Gregory."

"I was. He just left to join the guys for poker. I think at Phil's. What're you doing?"

"Sleeping. What time is it?" The clock's illuminated digits were hidden behind a small pile of books on the nightstand.

"It's only nine. Do you want to go back to sleep? I can call tomorrow."

Madison didn't know how Olivia, a night owl, managed on such little sleep. "No, I could use the distraction. I've got visions of Colorado ghosts clogging my head again."

"C'mon, we've been over this," Olivia said. "If he were looking for you he'd have found you by now."

"I know. I know. But I can't shake the look in his eyes. Let alone his behavior when I left. It's too hard to explain. You'd have to know him, and these nightmares don't help."

"Well, you've managed to make yourself pretty difficult to find. Just a P.O. box and a cell phone keep the information seekers at bay."

"It doesn't take much to find someone."

"Exactly my first point. Either Rick or a private investigator would have discovered you by now if they really wanted to."

"Maybe he's waiting for the right time. Whatever that might be. And, he wouldn't hire someone, he'd find me himself. That much I know."

"Maybe you're worried about nothing. He's probably happily married with a baby on the way by now. Go back to sleep."

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“Okay, okay.” With that, Madison ended the call and found her way back under the covers. It was 11:12 p.m. when she last stretched to look at the clock and fell back onto her pillow.

TWO

The following Tuesday was a bitter cold one, even for late January in Charlottesville. The sun's weak rays made their way behind the Blue Ridge, settling in seasonably early for another evening. On Hampton Lane, Madison entered her house through the side door when her phone rang.

"Hey, Madison! Ready for a round of retail therapy?" Olivia chirped into the phone.

"Sure," Madison said as she plunked her backpack down on the kitchen counter. "I'll come get you, just give me a few minutes."

After picking through misfit bras, Madison finally chose a black lace one along with hot pink bikini panties.

"It bugs me when they don't sell matching sets," she told Olivia who was across the bins picking through her usual comfortable cottons. Madison made her purchase anyway, teasing Olivia for wearing cotton when she was the one with a boyfriend.

"He doesn't mind," Olivia said.

"That's what he tells you. Why don't you surprise him for Valentine's Day with something sexier than cotton stripes?"

"If he wants me to wear silk or satin he can buy it for me. Until then, I like to be comfortable."

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"I'm just saying..." and Madison let it drop.

Madison had begun wearing "adult" underwear in high school even though she had neither sought nor gained attention from males during her teens or well into her twenties. When she met Rick he bought her all sorts of beautiful pieces for Christmas, her birthday, and especially Valentine's Day. He never grew past the Victoria Secret level of gift giving and eventually the gifts faded. There were only so many times she could open a package and still be excited over lingerie rather than diamond earrings or a pretty necklace.

They meandered through the mall and into a card shop where Olivia searched for a Valentine's Day card for Gregory.

"Why does it have to be so difficult to find the right card?" Olivia asked. "Gregory would gag at these mushy ones, and the funny ones aren't appropriate. Don't they know we want something in-between?"

"I know. I could never find the right card for Rick." Madison re-shelved a birthday card.

"Well, that situation was hard to get into the Hallmark mood over," Olivia said. She, too, re-racked a card.

After window-shopping a few more stores—and thanking God they had been spared running into any of their students—they headed for the nearest exit.

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A few days after shopping, Madison and Olivia grazed the aisles of the local video store in search of romantic comedies. Settling on an old Goldie Hawn flick, Madison stood in line. She felt a tap on her

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shoulder, and when she turned around, she became face to face with a handsome man in a suit. His good looks startled her more than the tap.

"Excuse me," he asked, "but do I know you?" He cocked his head to one side.

Madison regarded him closely, not believing he used the oldest line in the book. Olivia joined Madison, but the man didn't budge. His stood with his elbow leaning against the candy rack. His eyes never left Madison's.

"I don't know," said Madison.

She rocked back on her heels. The close proximity was a little unnerving, good looks or not. But, he still drew her in on a nonphysical level that she couldn't avoid. She paused for another moment, wanting him to feel uneasy. But the lull allowed time for her to explore the many shades of green and yellow that speckled his irises. A solid dark rim encircled the chaos of the random flecks, containing them within the stark white surround. A white place from which no answers poured. The answers she innately sought in this man did not come through the whites and the irises were so intriguing they camouflaged any truths. It was then when she realized that the iris is the tunnel to our souls, where we look in others to find unspoken answers. It is the whites of our eyes that hold our sacred secrets, and knowing that the irises divulge all, the white remains pure. But, his irises were different. They didn't divulge and she was left to follow her gut.

Olivia's elbow nudged Madison into responding. "Maybe I teach one of your children?" she blurted.

"No, I don't have any kids."

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"How 'bout the gym?"

"That could be," he said. "I'm Michael." He settled three Dirty Harry videos into one gloved hand and offered her the other.

"I'm Madison."

She admired his slanted smile as well as the effort he made to shake her hand. He boasted a razor-edged crew cut and an equally-defined jaw line. The two complimented each other in a ruggedly handsome way.

"Do you lift weights too?" Olivia asked, inching closer. She limply held out her own hand. Michael glanced sideways at her and nodded, but his attention remained on Madison. The cashier called to Michael and he moved ahead to pay for his rentals. Madison thought it funny that he'd be watching not one, but three, Dirty Harry flicks. Does he have a social life? She wondered and then dismissed the idea. Why should she care?

Before he left he tipped his head at Madison and said, "See you around."

Once outside, Olivia grabbed hold of Madison's arm. "In case you didn't notice, he was watching you in the aisles. Not from the end of the isle where you'd see him, but from the next row over between the videos. Creepy like."

"I didn't notice," Madison said.

In her thirties and now fully grown into her looks, Madison caught the attention of others as she walked down the street, shopped, or sat in a café sipping hot chocolate. She often didn't notice the attention since her transformation was years in the making. The attention gained was as gradual as the process itself. On the rare



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occasion that she and Rick went to dinner or a movie and men took notice of her, he would make a scene. She learned to ignore the attention so as not to exasperate his insecurities.

The videos under her arm interfered with retrieving her car keys from the bottom of her purse. She handed them to Olivia. "Can you hold these while I find my keys?"

"Sure. Give 'em. Did you know he was at the mall the other night?" Olivia continued, huffing to keep up with Madison's New York City pace.

"How do you remember these things?"

"Easy," Olivia replied, grinning. "He was on one of those benches in the middle of the mall. You know — the red fake leather ones that we never dare sit on because they're spattered with melted candy and ice cream."

"What's the point?" Madison asked.

"I'm getting there. Let's see. He wore a similar suit, but a lighter color." *Leave it to Olivia to notice the color of his suit.* "He followed us into the card shop. I didn't think anything of it at the time. But now...now I don't know. Fishy."

Madison half-listened as she unlocked the doors and climbed in. Maneuvering through the parking lot, she headed toward the traffic light that would set them onto Gryphon Road. The circular red light gleamed above, no emotions, no secrets, just a colored circle.

"All I know is this guy seems to be following you. What if he's as weird as he is cute? Wait! What if Rick sent him to find you?" Olivia added.

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"Now who's the paranoid one? It's a total coincidence, Olivia," Madison said. "Besides, Rick definitely wouldn't send someone to hit on me. Let alone a good looking guy!"

Still, Madison wondered if she had ever crossed Michael's path at the gym. Members were sparse during the early morning hours when she customarily went. His face wasn't familiar though.

"Looks like he drives a red BMW," Olivia said, her eyes on the wing mirror.

"Lots of people do," Madison said.

"Well, now you have a good looking and rich stalker. Perfect."

Olivia sat back, crossed her arms, and turned toward the window. Madison glanced over. *What's gotten into her?* Olivia was always telling Madison not to worry and now it was her knickers in a flutter.

The two women shared over two years of teaching at Hawthorne High School. Their friendship had evolved during the school's new teacher orientation. They were the two youngest, both new to town. Looking as young as some of the students, Olivia's tight blonde curls framed her round face and brown eyes. Her boyfriend, Gregory, lived out of town and visited only on the occasional weekend. Madison, on the other hand, chose to remain single after finally freeing herself of Rick.

Madison changed the radio station and the subject of conversation to school and their students. Neither Michael nor Rick came up again and when she dropped off Olivia, Madison got an over-the-shoulder

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wave good-bye and a, “See you in school tomorrow” as she disappeared inside.

As Madison drove home, her thoughts remained on her students, specifically one of her ninth graders, Eric. The end of the third quarter was nearing and he hadn’t made progress. If anything, he had sunk deeper into an orb where only his mind goes. Zeros filled his second quarter report card where homework grades should be. Most days, his eyes gave a flat and expressionless gaze. He avoided conversation with students and teachers alike. The many phone messages Madison and fellow teachers left at his home went unanswered, as did the notes sent home with him. Frustrated, Madison struggled with other solutions. Typically, the next step would be a meeting with his parents, but since she hadn’t yet reached them, it was difficult to make progress.

The oversized couch in her living room and the leftover pineapple-and-cheese pizza in the refrigerator were just what Madison needed when she walked through the door. Returning to a quiet, empty house had become normal for her, as did looking around the room after she entered.

THREE

The next morning brought cold air and blustery winds, the kind that made southerners wonder why Yankees tolerated such weather for so long each year. Never fond of jackets, no matter how cold the temperature, Madison refused to wear one. She preferred large sweaters and scarves, so she shivered while walking from her car and house or school.

It was Friday. Madison's ninth grade English class was bound to be rowdy. On Fridays she allowed students the option to write freely in their journals. They responded well to this, especially after writing about Madison's selected topics earlier in the week. Journal entries themselves varied depending on the student, on the day, but most had grown to enjoy writing. Some students were more animated in their written expressions; others had improved greatly with regard to structure and fundamentals.

At exactly eight-thirty the bell echoed throughout the hallway. The rumble of students approaching the classroom resembled the finish line of a running race — with posturing, shoves, and public displays of affection in the mix.

"Good morning, Ms. Ragnar," they said as they entered the room.

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Madison always placed their journals on the desks ahead of time so they could immediately begin writing. The journals' decorated covers boasted everything from puppy dog stickers to football stars to faces of rock musicians.

The class wrote until the morning announcements began. When the interruptions ended, they promptly resumed writing. The routine had taken a few weeks to adapt to at the beginning, but it was now an expectation they readily met.

While her students were engrossed in their free writing assignment, Madison perused the room, glancing at the words eloquently, and not so eloquently, scribbled on lined pages. Out of respect for their privacy, she did not linger too long, even though they knew she would read their entries in the seclusion of her office later. They relished the comments she added every few weeks in response to their entries. On the rare occasions when she lacked the time to comment, the students asked when she was going to "write back."

Amanda, a perky and bright fifteen-year-old, asked earlier in the year, "Ms. Ragnar, are you going to write in our journals this weekend or do you have a date?"

Madison brandished their journals and asked, "What do you think?"

Evidently her students had been placing bets about her dating life. There were rumblings throughout the room when they opened the pages on Monday morning to red ink and smiley faces.

On this morning, as Madison approached Eric she paused. He had hunched himself over his desk, using

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his left arm to guard against prying eyes while he drilled words onto the page with his right hand. His disheveled brown hair shook with each forceful stroke of his pencil. Madison glanced down. His pencil created unusually dark, scattered letters across the page. The distant and unreachable look in his eyes matched the writing.

Madison made a mental note to pay close attention to his journal later that day. Fifteen minutes of free writing came to an end, the journals were handed in.

"I have good news for you. Today we begin my favorite book. I'll hand it out before we start your grammar."

"Why do you make us do that crap, Ms. Ragnar?" Jonathan asked, scrunching up his face till he looked like a pug.

"Oh, you know, I sit home all night conjuring up death-by-grammar lessons." Madison added, "It's what they pay me to do."

Jonathan shrunk in his chair when Madison glanced sideways at him, letting the "crap" comment slide.

"What book?" Amanda asked, sitting up straighter in her chair. She always dressed "casual chic." Her French braids lay tight against her head. Even in ninth grade, they worked for her.

"Who's heard of *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" Madison asked. She pulled copies of the book off the shelf and stacked them on her desk.

Jonathan spoke up again. "Isn't that the creepy one with the two kids and the scary guy next door?"

"Well, we'll find out just how scary he is. But, yes," Madison replied as she handed them the books. Several

students thumbed through the already worn pages of their copies, some started reading the back cover, and others stuffed the book in their backpacks between textbooks.

"Will we get to watch the movie?" Eric asked in a flat tone, tapping his pencil on his desk and peering up through his dangling bangs. His engaged voice from the back corner of the room surprised Madison.

"As a matter of fact, we will. It's a classic movie starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch," Madison said.

"Gregory who?" Peter piped in.

"Gregory Peck. You'll see when we watch it. In the meantime, read the first chapter by Monday. We'll begin discussing it in more detail then," Madison instructed. "Each of you is responsible for bringing in two vocabulary words from the first chapter. I am picking 'assuage' and 'dictum' for my words. You know the drill: pick two words and write out their definitions. We'll decide then which ten words you'll have on your vocab list for next week."

Madison instructed them to put away their *Mockingbirds* and retrieve their grammar workbooks to begin their unit on gerunds. When the bell rang at the end of class, they were packed up and waiting by the door. It opened like a floodgate and in seconds they were gone. "Bye!" and "Have a good weekend, Ms. Ragnar" trailed down the hall.

The last bus departed school grounds by three thirty-five. At her desk, Madison opened the students' journals. One by one she read what was on the minds of her ninth grade students. The first few entries revealed upcoming weekend plans – or, in a few cases,

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a lack thereof. Jonathan wrote about a new street-chase video game. Ginny wrote about her cousin, Eliza, visiting her for the weekend.

Madison pulled out Eric's journal next.

*I hate school. I hate all of the kids who tease me. They think they're so funny calling me a redneck. Like they aren't rednecks. I hate this damn place. I don't care if I die.*

Staring at the penciled words, Madison sat motionless. She had seen angst and frustration in these teenagers' faces, but emotional disturbance of this level had yet to show up in a journal.

With trembling hands, she marked the page, closed the journal, and headed for the assistant principal's office. Her shoes clacked down the hallway. Each classroom's desks and chairs lined up in military fashion, empty after a long week of school. The janitors would spend the weekend scraping gum off the bottoms of seats and cleaning chalkboards.

John Whyte answered with a distracted, "Come in," when Madison knocked on his door. He had a reputation of being stern with students and direct with parents. This was his tenth year at Hawthorne. In Madison's time there, she had rarely witnessed a smile on his face—except for Graduation Day when parents were in attendance and seniors moved on to the next phase of their lives. Yet he was the man to whom Madison was required to report student issues.

"John, I have a problem with a student," she said, offering Eric's journal over the desk. Mr. Whyte was engrossed in an e-mail but glanced at the black-and-white composition book. Several students settled for the traditional composition book as their journal.



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"What's the matter, Madison?" Mr. Whyte mumbled.

Madison watched him click "send" on the screen. "It's Eric. Read the tagged page and you'll see what I mean. You should read it first hand."

Taking the journal from her, he rocked back in his chair. His blazer hung across its back, leaving him in a loosely-buttoned pinstriped shirt. No tie choked at his neck. As he read Eric's entry, his eyes widened, his cheeks sank, and his mouth cracked open, though no words left his lips until after he read the words sprawled on the page at least twice.

"I'll contact Mr. and Mrs. Morrison this evening to alert them. They'll need to meet with us first thing Monday. I should still be able to line up a guidance counselor or school psychologist."

"You know his parents are almost impossible to reach. I've been trying for a while. This is a cry for help," Madison said. She leaned against the closed door and crossed her arms wondering how Mr. Whyte thought he'd be able to pull off a meeting.

"I'll go to their house if I have to," Mr. Whyte said. "We can't be certain exactly what this is until we talk to Eric, and possibly not even then. This needs to be in the hands of a counselor. What's his behavior been like lately?"

"He comes in, sits down, and resists work like he always does. Other than the journaling, it's not unusual for him to refuse to work in class. His test scores and homework grades have dropped quite a bit since the beginning of the year. I've discussed it with him and his guidance counselor. I've tried calling and e-mailing

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his parents, but never get a response. I've left several messages."

"Okay. Thanks for bringing this to me. I'll let you know what happens," Mr. Whyte said, dismissing Madison for the weekend with the wave of a hand.

As she left, she noticed his hand reaching for the phone. Closing his door behind her, she walked past the secretaries, who were busily preparing to close up for the weekend.

The sun had begun its descent behind the gray clouds of winter by the time Madison was able to venture out for her evening run. The temperatures dipped below freezing and by the end of the second mile the sweat at the bottom of her curls had lightly frozen. Her warm breath escaped from her chapped lips and became visible against the chilled air. Yet, the roads were free of snow, ice, and salt for the first time that week, allowing her to focus on the events of the day rather than her footing. Layered in her weather-appropriate clothing, Madison stared ahead at the welcoming road she had run so many times before.

A few more miles and her mind was content with running in the cold. Madison's thoughts drifted back to Eric. When it came to her students, it was hard not to bring the emotional part of her job home with her. With each step to the pavement, she contemplated why she could see into the heart and mind of this student and knew it was because she allowed him the choice to write freely in his journal. A choice the students embraced, but the ramifications of doing so created conflict within Madison when she read their words.

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Who else would reach out to these kids if she didn't? Who else cared enough about them?

By the last mile Madison refocused on the autonomy of her running. She ran to escape and didn't want the run to pass by without feeling some sense of that. Her breathing came into focus—in, out, in, out. The hypnotic trance of her breathing was all she wanted to focus on. The undulating gaps of the Mountains became indistinguishable in the distance. She quickened her pace in order to return home before dark thoroughly engulfed the evening.

FOUR

Steam rose from Madison's bowl of oatmeal topped with dried cranberries, slivered almonds, raisins, and a large dribble of pure maple syrup. Her typical oatmeal breakfast left her full until lunch. She washed the bites down with a mix of soy protein powder and pulpy orange juice, an amalgam that tweaked her friends' faces when they saw it.

As she was almost done washing the dishes, Olivia called.

"Good morning, Ollie," Madison greeted and put the dripping, soapy sponge in the sink.

"Good morning. Sleep well?" Olivia inquired.

"Kind of. I'll be ready to go in a few minutes."

They had already agreed to stop by the running shop and pick up entry forms for the annual Valentine's Day race.

"Ready when you are."

Madison traded the phone for the soaking wet sponge again and took a second gaze out her kitchen window at two squirrels chasing one another up a tree. Her fenced backyard sprawled a few acres, leaving room for nature to inhabit it. A cluster of trees reached beyond the fence, creating a thick patch of woods between her house and the neighbors'. In a few months, the trees would bloom and fill in the gaps,

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providing the much-needed shade to keep the house cool during the humid summer months.

Saturday mornings were busy in Charlottesville. The downtown was encircled by new neighborhoods that blended in with old, grand farms at its perimeter. With only two main roads leading into town, traffic congestion was normal on Saturday mornings.

Madison and Olivia felt compelled to try and beat the crowds. The running shop was in the heart of town and was frequented by all the town's runners. On a Saturday morning, though, most of those runners were out on their weekend runs, not shopping.

In the running shop, a map of the route accompanied the entry form, which sat on a corner table in a neat pile. A 5-kilometer race, the course itself was easy compared to the many hilly courses throughout town. Paralleling the course's gentle, rolling road was a strip of dense woods, woods that created chilled shadows on an early Valentine morning. At twenty-five dollars per pair, the entry fee was reasonable. Each entrant received a long-sleeved race t-shirt, an important addition to any runner's race career. Real runners didn't wear cotton during the race; they wore high-end Coolmax jerseys that wicked away sweat. Madison wore the cotton race t-shirts to bed—large or extra-large provided for comfortable sleeping.

"Let's run the course tomorrow morning," Olivia suggested. They had run the same race twice before, but began a ritual of refreshing their memory of the terrain before the actual race.

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Filling out the entry form, Madison used her post office box and cell phone as her contact information. Madison always used Olivia's name as an emergency contact.

They completed their entry forms and handed them to the pimply-faced clerk who informed them that their t-shirts and numbers would be available on race day, as usual.

By the time they left the store, the outdoor temperature was a bit warmer.

"How about we drive the course?" Olivia suggested.

"Fine. We have a map, so we can note the mile marks on it. I can never remember where they are," Madison said. When it came to running, she was obsessive about the numbers involved. Distance, speed, time, and heart rate all had to be accounted for and calculated.

The race was run every year in a remote town at the northwestern outskirts of the county. As she passed by the reservoir, Madison slowed down to find the starting point. A few runners, identified by their high-tech clothing, were out on the course, a common scene in the weeks leading up to the race.

"It should start here," Olivia said as they passed the small private school where runners parked during their weekend forays.

Madison pushed the button to zero out the trip-meter. The course led them to the first left turn where they headed down a side road. The woods along the pavement grew thicker, filled with hemlock, hickory,

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and holly trees, accented with a sampling of Virginia pines.

Through the leaf-deprived hickory and hemlocks, however, Madison was able to see a house in the distance. Its roof was a deep red, and a pond sat between the brush and the house itself. *How lonely it must be to live there, but what peaceful surroundings.*

"This is the turnabout to head back to the finish line," Olivia said as they approached the rural house's mailbox.

The white newspaper box leaned gingerly against the black mailbox, which was cracked open. Madison glimpsed at the cobwebs inside the mailbox glistening in the sunlight as she pulled into the driveway to turn around. The house's faded curtains were drawn.

"What do you think of this house?" Madison asked. "Freakishly remote, huh?"

"Aren't all of the houses out here remote?"

"I guess so. This one just seems more so."

Madison drove back down the road, the red-roofed house still in her thoughts.

"You must be teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* right now. Don't worry, Boo Radley doesn't live there. If he did, he wouldn't want you, anyway. He only likes to toy with kids who are up to no good, like our students!" Olivia teased.

Madison wasn't sure if the house was calming or unnerving, but the sight of it left her with an odd feeling. She dropped the subject and watched as the house grew smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror.

FIVE

On Sunday morning the pavement scrolled rhythmically beneath Madison and Olivia's feet. Both were dressed in black running tights and classically colorful running jerseys. About a mile into the race's course, and with their muscles warmed, they fell into a comfortable pattern of running hard but still able to talk.

"We haven't run on a flat road in a while. Nice change of pace," Madison commented. She turned to find Olivia preoccupied with someone behind them.

"Madison! That was that guy!" Olivia exclaimed.

"Who?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Madison viewed the back of the multicolored jerseys.

"The guy from the mall," Olivia panted, "and the video store. You know? Michael!"

"Are you sure?"

"Why is it I'm the only one who notices him following you? You worry about Rick, but someone right here is sorta stalking you and you act like it's nothing."

"I didn't notice everyone around us," Madison said. "Besides, if he truly was following me, he'd be running in the same direction."



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"I'm sure it was him. Let's turn around and see if we can at least catch him driving off. He drives a red BMW, we know that. It shouldn't be hard to find."

"Let's just keep going. It might not have been him. And if it was, we'd look pretty stupid hunting him down for no reason," Madison argued. "It's a small town and this is a popular running spot. Not that big of a coincidence, Ollie."

Up ahead, the red roof once again became visible through the trees. Despite the daylight and the many people about, the house still seemed eerie to Madison. Once at the top of the driveway, she noticed the cobwebs in the mailbox again. A breeze pulled cold damp air off the pond. She felt chills run up her spine, an odd contrast to the sweat dripping down her back.

"You okay?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay." Madison felt her cheeks drain of blood.

"You sure? We're halfway done, focus on that." Olivia said.

Neither spoke as they increased their pace. The third mile passed, and all that remained were their thoughts, their breath, and their legs pulling them along to the finish.

"I don't see his car," Olivia announced breathlessly as they finally stopped running.

"Good," gasped Madison. "I'm hungry. Let's grab something to eat on the way back."

"Food? Sure," Olivia said, but Madison caught her glancing up and down the road before they left.

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Winter Sunday afternoons were Madison's least favorite hours; the time from late afternoon until bedtime dragged. Most people were home with their families eating Sunday dinners, reading the paper, or doing whatever families did during this time. She, however, usually used this time to pay bills and prepare lesson plans for the week ahead. Grading papers or writing comments in her students' journals became routine, starting her school week on Sunday afternoon with no break until Friday's last bell.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* lay on Madison's nightstand. She picked it up and flipped through the yellow-tinted pages. Many of them were tagged and highlighted, penciled notes in the margin. It was her third copy of the book, and she was ready to replace it with a new one. Despite the fear invoked by Boo Radley and his seemingly haunted house, Olivia was right: Madison taught it every year at this time. It was her favorite book as a teenager, and no matter how many times she taught it, each class of students gave her new insight on it.

Monday morning's buses streamed into the school parking lot. Students eased off them like catsup out of a bottle, barely recovered from their weekends of teenage shenanigans. When the first bell rang, most of Madison's students slumped into their seats and stared off into space. Their journals sat on their desks awaiting entries that would no doubt reiterate their wish to stay at home, play video games, and eat.

Eric hadn't shown up for class. Madison wondered if Mr. Whyte had been able to reach his parents after she left Friday afternoon. When she stopped by the

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office early that morning, he was already behind closed doors and the secretary told her he would be unavailable for some time.

"Ms. Ragnar, did you write in our journals this weekend?" Ginny asked as she sauntered into the room and flopped into her seat, joining the others. Her long hair fell to her waist in a tight ponytail.

"Yes, I did," Madison replied as the tardy bell rang. "Take a minute to read my comments before starting with today's prompts. As you can see, the three prompts for today are career-oriented. Before we start, Amanda, will you read the prompts out loud for everyone?"

"If you could have any type of store, what kind would you run?" Amanda read. "What kind of college degree would help you achieve opening this store? And who would you hire to help you? Why?"

Madison looked around the room, assuring herself that everyone heard Amanda. She sat down and watched as they began writing. Pens and pencils streamed across paper.

While they wrote, Madison wondered what was going on behind Mr. Whyte's closed doors.

"Okay, time's up. Ginny, would you please collect the journals? Everyone else take out your books," Madison directed.

"Ms. Ragnar, can I borrow a copy? Mine's at home," Peter asked. Madison nodded and handed him one of her extra copies.

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"Without opening your books, who can tell me who the main characters are in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" Madison asked. Amanda was first to raise her hand.

"Okay, Amanda."

"Scout, Jem, Dill, Atticus, Calpurnia, and Boo Radley." A mouth full of braces smiled as Amanda finished her list.

"Good. And what have we learned from the first chapter?"

"That their mother died when Scout and Jem were young and that Boo Radley lives next door, and they're afraid of him." Amanda continued.

Jonathan piped in next. "Dill is there for the summer. He's some rich kid whose real name is Charles...Baker...ummm...Harris and he lives with his aunt. Rachel, I think." Jonathan's voice squeaked slightly as he ended. Puberty was slow to catch up with him.

"That's right, Jonathan," Madison said, impressed with his recollection of the first chapter. She continued with the background of the book and emphasized the role that Atticus played in his children's lives, especially as a single parent in the 1960s.

"Atticus is Jem and Scout's father," she continued. "He's a defense attorney who takes on a very controversial case. Throughout the book, you'll begin to notice the superior principles he strives to instill in his children. I want you to be looking out for examples of these principles. Your final paper on this book will focus on these, but don't worry, you'll have ample time to write about them as journal prompts," Madison explained. "Think about whether or not these

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principles would still apply today in order to gain respect in the community and within yourselves.”

The discussion continued for a while longer before Madison allowed them to begin reading Chapter Two quietly at their desks.

Later that afternoon, after the last bell rang, Mr. Whyte joined Madison in her classroom.

“I met with Eric and his parents this morning,” he began. “Naturally, when I spoke to them on Friday night they were alarmed by his journal entry. He’s also clearly disturbed by the attention revolving around it.”

“I’m surprised you were able to reach them,” Madison said.

“They’re taking him in for a psychological evaluation. I gave them some phone numbers to call. Hopefully he’ll find someone he can talk to more openly about all of this,” Mr. Whyte said while looking down at his watch. “He should be back in class tomorrow, so keep an eye on him and keep me posted on his behavior. Sorry, I’ve got to run to a principals’ meeting at the county office.”

After Mr. Whyte left, Madison loaded the students’ journals and her laptop into her backpack and headed down the long quiet hallway. With each step she wondered what Eric’s evaluation would show and what principles from *To Kill a Mockingbird* her students would come up with this year.

SIX

**M**adison dreaded Valentine's Day. When she lived in Colorado she spent the early hours of February 14th on a long run. She often returned to find a generic card and semi-limp flowers on their kitchen counter—Rick having already left for work. He failed on the one day during the year when he had the opportunity to put away his attitude and attempt to be romantic, to turn things around. By their fifth year together, Madison stopped encouraging him or expecting him to change. On their last Valentine's Day, she resorted to visiting a friend after school let out, not to return until late in the evening. When she came home, he said, "Did you really wear that outfit in public?" and spent the rest of the evening watching television and playing with Seth.

Having raised Madison in a town where people married for money, security, and convenience, her mother developed a thick mantra, "I don't see what your problem is. Rick puts a nice roof over your head. Remember our neighbors? The Johansons? Now, he was an abuser. All that money and still such troubles. You, you don't have those troubles."

Madison eventually stopped discussing it with her family.

After her move to Charlottesville, Madison avoided dating. Although men had approached her, and well-

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meaning friends tried to set her up with colleagues, brothers, or friends, she was not ready to trust a relationship. Valentine's Day, as a result, became just another day to muddle through. This year it fell on a Sunday, making it the ideal day for the running race, which worked as a distraction. And best of all, the scenario of seeing bouquets of roses delivered to other teachers and looks of pity cast upon her for not having a flower-filled desk was avoided.

Several cars lined the roadside by time Madison and Olivia arrived at the race. They found a gap to park in behind an old white Toyota pickup truck—the bumper smiled with stickers like braces on a teenager. The car behind it had a license plate frame that read, “I'd Rather Be Running.”

The lines to pick up their race numbers and t-shirts were long, despite the several volunteers behind long tables handing them out to the runners. Madison waited in the “Last Name: Q-T” line. Once through the line and after pinning her number on her shirt, she tracked down Olivia who was bent over re-lacing her sneakers.

“What number did you get?” Madison asked.

“Two-twenty-two. You?”

“One ninety five. I like the shirts. Much nicer than last year's. Let's stick 'em in the car before the start though.”

A warm weather trend had kicked the week before. Most of the runners wore their summer shorts and a variety of tops, depending on their individual preferences. Madison's tank top was bright pink and its thin straps lay across an underneath jog bra. She knew

she would warm up quickly and her distaste for sleeves made her to forgo them whenever possible—a quirkiness along with winter coats.

“Racers to the start,” instructed the race director through a megaphone. All four hundred and fifty-odd participants lined up behind the starting line. The rules indicated that any two people could race as a team and their times would be averaged in the final results. Madison and Olivia ran the race together each year since Gregory wasn’t athletic, nor would he be caught dead running in tight black tights or swimsuit like shorts, as he liked to call them, the way most of the male runners dressed.

Madison and Olivia weren’t concerned with their finishing time. The race acted as a good reason to run on a Sunday morning with a group of locals, benefited by the free bagels, bananas, and orange juice or Gatorade when they finished. They headed toward the starting line and found a place toward the back where the slower runners were traditionally supposed to line up. A flowing field of shoulders topped by baseball hats, headbands, baldheads, ponytails, and crew cuts lay ahead.

“On your mark,” barked the race director through his megaphone, “get set...go.”

The gun popped. The group of runners separated into small pockets. The fast runners who were there to win set out to achieve their goal. The casual-yet-competitive runners there “to be seen” filled the middle section, while the “I just want to run” racers settled into their natural pace toward the back of the



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pack. This was where Madison and Olivia found themselves.

"Sure are a lot of people," Madison huffed to Olivia, making conversation to drown out the alternating plodding and heavy breathing exhuming from an elderly man on their heels.

Olivia only nodded at her. The first mile marker approached quickly.

"Ten-minutes-thirty-four. Ten-minutes-thirty-five," the volunteer announced their time as Madison and Olivia trudged by.

By the time they reached the turn onto a side road it was thick with the lead runners who had already turned around at the half-way mark and were now heading back toward the finish. Staying to the right side of the road, Madison focused on the upcoming abandoned house. After several more strides, and as the runners thinned out again, she could see that there was a dark blue pickup truck sitting in the driveway near the house. A ladder reached to the gutters, but no one was in sight. New shingles glistened on the backside of the house, leaving obvious old tattered shingles in comparison, some of which were missing, leaving the section looking like a toothless smile. Like the vision of bumper stickers as braces, Madison smiled at the thought. *Why the apparent sudden activity around the house?* The cobwebbed mailbox indicated no one had been around in a long time.

The crowd thickened again at the turn around point, making it difficult to see any more of the house. Olivia tugged at Madison's shirt, capturing her attention as they made the turn back to the finishing

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line, though no words were spoken as they headed back.

The digital display lit up the race time in bold, bright red numbers. "31:31:49" gleaned brightly at the finish line. Each racer removed their number and handed it to the volunteers who recorded their times. Madison and Olivia managed to save energy for the last half-mile, allowing them to sprint to the finish.

"That's not too bad," Madison said as they approached the tables that were now filled with more empty paper bags than bagels.

"Our time? I guess not, but I was hoping to beat thirty-minutes," Olivia said.

"Me too."

They managed to rummage through the bags and found two raisin bagels. After they grabbed two Gatorades, they sat in a resting spot at the base of a tree on the outskirts of the crowd. The runners who knew they'd win an award clustered toward the front. The race director awaited final results before announcing the winners. In the meantime, everyone was content from the warm air and having refueled their bodies with carbohydrates and fluids that put them in a quiet post-race zone.

As they ate, announcements began to drone in the background from where Madison and Olivia sat. "In first place for the men's thirty-five to thirty-nine year-old age group is Michael Harrington," the announcer exclaimed through the megaphone.

Madison, who was wolfing down her bagel, didn't hear the announcement.

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"Oh my God!" Olivia nudged Madison, knocking over her Gatorade, leaving a spill of sugary water on Madison and the ground where it was sure to attract ants even in the winter.

"Hey! Now I'm drenched!" Madison exclaimed.

"Never mind that! Look on the stage!" Olivia screeched.

"I don't see anything," Madison said, wiping sticky Gatorade off her lap with napkins.

"You missed him again." Olivia smacked her hand to her forehead. "What's wrong with you?"

"Missed who? What are you talking about?" Madison asked.

"Michael, that's who. He just won first place for his age group. Stood right up there on stage." Olivia gestured toward the stage. "He scanned the crowd, so if he saw you and comes after you tonight don't blame me!"

"Oh my god, Olivia, he's just another runner. He's allowed to enter and, dare I say, even win a race. Drop it, will ya?"

"Fine. But, if I see him around us one more time, I'm asking him what his deal is," Olivia insisted and munched down on her bagel.

"Go ahead. He'll probably think you're nuts like I do." Madison shrugged and got up to throw out her garbage. They finished cleaning up and headed back to the car. Madison dropped Olivia off, headed home and peeled off her sweaty clothes before hopping into a hot shower.

\*\*\*\*\*

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Monday morning after the race was difficult to wake up to. Madison's hamstrings and calves fought pulling her out of bed. Frost on the windows indicated a swift halt to the warm spell. The trip from her bed to the shower would surely be miserable. She wished she could leave her entire body in bed, sending just her soul to school. Reluctantly, she hit the snooze button one last time and glanced at the clock, which indicated it was already past six-thirty. Slipping one foot out from under the covers, she tested the air. Cold. Just as she expected. Rolling over, she cursed winter.

A moment later and as inspiration to rise, she thought of what lay ahead for her day. Atticus. That's right. She wondered how many students picked up the meaning of one of Atticus's most noted quotes in *Mockingbird*. This proved enough to encourage her departure from the warm flannel cocoon.

Her classroom remained chilled from having the heat off all weekend, but her digesting breakfast and winter attire kept the chill down. The maintenance crew cleaned the chalkboard over the weekend, leaving a shiny black surface. The white chalk in contrast filled the board with objectives and activity assignments.

Madison wrote, "Atticus: 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.' Pg. 33."

The students' journal assignment was to write about a time when they walked in someone else's shoes or whose shoes would they want to walk around in for a day.

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Her thoughts wandered to her move from Colorado while she arranged the desks and chairs into two large circles. She had driven from Colorado to Columbia, Missouri in just under twelve hours after leaving that unforgettable morning. Her first night of truly being alone after several years was spent in a second floor room of an old musty hotel. It was all she could afford. Until her first paycheck came at the end of September, she was on a tight budget. In her urgency to leave Colorado, coupled with not having a truck, she left a good portion of her larger belongings with Rick. Having to leave behind her grandmother's antique secretary desk was the most difficult.

Starting that night, and for the first time in her life, Madison was without any household belongings. Her possessions fit into the back seat of her car and she was sleeping in hotels; her spirit deprived of life.

Amanda was the first to saunter into the classroom. "Hi Ms. Ragnar. How was your race?" she asked, freshly twined French braids in tact.

"Fun! Lots of people because the weather was so nice. Ms. Finnigan and I finished in pretty decent time despite the crowds," Madison said. "Can you put these out?" she handed over the journals. "How about your weekend?"

"It was okay. I read ahead. I think I'm on chapter eight now." Amanda finished putting the journals out, sat down and pulled out a notebook and pen.

"Great. You should have no problem with the prompt today."

The remaining students arrived moments later. Once seated, and having taken note of the prompt, they

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wrote fiercely. Madison had guessed they'd be intrigued by the assignment. She led them into a discussion when they finished writing before separating them into two groups.

"Anyone like to explain the quote? Read to the class what you wrote?"

Meghan raised her hand and Madison nodded at her.

"Atticus means that you shouldn't criticize people until you know what their life is really like," she said. She continued to read her entry after Madison gave her a nod. "I remember the first time I babysat for my little brother, Andrew. He was two and a half, I was twelve. My mom went next door to the neighbor's house because his wife passed away and she brought him a casserole. Mom didn't want us following along since Mr. Weaver was pretty upset and all. She said she wouldn't be long and gave me the phone number to call if I needed her. After she left I was proud that I was given the responsibility to take care of Andrew, but it was also the first time I felt kinda like a parent. Andrew didn't cry or anything, so that was good," Meghan paused to look around the room, "but I had to make sure he wasn't getting into trouble. My mom was only gone for half an hour, but that was the first half hour of my life that I felt like I was in my mother's shoes." Meghan stopped and looked up at Madison.

"Excellent example, Meghan. I'm sure by now you're an expert at taking care of your brother. Do you think that Scout understood what Atticus was saying?" Madison asked.

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Meghan pondered for a moment and responded before another student had the chance to shout out an answer. "I think she's probably still too young to really get it, but maybe when she's older she'll think about it and it'll make sense then."

"Good point," Madison said. "What I'd like you all to do now is separate into two groups. The group assignments are laid out on the chalkboard. Each group has a slightly different topic to discuss and write about. Assign someone in the group to write down your ideas, then choose someone else to present to the other groups. The rest of you are responsible for contributing ideas. I'll give you forty-five minutes."

"Ms. Ragnar? For number three, do you want the view of Scout as a six year old, or can we say what she might think later on as an adult?" Amanda asked.

"That'll depend on whose shoes you might see her walking in. For example, after beating up the Cunningham child, she might realize what it's like to walk in his shoes. Or if she becomes a teacher, she may realize what it was like for her teacher to have to break up the fight she caused."

"Okay. We've got it."

While they worked, Madison returned to her desk, prior thoughts of leaving Colorado resurged. The image of Seth at the end of the driveway, not sure whether to chase her car as she made her way down the road, crossed her mind. Fighting tears, Madison had tried not to look in the rearview mirror. Seth was as much her dog as Rick's, even if Rick would never admit it. Madison fed him, bathed him when he

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returned from a rainy day on a job site with Rick, and took him for long walks.

Now she longed for the day when she could find a rental that allowed dogs, or better yet, a home of her own. She missed the quiet companionship, the gentle push of a muzzle against her arm for attention, and the unconditional acceptance that a dog like Seth offered.

Breaking Madison's thoughts, her students announced they were done. She was impressed that they finished the assignment within the forty-five minutes. Each group gave entertaining presentations that helped distract Madison's thoughts and refocused her on the classroom. The rest of the period slipped by as students stood up and related all they had learned in their short teen-years from walking in someone else's shoes.

Jonathan headed the first group. "Each of these scenarios reflects an experience that one of us had," he said pointing at their display. "We, as a group, rated them on the chart. The rating reflects how far away the situation took us from our normal lives." He took a deep breath before continuing. "As you can see, Peter's situation was rated the highest, meaning he experienced something further from his normal existence than the rest of ours did."

He continued on to explain the rest of the group's place on the color coordinated chart they had constructed.

Ginny was chosen for the lead of the second group and delivered her presentation without flaw. "We decided to write a story based on all of our experiences combined from the perspective of one person." She



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read the story out loud to the entire class. It was from the point of view of a teenage girl living in the ghetto who was adopted by a family in the suburbs. Madison, delighted with their creativity, clapped loudly along with the other group when Ginny finished reading. Madison noted that Eric sat in the back of the room with his group physically, but not mentally. His return to the classroom went unquestioned by the students. They were accustomed to his reticence.

SEVEN

“C’mon Madison, it’ll be fun. It’ll do you good to get out and live beyond your students and your house,” Olivia pleaded. “Some of Gregory’s friends will be there, and I promise you can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay, okay. Just remember if there’s too much smoke I’m leaving no matter what.”

Madison held her phone to her ear while looking desperately in her closet at the line-up of clothes, which screamed “I’m a Teacher!” Gone were the days of her mini skirts and fun, sexy tops. Rick had never taken her anywhere that warranted dressing up, and on the rare occasion when she went out with a friend during the years they were together, he frowned upon her wardrobe choice as she walked out the door. She dreaded seeing that look on his face when she returned. While her body was worthy of the outfits, the ultimate price of wearing them in front of him was not.

“Over here!” Olivia mouthed, waving from a booth inside the brewery as Madison peeked in through the window. She entered through a large door with wooden handles carved into gargoyle heads, the kind of door she hadn’t opened since her teens when she last attended church. The pair of black stretch pants and the purple sleeveless turtleneck sweater she wore clung

snuggly to her frame. She had retouched her makeup, yet still looked natural. Eyes followed her across the room as she made her way through the crowd of thirty-somethings. She ignored them, focusing only on the booth ahead. Olivia, Gregory and a few unfamiliar faces sat in a booth against the wall.

"Madison, this is Mark," Olivia announced. Mark reached his hand across the table between beer mugs and a half full pitcher of beer. "And, this is Phil." Phil shuffled over in the booth to make room for her and nodded a hello with a large, white, toothy smile.

Gregory called the waitress over to bring an additional mug for Madison and nodded a hello.

"We were just talking about Phil's big trip this summer. He's driving out to California," Olivia said.

"Oh. That should be a fun trip," Madison said. "What's in California?" She couldn't help but notice his strong facial features and tried to not look too long.

"A grant to study oceanography. I'll be traveling from San Diego up through Big Sur," Phil explained. "But, I've never driven cross country, so I'm looking forward to that."

Madison nodded and looked around for the waitress, her mug.

"Olivia tells me you drove here from Colorado. What was that like?" Phil asked. He poured the last of the beer from the pitcher to his empty mug.

Madison shot a glare at Olivia, who shrugged and turned her attention back to Gregory. "Yeah, I drove here. Took two twelve hour days," Madison replied, hoping that would satisfy his curiosity.

"Twelve hour days?" Mark piped in.

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"It's not so bad."

The waitress approached and placed Madison's mug on the table and left before noticing the empty pitcher. *Great.* Madison fingered the handle of her empty mug.

"Geez, you must've been hauling," Phil added.

Standing up, Madison announced, "I'm going to refill the pitcher." With that, she and the empty pitcher headed back through the crowd toward the bar.

Leaning against the edge of the heavily-glazed wood bar, she waited for the bartender, but the only immediate attention she received was from a middle-aged man sitting on the stool to her left. His voice slightly slurred as he inched toward her and introduced himself as Roger. He was tall and thin with dirty blond hair that matched the tuft of hair on his chin. He squinted at her. The stench of whisky as he crept over revealed that he seldom left his permanent seat at the bar.

"Your beautiful hands must play the piano, no?" he asked.

Madison glanced down at the man's cracked hands and discovered a tan line where his wedding band should be.

"The tan line on your left hand indicates that you're either married, and not wearing your ring, or recently divorced. Neither of which interests me."

Madison turned toward the bartender, whose attention she finally captured. The bar vagrant retracted to his stool and moments later, still agitated, Madison returned to the table.

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"Sorry it took me so long. The bartender was pretty busy," Madison said as she returned the pitcher to the center of the table amongst the fresh plate of appetizers. Phil slid over to make room for her again, and when she sat down he filled her mug. She was ready to go home, but decided that since she was already out and dressed up, she would give it awhile longer.

"Olivia was telling us about this Michael creep who's following you. What's up with that?" Phil asked. Madison wished she had stuck with her gut instinct to leave.

Glancing at Olivia, she said, "Well, *that's* what Olivia believes. I realize that this is a small town and we run into the same people on occasion."

"Oh, c'mon on Madison! He's everywhere you are," Olivia said. "I can't figure out how he knows where you'll be though"

"Exactly! How *would* he know?" Madison asked. "All the more reason that it's a coincidence."

"Still, it sounds creepy, and Olivia's worries about you," Gregory said.

"My gut tells me he's not a threat, and you know what they say about a woman's gut instinct," Madison said.

"Well, my gut says otherwise!" Olivia exclaimed.

"Good thing it's not your gut that matters. It's my situation," Madison said.

"So, who here has heard of Home Finders, the dog fostering program?" Madison smiled at the round of concerned looks.

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"I have. I know someone who adopted a dog from them," Gregory said.

"I'm thinking of helping by fostering some dogs, and I hear they're pretty good."

"Madison, that's a great idea," Olivia said. "Why don't you get a nice big dog with a loud growling bark? That way you'll have plenty of protection."

"Very funny," Madison said. Redirecting her attention to the men, she added, "I miss having a dog around, so I thought it would be fun to take one or two in."

"Won't you get attached and want to keep them all?" Phil asked.

"I'm sure I'll get attached. Wouldn't be human if I didn't. But, I think finding a good home for them would be more rewarding. Like my students—love teaching 'em, but they go home to their parents," Madison said.

She decided that placing her empty mug on the table symbolized a good time to make her exit. As she pulled her coat up from the bench she explained that her early morning run meant needing a good night's sleep. Everyone nodded good-bye and other niceties as she left. Madison was relieved Olivia let her leave without contention.

The cold air greeted her face, a welcome contrast to the stuffy atmosphere she just fled. White glare from the streetlights above illuminated her surroundings while she stopped for a moment to pull on her gloves.

"Can I walk you to your car?"

Startled, Madison turned to find Phil behind her.

"No, that's okay. I'm just parked right over there."

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"Well, I was kind of worried about you leaving alone if this Michael guy is following you."

"Did Olivia send you out here?"

"No, I can worry about someone on my own." There was that toothy white grin again. "Let me walk you to your car. That's it."

"Okay." Madison held her keys. On the way to the car she noticed Phil looking around the lot. "See any boogie men out there?" she jeered.

"No, not out there, because he's hiding in the back of your car!" Phil grabbed hold of her shoulders, tugging her backwards. Madison stomach scaled up to her throat. She looked frantically into the back seat of her car where she spotted her backpack filled with schoolwork. Phil laughed and released her shoulders.

"You jerk! That's not funny!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry, but you were so confident about your well being. I didn't think you'd fall for it. I'm really sorry."

Madison caught the glint in his eyes. "You really should go now." Madison moved to open the door, but Phil took hold of her arm. The lines of his bicep emerging through his shirt caught her attention despite her anger.

"Hey, I really am sorry. Can I make it up to you? Say with dinner next week?" Soft brown eyes pleaded with her. The same brown reflected the natural amber tone of his hair.

"No, I don't think so. I'm not interested in dating right now."

"Not a date, just an apology dinner," he said. "I'll leave my phone number with Olivia, and if you still

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don't want to go just give me a call. Otherwise, how about Amigo's on Tuesday at six-thirty."

Madison nodded, hoping it would appease him and she'd be released. She would call to cancel later if it meant ending the conversation now. Phil released her arm, and gave her one last smile. As he approached the bar's door, the man with the missing wedding band staggered out with an intoxicated young woman on his arm. Her pantyhose were slightly torn by the ankle, and her makeup lacked recent application. To her credit though she was able to walk in the stiletto heels despite the apparent amount of alcohol in her system. Madison drove the other direction and headed home where she wished she had stayed in the first place.



EIGHT

"Turn to chapter ten, please." Madison held her *Mockingbird* open while she waited for her students to follow suit. "What lesson did we learn from Atticus while reading this chapter? It reflects the title of the book."

Five hands shot up.

"Okay Jonathan," she said.

"It's a sin to kill a mockingbird." His head bobbed with his words.

"And why is that?"

"Because all a mockingbird wants to do is sing. They don't harm anyone."

"Good. Would anyone else like to add to Jonathan's thought?"

Amanda raised her hand and said, "It means that we should respect mockingbirds because they're happy singing." She thought for a second before adding, "Their singing shows us how simple it can be to exist happily."

"Well put, Amanda." Madison looked around the room at the other faces. Many of them might never know the true formula for happiness. They complicated their lives with seemingly trivial agendas, but to them the issues were real. She respected that.

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"At this point I'd like you to take out a piece of paper and write down ten sentences about things that make you happy. There's a catch though. They ought to be what you bring to yourself, not what others bring to you. You have the rest of the class to work on this."

The only sound Madison heard until the bell rang was the rapid brush of pens across paper and the clap of her own footsteps up and down the aisles.

"I'm happiest when I'm playing my video games and my sister isn't around to bug me," wrote one student.

"I'm happiest when my parents aren't fighting," wrote another, stretching the rules.

Eric wrote in his notebook, but kept his paper covered. Madison didn't want to pry. At the end of every week, she submitted his journal entries and other relative assignments to his counselor for review. He was attending school consistently, and the mandatory "progress meeting" with his parents, the counselor, and his teachers was scheduled for the following week.

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The next morning, as the students took their seats, Madison handed out lyrics to a lullaby.

"What are we doing today Ms. Ragnar?" asked Ginny.

"I thought I would take you back to your childhood with a lullaby."

"Huh? We're not babies!" Jonathan protested.

"I realize that. Believe me. Ginny, can you read the first two stanzas?"

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"Hush, little baby, don't say a word. Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird And if that mockingbird won't sing, Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring." Her voice resisted the urge to sing. "So, what's the point?" Ginny asked.

"That's what your activity is today. Write a paragraph or two comparing these lines of the lullaby to the mockingbird theme in the book," Madison explained as she approached the chalkboard where she wrote the directions down so she wouldn't have to repeat them.

"What if we don't get it?" Ginny asked.

"Take a few minutes to think about it before writing. Think back to what we discussed yesterday in regards to Atticus's quote about why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

The grumbling diminished. Some of them began writing while others sat and pondered before transferring their ideas to paper. Fifteen minutes later pencils started dropping to their desks. Some papers filled with more than the required two paragraphs. Pleased with the amount of writing, Madison was now curious about the quality.

"Would anyone like to read what they wrote?"

Peter raised his hand from the third row.

"Okay, go ahead, Peter."

"I'm not sure if it's right, but here goes," he started. "Atticus's quote indicates that it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because a mockingbird simply sings. A mockingbird does not bring harm to gardens, or take up space in the road eating road kill." Laughter erupted, but he was able to continue and regain their

attention. "In the lullaby, a mockingbird is offered as a gift and if it didn't sing, other gifts like a diamond ring would follow. I've never heard a mockingbird sing, but I would rather have one of those than a dumb old diamond ring!" A burst of laughter arose once again, leaving Peter overly proud of his almost poetic statement.

"Okay. Settle down. Interesting comparison, Peter. Would anyone like to elaborate regarding the lullaby's gifts?"

Amanda raised her hand. The class grew serious again.

"I wrote that I thought it was interesting that a diamond ring would only be given if the mockingbird didn't sing. To me, that puts the mockingbird's worth above the diamond ring. Like it's more precious."

"What do the rest of you think? Is Amanda right?"

"Well, most girls would want a diamond ring over a mockingbird," Ginny said.

"Maybe. Did you know that mockingbirds were often caged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which led to near extinction?" Madison said.

"I want one for my house!" Peter said, yet did not receive the same reaction as his earlier antics. He sat back in his chair and pretended to write.

"Amanda, that's a great observation. You could write your final paper on it if you'd like." Madison was satisfied with the discussion and in preparation for the next day she allowed them time to start reading the next chapter.

Later, the building was void of activity when Madison sat down to read her e-mail before going

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home. There were two new ones. One from Eric's mother indicating that Eric would likely be switching to the GED program. She requested his journal be sent to his guidance counselor, who would then pass it on to his psychiatrist. Madison forwarded the e-mail to Mr. Whyte to keep him up to date, and assured him and Eric's mother that the journal would be available for pick up the next day.

The second e-mail was from Phil reminding her that he would be at Amigo's at six-thirty. She had completely forgotten to get his phone number from Olivia so she could call and cancel. Now it was four-o'clock and Olivia was in a parent conference.

Without much choice, or even a real reason to cancel, Madison pulled into the parking lot of Amigo's at six-thirty. She wasn't sure what kind of car Phil drove, but was sure that he would be there waiting.

NINE

Phil stood just inside the restaurant door. He wore jeans and a green, plaid flannel shirt.

"Wasn't sure you'd make it," he said, a curved grin across his square face.

"Forgot to get...oh, forget it. Yes, I'm here."

They were seated in a corner booth. The waitress arrived, handed them menus, took their drink orders and left.

"I assumed you like Mexican when I invited you," Phil said.

"I like Mexican," Madison said while reading the menu. "How late did you guys stay on Friday?"

"Oh, not much longer. Gregory and Olivia wanted to get going, and I was beat from a long day."

"I didn't see Olivia the rest of the weekend. When Gregory's in town I don't see as much of her." Madison fidgeted with her napkin in her lap.

"I know what you mean. I rarely see him as it is. But, that's okay, they make a good couple." He turned the page of his menu. "So, what do you teach at Hawthorne?"

"Ninth grade English."

"Man, that's gotta be a challenge!"

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"Yes and no. They're still trying to figure out high school, themselves, let alone each other. But, for the most part they're good kids."

"What books have they read?"

"We're partly through *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

"Oh! That was my favorite book in high school." Phil's eyes sparkled.

"A lot of people say that. It's a classic and very popular partly because the movie is so terrific. It's hard to find a movie that's almost as good as the book." Madison eased back in her seat.

"Boo Radley. What an interesting character."

"Yeah, he spooks the students at first, which, of course, is the point of his character. But, they like him in the end."

"Any projects to go along with the book?" Phil leaned back and stretched his right arm out along the back of the booth.

"They write in their journals daily, and right now many of the entries reflect the reading. That way when they write their final paper, they'll have plenty of their own written material to reference." Madison watched the waitress set their drinks down. "They enjoy doing the journal entries because they're small, daily chunks."

"All I remember was reading the book and watching the movie when we finished," Phil said. He picked up his menu and asked, "What do want to eat?"

"I think I'll go with a bean burrito and cheese enchilada with rice," Madison said.

"Sounds good. I'll have the same."

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The waitress approached their booth, took her order booklet out, and stood ready to write. Phil ordered for the both of them and handed the waitress his menu. As he went to take Madison's menu, his hand brushed against hers. Madison felt it, unsure of what the butterflies in her stomach meant. Silence choked the air; the empty booths surrounding them only added to the tension.

"When do you leave for California?" Madison broke in.

"Not till the end of March. I'm psyched about this grant. It'll pay for the research as well as my living expenses. I decided to drive out there so I'd have a car. It'll be cheaper than renting one." Phil looked at her.

"That's a good plan. Gotta have the car." Madison reached for her drink.

"I expect to be there for two to three months. There's a handful of others who'll be joining me from various parts of the country, so that'll make it interesting."

"A bunch of ocean geeks gathering together in the name of science?" Madison let a smile form.

"Hey, it's an important study. It could save the lives of the elephant seals that migrate up and down the California coastline."

Phil swirled his straw around the edge of the glass, spinning ice cubes along with it.

"Elephant seals? What the heck are they?" Madison laughed at the name.

"Well, they're seals with a trunk like nose. They weigh about two tons and give birth to their pups up and down the coast every spring. Usually early



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spring," Phil said. "They draw a huge crowd of spectators, which is starting to cause problems for them. You actually have to buy tickets to see them beached. The most interesting fact about them is that they don't eat for three months during molting season." He swirled the carbonated bubbles in his glass with his words.

"Hmm. That's interesting. Good thing Boo Radley's not involved. That wouldn't be a good sequel. *To Kill an Elephant Seal*," Madison said.

"Funny, but no, that wouldn't be good. Our purpose is to save them," Phil explained. "Elephant seals spend most of their time in the water. They beach themselves during birthing and molting season. They're indifferent toward humans for the most part, which'll make the study tricky."

The waitress appeared; steam spiraled off the heaps of rice. She placed a small dish with a dollop of sour cream between their plates. In tandem, they used forks to spread their rice around their plates, releasing more steam.

"Can I get you anything else?" The waitress asked as she wiped her hands on the pockets of her apron.

"I think we're good right now. Thank you," Phil said. He looked at Madison, who was already poking holes in her burrito. "Have you ever been to California?"

"No. The elephant seals haven't invited me to visit." Madison took a spoon and scooped a smidgen of the sour cream onto her burrito before taking a bite.

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"That's right! You hang out with Colorado grizzly bears. Is that where you grew up?" Phil asked before taking the first bite of his burrito.

"No, the northeast."

"That's a far ways from Colorado. What took you out there?"

"Mostly work," Madison lied. She didn't want to explain Rick. "After graduation I taught tenth grade English. We had a job fair for teachers at school, and I interviewed for the position. They offered it to me on the spot, which was nice." Taking another bite, Madison looked around the restaurant—still quiet.

"If you're looking for that creep, I don't think he's here. But, then again, I don't know what he looks like," Phil said.

"No, I'm not looking for Michael. Olivia's paranoid enough for both of us."

"Well, you were afraid of something the other night. I don't think it was just the fictitious boogey man either."

"That was different. You scared me."

"Are you sure it was me that scared you?"

"Yes," Madison answered him with a determined voice, but it fell on deaf ears.

"Fine, think that, but I'm not believing you."

"Why do you care?" Madison suddenly wished she had become deathly ill at five o'clock.

"I'm curious about you, that's all."

His comment surprised Madison. "Sometimes people need a break from dating."

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"Well, I'm glad you at least came out to dinner with me," was all that he said. Phil returned to his burrito.

"Actually, I kind of forgot about it until I saw your e-mail." Madison took another bite to avoid answering his inevitable next question right away.

"Oh? Didn't Olivia give you my number and remind you?"

There it was.

"I didn't see Olivia for the rest of the weekend," Madison said and swallowed her bite prematurely. She wondered if that would somehow turn him off, chewing with her mouth partly open while talking. But, he's the one who asked the question when her mouth was still full. "Besides, I get sidetracked with my students easily. I have one in particular that is going through a rough time. He's in counseling and will probably just end up with a GED," Madison said, relaxing again now that the focus was on her students.

"Wow, that's tough. How do you handle that emotionally?"

"That's what we teachers do. We care about our students, try to help them, but also realize there are different people who are more qualified to help them in other areas of their lives."

"I know Olivia grows attached to some of her students."

"I guess. It's not really an attachment thing as much as it is an overall caring."

"Well, I commend you for choosing to teach. If I ever have kids I hope they end up with good teachers. A few definitely made a difference in my life."

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"I think we all have at least one teacher who made a difference in our lives, whether we realize it or not."

It was close to eight o'clock before they finished their meal. Phil walked her to her car. "So, maybe you'd consider going to a movie sometime, or something?"

"Maybe," Madison replied. "Thanks for dinner, the food was good."

"You're welcome," Phil said. "Good night."

He stood by her car until she was safely inside. Madison drove away with her cell phone to her ear. She listened to two phone messages. The first was from Olivia wondering where Madison was and the second she wondered why Madison hadn't called back yet. Madison's first date in years and her best friend didn't even know about it.

TEN

**M**adison woke up before her alarm went off, engulfed in thoughts from dinner the night before. Phil displayed an appealing side to himself over burritos and rice that attracted her to him, but she wasn't ready to admit it. Olivia's phone calls went unreturned, which Madison knew she would pay for later. Once again, she stood in her closet looking at her "I'm a teacher" line of clothes. Nothing looked appealing. The colors flat, the textures bland, the styles outdated. When she did find something acceptable, she couldn't find shoes to match.

Running late, she skipped her oatmeal and opted for a quick protein shake. She stuck a yogurt coated protein bar from her stash in her backpack. So much for waking up early.

"Where were you last night?" Olivia exclaimed, her words echoing throughout the empty hallway.

"Shh. I'm fine," Madison said.

"So, where were you? How come you didn't call back?"

"I had dinner with Phil."

"Phil?"

"Yeah. He was supposed to have given you his phone number last week in case I wanted to cancel."

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"He may have given it to Gregory," Olivia said. "I didn't talk to him much after he came back because I was in the bathroom, then we left. So, how was the date?"

"It wasn't a date. It was just dinner."

"Whatever. How was it? Where'd you go?"

"Amigo's, and it was fine."

"When did he ask you out?"

"After I left he followed me to the parking lot. You must've been in the ladies room."

"Geez, one pee and I miss everything! He's a nice guy. The grant he got is really interesting." Olivia put her backpack down next to the classroom door where they stood.

"Yeah, it sounds like a fun project. Hanging out on the beach with elephant seals, how cool is that? He's leaving in a month."

"Well then, if you like him, you better get busy!" Olivia gave an encouraging look. Madison ignored it.

The PA system interrupted, "Madison Ragnar to the office. Madison Ragnar to the office."

"Oops, gotta go."

Relieved to be released from Olivia's inquisition, Madison made her way back to the office where Mr. Whyte was waiting by his secretary's desk.

"What's up?" Madison asked.

"Come into my office," he said.

Madison followed him, wondering why the secretaries looked so glum. They briefly glanced up at her from their work, but wouldn't hold eye contact.

Sitting down after closing the door behind them, Mr. Whyte rested his elbows on his desk and settled his

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chin on his hands. After a deep sigh, he said, "I've got some sad news."

"Okay." Madison formed her fists in a tight little ball in her lap.

"I got a call from the social worker this morning. Eric committed suicide last night."

"What?"

The room spun. Colors from the paintings on the wall blurred together in a tornado-like configuration. Her palms grew damp, cupped in the fists in her lap.

Mr. Whyte continued, "He hung himself in his closet. His mother found him and so far they haven't found a note."

Her stomach turned.

"Why?" Madison asked. "Why couldn't they help him? Why couldn't they stop him?" The carpet joined the walls, the paintings.

"You and I both know we can't answer that." Mr. Whyte remained as professional as he could. He explained to Madison that the school would be notified of funeral arrangements. Counselors borrowed from other schools would be brought in to help the other students for as long as necessary. The moment of silence the next morning would be in his memory.

During all of Mr. Whyte's formalities, Madison found herself shrinking deeper into a hole. Her peripheral view was murky; his words choppy diction swirling around her head in the darkness with the tornado of colors and fixtures encompassing the perimeter. With head in hands, she fought to regain control. Losing the fight, she hurled her protein shake

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in a puddle around the blue clogs she finally chose to wear that morning.

Excusing herself, she ran to the ladies room down the hall. Sitting on the cold tile floor in the corner, she sobbed for several minutes. Tears streamed down her face, running into the corner of her mouth and across the thick of her lips, allowing the taste of salt on the tip of her tongue. Her hands trembled; she attempted to push her hair out of the way, to wipe off the remains of her protein shake from her chin.

Balancing her weight on one hand, she reached up to the paper towel rack on the wall above her with the other hand and tugged a sheet loose. The water in the faucet was cold when it hit the towel, yet warmed quickly against her flush cheeks. She finished by pulling herself up off the floor to view her reflection in the mirror. It'd been years since she really looked at herself in a mirror. As she did, she wondered just who was looking back at her. Her immediate answer—someone who failed her students in the worst possible way.

“Madison? Are you okay?” It was Olivia and a knock. “Let me in so I know you’re okay.”

“I’ll be out in a minute.” Madison pulled one more towel from the dispenser and coated it in cool water. This time she wiped it up and down her arms, wishing she were home in her shower. How she loved the escape of her shower.

It was several minutes before she cracked the bathroom door open. Olivia stepped away from the wall she was leaning against and toward the opening



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door. She clasped Madison's arm in her hand like a mother who just found her lost child. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I...I just don't understand how this could happen. Wouldn't they be watching him more closely?"

"We really don't know enough about what happened yet."

"Doesn't matter. The fact is he was alive yesterday and now he's dead. He was getting care and now he's not."

"Let's go sit in the teacher's lounge. Students are starting to arrive. Don't worry about your class, Mr. Whyte got Mr. Blake to cover it."

"Oh my God. My students. What am I going to tell them?"

"Don't worry. Mr. Whyte's going down there to talk to them. Some of them may already know."

"No, I need to be the one who tells them."

"Whyte's already on his way down..." Madison yanked her arm free and in a dash headed to her classroom. Wiping the final tears from her cheeks and straightening her dress before she walked in, she found Mr. Whyte standing at the front of the classroom. His words flowed like a drip from an I.V. bag. Broken words: "found this morning" "not anyone's fault" and "the moment of silence" pooled into her blood like toxic waste. Her head began to spin again. Gripping the doorframe, she felt her students' eyes fall on her. Mr. Whyte stopped his mantra and motioned for her to enter.

Ginny was the first Madison made eye contact with, her eyes followed the rest of the rows. Red cheeks and

smudged mascara painted the faces of her normally content students. They were old enough to wear makeup, but not old enough to face this. No one was old enough.

"I was explaining to the students that Eric won't be with us anymore."

"Oh. How much did you tell them?" Madison spotted Mr. Blake standing in the back of the class, as though he would catch her students when they fell.

"Just that Eric was found early this morning. That some counselors are on campus for them to talk to if they need to one, which is highly encouraged."

"Thank you, Mr. Whyte. I can take over from here. Mr. Blake, I appreciate you covering for me as well." Madison redirected her attention to her students.

The sound of the door softly closing behind Mr. Whyte and Mr. Blake hung in the air for a moment while she thought about what to say next. The students she had taken under her wing from the first day of school now looked to her for their greatest answer; an answer to a question that would not appear on a quiz or a test, but in their hearts. *Why?*

"Eric will be greatly missed in our class," Madison started to say, choked up, but still with an air of dignity to honor Eric. "I know you must have questions that you want answered. There are professional counselors available in the auditorium if you are more comfortable talking in private. We can discuss it here as a class too. Whatever makes you guys most comfortable is what I want for you."

Not one student budged. The door remained closed and their private grieving process began.

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Jonathan wiggled in his chair before speaking. "So, do they know why? Why he did this?"

"Well, we don't really know why. Maybe we can focus on why anyone might want to, rather than Eric specifically since we can't answer for him?"

"I don't know why anyone would want to," Jonathan said.

"Sometimes life is too hard for people," Amanda said, her voice emulated experience beyond her years.

"Why wouldn't someone get help? Or call that hotline?" Ginny piped in optimistically.

"Not everyone feels that they can be helped," Amanda explained.

"What if we step back and think about what Atticus might say to Scout if someone they knew committed suicide?" Madison asked.

The room didn't stir. The blinds allowed a stream of sunlight to gaze upon the middle row. The students' shadows in other rows appeared as though they were in a dark alley during the wee hours of a winter morning. Madison struggled to see the faces of the students in these rows and moved about the room to change the lighting and her view. She wanted each student to be able to look her in the eye, her own need to see their grief.

"Well, he might compare it to the mockingbird," Jonathan said.

"How so?"

"Well, the mockingbird is alive to sing, and we know they sing to bring happiness to others. Maybe in some way nobody sang for Eric?" Jonathan sat quietly after his burst of verbal thought.

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Amanda raised her hand, "I think we each need to find our own mockingbird. I mean, we know that other people can make us happy, but they can't be there all the time. There are times when we have to make ourselves happy. Ya know?"

The class chimed in with agreement.

Madison's eyes welled up as she captured the sensitive side of her students that occasionally emerged. The same students who talked about Friday night football games, hanging out at the mall, and their love lives. Goosebumps formed on her back, her heart enlarged. In order to recompose, she turned and walked back to the front of the classroom. When she refaced her students, she smiled through tears. A smile that told her students they would be okay.

A slight knock at the door preceded it opening a crack. Mr. Whyte stuck his head in, "Everything okay in here?"

"We're just fine, Mr. Whyte," Amanda said. The door closed as quietly as it had opened. The sound of Mr. Whyte's footsteps fading down the hall was all that could be heard until they dissipated.

"Can we write about Eric in our journals?" Ginny broke the silence.

Journals opened without an official answer. Madison thought it interesting that they felt compelled to write rather than talk. She knew that writing could be very healing during times like this and was glad her students sought this route. She wondered if any of them would seek the counseling provided. Maybe during their next class?

ELEVEN

**"M**adison, it's Phil. I was wondering if you'd you like to join me for dinner tonight or maybe tomorrow night. I know you don't want to date, so it'd just be dinner. I've got an idea I want to run by you. Well, actually more of a question. Give me a call."

Phil's message was the only one on Madison's voicemail at the end of the day. Her palm gripped the phone as she listened. Dinner? Again? She was, however, intrigued by the question he wanted to pose. After the day she had she didn't feel much like going out, but decided it might help and thought she could pull herself together for dinner.

Olivia walked in and dropped her backpack to the floor. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah. I think so. I'll see you in the morning though."

"Call me if you need anything. Anything at all."

Madison nodded and waited for Olivia to leave before dialing Phil's number. The phone only rang twice.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's Madison."

"Oh, hey. Did you get my message?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling. I guess I could do dinner tonight." She sat back in her chair and looked at

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the calendar above her desk. February was fading away.

"Great. How about Thai food? There's a good place on Arlington Road."

"Sure, that'll work. I can be there around six-thirty."

"Sounds great. I look forward to it," Phil said.

Madison hung up the phone feeling as though she was on autopilot and that any decisions she made were not truly her own at this point. But, it'd been a long time since she rode with tide, and she simply didn't have the energy to fight it.

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As Madison headed up her stairs to change, she noted that the stairs needed vacuuming. Although she spent many hours at home, she realized she needed to spend more of those hours cleaning. Her closet displayed the same clothing quandary. She decided on the same outfit she wore the Friday night that she met Phil, and laid it out on her bed. She changed her accessories, and the dangling earrings she decided on were dug out from the bottom of her jewelry box along with a thin bracelet garnished with various precious stones. She placed the jewelry on top of the purple sweater.

Satisfied with her clothes and accessories, she entered the bathroom. One look in the mirror screamed, "Take a shower!" back at her. Her eyes were still slightly swollen, and her hair hung lifelessly upon her shoulders. She thought about Eric's hair, the way it flowed to and fro as he wrote. Fighting back tears, she turned on the shower. Next she turned on the

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waterproof radio that hung from the spout. The oldies station was updating the local news at the top of the fifth hour. No mention of Eric, as she feared may have happened, relieved some of her anxiety. Usually news reports were quiet about suicides.

The hot water was slow to resonate from the showerhead. Madison entered at the appropriate temperature. Once her hair was thoroughly wet, she realized a song had replaced the news. Standing suddenly still, the lyrics filled the walls of the shower. "...He's gonna buy me a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird don't sing, he's gonna buy me a diamond ring. And if that diamond ring won't shine, he's gonna surely break this heart of mine..." Carly Simon's distinctive voice trailed off as Madison's thoughts directed themselves to her class discussion on the same winged bird. Leaning up against the tiled shower wall, she wondered where Eric's Mockingbird had been.

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The entrance to the Thai restaurant had a cushioned bench to the left of the door. Madison arrived prior to Phil and took a seat on it, giving her a few minutes to wonder what his question for her might be. When he entered through the door, his smile grabbed her attention. Were his teeth always that white? As they were guided to their table, she felt his hand lightly touching the center of her back. Her shoulders tightened, but managed to relax before she reached her seat. By habit, she sat in the seat that faced the restaurant, leaving Phil's back to the crowd. He pulled

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out her chair as she draped her purse across the back of it.

"So, what's your question?"

"Anxious, 'eh? Is it okay if we look at the menu and order before we jump into that? We've got all evening. I won't leave you guessing for long though, I promise." Phil sat down, shook his napkin out, and placed it in his lap as he answered her.

"Sorry."

"I like their stir-fried vegetables and tofu," he said.

"That sounds good. Can we share an order of the spring rolls too?" Madison asked.

"Sounds delicious, both the sharing and the rolls."

Madison realized her overly personal request too late.

"How was school today?" Phil asked.

"I'd rather talk about that later. It was a tough day, but I can't talk to you about it here, okay?" Madison fought back tears.

"Sure. That's fine. I can imagine teachers have a lot of days like that."

"Not like today's."

Hiding behind her menu, Madison shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them the waiter was approaching to take their orders. Phil ordered for the both of them, a relief to Madison who was still choked up.

"Okay. So, here's my question for you," Phil started.

"Good. Let's hear it." *Phew.*

"I've got a dog..."

"What? You never told me you have a dog!" Madison was suddenly engaged.



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"Yeah, well. I would have told you the night at the bar, but you left early. And during our last dinner we talked about a lot of other things. I guess I just forgot to mention it."

"Okay, so go ahead."

"Well, I know you asked about dog fostering, which probably would've been a good time to mention that I had a dog," he grinned, white. "Anyway, when I go to California, I can't bring Julie with me. That's her name, Julie."

"Why not?"

"I'll be working long days, and I don't think the others will want her in their way. Not everyone's a dog lover and the living quarters might be tight."

"What kind is she?"

"She's a three year old Chocolate Lab. I got her from a friend when she was a puppy. She normally goes just about everywhere with me, but she can't go this time. So, I was wondering if you'd want to look after her while I'm gone. I'll pay you, and I'll buy a bunch of food for her before I leave."

"Hmmm. Sounds tempting. It might be fun to have her around." Madison knew the company would be an enormous relief.

"If you have any doubts, just let me know, but I think you'll like her. She's well trained, obviously housebroken, and is used to sleeping on my bed, but you wouldn't have to let her on yours."

"Oh really? That must be crowded."

"No, I'm used to it and I haven't had anyone else in bed with me, not for a long while anyway," Phil looked

down at his plate. "She loves people and other dogs, so you could take her to the dog park. She'd love that."

Suddenly Madison felt as though the idea was moving too quickly for her. She wiped her mouth with her napkin and thought for a moment. "Well, let me think about it over the next few days, or at least over night."

"Absolutely. I don't leave for four weeks, so we've got time. If you think you'd want to take her, I'd like for you to meet her though. Just let me know. She would be good company. Not the greatest watch dog, but good company." His last plea left Madison wondering if Olivia was behind the deal.

Their meal continued with casual, lighthearted conversation that allowed Madison to forget about everything else for a few hours. Sitting next to Phil at the table, instead of a booth, placed her physically closer to him. The aroma of his aftershave caught her attention, even through the tofu and spring rolls.

While he was busy looking at what would be his next bite, she caught more glimpses of him. Glimpses that told her he had nice ears, especially the when his curls sat on top of them. She noticed that his eyes were the color of his brown shirt with a hint of green in them. He spoke to her about the Elephant Seals, and what he knew about the other grant recipients who would be joining him in California. She learned that his sister lived in Oregon and was hoping to drive down the coast to visit him in April. They remained at their table talking long after the waiter brought the check. It wasn't until nine-o'clock when Madison looked at her watch.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

“Whoa, look at what time it is,” she said. “It is getting late. Maybe we should call it a night.”

Phil called for the waiter and pulled out his wallet to pay for the meal. Madison excused herself and headed to the ladies room. A sense of calm warmed over her once she was alone to fortify the thought that she had an enjoyable evening.

TWELVE

Ginny emptied her backpack on her desk as though she decided to move in. "I'm trying to find a note Eric wrote me two weeks ago," she said. She continued looking through her papers; tossing out wrinkled ones, filing others in different sections of her notebook. Teetering from foot to foot while sorting through the mess, her lower lip began to quiver. Her long bangs blocked her vision, but Madison saw the tears welling up; eventually one of them trickled down her cheek like a melted snowflake crawling down a window in late February.

"You'll find it," Madison said. "Maybe it's in your locker. You can look after class."

Ginny slumped in her chair, wiped her cheek and stared at the chalkboard while the rest of the students entered the classroom and filled their seats. Their journals sat in the corner of their desk, but Madison hadn't written a prompt on the board that morning.

"What are we writing about this morning?" Jonathan asked.

"I thought you may want to write a letter to Eric or his family," Madison said. "The funeral is on Friday and we can give the letters to his parents then. Of course, this is optional."

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By the time Mr. Whyte entered the room, each of the students were engrossed in writing their letters. Madison met him at the door, guessing that what he had to say was confidential enough that he didn't want the students hearing their conversation. She was right.

"Eric's parents would like to meet with us on Thursday, before the funeral on Friday," he whispered, scanning the room. The students were still writing.

"Sure, that's fine. Do you know what they want?"

"I'm thinking they just want some closure. Maybe some more answers."

"Do you think they're blaming us?" Given her involvement with the journal entry, Madison couldn't face that accusation.

"I wouldn't think so, but they may go through a period of wanting to blame other people. We should be sensitive of that. I'll make sure the social worker is here too."

"Okay. Let me know what time."

Shortly after Mr. Whyte left, the moment of silence for Eric began. Some students dropped their heads to their desks, others stared at the wall, and some put their heads in their hands. All were quiet. The moment of silence set a passive tone for the rest of the period.

At the end of class, a pile of letters to Eric's parents sat on Madison's desk. She sat in her office and thumbed through them during her lunch break.

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. Morrison,*

*Eric was your son, and he was our friend. That means we have something in common. He knew all of us, and we all cared about him. Sometimes he was sad and withdrawn in school and we didn't know what to do to help him. Other*

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*times he was funny, helpful, and caring. One time I left my book in the library without knowing it, and Eric brought it to our next class for me. I thanked him, but in retrospect, I wished I had reached out to him more than beyond just a few words of thanks. He deserved it, but we just didn't know how much.*

*We share in your sorrow.*

*Sincerely,*

*Peter*

Madison thought of her class clown and jokester. Touched by his sympathy, she continued reading the rest of the letters. Each of them was unique in their approach, but the message was the same. They felt they could have done a better job in showing Eric that they cared.

Olivia was in her classroom preparing for her last class when Madison entered. Luckily for Madison, she had her planning period during the last block of the day, which was usually spent calling parents, but today it allowed her to wind down from a long day.

"How's it going?" Olivia asked.

"Fine. I had the kids write letters to Eric's parents," Madison said. "They did a great job. The letters are perfect."

"That's a good idea. I'm sure his parents will love them." Olivia eyed Madison. "How was dinner last night?"

"Oh, that. We had a nice time. He's really into those elephant seals. I'm sure he'll have a great time in California." Madison sat on top of one of the desks before continuing. "He asked me to take care of his dog

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while he's gone." She crossed her arms, awaiting Olivia's reaction.

"Oh?" was all she said.

"Yeah. I think it would be fun to have a dog around."

"But..."

"But, I'm not sure about doing it for that long of a period. Three months is a big commitment. I hardly know the guy or Julie. That's her name."

"Are you worried about the commitment of his dog for that long or the potential contact with him for that long?" Olivia raised her eyebrow as she posed the question.

"That's what I'm not sure about. I'll admit I like his company. He's a nice guy. I just don't know about all of this."

"Well, it's just a few months. It'll get you through the rest of the school year with some much-needed company. He'll probably just call once a week or so to check on her."

"What if I want to go away or something?" Madison knew she hadn't left town since the day she first drove into Charlottesville, so her argument there was moot.

"I'll watch her for you if you go away." Olivia was stacking her students' homework on one of the desks at the front of the room. She stopped for a moment and looked at her friend. "What are you really worried about? It sounds like more than just a four pawed pup in your house."

"Him." Madison lowered her head so that Olivia couldn't see the look in her eyes. The words were the

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first admission, verbally and otherwise, that she was falling for Phil.

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Eric's funeral was planned for the next morning. During the Morrison's meeting with Mr. Whyte, Madison, and the social worker, it was clear that the Morrison's were struck with despair. They wanted to thank Madison for bringing the journal to light and the social worker for doing what she could in the short amount of time she worked with Eric. They would continue their own counseling and hoped that their younger son, Drew, would have a better go of it next year when he entered high school. The details of the funeral were laid out with an extended invitation to anyone who wanted to attend the service.

"Afterwards, food and drinks will be served at our house until four-o'clock. All of the students are invited, of course," Mrs. Morrison said, and then explained that when they had to leave to go to the funeral home with the clothes they picked out for Eric to wear. She showed them to Madison and asked if she thought they were appropriate. Madison held the pants and collared shirt up. A stain was on the sleeve, but not very noticeable. She smiled at them and agreed that they were perfect.

The days were getting longer, allowing Madison to enjoy longer runs in the extended daylight. Stepping out of the front door, she realized her iPod's battery was running low. Frustrated, she left it behind, which meant she was forced to listen not only to her



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breathing, but her thoughts. Amplified by silence, her thoughts screamed at her.

As a distraction, she decided to run a different route. Olivia had a parent conference and was unable to meet her, which only added to the frustration of the lack of music. Madison thought of the irony of the situation...no external noise created an even louder internal noise.

She took a left turn down the next road that lead into a new subdivision. She had run in there before and recognized the Beagle in the yard of the second house. He howled at her as she ran by and didn't stop until she was out of sight and in view of the next dog. He was a handsome Chocolate Lab, which instantly reminded her of Julie. She was supposed to let Phil know her decision soon. If she weren't willing to dog sit, he would have to find someone else. She stopped for a moment and the dog romped over to her and licked her legs. What was it about dogs and salty skin? She laughed and scratched him behind his ears. At that moment a car drove by. It slowed down as it passed, and the pup cocked his head while he watched it go by. When Madison looked back over her shoulder, all she saw was the rear end of a red BMW sedan. It turned right onto the next cul-de-sac and went out of view. She looked up the street in the other direction; no other cars were around. It couldn't have been Michael, could it? There were plenty of red BMW's in town. For a moment, she was glad Olivia wasn't with her. Knowing Olivia, she would want to run down the road to see if the driver was Michael. Either way, Madison

decided it was getting late and turned back the way she came. The pup wagged its tail as she ran away.

When her phone rang that evening, Madison expected it to be Olivia calling to complain about the parent conference, so when it displayed Phil's number, she was caught off guard. She pondered whether or not to let it go to voicemail. That way she would hear what he wanted before actually talking to him.

Two more rings until it would roll to voicemail.

"Hello?" she said, surprising herself by answering.

"Hey, it's me."

"Hi. How are you?"

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"No, not at all. I just came in from a run and was about to take a shower." Cringing as she sat on her bed, she regretted providing him with that image.

"Just wanted to see how you're doing. I know you've had a tough week and we weren't really able to talk about it the other night."

"Oh. Yeah, it's been a tough and very busy week," she said. "I haven't had the chance to tell you what's been going on." She took a deep breath before hearing herself say the words, "One of my students committed suicide earlier this week. The funeral is tomorrow."

"Oh my God. I had no idea. Is there something I can do?"

"Well, everything is pretty much set for tomorrow. You already helped by taking me out to dinner the other night. That was the day we found out. It gave me time to step away from it all." Slapping her hand to her forehead, Madison quietly told herself to shut up.

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"I'm glad then. I had a good time, but I'm sorry about your student," Phil said. "What time is the funeral tomorrow?"

"One-o'clock. They're having people over to their house afterwards. As far as I know, most of my students are going. They each wrote letters to his parents, which was nice."

"Wow, that's a pretty great idea. I'm sure his parents will treasure those."

"I hope so. I'm bringing them tomorrow."

"Maybe you'd want to go out afterwards? Unwind a bit."

"I think I'll be stuffed from all of the food, and probably pretty drained emotionally."

"How 'bout coming over here then? You can meet Julie and we can just hang out. I can rent a movie, or we can play checkers. Whatever you want."

"Umm. I guess that would be okay. I did see a Chocolate Lab on my run today that reminded me of her." Slapping her forehead again she decided she better end the call before she gave away more incriminating evidence that she had thought about him since their dinner.

"Great. I'll e-mail you directions, but I'm on Cardinal Street. Come on over when you're ready. Just call if you get lost."

"Will do. Probably around six. See you then."

When Olivia called later, Madison did not mention what would be her third date with Phil. Instead, they talked about the parent conference, and as expected Olivia was frustrated with the student's situation. However, she spent much of the rest of the

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conversation talking about her plans with Gregory for the upcoming weekend. Madison hung up relieved from just having to listen and not be questioned about Phil or anything else. She had completely forgotten about the red BMW sedan until later that evening, and Olivia's voice in her own head talked her into shutting the blinds tightly before she went to bed.

THIRTEEN

When Madison approached the distinctive wooden doors of the church, she was reminded of the gargoyle doors at the bar only a few weeks ago. *Eric was still alive then.* Light streamed inside, casting a shadow across the hardwood floors as she pulled the left door open and waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Once inside, she found the church to be filled with teens and adults as far as her eye could see. A poster of Eric, although not very recent, adorned a stand in the front of the church. Blue and yellow flowers surrounded it—an attempt to soften the atmosphere.

Madison made her way through the crowd, touching the arms of different students as she passed. Several tearful eyes met hers, choking her to the point of not being able to open her mouth. Nods sufficed, as everyone seemed to understand. The pews were recently polished, candles were lit in their holders along the wall, and the seemingly darkness of the room subsided as her eyes adjusted. Amanda, Ginny, Meghan, Jonathan, Peter, and a handful of other students sat in the third row waiting for her.

“Ms. Ragnar, we’re over here,” Amanda called to Madison through the crowd. She managed to squeeze into the seat saved for her, thankful that they had planned it that way. Reverend Landon made his way

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to the front of the church. Eric's parents and other family members sat in the first row. The crowd, clothed in black dresses and suits varying in styles, made their way to their seats. The first several rows were filled already, leaving a standing-room-only by the time the reverend cleared his throat. Madison wondered if everyone else was thinking the same thing she was...just how does a reverend address suicide? Before she had a chance to read the surrounding faces in search of an answer, the service began.

"As most of you know, Eric suicided," began the reverend. Madison was struck by his sole use of the word as a verb instead of a noun, especially having never really thought about it as an action in the past tense. But it made sense. His blunt opening caught everyone's attention.

The reverend looked out to the crowd and said, "Eric was a loved and respected young man who was known as kind and caring. No one really could have realized how difficult things were for him. Often we cannot anticipate these events, and those of us here who knew Eric must be feeling anger, numbness, and sorrow. Those emotions are the inevitable part. When someone ends their own life, the people who are closest to them feel guilty. Everyone asks where they failed and what they could have done differently. My question is—did anyone really fail?"

After taking a breath, which let the last thought sink in for a moment, he continued, "Everyone here might be blaming themselves for Eric's death. We also might want to blame other people. But in fact, no one's perfect and we can only do our best. As humans, we've all

done things that are considered wrong. Yet, let us remind ourselves that guilt and blame are insolent. We really don't have the right to take from Eric what was his responsibility. Eric chose this responsibility. He chose to be responsible for ending his own life. By feeling guilty, we take that responsibility away from him."

The reverend took another breath. Madison looked over at her students. They clung to every word spoken. No real expressions on their faces, just apparent moments of understanding and clarity. They were absorbed.

"He was a good son, a good brother, and a good friend to us all. People in this church and out in the world cared a lot about him. He made what we see as a wrong decision, yet it was still his decision. Nobody else can take blame. Perhaps some of us feel angry with Eric for making his decision, and that's okay. We may feel that he wasted his life; a life we considered to be a good enough life that could've been made better. We can feel angry, but at the end of the day we must accept and respect his decision. Try to understand, as nobody can really know why he ended his life. Suicide is the final act in an intricate web of origins.

"In the end we don't know much. Even Eric, if we were able to ask him now, might not be able to provide for us a clear explanation of why he wanted to die. There is no way we can know for sure. But it was his choice, and as we respect his life, so we must respect his death. And we can know for sure that at the end he was in a great deal of pain. Now his pain is over, and for that, at least, we should be grateful.

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“And, as each of us sometimes does, he protected those he loved from his demons and his darkness. That is a mistake that we all make. We may think our darkness is too great, too personal to share. We need to learn to share the darkness with our friends and those we love, in order for the light to show through. But Eric didn't share his darkness.

“Although we are hurt, and angry, and sad, and even though may feel guilty, we also must realize that today is a day to celebrate a life. As we reflect on Eric's life it's easy to remember the last few weeks and months. We remember first the most recent period. But today we want to remember the whole of Eric's life.”

Ginny wiped her nose on her wrist. Jonathan fought back tears, facing away from his friends to do so. Amanda leaned in toward Madison as the reverend finished his slow and deliberate sermon. Madison reached out and touched Amanda's forearm, noticing the clamminess of her own hands as she did so. She could hear noses being blown behind her, and witnessed several eyes wiped in front of her. Thankful that she brought a handkerchief, she pulled it out and dabbed her own eyes. Amanda looked up at her with questioning eyes. *Why?*

The reverend moved to the side as Eric's friend, Michelle, read a poem. Her voice was clear and the words succinct as she read, clearly in honor of Eric. Gripping Madison's arm, Amanda began to sob uncontrollably. The chain reaction she created encompassed the room within minutes. Michelle rose to the challenge, reading clearer and stronger with each



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word until she finished with the words, "I will miss you, my friend."

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The Morrison's home was at the end of a gravel road just outside of town. Large trees stood in the center of the circular driveway; daffodils surrounded their trunks. The first indication of spring emerged poetically from the soil beneath the trees. The picture window in the living room eloquently framed the mountain scene in the distance. Snowcapped, they sat in contrast to the daffodils in the front yard. Eric's brother, Drew, helped to bring the trays of food from the kitchen to the dining room table. Neighbors and friends looked upon his expressionless face with sorrow. He did not look much like Eric, but their eyes gave away the strong message that they were brothers.

Madison made her way around the dining room, avoiding many of the adults, in search of her students. Most of them did not have a driver's license yet and had to find rides with older friends or family members, but they all made it to the Morrison's house one way or another. Jonathan was the first one Madison found. He was cornered by two of Eric's elderly aunts; bombarded by questions, he needed rescuing.

"Jonathan, I'm glad you could make it today. It was very understanding of your boss to let you have today off to be with your friends and honor Eric's life," Madison said as she approached the threesome.

Grateful eyes fell upon his teacher as he responded, "Yes, Ms. Ragnar."

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"Have you seen Ginny or Amanda? I was hoping you guys could help Eric's brother over there with the food."

"No, but I can go find them for you."

"You wouldn't mind? That would be great." Madison noticed his shoulders relax as he nodded farewell to the ladies beside him. They turned to Madison and the one on the left said, "You must be so proud of your students."

"Yes, I have a wonderful class this year. In fact, they all wrote letters to Eric's parents. Do you know where I might find them so that I can give the letters to them?"

"Why yes, they are in the living room. I don't think Angela can stand the sight of food right now. Go on and find them."

Envelope in hand, Madison found them exactly where the elderly aunt indicated they would be. Mrs. Morrison sat on the couch with her husband standing by her side. Madison noted a spot next to her on the other side and took a seat. She put her hand on Mrs. Morrison's arm and said, "I want to express once again the sorrow my class and I feel over the loss of Eric. The students would like you to have this envelope. It's filled with letters they wrote. We hope they somehow help you in your healing process."

Clutching the envelope, Mrs. Morrison smiled beneath her tears. All she could manage was that, and that was good enough for Madison.

Madison stood and went across the room. While eating carrots, dip and chips, Madison noticed her students approaching the Morrisons almost one by one to show their respects. Only Madison knew how much

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her class matured that year. If only Eric had known how much they really cared. She thought about what the reverend said about guilt, thought about the mockingbird's song, and thought about what Eric's final paper would have been about.

Before leaving, Madison made one more round to check on her students and to say good-bye. Most of them were in the kitchen eating desserts while talking to Drew about high school.

"Here's one now," Ginny said when Madison walked through the doorway.

"One what?" Madison asked.

"A high school teacher. We were just telling Drew about high school and what teachers he'd be lucky to have or not have next year."

"Oh, and what list was I on?"

"We can't tell you that. That's confidential student information," Ginny said.

"Hmm. I see. Drew, don't let them misguide you, all of the teachers are good. Unfortunately though, this one needs to leave. I know today wasn't easy, but you all did a great job helping out here and showing the Morrison's how much you care. I'll see you guys on Monday, and Drew, we'll see you next year."

"Bye Ms. Ragnar," was heard in unison as she left the house.

Madison reviewed the directions to Phil's house before pulling out of the driveway. Since she had to pass her house, she decided to stop and change into something more comfortable than the black dress she was wearing, especially since she was meeting Julie for

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the first time. Labs are known to be rambunctious, and she wanted to be prepared.

Deciding on a pair of jeans and a light blue, turtleneck sweater, she followed up by washing the remains of the tears from her face and reapplying her makeup. The sun had set a while ago, leaving only a crescent moon and a few stars visible in the sky. To her, Eric represented one of those stars.

FOURTEEN

When Phil opened the door, a Chocolate Lab that seemed to have a smile as big as her owner ran out to greet Madison. Julie was smaller in stature than Madison had guessed she would be, which pleased her.

"This is obviously Julie," Phil said, moving out of the way to let the two girls enter the house.

"Well hello there Miss Julie, I'm Madison," Madison said to Julie, then turned to Phil and said, "She's beautiful."

"I like to think so too, but I'm biased. It's always nice to hear other people agree with me. C'mon in and have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?" Phil led her to his great-room where there was a soft, beige leather sectional sofa and a glass coffee table in the center of the room. "I have soda, beer or wine."

"A beer would be fine."

"All right. I'll be right back. You two can get to know each other while I'm gone." Wagging her thick tail, Julie followed Madison to the living room. Rather than sitting on the sofa, Madison sat on the floor next to Julie. Scratching Julie behind her ears, Madison admired the big brown eyes that looked back at her. She laughed inside about how they resembled Phil's.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Sit," Madison said. Julie sat. "Down," Madison said and made a downward gesture with her hand. Julie lay down. "What a good girl you are! Who taught you those tricks?"

"I did of course," Phil announced as he came back in the room with two beers and a rawhide bone. He joined them on the floor, putting the beers on the table and the bone in Madison's hand. "Make her work for it. She doesn't just get hand outs."

"Oh, is your daddy strict with you?" Madison rubbed Julie's belly and put the bone behind her back. Julie rolled back over and immediately sat up to find it. "Sit." Julie sat and Madison gave her the deserved bone.

"She's very cute and well trained," Madison said.

"Thanks. I have to admit that her intelligence was half the battle with training her, if not more."

"Well, you seem to have done a good job." Satisfied with her compliments and bone, Julie found her way to the dog bed in the corner of the room where she began chewing.

"So, how'd it go today?" Phil asked as he handed her one of the cold beers.

"The turnout was astounding. I hope his spirit was looking down and seeing all of the friends and family who cared about him."

"I'm sure it was. Spirits work in amazing ways. Maybe in his next life he'll find the happiness he felt he missed out on this time."

"You believe in multiple lives?"

"Absolutely. The spirit world is a place that we, in our physical form, are often afraid to tap into. But it's

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real and much more powerful than we can imagine. Actually, I imagine that's exactly what we fear."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, people usually only believe in what they can see or touch, and sometimes what they hear. But, since the spirit world is intangible many people have a hard time conceptualizing it."

"You sound like you've mastered it."

"Well, I don't know that anyone ever really masters it, but I have a great appreciation and understanding of it. For instance, it's not only possible that you and I shared a past life together, but it's probable."

"Oh really?" Madison's interest was peaked.

"Oh yeah, most spirits go from physical life to physical life with other spirits in a quest to learn lessons they didn't learn from past lives. Until those lessons are learned between each other they continue to go from life to life together. That's what's known as karmic debt."

"Really? So what lesson did I not learn from you in a past life that I need to learn now?" Surprised by her brazen question, Madison awaited his answer.

"That's a good question. We really don't ever consciously quite know what the lesson is until it's learned, and even then we may not realize its potential or purpose until much later."

"So, what you're saying is that I need to stick around to find out?" Madison took a sip of beer before setting it back on the table.

"Exactly." Phil put his beer down next to hers.

"What if I walk out of this house and never see you again? Then what?"

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"Then we'd go into our next life and we'd have to do it all over again. We'd meet again and again until the karmic debt is paid. It's a viscous cycle, but can be well rewarded."

"Rewarded?"

"Sure. The light rewards us when we learn a lesson."

"The light?" Madison asked as she leaned back against the soft leather of the sofa. Her blue sweater now rose up, exposing her bellybutton.

"Yes, the light of the Universe." Phil raised a hand toward the ceiling.

"Oh, I thought you meant the light that can be seen in people's eyes."

*What am I saying?* Madison looked down at the floor, her cheeks flushed.

"Well, the light in your eyes reflects the light of your soul. If you have only a small amount of light in your eyes, then there is only a little bit of light in your soul." Phil leaned over her, placing a hand on the rug beside her right leg. He cupped his other hand under his chin as he looked into her eyes.

"Is there a light at the end of the tunnel?" Madison asked, leaning her head toward his. She smelled his aftershave, having no idea what brand it was, but noticed its rugged scent. His partially opened shirt exposed his chest muscles, the first time she was able to appreciate them. They were strong and appeared to lead to matching abdominal muscles. His hair smelled freshly shampooed and a few locks framed his well-defined face.



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"I think so. It's a long tunnel though." With that, Phil kissed her. Giving in to the warmth of his lips and the tenderness of his kiss, Madison melted beneath him. His hand reached down and touched her exposed belly and stayed there. The kiss lasted several moments before they stopped and looked at one another.

"You are a sensational kisser, Ms. Ragnar."

"I guess you're used to kissing elephant seals, but I'll take that as a compliment," she laughed nervously and leaned in to kiss him again. This time he allowed his hand to explore more of her body, starting at her belly again, he moved slowly up and brushed the underside of her breasts. Madison stopped him, sat up, and wet her lips with another sip of beer.

"It's been a long time since I've kissed anyone," she admitted.

"Me too. Don't worry." He held her hand in his.

"Obviously, I've been hurt. Quite hurt."

"I figured that, which is why we can take this as slowly as you want. We're here and that's what matters most to me."

"Actually, as you may recall, you're going away soon."

"That's true, but it's just for a few months."

"That's a long time to be away at the beginning of a relationship." Madison hadn't used the word "relationship" in so long it felt like she was speaking a foreign language.

"Let's just see where things go between now and then. We'll continue to take this at whatever pace you like." He kissed her again, this time for quite a while.

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The candles in the room shed dancing shadows on the wall behind them. Julie chewed with merriment on her bone, and the evening rapidly turned to nighttime as they sat and talked.

"I better get going," Madison said as she gingerly pulled away. Phil stroked her hair back with his hand before she stood up. Once she was standing, she straightened out her sweater. Julie peered over from her bed. Her tail thumped against the wall behind her, a thump that grew rapidly as Madison approached the hallway table for her car keys. She glanced over her shoulder in time to notice Phil getting up from the floor where she had left him sitting in a daze. He brushed back the few curls that were on his forehead and stretched his arms high in the air while letting out a deep sigh.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Madison said. Phil placed his hands on her shoulders as she walked toward the door and turned her back toward him for one more kiss goodnight.

FIFTEEN

“Olivia, are you awake? Call me when you get this message.” Madison hung up the phone and tied her laces before heading out the door for an early morning run. They didn’t have plans to run together that morning, but Madison hoped there was an off chance that Olivia would be able to go at the last minute. Energy abound, Madison was ready to put some miles behind her and decided to do so on the country road where the Valentine’s race had been.

During the drive out there, every song on the radio made her think of Phil in one-way or the other. Breakup songs made her wonder what it would be like if they had to break up; love songs enhanced the anticipation of seeing him again. When did she start feeling this way? She didn’t recognize the woman she had become since falling for him, a woman who resembled the body, mind, and spirit of friends, but not Madison Ragnar.

During the last mile of the road that approached the parking area, her cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me. Am I too late to join you?” Olivia asked between what sounded like chewing the remains of her breakfast.

“No, not if you hurry. I just got to Gilbert road.”

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

“Okay, I’ll be right there!”

Madison checked her watch, knowing it would take Olivia at least ten minutes to drive there, she decided to walk down the road as a warm up. The trees were beginning to fill in with the infant buds of spring. Daffodils were abundant, and a few crocuses began to emerge from beneath the soil. As she made her way down the road, she broke into an easy jog. Her mind wandered to Phil and their evening of beer, kissing, and brief discussion of past lives and where their relationship was heading. However, most of her thoughts were on the kisses. The passion behind them was unlike anything she experienced with prior boyfriends, especially Rick. There was something about Phil’s emotional maturity that radiated through his body when he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. She couldn’t place the feeling as one that she had felt at any other time. She knew it was special, and his impending departure worried her. But, the worry wasn’t as strong as the feelings she was developing for him each day.

Without realizing how far she had run, she found herself approaching the “haunted house.” The red roof was less visible through the blooming trees, but visible nonetheless. No sign of life, or death for that matter. Not a duck in the pond, a horse in the field, or a person to be seen. Only what appeared to be an empty house with blinds half drawn. She reached the mailbox and tried to glance inside it to see if there was any mail, even if the mail was old and damp, it would indicate a mailing address was being used. The dent on the side of the black box created a gap between the box and the

flap door. It was too dark inside to see, and she didn't dare open it. Besides the fear of leaving traceable fingerprints on it, she didn't know what insects were waiting to suck her blood.

"Pretty freaky, isn't it?"

"Huh?" Madison jumped at the voice behind her.

"The house. It's pretty freaky, isn't it?"

Madison was face to face with Michael. "Uh, yeah," she muttered before building up the nerve to speak louder. "What are you doing sneaking up on me out here?" This time her voice radiated anger, hoping it might disguise her sudden fear of being alone with him near the haunted house.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay, just be careful next time."

"It's an old house isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Madison looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was with him. Not a soul.

"Aren't you Madison? From the video store?"

"And the gym."

"That's right. I'm Michael." This time he looked over her shoulder.

"Yes, I remember your name. What are you doing out here?"

"I was supposed to run with a friend, but he wasn't able to show. We run here almost every weekend, so I decided go it alone." Michael leaned over and re-laced one of his sneakers. Madison let her breath out while he wasn't looking.

"I need to get back. My friend is meeting me at my car any minute." Madison didn't add that Olivia would

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

have a heart attack if she knew who Madison was alone with and talking to.

"I can run back with you if you want," Michael said, straightening back up and into an overhead stretch.

Madison choked at the thought of Olivia seeing her running up the road with Michael. "No, no. That's okay. I'm sure you want to keep running the way you were heading."

"Well, sort of, but I wouldn't mind."

Madison caught him looking at her from what appeared to be different angles, as though he was viewing her in a prison line up.

"That's okay, really. She's probably running toward here by now."

"Okay. Well, enjoy your run."

Madison was already in an easy jog as he finished his sentence. She waved over her shoulder, looking back twice to make sure he was running the opposite direction. When he was out of sight, she took another deep breath.

After a few turns in the road, and about a half mile back to the car, she found Olivia. "What are you doing running already?" Olivia asked.

"Sorry, I had pent up energy I had to burn off. I'm ready to keep going though."

They continued running in the opposite direction from Michael and Madison didn't mention their interaction.

"How'd the Morrison's go last night?" Olivia asked.

"It went okay. You know how funerals are. The service was interesting though because it focused on suicide and all the issues that go along with it."

"Yeah, that's a whole 'nother candle to burn," Olivia said, shaking her head.

"I don't think I ever told you that my grandmother died right after I moved here. I've always regretted not attending her funeral."

"No, you never mentioned that. Why didn't you go?"

"I'd just left Rick and was on the outs with my family. Gee, imagine that! And I was settling in here and didn't have any money. I said goodbye to her in my own way up in the mountains. In a way, that was better."

"I'm sure she thinks so, too."

"Yeah. She was the only one in my family who understood me. I miss her. Anyway, the service yesterday had me thinking about her." Madison rarely spoke to anyone about her grandmother. "She was a writer ya know."

"Really? What'd she write?"

"Comedy mostly. Some screenplays and columns."

"Wow, that's cool."

"Yeah, I have a lot of her documents. The only thing I don't have that I wish I had taken when I left Rick was her antique secretary's desk. A friend tried to get it from him after I left, but he never returned her calls."

"Jerk," Olivia said.

"Yeah."

"So, what'd you do after you left the Morrison's?"

"Stopped by Phil's to meet his dog, Julie."

"Oh? How'd that go?" Olivia raised an eyebrow at Madison.

"Fine, she's a great dog."

*Through Hazel Eyes*

"I didn't mean just meeting the dog."

"Well, that's why I went there. I'm going to take care of her for Phil while he's in California."

"Great! Sounds like you two are hitting it off."

"Yup. I gave her a bone that she loved."

"You know what I mean! You and Phil. You're spending a lot of time with him. I can barely reach you at night anymore. What's going on that you're not telling me?"

"Okay, okay. Yes, things are moving along. We kissed last night."

"That's it? Just kissing? Geez Madison, get with it."

"Hey, give me a break. I want to take this slowly for many reasons."

"Give me one good one."

"All right. He's leaving for California in March. That's one good reason."

"Heck, that's a reason to get on with it. If you don't sleep with him before he goes, how will either of you know what to look forward to when he comes back?"

"Is that all you think about?"

"Yes, well no, but I think you should find out."

"We're taking it slowly. He's a gentleman and I'm letting him be just that." Madison looked over her shoulder as they turned down the next road.

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing. Anyway, Julie is great and I think it'll be fun to have her at the house while he's gone. If anything, the company will be welcome."

"Take my advice, or his dog might be all that's sleeping in your bed. You don't want him going to California and meeting some surfer chick in a string



bikini without remembering what it was like to be with you."

"Geez Olivia, give the guy some credit. After all, he is Gregory's friend, and the two of you have a long distance relationship," Madison smiled.

"Yes, but we both know what we're missing while we're apart. Men are men." Olivia flung her arms up in the air as though she had lost the battle. Ignoring her, Madison refocused on her breathing and Phil.

When they finished their run, Olivia announced that she had to meet Gregory in town before he left for home. "I'll be around tomorrow if you want to do something."

"I don't know what my plans are yet," Madison said.

"Being a Saturday night, you best get over to Phil's and make sure I don't hear from you until after breakfast." With that, Olivia hopped back into her car and sped off to meet Gregory.

Madison sat in her car and wiped the sweat off her face with her sleeve before picking up her phone. The indication of one voicemail caused her heart to race. Pushing the buttons of her password, she waited in anticipation of Phil's voice. She didn't have to wait long, and drove home while listening to it.

"Hey, it's me. You're probably out running or something disgustingly healthy like that, but I just wanted to let you know that I had a great time last night. Julie wants to know if we can meet up again tonight. Our house or yours. She's flexible, and so am I. Call me." Madison pressed the number four on the keypad to hear the message again, just for the sake of it.

*Through Hazel Eyes*

She waited until she was back in her house before calling him back. He answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Madison. You were right, I just finished a run."

"I figured you'd be doing something like that."

"How's Julie this morning?" Madison asked as she took her running shoes off and kicked them into the closet.

"She's fine. She's out in the backyard right now, but she would like the presence of your company again tonight if you're available."

"That'd be fine. I imagine she would want to see my house if she's going to be staying here while you're off playing with the seals."

"Does that mean you'll be willing to take her while I'm gone?" The hint of enthusiasm touched Madison.

"We can talk about that tonight. I've got some errands to run this afternoon, so why don't the two of you come over around six-thirty?"

"Okay, see you then."

After Madison hung up she realized that was the first telephone conversation with him that she wasn't torn about whether or not she wanted to see him. She sat down and made a grocery list for the evening, a list that included dog biscuits.

SIXTEEN

Madison spent an hour cleaning the house and putting the finishing touches on dinner before six-thirty arrived. She swept the kitchen floor one last time then tended to herself. Deciding to leave her hair down, she dabbed a bit of foundation on her face and highlighted her cheeks with a bronzer. After tucking and untucking her button down shirt three times, she tossed it in the laundry basket and replaced it with a pale yellow sweater that accented the auburn highlights in her hair. Content with the final look, she made her way downstairs.

When the doorbell rang at six-thirty she almost didn't recognize the sound. Olivia always walked right in and other than the occasional delivery or repair man, the bell wasn't used. Checking herself one last time in the entryway's mirror, she reached out and opened the door to find Julie sitting on the doormat with a card strategically placed in her mouth.

"Well Miss Julie, what do you have?" Madison reached down and gently took the card. Looking around the porch, Phil was nowhere to be seen. "Did you drive yourself over here and leave Phil at home? What was it? A fight?"

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Laughter emerged from behind one of the trees on the side of the porch. A hand holding a bouquet of spring flowers reached around from behind the tree.

"These are for you," Phil said, still hiding behind the tree.

"And are you going to bring them here, or do I have to come and get them?"

With that, Phil showed himself and presented the flowers to her along with a wide smile and a hug.

"They're gorgeous!" Madison said as she led Julie inside, card and flowers now in hand. Phil carried a grocery bag in behind her.

"What's in the bag?" Madison asked.

"Something for later. Stay here, I just have to go to the kitchen for a moment," he insisted. "I presume it's down this hall?"

Madison nodded and while he disappeared, she placed the flowers in the center of the coffee table and fluffed them back into shape after their travels. The combination of peach and light blue hues blended well with the colors of her living room. Looking down at Julie, she remembered the dog biscuits.

"Phil? While you're in there can you grab a few dog biscuits for Julie? They are on the counter."

Phil acknowledged her request and was soon back in the living room, biscuits in hand. "This is an easy house to find." He commented as he gave Madison the biscuits to pass on to Julie.

"I like the location since I'm technically in town, but on the outskirts of the traffic. It's too dark to see now, but the backyard is big and fenced in, so she'll have

plenty of space to play." Julie took the biscuit and lay down on the floor to indulge.

"I'm sure she'll be happy here, assuming you're agreeing to take her." Phil walked over to where Madison was standing.

"I'd like to. I think she'd be happy here with me." Madison sat down on the couch and Phil followed suit.

"It would be great for me knowing she's in good hands."

"Right now I don't have plans to go away this spring, but if I had to go somewhere Olivia could watch her."

"That sounds fine." Phil reached out and put his arm around her. Pulling her into him, she laid her head on his chest.

"Are you hungry? Dinner's in the kitchen," she said.

"Not just yet. I'd like to sit here for a bit." He leaned over and kissed her on the neck. His hands were warm as one rested on her shoulder and the other on the back of her neck. Madison responded by wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders and back, all the while kissing him back.

Forgetting about dinner, they sat on the couch engrossed in kissing. Phil navigated his hands gently around her body. After taking her sweater off, she welcomed his kisses on her neck and her shoulders. The bra she picked out from Victoria's Secret just over a month ago was now displaying her breasts to him. He cupped one of them with his hand and continued to kiss her. The room darkened with each passing minute

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

as the sun set. Enticed by one another, nothing else mattered.

Nothing until Julie approached them, nudging Phil's arm with her snout. "Julie, what is it?" He asked. Julie sat in front of him and stared back.

"Maybe she needs some food or water?" Madison gave Phil a pat on the knee, rose from the couch clutching her sweater and headed toward the kitchen.

"Thanks a lot," Phil whispered to Julie, who ignored him and followed Madison to the kitchen.

"I heard that!" Madison teased over her shoulder. "How about some dinner, I'm hungry."

Phil joined them in the kitchen. "Dinner sounds good. I like your kitchen, but you should put a deadbolt on the door that goes out to the backyard."

"Mmm. Good idea." Madison was involved with taking food out of the refrigerator. Everything was cooked and just needed reheating.

"I can bring one over and install it for you. I worry about that guy who's watching you."

"Michael? I wouldn't worry." Madison debated telling Phil that she saw Michael while running that morning, but decided against it at that moment. Michael gave her no reason to worry during their discussion, even if his sudden appearance next to the haunted house startled her. Besides, if she told Phil, he might say something to Olivia or Gregory.

"I can worry; I just won't bug you about it if that's what you want." Phil took the plastic bowl of water that Madison was holding out and put it on the floor for Julie, who drank from it enthusiastically. "Looks to me like she'll be content here," Phil said.

*Through Hazel Eyes*

"Yeah, I think so. When exactly do you leave?"

"March twentieth. I'm driving, as you know, so I'm a little flexible." He went over and stood next to her, putting his arm around her waist while watching her prepare a salad. "The elephant seals' molting season starts just after we arrive."

"Ooooh. That should be fun to watch." Madison raised her eyebrows in amusement.

"Oh, don't worry, you'll get plenty of postcards with updates."

"Julie, when is your molting season?" Madison laughed as she kissed Phil and moved on to another part of the kitchen to prepare their dinner plates.

"Very funny. You'll see—our work is going to put elephant seals on the map."

"Better make it a large plastic map!"

"You're on a roll tonight, huh. Maybe you should have run a few more miles?"

"Nope, but dinner is ready. Let's eat in the living room. If you grab the drinks, I'll bring the plates."

The three of them returned to the living room where Madison turned on a few lights and they settled in to eat. Their plates were filled with veggie chicken fillets, sweet potatoes, and green beans.

"Quite a colorful display," Phil said. "Are you always this healthy?"

"Yes. Why, would you rather have McDonalds?"

"Absolutely, I could use some French fries right about now." Phil nudged her and said, "Well, healthy habits have done you justice. You're a beautiful woman, Ms. Ragnar."

"Why thank you. Now shut up and eat."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

After dinner Phil stretched his arms above his head, a habit of his that Madison was just starting to notice, and said, "I better take Julie out for a short walk. Dinner was delicious, thank you. There's a surprise in the freezer for desert. Don't look. I'll prepare it when I return."

"I'll try not to peek." Madison reached over to pick up their plates. "You can take Julie to the end of the cul-de-sac if you want. I'm just going to clean up the dishes."

Phil snapped Julie's leash on and ventured out the door while Madison headed to the kitchen. She filled the sink with hot soapy water to let the plates soak for the rest of the evening, finished putting the rest of the food away, and wiped the counters down. As she tossed an empty container into the garbage can, a loud blunt noise hit the side of the house just outside the window. Screaming, she ducked to the floor. After a moment of silence she crawled her way over to the light switch to turn off the lights, allowing her to better see outside. Peeking out of the kitchen door's window to the back porch, she only witnessed the dark of the night. It was evident that she had to turn the porch light on, but she was still too scared. Where were Phil and Julie?

The blunt noise struck the side of the house again, this time louder and closer to the window. Madison curled up in a ball and leaned tightly against the cabinet below the sink. When the creaking from the front door opening and the jingle of Julie's collar was heard, Madison quietly called out, "Phil...come here...quickly." After what sounded like the leash



dropping to the floor, Phil's footsteps were evident in the hallway.

"Madison? Where are you? Why are the lights out?"

"Shhhhh. Come in here, but duck down." Madison motioned to him with one free hand; the other clung tightly to her knees.

"What are you doing on the floor in the dark?"

"Shh. Just duck down and come over here." Phil did as instructed. "I heard a noise. No, not just a noise, but a loud thump against the side of the house."

"When?"

"Just before you came in. I heard it twice."

"I'll go see what it is," Phil said, standing back up.

"No! Wait. What if it's a person?" Madison clutched tightly to his arm.

"Well, I'll find out and take care of it." Phil flipped on the porch light, illuminating the entire deck and part of the back yard. "I'll look out from here first, okay?"

"Just be careful."

"You should go back to the living room with Julie." Phil motioned his hands, shooing her away.

"All right, but yell if you need me." Madison crawled back to the living room and awaited Phil's return. Julie's tail thumped on the floor when Madison approached her on all fours. Fortunately, her wait for Phil was only a matter of minutes.

"It's okay. I think it was just a raccoon. The garbage can was turned over and the bag was torn open."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, no, but it's a good guess considering the sight." Phil sat down next to her. "Do you want me to stay here tonight?"

*Through Hazel Eyes*

"Uh, well."

"Nothing more than sleeping, if that's what you want. Promise"

"It'd be comforting to have you here. And I have a selection of large t-shirts for sleeping in that you can go through."

"Past boyfriend's shirts?" Phil asked nudging her.

"No, running race shirts. I get them in extra large so I can sleep in them."

Phil turned the lights on and went back to the kitchen. On his way, he called, "I'll be back in a minute."

What seemed like hours later, and after hearing much tinkering in the kitchen, Madison was presented with a bowl of coffee ice cream topped with whipped cream and rainbow sprinkles.

"How'd you know coffee is my favorite?"

"Oh, a little bird told me."

"Remind me to thank Olivia."

They ate their ice cream and watched television on the couch for a few hours before climbing the steps to bed. Phil chose a t-shirt from her stack that filled the top shelf in her closet. It was from a Valentine's race two years ago. Madison chose a New Year's Day race shirt, changed in the bathroom and climbed into bed. Phil slept beside her, one arm wrapped around her, while Julie curled up on a fleece blanket on the floor in the corner of the room. For the first night in a long time, Madison slept peacefully.

SEVENTEEN

By Tuesday most of the students were able to settle back into their normal routine. Discussions of Eric continued on the school bus and between classes though. Some of Madison's students continued to write about Eric in their journals, some questioned his actions, some questioned their role in his decision, but most were making an effort to move on, finding a way to make peace and to remember him fondly.

Madison was sitting at her desk between classes when her phone rang.

"Ms. Ragnar?"

"Yes, who's calling please?"

"This is Ginny's mom. Do you have a minute?"

"Why certainly, what can I help you with?" Madison took out a piece of notepaper and a pen in case she had to document the conversation, as she did when all parents called her.

"Well, as you know, all the students were pretty shaken up by Eric's suicide."

"Yes, they handled everything extremely well given the circumstances."

"They did. I think that many of them grew up pretty quick as a result of it."

"I can vouch for that. They wrote very impressive letters to Mr. and Mrs. Morrison. It was those letters

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

that showed me just how much they've matured, and how they stepped up to the plate to prove it."

"That's why I wanted to call you. I saw Mrs. Morrison in the grocery store a few days ago. She expressed to me just how much the letters meant to her and her husband. She indicated that the students' letters restored her faith in teenagers as a whole. She struggled so much with Eric and realized just how much the other teens tried to understand him when they couldn't."

"I can see that. Teens seem to have their own language at times. I have some insight to it, but they speak it fluently. Occasionally an adult can catch a glimpse, but not often enough."

"I wish it were more often. Well, I'll let you go. I just wanted to pass that on to you. I know how hard you work with the kids and you should know it pays off."

"Thank you, and by the way, Ginny is doing very well in this class. She's a pleasure to have in here and is always trying her best to motivate herself and others."

"Thanks for saying so. We're extremely grateful. Have a good afternoon."

Madison hung up and sat back in her chair. After pondering their conversation for a moment, she picked up the phone again and called Phil.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Hi me. How are you doing?"

"Good. I just wanted to say hello and see how you are."

*Through Hazel Eyes*

"This is a nice surprise. I'm fine. Busy getting some paper work done for California."

"How 'bout dinner tonight? My house." Madison glanced up at the calendar that indicated less than a month before Phil was scheduled to leave.

"Dinner sounds great. What can I bring?"

"Nothing, I have everything already. We can eat some more of the coffee ice cream too."

"Sounds good. How is six-thirty again?"

"That's great."

Later on during lunch Madison found Olivia in her classroom. "What's on tap for this afternoon?" Madison asked.

"Oh, I've got my high energy class. What about you? Do you want to run after school?"

"A run would be fine, but I have to be home by five-thirty or so."

"And that would be why?" Olivia put down the poster board she was preparing to hang on the wall.

"Phil's coming over for dinner at six-thirty."

"Ah ha! Is tonight going to be the big night?"

"I don't know. We're still getting to know each other."

"Well, that's one of the most important things to know!"

"Yes, but it gets in the way of the rest later." Madison leaned against the door jam, knowing she would eventually lose this battle with Olivia.

"Maybe, maybe not. Sometimes it enhances a relationship and moves it along better. Do what you feel is right, but with him leaving in less than a month,

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

your time is limited. What if it's really good and you don't find out until just before he leaves?"

"Is that all you think about? I don't know who's worse, your students or you. I need to get back to my classroom. Can we meet at my house and run from there?"

"Sure, see you after school." Olivia went back to putting her poster board on the wall while Madison made her way back down the hall. Mr. Whyte was heading her way as she turned the corner leading to her room.

"Madison, how's it going? It seems like the students have settled back into their normal routine," Mr. Whyte said.

"Yes, I believe they have. It was a tough week, but I can tell you that Ginny's mother called me this morning and told me that his parents really appreciated the letters from the students."

"That's great. That was nice gesture on your part."

"It was entirely the students' idea, and the words written were definitely their own." Madison reached into her classroom and flipped on the lights in anticipation of her next class.

"Keep up the good work," Mr. Whyte said before continuing down the hall toward his office. He passed a few students on his way, and Madison heard the students ask, "What's up Mr. Whyte?" No reply was heard though.

It was four-thirty before Olivia showed up on Madison's doorstep. "Ready to go?" She asked as she barged in the door.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Yeah, I just need to put some of these groceries in the fridge real quick."

"That's right, you have a big date tonight." Olivia followed Madison to the kitchen. "We can talk about your strategy during our run."

"Strategy for what?"

"You know, how to get him in bed while still keeping your dignity and all that stuff that you hold so close to your heart." Olivia took a seat on a stool at the end of the kitchen counter and thumbed through a magazine.

"You have a point there. Maybe I can seduce him, prove that I'm still worthy, and then when he leaves in a few weeks I won't have any regrets," Madison said from inside the refrigerator. Her head was aimed at the top shelf while she looked for a place to store the margarine.

"Now you're talking."

"That was me being sarcastic." Madison shut the refrigerator door, crumbled the plastic grocery bags, and stuffed them under the sink for future use. "Let's go run."

The traffic was heavier than usual so Madison suggested they take a detour through one of the neighboring subdivisions. "It's too dangerous, let alone noisy out here."

"Okay by me, just be sure we have you back in time to prepare for your date. Is your bed made?"

"Yes. Hey, do you believe in past lives?" Madison asked.

"You mean like we lived before this life? I don't know. Sometimes it feel like that. Why?"

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Phil thinks that he and I shared a past life together and that's why we are drawn to one another. Something about karmic debt and having to learn a lesson, which is why people join together from lifetime to lifetime."

"What happens when you learn the lesson?" Olivia pushed her bangs back, as though it would allow the coming answer to soak in better.

"I guess you move on to the next person and the next lesson. If you don't learn the lesson you're stuck with them though." Madison explained.

"What kind of lessons are we talking about here? Certainly nothing I teach my class, I gather."

"That would depend. Maybe, if what he says is true, all of our students could've been our kids in past lives!" Madison laughed at the thought of Olivia's students all lined up in baby joggers waiting to go for a run.

"Oh God, I hope not. Well, what do you believe? Do you believe in it or did it wig you out?"

"It's something I've never really thought about before and don't really know what to think. But I am curious about it and might do some reading over the summer on metaphysical experiences." Madison pointed to the next road, indicating they had to turn there. Olivia followed suit.

"I think it's worth reading about. At least then you'll have something more to talk about on your dates. Especially since the guy isn't getting any action."

They turned a corner just as a BMW sedan passed them; luckily it was dark blue.



## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"I wonder what lesson you and Michael have to learn? I don't think he ever learned to give people their personal space!" Laughing, Olivia picked up the pace, pulling Madison along.

The rest of their run remained at the faster pace, not allowing enough time between each breath to allow for words. Olivia spent a few minutes stretching with Madison in the driveway before heading home. Madison let herself back inside with only a half hour left to get ready for Phil.

Deciding on a pair of coffee colored Capri pants, a creamy tight tank top, and a dark brown, cropped cardigan sweater, she pulled them on and made her way back into the bathroom. Makeup was never a big issue for her; she wore it lightly only using a little bit of foundation, eyeliner, mascara, and eye shadow. Pink cheeks from her run assuaged the need for blush.

The salad came pre-made, loaded with carrots and snow peas. This left the salmon and asparagus to be steamed while the sweet potatoes cooked in the microwave. Having cooked for only herself for so long, Madison had to rethink portions and amounts while shopping and cooking. Dessert wasn't a problem since the ice cream sat in the freezer.

Just as Madison closed the lid to the salad dressing, the doorbell rang. This time when she opened it, Julie sat next to Phil, holding a medium sized gift bag in her mouth. Phil stood there in khaki pants and a dark green flannel shirt, looking even more handsome than the last time she saw him. She wondered if that was possible as she bent down to greet Julie.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Well, good evening Miss Julie. What is this?" Julie wagged her tail and gently put the bag at Madison's feet. Madison looked up at Phil and asked, "What did you bring this time?"

"I didn't bring anything; it was all Julie's idea."

Once inside and sitting on the couch, Madison opened the bag and tore through the multi-colored tissue paper. Beneath it all was a little square box. Holding it in her hand, her heart raced. She didn't dare look at Phil, but continued to open the box. Under the cracked-open lid sat a shiny gold pendant on a chain. The pendant was a pair of running shoes.

"Phil, what did you do? I love it! This is so incredibly sweet of you." Madison leaned over and kissed him, a kiss that reminded her how good his lips felt on hers.

"Wow, if that's all I need to do for a kiss like that I'll bring more."

"No, I love this one, just this one." Madison handed it to him and turned around. His hands reached around her neck and clasped the necklace. She leaned back against him, looked up and said, "Thank you. I'm not usually good at receiving gifts, but this one is an exception."

"I know this was a tough month and I wanted to do something to bring a little light into your life."

"You've done that all along, with the assistance of Julie, of course."

Their discussions over dinner ranged from her lesson plan for the next day, to the new shopping development going in up the road, to her telling him about the Morrison's appreciation of the letters. They

managed to avoid talking about his leaving for California, but it simmered in the back of Madison's mind most of the evening. She suppressed the thought and continued on with whatever topic they were discussing or began a new one. After dinner they lay on the soft, plush rug in the living room—oversized throw pillows supporting their heads.

It was Phil who eventually brought up the subject.

"I wish I weren't leaving in a few weeks."

"Yeah, well the elephant seals won't change their molting season this year just for you." Madison elbowed him before pressing in closer to his side.

"When I first took the job, I thought I'd only miss Julie." He turned his head toward her, looking down at her face he said, "Little did I know a lady as radiant and beautiful as you would come into my life right now."

"Well, isn't that part of the master plan? Maybe it has something to do with the lesson we need to learn?" Madison was half teasing, but was also beginning to see things his way and hoped that outlook would help ease the blow.

"Oh, I'm sure it's part of the master plan. That's the thing, fate has a way of showing up at either the best or the worst times in our lives, but it's almost always by surprise."

Holding each other, neither wanting to let go, they fell asleep on the floor wondering about the master plan before drifting off.

EIGHTEEN

When her alarm clock went off upstairs, Madison could barely hear it from the couch in the living room. Through blurred vision and crusty eyes, she looked around the room, wondering where she was for a moment. Her neck hurt and it didn't take long to notice she was still wearing her clothes from the night before, and that Phil was slumped across her arm and shoulder.

"Phil, wake up," Madison said, gently tugging on his arm. Julie stood up and stretched before staggering over to lick him on the cheek.

"I'm awake," he said. "What time is it?" He rolled over onto her pillow, which was now empty because Madison was making her way to the bathroom.

"Six-forty-five. I've got to get ready for school and you need to get to your office."

"It's a lab," Phil corrected, ever the scientist.

"Yeah, okay. Either way, we've gotta go."

"What's the rush? C'mon over here." Phil reached his arms out to her. Giving in, Madison went back to him and fell into his lap, placing her lips on his. His arms felt secure and welcoming around her as they kissed good morning.

"That's better. Now you can go get ready for school. I'm going to head home, but I'll call you later."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Phil and Julie left, leaving Madison time and space to shower and change.

An hour later Olivia bounced into Madison's classroom. "So? How'd it go?"

"We had a nice time."

"Ugh."

Holding her pendant out, Madison only smiled.

"What's that?" Olivia looked closer before her mouth dropped open. "Wow! That's beautiful. How thoughtful of him."

"Isn't it cool? I love it. He said he bought it for me since I've been through so much lately." Madison released the pendant and let it fall back onto her chest. The chain was barely longer than a choker, and the pendant lay in the dip of her neck.

"Okay, now you really owe it to him," Olivia said just as Amanda walked in the room.

"She owes who what?" Amanda asked.

"No one and nothing you need to worry about," Olivia said as she turned around and excused herself to go back to her classroom.

"I just received a nice present from a friend last night and she was advising me on a return gift." Madison explained as she handed Amanda the stack of journals to put out.

While her students were journal writing, Madison held onto the pendant, as though it was her new lifeline. She ran it up and down the chain, letting it slip from one end to the other. Her concentration was not to be broken until the timer went off, indicating the end of journaling.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Ms. Ragnar, what are we doing today?" Jonathan asked as he rested his chin on his desk, looking back up at her with puppy dog eyes.

"I'm going to give you twenty minutes to finish reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*. We made it through the trial and now we need to wrap it up so you can start outlining your papers." Madison collected the journals and put them back in her desk drawer.

"Next week we'll watch the movie." She quietly remembered Eric asking about the movie.

"If we've finished can we start on the outline?" Ginny asked as she pulled out her notebook, which was decorated with fashion models and pictures of her boyfriend.

"That's what I had in mind. The room should be quiet though for those who haven't finished reading. If you have questions about your paper, come up to my desk. You can go ahead and get started unless anyone has any questions."

No one raised their hands initially. A select few took out their books to finish reading while the rest took out blank paper for outlining. Three of the students approached Madison with questions about their paper, but for the most part they worked independently. As the students who were reading finished the book, they too took out paper and began their outlines. Madison walked around and checked on each of them as they worked or read.

"Ms. Ragnar, how many more weeks till spring break?" Peter piped in as though the class needed waking up.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Three. We have the first week of April off." Madison thought about how Phil will be in California by then.

"Then it's just about eight weeks until we're done. Woo hoo." Peter went back to his paper, satisfied with their brief interlude.

Eight weeks. She wondered if Phil would be back by the end of the school year. He indicated that he would be gone for two or three months, depending on funds and how their research went. Thank goodness for Julie and running.

During her runs of late, and while looking out of her classroom window, she couldn't help but notice that spring was arriving with bittersweet sorrow. The cold dry air of winter gave way to the damp dew of spring. Snowcapped mountains were now bright green, and the days were longer. This was the time of year that she didn't admire her northern friends who still had a month left of sudden snowstorms and the occasional below freezing temperatures. In Charlottesville, however, runners, walkers, and cyclists who hibernated in the gyms were now back out on the roads. Soccer moms and dads drove their minivans with renewed determination. Dogs were back out in their yards, re-marking their turf as Madison ran by their houses after school and on the weekends. There was no fighting it, spring was on the way and Phil would be leaving in a few weeks.

"Ms. Ragnar, the bell is about to ring," Amanda broke in.

"Okay class, hand in your outlines for my review. I'll give you feedback by Friday so you can start

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

writing over the weekend.” Each student placed their papers on the corner of her desk as they exited.

As promised, by Friday, Madison returned their outlines. She and Phil did not see each other Wednesday or Thursday evenings, but spoke on the phone. He was busy at the lab preparing for his trip and she finished grading previously turned in papers. She spent ample time writing comments on the outlines that she promised by Friday as well.

Spring rain was forecasted to cover the area all day Thursday, so Madison decided to go to the gym early and run on the treadmill before school. She hadn’t gone in weeks since she’d been over tired and emotional from Eric, and in contrast, busy falling for Phil.

After they scanned her member card at the front desk, she ventured to the locker room where she placed her gym bag in her usual locker, number sixty-five. On the way to the treadmill, she picked up a sweat towel in one hand and clutched her iPod in the other. Every time she went to the gym, she remembered she needed to update the songs. It was just one of those things that she only thought about while at the gym.

Her favorite treadmill in the corner was free. It faced the television that displayed NBC. There were several televisions hanging from the ceiling and each ran a different station. She liked to watch the Today Show and local news while running, even though she listened to music. The closed caption for the hearing impaired allowed her to read what they were saying. During commercials, she cranked up her music and ran sprints. This worked well for doing intervals that



helped with her running speed. For some it would be information overload, but for Madison it was an escape and a nice change of pace from running in traffic and on the roads.

The usual faces were on the other treadmills, the weights, and the elliptical trainers. A handful of men played basketball on the court in the middle of the gym. Their grunts and skidding sneakers were drowned out by time they reached the aerobic area. Across the room, in the weight area, Madison noticed Michele, another teacher who taught at the middle school. They often exchanged stories in the locker room before leaving for school.

Today, the only difference was that Madison purposely looked for Michael. If, in fact, he knew her from the gym, maybe she would see him there and that would ease her, or more likely Olivia's, mind. The bald headed trainer was busy working with a new client that Madison didn't recognize. The client was a woman in her late forties or so who wore too much makeup and an outfit from the 1980's—likely the last time she worked out. Madison didn't expect she would last long. They never do. She was the only new face. Everyone else fit "the usual" crowd.

The letters on the green "Start" button on the treadmill were worn out. Much of the last "t" was gone. But the model was new enough that it had plenty of numbers to display to feed Madison's number fetish. She could keep track of time, pace, elevation, distance, calories, heart rate, and other less meaningful digits. So much to pay attention to when the television and music weren't enough for her. Yes, she preferred to run

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

outdoors, but running on the treadmill was like playing a video game and getting a workout at the same time.

"Hi Madison," a voice called from another treadmill.

"Oh, hi there," she waved and replied in an, "okay, now leave me alone so I can run," voice.

By the time she reached mile three, Madison was sweating. The overhead fans were set lower than usual, causing her to heat up faster. Calories were burning, distance was behind her, music played, and all was going well.

That is until she spotted the back of a head across the room. Was that Michael? The lat-pull-down machine blocked her view, so she couldn't really tell. It looked like his crew cut. Was he that tall, or did seeing him in workout clothes deceive her? The figure moved over to the bench press machine. While he piled on weights, his back was still to her. She looked down at the treadmill and noticed her speed had increased by 2 miles per hour. She looked over at the bench press again. He was now lying down, head up, but facing away from her. Were those Michael's biceps? She couldn't remember how big his arms were. Damn.

Another half mile behind her, and the figure finally moved closer. *Turn around*, she thought in hopes that the telepathy would transcend the aerobic room and the weight machines. He turned all right. Turned and walked over toward the exit to the locker rooms. Still having a mile left to run, she knew he could realistically be able to shower and leave before she was done. Should she interrupt her workout to go see if it was him? She ran the risk of losing her treadmill and

all those numbers; a new runner would erase them. Her heart rate elevated another ten digits just from the stress of indecision.

After several minutes of toying with the idea, she came up with a plan to check the parking lot for his car while he was in the shower. That way she wouldn't have to actually talk to him, but she could confirm that he was there. Music blared in her earphones, Matt Lauer talked about male anorexia on the television above her, and the red glowing digits on the display in front of her changed moment by moment. Then she stopped it all. She had to know. She pressed the "Pause" button on the upper left corner of the display, left her towel draped across it, hoping that would show potential runners that she wasn't finished. There were still two other treadmills available, so she felt safe leaving for a bit.

She ran past the front desk and out into the cool, damp spring air. Her shorts and top were drenched in sweat and immediately absorbed the cold air against her skin. Madison stood just outside the door but under the awning. Starting with the left side of the parking lot, she scanned each row for a red BMW. Nothing there. She then scanned the middle rows. Again, nothing there. As she turned to view the right side, a voice boomed from behind her, "Looking for someone in particular?"

Madison froze and answered quietly, without turning around, "Uh, no. I just thought I left my headlights on. Was just checking." When she was certain her face was back to running red, and not embarrassment red, she turned around to face Michael.

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"Don't they turn off automatically?" Michael smiled down at her. Raindrops danced heavily on the asphalt. The automatic door slid open as a couple left the gym, covering their heads from the rain as they ran to their cars. Madison used the temporary distraction to vie for time before answering his question.

"No, I drive an older car. They didn't have that feature then." Pleased with her answer, she stepped back inside the sliding door. Michael followed her.

"See, I thought I knew you from the gym. Did you have a good run the other day? Your friend show up?"

"Yup and yup. Speaking of which, I need to go grab my treadmill back before someone snags it."

"Oh, don't let me keep you. I'm sure I'll be seeing you around." Michael smiled and left, gym bag in hand.

Madison watched as he went to his car and drove off. She didn't know what to say to him after his last comment. She only wondered if it was true and noted that his smile wasn't scary or threatening.

\*\*\*\*\*

By Friday night, Madison was more than excited to see Phil. That morning it dawned on her how much she missed him and Julie. They had plans to go out with Olivia and Gregory, back to the same bar where they originally met. Phil picked her up at seven o'clock on the dot. He brought Julie with him and left her there while they went out so she could get used to staying at Madison's alone.

"You look incredible," Phil said when Madison opened the door. She had acquired some new pieces of

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clothing in the past few weeks, one of which was a miniskirt that flaunted the long shapely legs she was known for in her younger years. She wore the skirt with a forest green top that accentuated her ever-changing hazel eyes. Depending on what she wore, her eyes either looked bright green or timid brown. The running shoe pendant he gave her sat at the nape of her neck and simple hoop earrings dangled from her lobes. The layers of her auburn hair swept gently on her shoulders. She realized how good it felt to dress up for him and to have it appreciated.

They held hands in the car on the way to the brewery except when Phil had to shift gears. The radio played in the background while they talked about Julie's feeding and general routine.

"I've already gone to the pet store and picked up four bags of dog food, which should be way more than you need. None of them are due to expire before June." Phil talked, drove, and occasionally squeezed Madison's hand. "I also grabbed some chew bones, a few new toys, and some Frontline for ticks and fleas since you'll be getting into that season."

"I could have done all that after you left. You've got enough to do for your trip."

"That's okay. It helped me to not feel guilty about leaving her. I haven't been apart from her for more than a week since I got her."

"She's going to miss you, that's for sure."

"I'm glad she'll be with you. I want to pick up a digital camera so you can e-mail me pictures of her."

"Just her?"

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"If you can teach her to take pictures, I'd love a bunch of you too. If Julie can't do it, have Olivia take some or use the self-timer." Phil turned onto the road leading to the brewery and found a spot near the entrance. He opened Madison's door for her and held her hand as they walked up to the large wooden doors. Madison slid her finger along the gargoyle's head, amazed by the intricacy of the work. Once inside, they found Olivia and Gregory.

"Hey! We were lucky to get the same booth," Olivia said. Her mug was almost empty. "Gregory went to the bar to refill the pitcher since the waitress isn't anywhere to be seen."

"I'll go find him and get two more mugs," Phil said. He kissed Madison and turned to make his way through the crowd.

"Ooooh. Kissing in public now?" Olivia smirked.

"Very funny. So, how's Gregory?"

"He's good. It was a long drive up here with traffic, so he's tired, but he'll last."

"He better, it's still early." Madison slid into the corner against the wall, leaving enough room for Phil when he returned. "Phil said he bought a bunch of food and toys for Julie for when he goes to California."

"I'm sure Julie will miss him, he's had her for a long time. Gregory jokes that he's been with that dog longer than any girlfriend."

"Well, both of us will miss him, but he's going to buy me a digital camera so we can e-mail him photos."

"We're sad to see him go, even if it's only for a few months," Olivia said before taking her next sip of beer.

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What was left of the frothy foam floated to the corner of her mug as she raised it to her mouth.

"Me too," Madison said. She didn't continue the conversation though. "I'm going to hit the ladies room before they get back." Madison slid back out of the booth and headed down the hallway.

As she tried to open the ladies room door, she discovered it to be locked. "Hey, someone's in here!" screamed a woman from behind the closed door.

"Sorry," Madison answered and leaned against the wall between the men's and ladies room to wait. She barely felt the first tap on her shoulder, and the second one startled her.

"Hey, Madison, how are you?" A familiar voice fell upon her ears. She looked up and was face to face with Michael. The shocked look on her face must have scared him right back.

"What are you doing here?" was all Madison was able to get out.

"Um, I'm using the bathroom between beers."

"Oh, sorry, of course. I'm just not used to seeing you here. I didn't know you drank beer." *What am I saying?* Madison tried to think about what to say next, but she was so caught off guard, her brain was mush.

"Do you come here a lot?" Michael leaned his hip against the wall next to her.

"Uh, well, no. Not that often," Madison said as she took a small step backwards, hoping he wouldn't notice the recoil. She glanced over his now lowered shoulder to make sure Olivia didn't have a view of the hallway and was relieved to discover that there were

too many people blocking the view. *Or was that a good thing?* "So, are you here with friends?" she asked.

"No, not yet. A few of them might stop by later. Same guys that I run with, so you know how predictable that is."

"Oh yeah, them," recalling when she ran into him on the run that day and how he had said his friend cancelled on him.

"You know, I know I've asked you this before, but I really think I know you from somewhere other than the gym." His eyes would not leave hers while he spoke.

"Geez, I don't know where that would be though."

"Do you have a dog?" Michael continued the line of inquisition.

"No, not right now. Why?" Madison wondered if he was asking just to find out if she had protection. She had to admit in that moment that Olivia's paranoia was rubbing off on her.

"I'm a veterinarian. Thought maybe you bring your dog to my clinic."

Hearing this relaxed Madison a bit. How bad could a veterinarian be after all? Before she could respond to her own question, the ladies room door opened and a drunk, snotty lady emerged and brushed past Madison.

"I need to run. My friends are waiting." As soon as she said it, she regretted it. What if he stopped by their table? Olivia would surely blurt something out.

"Okay, nice seeing you again." Michael disappeared back into the crowd, but Madison did not go into the ladies room until he was out of sight. She glanced over



to the booth and was relieved to see that Olivia was engrossed in conversation with Phil and Gregory.

"That wasn't very quick. Everything okay?" Olivia drilled when Madison returned.

"Yeah, there was a line." Madison thought about telling them about Michael in case he came to the table, but decided to take her chances that they wouldn't see him.

"Fill your mug. Phil's telling us more about his trip," Gregory said. He had a magnetism that overshadowed most people who surrounded him.

"First I drive for four days, then when I land in California I study the elephant seals, fill out reports, and miss Madison while I'm gone," Phil said. He did, however, explain the finer details of his trip after everyone said, "Awww."

He mapped out his driving route on one of the paper placemats. After drawing a rough draft of the United States, he showed them his route, which consisted of Interstate 70 for most of the way. All the while, his free arm did not leave Madison's shoulders.

"A good portion of the other people will be flying in, and from what I hear, not many are renting cars. So, I think I'll be putting on lots of miles. The accommodations aren't bad, but since most of the grant money goes toward the study, and not our luxuries, I'm sure they won't be five-star. They are, however, right on the beach, which is nice."

"Will there be internet access?" Gregory asked.

"Definitely, we'll need it for e-mailing all of the sponsoring labs and documenting what we find. Of

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course I expect to be hearing from you guys, too," he said as he squeezed Madison's shoulder.

"Gregory, how cute is this? Phil is getting Madison a digital camera so that she can e-mail him pictures of herself," Olivia said.

"No, it's for pictures of Julie," Madison reminded her.

"Hey, hey. It's for pictures of everyone, and I expect at least one a day." Phil defended himself between sips of beer.

"Are you packed?" Gregory asked.

"Somewhat. There's really not too much I need besides shorts, t-shirts, bathing suit, notebooks, a few towels, my digital camera and a sleeping bag in case I want to sleep on the beach at night or go camping on the weekends." Phil recited his list as though he committed it to memory.

During their discussion, Madison searched the bar for Michael. She noticed him moving across the other side of the room between groups of people. He appeared to looking for someone, but eventually made it to the door and left, alone. Another bullet dodged, but he was correct. They did run into each other again.

NINETEEN

On Saturday morning, Madison and Phil woke up in her bed. He rolled over and wrapped his arms and legs around her. "Good morning, precious."

"Good morning." She pressed herself against him and returned the embrace. "What time did we get home?"

"Just after midnight. You were so tired I practically had to carry you up to bed."

"I don't remember drinking that much."

"You didn't, but you were distracted most of the night and exhausted by time we left. Everything okay?" He took her chin in his hand so that he could see her eyes.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Friday nights are tough for me after a week of teaching," Madison said. She immediately thought of Michael and the coincidence of seeing him again. Trying to shake the image from her head, she propped herself up on one elbow and looked back down at Phil. Her hair cascaded across her face and he reached up and brushed it back. She wrapped her leg tighter around his leg and kissed him. Pulling her on top of him, they kissed harder. Still holding her hair back with one hand, he explored the nooks of her body with the other. Her curves were slight and tighter than most of the women he'd bedded.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Close your eyes," he told her as they lost themselves in the moment. Hips joined, he stroked hers, pulling them tightly against his own. She moaned and arched the small of her back toward the ceiling, letting him know it was okay. A rush of physical and emotional passion flowed over her, a stark reminder of what she had been missing for so long. His hands tugged at her t-shirt, pulling it up over her head, exposing her supple skin, taught muscles, and curves. Not taking his eyes off her body, he yanked his own shirt off and stuffed it under the pillow.

Their naked bodies glued together with sweat as they made love for the first time. Slowly, he took her to places she hadn't known existed. Slowly, she showed him what love felt like. And slowly, they beckoned one another for more.

Sheets lay twisted at the foot of the bed when they finished, exposing their wet bodies to the skylight in the ceiling. Breathless, she lay face down on top of him, her breasts pushing on his chest. Her hipbones settled into the curve of his abdomen. She rested her head in the nook of his neck and listened as his heart thumped below. He stroked her back gently with his fingertips, and other than that neither of them moved for a long, long while.

Deciding on the Pancake House was an easy decision for both of them after a long hot shower and pulling on some clothes. Madison had forgotten about the appetite side effect of making love. A stack of waffles sat before her along with a tall glass of orange juice.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"You're absolutely amazing, you know that?" Phil said.

"Don't flatter me too much, I'll get used to it, then when you're gone I'll miss it." Sipping her orange juice, she peered over the top of her glass, looking into his eyes that now had a glint in them that hadn't been there before.

"Well, get used to it. Besides, I can flatter you on the phone and via e-mail." Phil reached across the table and clasped his hand around hers, continuing to eat with the other. His plate overflowed with scrambled eggs, hash browns, and toast, all of which he devoured like a bear out of hibernation.

"You're just saying that because I'm helping you out with Julie," Madison said, a spangle of light in her eyes.

"Damn, you figured me out. It's true. I just want you so that you'll take good care of my dog. It's all for Julie." After a quick tightening of his grip on her hand, they finished their meal, both in quiet reflection of waking up together.

Breakfast left them full, but ready to do something. "Why don't we take Julie down to the Hollow and walk along the river?" Phil suggested. Madison agreed to the idea, and they drove back to her house to pick up Julie.

The drive out to the Hollow was far enough out that most people didn't bother with the trip. But, Madison always enjoyed the views and the peace and quiet when she went out there. Today was no different, tranquil. The surrounding peace was accompanied with a quiet calm and warmth that enveloped her.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

The signs of spring were evident along the river, even if it was too early for the butterflies that flocked the riverbanks in April and May. March was about the pre-season changes. The snowmelt from the mountains cascaded through the river. Daffodils had reached their peak and bowed away allowing for the crocuses to take over the show.

Madison and Phil strolled along the riverbank, digesting breakfast. Julie darted ahead, swam in the river, then rejoined them many times over before she tuckered out and permanently joined them in their stroll.

"Pretty soon you'll be looking out at the Pacific Ocean instead of just a measly 'ol river," Madison said. They stopped walking and sat on an enormous rock that jetted out from the bank and extended half way across the river.

"Nothing that I share with you is measly and the ocean will just be a substitute for looking at you." Phil smiled down at her.

"There you go with the compliments again. I warned you to be careful with excessive compliments." Madison picked up a stone and skimmed it across the river.

Phil reached over and pulled her close. "Are you glad we made love?" he asked.

"Yeah, but don't tell Olivia, she's been bugging me about it." Madison didn't have any qualms about telling him that she and Olivia had discussed the issue since it was more about Olivia pestering her.

"Oh really? Well, why don't you tell her I wanted to wait? That'll shut her up."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Seriously though, it'd been quite a while for me. But, you were amazing, patient, and loving," Madison said.

After kissing for several moments, they stood back up and continued their walk before heading home. Julie slept soundly on a blanket in the backseat while Phil and Madison drove toward town.

Shopping for Phil's trip kept them busy for the rest of the weekend. Even though he indicated that he didn't need much, more and more items became necessary as they put their heads together and thought about it. Knowing he was not going to want to shop for drugstore items while there, he stocked up on razors, shaving cream, toothpaste and other toiletries. At an electronics store they found a digital camera that was perfect for Madison. E-mail capabilities were simple and it was small enough to carry in her purse or a small backpack. After a weekend of hiking and shopping, they were exhausted by Sunday night and decided on pizza delivery for dinner.

"Pizza with pineapple is my favorite," Madison said as she opened the phonebook.

"That's fine with me." Phil was sprawled out on the couch, waiting for her to return. After phoning in their order, Madison joined him. They lay entangled with one another and dozed off until the doorbell rang, sharply stirring them out of their nap.

"Do we have to get it?" Madison mumbled from under his arm.

"Well, I'm as hungry as I am tired, so yes. I'll take care of it," Phil said as he pulled out his wallet and went to the door. The aroma of hot pizza filled the

living room. Madison went to the kitchen for plates and drinks. By the time she returned, Phil was sitting up right flipping through the channels of the television. The pizzas sat on the table in front of him, steaming hot.

They watched the news and ate until they were stuffed. Julie had eaten her dinner a few hours before and was now asleep in her new favorite spot on the living room floor.

"That was just what I needed," Madison said as she put down her plate and took a sip of her orange soda before leaning back against the couch pillows. "I haven't been that ravenous or eaten that much in a while."

"I haven't had such a nice weekend in a while." Phil placed his hand on her knee and squeezed it before getting up to clear the plates.

"No, you sit down. You've catered to me all evening; I can at least clear the plates." Madison released the plates from his hands and headed toward the kitchen. When she returned to the living room, Phil was laying on the couch holding his arms out to her. Without saying a word, she lowered herself onto him and within moments they were making love. Legs intertwined like twisted licorice, arms wrapped around one another as though they would never let go, their bodies came together as one; neither one of them sure where which one ended and the other began. Phil's lips met hers after making their way up her neck. They devoured each other. Sweaty and drained when they finished, they lay together still intertwined and melted in place. Madison's bangs stuck to her forehead. Phil's



## *Through Hazel Eyes*

brow was moist against her neck. Her long legs glistened in the glare of the floor lamp as they lay in a naked lump of flesh.

"That was amazing," was all either one of them could mutter. It seemed like hours before Phil finally reached up and looked through her hair and down at his watch. "It's after ten, honey." He looked up at her, releasing his brow from her neck.

"Uh huh." Madison clung tightly to him, still not wanting to move. Within minutes they were both asleep and wouldn't wake again until early the next morning as the sun came up. Still naked, and now chilled from the cool night air that set in long ago, they awoke, stretched and smiled. Phil was the first to speak, and only spoke the three words, "I love you."

TWENTY

**"A**re you sure you have everything?" Phil asked as he looked around Madison's kitchen.

"Yes, I'm sure. I can always buy anything else she needs." Madison reached out and took his hands in hers and pulled him close. "We'll be fine, so don't worry."

"Okay. I'll call you from Missouri. I ought to be there by nightfall. My cell will be on if you need to reach me or just want to say 'hi' or something."

"Good. Be careful on the road, there are a lot of big rigs out there who think they own it." Madison tried to keep her bottom lip from quivering as she spoke.

"I'll be careful. God, I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too, but we'll e-mail lots of photos and you'll be so busy time will fly by." She tugged at his shirt, pulling him closer.

"I hope so. I love you." Phil leaned down and kissed her.

"I love you too, but you better go if you're going to make it to Missouri by nightfall."

They walked out to his car that was now packed to the ceiling. He left enough clearance down the middle so that he could see the road in the rearview mirror. The sun was beginning to show itself over the horizon creating a morning glow.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Julie sat at Phil's feet. He knelt down next to her and said, "You take good care of Madison. Don't let any boogey men come in the house, and make sure she smiles at least once a day." He kissed Julie on the top of her head and stood up. "One last kiss for you, too."

"Just one, then you need to go before I hide in the car." Madison stood on her tippy toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. The long kiss good-bye ended and he climbed into his car. "Say hello to the elephant seals for me," she said.

Madison watched and waved good-bye as he pulled down the driveway. She momentarily flashed back to leaving Colorado and Rick. This bittersweet departure was much different than that one. She was happy that Phil was going to make a name for himself in the oceanography arena with this project, but the thought of not seeing him for at least two months suffocated her. Parting on a Saturday morning made it that much harder. She now had the entire weekend ahead of her; she was alone again. Just then Julie nudged her, reminding her that she wasn't quite as alone as she felt.

Once they were back inside, Madison was tempted to call Olivia for company but decided against it. She wanted to feel her emotions and let them settle in before having to put up a front for other people. Although she knew Olivia would understand, she wasn't ready to face anyone yet. She wasn't ready to hear all of the cliché advice, "The time will fly by," which she had already given Phil, or "At least you can e-mail and talk to him on the phone." Instead, she decided to go upstairs and take a bath, wondering if that might rinse her sorrows down the drain. She used

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

to love taking baths as a child, mesmerized by the whirlpool effect of the last bit of cooled water topped with a soapy film going out to sea. She used to marvel over how the draining appeared to hasten toward the end, almost as though the draining water knew it was almost done—a sprint to the finish line.

As she entered the bedroom, her eyes caught a glimpse of something square on her pillow. Upon closer inspection, she found a big red box with a white bow on top. “Julie, what is this?” she asked partly to herself and partly to Julie, who only wagged her tail and sniffed the edge of the bed.

Madison sat down on the unmade bed where she and Phil had made love that morning and picked up the box. The box was light and her curiosity peaked. She shook it gently, but the only noise from within was the scuffing of tissue paper against the cardboard. Once the ribbon was off, she removed the lid and peeked inside where she found a flannel shirt and a card sitting on top.

She read the card out loud, as though it would help. “Dear Madison, I wanted you to have one of my shirts to wear while I’m gone. Preferably, you’ll wear it to bed. This way I can think about your skin next to my shirt when I go to sleep at night and wish it were me instead. You know that I’ll miss and think about you every day. With love, Phil.”

Madison pulled the shirt out of the box and held it to her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks and onto the soft flannel collar as she took in his smell. She thought of him going to sleep at night, picturing her in his shirt.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Once soaking in the tub, the warmth of the bath water seemed only to increase her melancholy stupor, and Madison decided not to stay in the water for long. She pulled the drain plug and watched the water disappear, like she had as a child, orbiting through the tiny hole in the bottom of the tub until each drop was gone. She imagined it flowing out to the ocean, realizing, of course, that it wouldn't be the Pacific Ocean. She dried off and dressed herself in jeans and a long sleeved shirt. For the first time in her adult life, her morning oatmeal tasted like gooey cardboard, but she made herself eat it anyway. Julie ate her own breakfast without hesitation, which was a relief to Madison.

"I know what Julie! We can go to the dog park." Madison thought the idea was brilliant and that it would be a good distraction for her, let alone an adventure for Julie. After taking two bottles of water out of the refrigerator, she clipped Julie's leash to her collar and loaded her into the car.

The dog park was a few miles south of town and was crowded. When she opened the gate, several dogs approached Julie and sniffed her out to make sure she was worthy of the rank of dogs within the fence. When the sniffing was settled, and tails were wagging, the dogs took off running across the field. Madison found a bench to sit on, not sure what else to do since she hadn't been to an official dog park before. The fact that so many dogs could coexist in a large fenced area was amazing to her. A few of the owners beckoned their dogs, leashed them, and left, but not before others

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

would arrive and unleash their own dogs that joined in on the fun.

"Anyone sitting here?" An elderly lady asked while approaching the bench.

"No, no. Please, have a seat." Madison made room for the woman.

"Thank you. My Elsa is on the other side of the field, but I am just too tired to stand and watch her. She likes to play with the big dogs even though she's quite small." The woman's face was kind and gentle. Slight wrinkles framed her eyes and mouth, her cheeks smooth and pale. Madison watched the woman gaze across the field while she talked.

"I'm here with a friend's dog. I just got her this morning and thought this would be fun for both of us," Madison eventually said.

"Oh yes, the dogs do enjoy the park." Still gazing, the woman rested her elbows on her lap and placed her head in her hands. The childlike pose brought out an innocence that further warmed the elderly woman to Madison. She felt comfortable in her company, and the anxiety of the early morning waned as they sat and chatted.

"My name is Caroline, by the way." The old lady said in the middle of conversation.

"I'm Madison. Nice to meet you, Caroline."

"Isn't it funny how some of the dogs look like their owners? Isn't it? Or how you can pretty much tell who belongs with whom?" Caroline said.

"Yes! Just look at that Great Dane. He must belong to the man over in the far corner. The one holding an industrial sized leash."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Laughing, they settled back in the bench and continued their observations and to play the game of matching dogs to owners.

"Hey, do you think the guy with the beard owns that gray dog over there?" Madison asked.

"Oh, I'll bet you're right!" Caroline laughed out loud. "What about the little white one? Who do you think owns him?" Madison heard Caroline, but was sidetracked by a tail that caught her attention. Through the field of fur, she swore she recognized it. She stood up and peered through the fur and paws, but was unable to catch another glimpse. One pack of dogs blended in with another, making it more difficult to see through them.

"Are you worried about your friend's dog?" Caroline asked.

"No, I thought I saw another dog that I recognized. I must've imagined it." Madison sat back down.

"That happens. Some dogs look alike, but it's their personalities that keep them different."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Which dog belongs to your friend?"

"The Chocolate lab in the corner playing with the Collie. Her name is Julie."

"Oh, she looks sweet. I can't see her eyes without my glasses on, but being a Lab, I'm sure they are brown and soulful."

Caroline's words struck Madison. Yes, Julie's eyes were brown and soulful just like Phil's. The irony that he worked in a lab and owned a Lab dawned on her as well.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Yes, she is a sweetheart. Lots of love to give." Madison took one more look for the tail she thought she saw before and then gave up. She didn't spot it again.

Caroline and Madison talked for another half hour before they both decided it was time to leave. Julie, tired out by now, was ready to go and came when called.

"Thank you for talking to me, Madison" the woman said. She leashed up Elsa on a bright pink leash.

"I enjoyed it. Maybe we'll see each other again," Madison replied.

When Madison got home, she felt better and called Olivia to see if she wanted to go for a run. Knowing that Olivia probably slept in with Gregory, there was a good chance that she hadn't run yet. Madison refilled Julie's water bowl while the phone on the other end rang.

"Hello?"

"Hey, how 'bout a run?" Madison cut to the chase.

"How 'bout fine." Olivia said. "Where?"

"I was thinking we could run out at the Hollow. Phil and I went hiking there the other day and it wasn't that crowded."

"It's kind of a hike just getting there."

"Ah, c'mon. It'll be worth it," Madison said.

"Fine, give me time to change."

Madison hung up and made sure Julie was set before leaving. When she found her in the living room, she was sound asleep...obviously tired from her outing. When Madison walked outside, she noticed that the driveway seemed empty without Phil's car



## *Through Hazel Eyes*

there, yet the budding leaves on the trees gave hope to the new season dawning.

"So, dare I ask how the goodbye scene went this morning?" Olivia didn't waste any time once she climbed into the car.

"I kept my cool, but inside it was killing me to say goodbye to him. I'm in a bit of shock and denial that he's gone. Probably in Kentucky by now."

"Aren't you glad now that you slept with him before he left?" Olivia asked.

"Yes and no. Now I miss both him and that!"

They drove past several old family-run farms on their way out to the Hollow. Many of the farms passed down from one generation to the next, while others had no family members left to inherit them. Those were the ones that were sold off and subdivided into small lots where new and bigger homes were built. The essence of the countryside was gradually changing, but to a city dweller out for a country drive, the landscape remained genuinely southern.

"How's it going with Julie?"

"Seems to be fine. She ate her breakfast easily enough after he left. She must've known something was up by his loaded car, but she's also used to me by now."

Turning down the narrow road that led to the Hollow, Madison slowed up and refocused her attention on their impending run. The reservoir at the tail end of the road reflected the morning sky. Hiking trails surrounded the water, but were not conducive to running due to their rough terrain and narrowness.

Runners and walkers stuck to the paved road, which led them alongside the river that flowed from the reservoir. Madison and Olivia ran quietly for several miles, enjoying the welcomed morning air and the hypnotic sound of the flowing water alongside them.

"We haven't heard much from Michael lately. Do you think he's given up on stalking you?" Olivia eventually asked.

"Well, actually, I forgot to tell you that he was at the bar the other night," Madison stated matter-of-factly. She chose to leave out the incident at the gym.

"What? How could you forget to tell me that? I didn't see him."

"You were sitting in the booth. I saw him when I went to the ladies room. He was just suddenly there while I was waiting at the door."

"That's weird!"

"You think everything about him is weird."

"No, I don't think his red BMW is weird. But, yeah, everything else seems to be. What did he say?"

"He insisted again that he knows me from somewhere. Other than the gym I guess."

Their run finished as Madison made the last comment. They walked a bit further to let their heart rates drop before stretching their legs.

"I think you need to hire a private investigator to figure out who this guy is. This is getting creepier." Olivia stretched her calves. "Now that Phil is gone, you're vulnerable again."

"I've got Julie, and I'm still not worried. Yeah, he startled me at the bar, but there's something in his eyes that tell me he's not out to harm me." Madison

followed suit and stretched her calves before stretching her hamstrings.

"What then? If he wanted to date you, he would have asked you by now, don't you think?"

"Maybe, but not if he's shy."

"He's not shy! My God, he shows up everywhere you are. That's no shy man, that's a bold man!" Olivia was now standing up in her teacher pose, making Madison feel like one of Olivia's students in the back row who was just called on even though she didn't raise her hand.

"Know what? I'd really like to drop this subject. It's getting old." Madison unlocked her car and climbed in, careful not to get her sweaty palms on the steering wheel until after she wiped them on her shirt.

"Geez, I can see someone's edgy since her boyfriend left town. If you don't hire an investigator at least go online and do a search on him. What's his last name again? They said it so fast that day at the race, I don't remember though." Olivia said before she climbed in the passenger seat.

"I don't know. I didn't even see him, remember?" Madison said. "If it makes you feel better, I'll see what I can find out over spring break."

Madison wasn't ready to face her empty house. After the grocery store, the bookstore, and another hot chocolate from the coffee shop, she gave in and returned home. Julie wagged her tail with great enthusiasm when the door unlocked and opened. Madison let her out in the back yard and fed her dinner when she came back in from her short walkabout.

Madison was starting to see why people owned dogs. Dogs rarely disagree with you and are always happy to see you. The comfort of her couch welcomed Madison as she lay down to watch television. Any show would do, if it took her mind off Phil being gone. She knew each day would grow easier, not only because she'd be more used to him being gone, but because it would mean one day closer to his return. Having met Rick fresh out of college, she hadn't had much experience with the different dynamics of a relationship and long distance was definitely not on the list.

Hours later, the phone rang. It took her a minute to locate it in her stupor, let alone the dark. She had fallen asleep while it was still light out. Eventually, she found the phone and was relieved to see Phil's number on the caller ID.

"Hello!" she said.

"Hey, hon! How are my girls doing?" Phil sounded chipper, despite his long day of driving.

"We're fine. How's your drive?" Madison reached down and rubbed Julie behind her ears while listening to his recall of the day's events on the road. He described the tractor-trailers as though they were deadly serpents hunting down cars that were mere minnows. "That sounds like an adventurous start to your trip. Did you get enough to eat on the road?"

Madison didn't want to hang up, especially now that she was wide-awake and knew she'd have difficulty falling back to sleep later.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Yeah, I ate the sandwich you made me by ten o'clock, then stopped for some snacks at lunchtime. How about you? What'd you do today?"

"Went running with Olivia down in the Hallow. That was fun, but it was tough being there without you." Madison paused, twirling her hair with her index finger. "The good news is that Julie's eating just fine. She went to the dog park today and seemed to enjoy it. I'll take her back tomorrow so I can get a picture of her. That way you'll have one when you get to California."

"That'd be great, but make sure there's one of you too," Phil said.

"Maybe, maybe not. It'll be a surprise. Well, I should let you go to bed. I know you've had a long day. I miss you."

"I miss you too. Love you. Good night." The phone clicked before Madison was able to say, "I love you" back. Instead she whispered it to the empty room. She climbed the stairs to her bedroom where she changed into his shirt before slipping under the covers.

TWENTY-ONE

The purple leash Phil bought for Julie was shorter than Madison would have liked. However, if she went running with Julie, it would be better to use a shorter one than a longer one. She drove over to the dog park, this time arriving earlier than the day before. Julie stood on the back seat of the car with her head out the window and ears flapping in the wind. *Oh, to have the life of a dog.* Fewer dogs than the previous day were inside the fenced area, making it easier to let Julie in through the gate. After Madison unhooked the leash, Julie took off across the field to play the other dogs. Many of them were chasing a ball that one of the other owners was throwing. Fortunately for him another Labrador Retriever was consistently coming up with the ball, delighted to return it to the man.

Madison took a seat on the same bench where she had met Caroline. This morning, however, she was relieved to have the bench and her thoughts to herself. Absorbed in watching the various dogs at play, she engaged herself again in playing the game of guessing which ones belonged to which owner. A long haired Collie mix with an equally long nose apparently belonged to the woman with a braid that reached the middle of her back. The Beagle with a gray muzzle stuck closely to its owner, an elderly man with soft

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

cheeks. Julie seemed to make friends with a German Shepherd mix that followed her around more than any other dog there.

Madison sat with the hot chocolate she stopped for at the coffee shop up the road. The hot to-go container sat cupped between her hands, which she rested on her lap. The tips of the whipped cream teased her lips, daring her to indulge in the wickedly hot fluid beneath it, while the rest melted, swirling artistically into the chocolate, looking much the last drops of soap atop the water going down a bathtub's drain. She had just taken a sip when a voice from behind startled her.

"Hello," the man's voice said. "Fancy meeting you here."

Madison gulped down her sip of the still quite hot hot chocolate and turned to find Michael standing there. His left foot was planted on the bench behind her; his elbow was rested on his knee. From where Madison sat, he appeared larger than life, statuesque. She squeezed the to-go cup so tightly the hot chocolate spilled over the edge and onto her lap. Still, she sat there, not sure whether to keep her eye on Michael or to mop up the hot chocolate that was now soaked through to her skin. After a moment, her eyes shifted from the cup to Michael and back again until Michael spoke. "I'm really sorry! I didn't mean to surprise you. Here, I have a bandana you can use to wipe that up."

Michael pulled a tattered blue and white bandana out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Sorry, it's all I've got. It's usually around my dog's neck, but it's clean."

"Dog?" Madison reached out, took hold of the bandana, and used it to wipe her lap.

"Yeah, I bring him here to play. I left one of his toys here yesterday, so I'm just back to find it." Michael took the bandana back from Madison when she was done and put it back in his pocket. "Maybe you've seen the toy? It's one of those floppy Frisbees."

"No. Sorry, I haven't seen it." Madison turned her legs around so that she could face him straight on, realizing she hadn't showered or even washed her face that morning. She didn't expect to see anyone she knew. She didn't expect to see Michael.

"I didn't know you have a dog," Michael said.

"It's, um, my boyfriend's dog. I just started bringing her here."

"Oh. And where is he?"

"Um, well, he's at home. Probably making breakfast for us right now, so I should go." Madison called to Julie, who came running right over. "Hope you find your Frisbee."

While Madison hooked Julie's leash back on, Michael said, "Okay then. Have a good day."

Madison cursed Olivia under her breath for building paranoid thoughts in her head. Had Michael not startled her and if Phil were still in town, she felt she'd be having a different reaction. As she loaded Julie into the car, she looked back across the field and noticed Michael walking toward his red BMW, Frisbee in hand.

Back at home Madison wished that Phil really was there making breakfast for them. He had grown to like her oatmeal and protein shake concoctions, and he



often made breakfast for both of them. Julie ate her dog food while Madison made her oatmeal. Most of her protein shake sat in the fridge, left over from earlier that morning when she drank some of it just to get her through the first waking hours. The hot chocolate helped with the rest.

Rays of sun lay in parallel lines across the living room floor, interrupted only by Madison's glide across the room. Laptop in hand, Madison brought up the Internet and typed in a search engine address. Once it loaded, she typed; "Michael Harrington" and hit "Search." She hadn't told Olivia that she looked up the race results online the other day and found his last name. It was easy to do since he had taken first place in his age group. By time she found the results and his last name, she had to leave for school. Now that she had some free time, she decided to look further. Julie lay at Madison's feet, watching her with big brown eyes as if she knew what Madison was doing.

"Finally," Madison said as the screen displayed the list of links that entailed her search results. "Let's see, Michael Harrington...no, that can't be him. That guy died in nineteen fourteen. What about this one? No, can't be him either. That guy lives in Norway."

Madison continued reading the results to Julie, happy to have a partner in crime, even if it was a four-legged partner. After scrolling through the first page of results, she finally found one that looked promising.

"Ah ha! Maybe that's him? 'Veterinarian Michael Harrington is welcomed by the Mountain Veterinarian team.' Well, that's not news. He already told me he was a vet." Madison clicked on the link anyway and was

caught off guard by his picture as it loaded in front of her. The heading above it announced his arrival. As the picture slowly revealed his face, she was able to really look at him. There was nothing that she recognized from another place or time, but his eyes had something to them that kept her intrigued. The image was primarily a headshot, and below it the caption indicated that he owned a dog and had practiced veterinarian care for over fifteen years. There were no other links that lead her to more information, unless she wanted to pay for a background search. That thought alone was scary.

"Oh well, Julie. The mystery man remains a mystery, if he even is one. Don't tell Olivia I looked him up, okay?" Madison reached down and scratched Julie behind the ears. "Should we call your daddy and see how he's doing?"

Phil answered on the second ring, "Hey, hon! How are my girls?"

"We're fine. Just wanted to check and see how the drive is going." Madison knew she didn't need an excuse to call him and hear his voice.

"Well, I'm just about to Colorado. Kansas was flat and ridden with eternal fields. It'll be nice to see the mountains in a few hours."

"Try and get some pictures of the Rockies if you can," Madison said. She didn't long for much of the life she left behind in Colorado; however, the scenery was on her list of missed things.

"I will. How about you? What've you been up to?"

"Oh, you know, the dog park, running, and grading papers. I can't wait for this semester to end. It's been a

long, tough one. You, on the other hand will be the omniscient Lord of the elephant seals."

"Ah yes, call me Lord Seal." Phil sighed, and then told her about the rest of his drive. Eventually, their connection was lost as he headed into the mountains and Madison had to hang up without saying good-bye.

The rest of the week was more of the same for Madison. Daily routines became a mantra that both Julie and Madison settled into without a glitch. School let out on Friday, and spring break was the next week. Olivia was going with Gregory to visit his parents, which left Madison on her own.

In order to keep herself busy and focused, she made a plan for the week. Each morning would start with a visit to the dog park followed by her daily run. Errands would be done before lunch, leaving the afternoon free to clean her house, grade papers, and perform yard work. Spring was in full force now, and the yard needed attention, as did the interior of her house. Pollen filmed her car and the windowsills, reminding her of rebirth.

Tuesday turned out to be the best day for yard work. The sky was a crisp azure blue highlighted by jetted white streaks of clouds. The sun was high enough to warm the yard without peaking like the southern sun's height and power of summer. Her skin absorbed a layer of sun block and with garden tools in hand, and Julie by her side, Madison headed out into the yard. Azalea bushes lined the back of her house. The gaps between branches were filled with maple leaves that had fallen before winter set in.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Her gardening gloves protected her hands as she began pulling the leaves out of the tops of the bushes. Later, she used a rake to bring them out into a pile in the yard. The warmth and light of the sun was healing for her spirit, and having Julie there besides her gave her someone to talk to, even if the responses were limited to dog speak.

After finishing the first row of bushes, Madison moved on to raking leaves from other parts of the property. Meanwhile, Julie was off exploring the far end of the yard and dug up something of interest.

"Julie, what are you digging?" Walking over to where Julie was, Madison began to see the big hole forming underneath Julie's paws. "Oh no, Julie, that's not a good idea!" Julie looked up, nose covered in dirt. "Let's fill it back up." Madison used her sneaker to push the dirt back in the hole. When she finished and turned around, she saw Julie tugging at her ear with her paw.

"What's the matter, Jules?" Upon closer inspection, Madison noticed a large tick deep in the pocket of Julie's ear. It was plump and at an obscure angle. "Crap! What do I do now?"

Madison brought Julie indoors to have a second look, as though it might have fallen out en route. Julie sat patiently on the floor while Madison examined further; the tick hadn't budged. "We need to get this thing out, but I'm afraid of hurting your little ear."

Deciding she better have a vet remove the tick, Madison looked for the piece of paper Phil left with the vet's phone number on it. There in bold letters was, "Mountain Veterinarian 434-555-1117."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Oh great, Madison thought. Looking back and forth between Julie and the phone number; she knew she had to call.

"Good afternoon, Mountain Veterinarian Hospital, how may I help you?" the chirpy voice on the other end greeted.

"Um, this is Madison Ragnar. I'm taking care of Julie Lanyard, Phil's chocolate lab."

"Oh yes, uh huh."

"She has a large tick deep in her ear, and I'm afraid to try and take it out myself. Can I bring her in?"

"Absolutely. We can see her at three thirty. Does that work for you?"

"Yes it does. We'll see you then." Madison debated asking her which vet would be seeing them, but the receptionist hung up before she had the chance to finish contemplating.

Charlottesville had a large selection of veterinarians, but Mountain View was the one Madison had heard of the most. Her student's parents, friends, and neighbors have all mentioned the clinic in passing with nothing other than praise and high regard. Madison, of course, never had any reason to go there, and when she arrived she was immediately impressed with the brick sided building. Statues of dogs and other animals lined the grass area leading to the entrance. The double doors swung open, displaying a waiting room filled with benches, dog treats in baskets, and pet related magazines. Behind the counter sat three receptionists. The one on the right looked like she'd been there since the first brick was laid and was the first to ask Madison if she could help her.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Yes, I'm here with Julie Lanyard," Madison announced as she approached the counter. Julie walked around the waiting room, sniffing out the treats that she must have known were in close proximity.

"Okay, have a seat and we'll call you in a minute"

The waiting room was empty, but each of the exam room doors was closed. Madison found a seat in the corner next to a basket of treats. Photographs of various dogs and cats papered the walls. Holding tight to Julie's leash, Madison waited, wondered. It was too late now to ask if Michael was Julie's vet or if someone else would be seeing her. They were there and that tick had to come out. Julie lay on the floor, knowing the drill better than Madison did.

"Mrs. Lanyard, the vet will see you know," said the receptionist who greeted her.

"I'm not..." there was no point in finishing her sentence. The receptionist went to the back of the room and grabbed Julie's chart from another table. She was on a mission to get them into a room.

On the exam table lay a rubber mat to keep Julie from slipping, but Madison wasn't able to lift her up there by herself. She sat in the chair in the corner of the room and waited. Again, Julie lay at her feet, occasionally twitching her tail in a half wag. At least she wasn't scratching the ear anymore.

Not knowing the procedure for vet visits, Madison hoped they didn't ask her anything she couldn't answer. Rick had always brought Seth to the vet when needed.

Madison's palms began to sweat, and she wasn't sure why she still insisted on holding the leash; it

wasn't like Julie could go past the closed doors. Legs crossed, Madison tapped the ball of her foot on the floor. Nail biting wasn't a habit of hers, but she found herself tearing off small pieces from several of her fingers. Three of them were torn through before she became consciously aware of the fresh habit.

The clock on the wall ticked—each second nagging at Madison more than the last. She looked up to see what time it was. Three twenty-five. She was always early, and the anticipation of possibly seeing Michael made her anxious to leave the house early.

Another minute of ticking, and she looked back up again. This time, after reading “three twenty-six” on the clock, she looked over at the bookshelf on the far wall. That was when she saw him. Saw them. The picture was framed, settled in the middle of the shelf amongst a few others. Colorful: clear as day and as daunting as night. She wasn't sure how, but she managed to stand up and ease her way closer for a better look. Her keys fell from her fingers to the floor; the leash drifted down her sinewy fingers and off the ends of her fingertips, falling in slow motion and landing on the floor next to the keys. Within seconds, Madison was flat on the floor; her keys and the leash lay at her side.

TWENTY-TWO

Fluorescent lights always irritate Madison's eyes. The lighting at Mountain Veterinarian Clinic was no different. Madison woke up flat on her back. She squinted up from the cool linoleum floor at the speckled ceiling and plastic light covering that was filled with dead, light seeking bugs. The first thing she felt with her left hand was the cold floor and her keys. It was then that she remembered where she was, but she didn't need to speak. The face looking down at her said it all.

"Hey, are you okay?" Concern was not a look Madison was used to seeing on Michael's face. "You seemed to have fainted before I even brought the needle in. I was just about to call for help." Michael was holding a needle in one hand as he spoke.

"Hmmm. Right." Madison clambered her way back to the chair where she sat before...*before what?*

Michael put down the syringe and grabbed her elbow. "Are you okay? Do you need some water? Should I call a doctor? Ambulance?" Without waiting for an answer, he opened the door and yelled down the hall to one of the techs to bring a cup of water.

Once in the chair, Madison looked back up at the photograph. Studying it for a moment, she looked from the photograph to Michael and back to the photograph



before asking, "Where did you get that dog? Is he yours?"

"Yup, he's my boy. The one I told you about at the dog park." Michael leaned back against the counter and looked at the photograph in question.

"Here you go. Everything okay?" One of the vet techs stuck her head in the door and handed Michael a cup of water. Michael turned to Madison, who nodded at him.

"We're good," Michael said. The tech shrugged and left.

"Where did you get him?" Madison took the cup of water and sipped from it, savoring the coolness.

"Seth? I've had him for almost three years now. He belonged to a guy I knew in Colorado. Why?" Michael's eyes were set on Madison. She knew he must be wondering where the questioning was going, but she was still trying to piece it all together herself. *Why on earth would Michael have Seth?*

"Who? Who did you know in Colorado?" Madison wasn't sure if her newly acquired headache was from fainting or the present conversation she was having with her alleged stalker.

"His name was Rick. He was a carpenter working on my old farm house." Michael turned to the sink to wash his hands in preparation for the tick removal.

"How did? Why did? I don't understand..." The room started spinning again, but somehow Madison contained herself. She took another sip of water. "But why do you have Seth?"

"The poor guy died working on my roof one summer. He was in a bad place emotionally. His

girlfriend had just left him..." Michael's voice trailed off. Water streamed across the floor, dripping from his hands, as he turned and looked at Madison. He looked long and hard at her before finishing. "You. You're her. The one in all the photographs." Michael shook out his hands, wiped the final drops off on his pants, and sat down across from Madison. He looked straight into her eyes.

Madison gripped her chair and asked, "What do you mean Rick's dead? What photographs?" A deep breath followed her question. Julie stood, went over to Madison, and rested her head on Madison's lap.

"You're the one who left him, aren't you? That's why your face is so familiar. The photographs were taken awhile ago. You look different now, so it didn't quite click, but it all makes sense." Michael sat back in the chair and put his arms over his head, clasping his fingers tightly behind his neck.

"Sense to you maybe. Rick died working on your house? When? How? You saw my pictures? Where?" Frustrated, Madison tried to put Michael back on track. Everything made perfect sense to him, and the fact that Rick died was old news to him. But to Madison, Michael dropped a bomb on her and the shrapnel lay scattered amongst the room.

"What I know is that after you left Rick he was very distraught. I tried to convince him to take some time off to clear his head a bit, but he wouldn't hear of it." Michael stood back up and leaned against the exam table. "He insisted that working was what he needed. 'Kept him focused,' he said." Michael stared out to space as though the rest of the answers existed there.

"And?" Madison insisted he continue.

"Well, he was almost done with the roof. I owned a historic farm house outside of town." Madison didn't have to hear anymore about the house. She knew his house was the one in the blue prints Rick had been examining that dreadful morning. "I wanted it restored, but to it's original flavor. Rick only had a few shingles left to place. That was all. Next thing I knew, his ladder's on the ground with him under it, and the shingles were strewn across the yard." Michael shivered.

Madison's head dropped to her hands. Fingertips pressed into her forehead, the rest of his words sunk in like a missile landing. "He died before we got him to the hospital." There it was, the explosion. The room went silent.

Glassy eyed, and several clock ticks later, Madison looked up at Michael. "So, you took Seth?" That was all she could think of to say.

"Yup. Seth came to the job site with Rick daily, and I had gotten quite attached to him. I felt bad since Rick didn't seem to have any family or friends. Kinda a loner, especially after you left." Michael looked at the picture on the wall. "That photo was taken when we first moved here. My dad took it."

"So, wait, go on. What happened after the hospital? Where is Rick buried?" Madison asked. She wondered if she'd find more answers just from his eyes without having to ask. She wasn't sure what he'd be able to offer her, but she wanted as many answers as she could summon.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Let's see. He had a will, and I think his life insurance policy paid for the burial. He was buried in a plot just beyond the north side of town. His estate went up for sale and the funds went to a charity."

"A charity?" Madison almost had to laugh at that one.

"Well, that's what a lot of people with no family do. I kinda felt responsible for everything, so I went over to his house to help pack stuff up. His lawyer let me in. I thought it was the least I could do." Michael took a breath and continued. "Seth stayed with me the first week, and when I checked with the lawyer he insisted that Seth wasn't mentioned in the will anywhere," Michael said and looked back at the photo on the wall. "No one seemed to know about Seth, so I kept him. Later, after clearance from the lawyer, was when I helped pack up his personal things. That's when I saw your photos. They were everywhere." Michael looked down at the floor and slowly shook his head.

"When exactly was this?" Madison said.

"About a month after you left him, I think. He didn't talk about you much though. It wasn't until a few weeks after you left that I was able to get anything out of him. Seth moped around a lot too, so I knew something was up. Finally Rick told me that you moved, but he didn't say where or why."

"That's because he didn't know where and the why he wouldn't admit to." Despite her words, the vision of Rick falling still hadn't left her head. "How's Seth doing?"

"He's great. We moved here a little while ago to help my dad out. He owns an old house on a piece of

property outside of town that needs work. I came here to help supervise the contractors and make some of the bigger decisions. He was getting old and I didn't want him getting ripped off by anyone. Plus, after all that went on in Colorado, it was hard for me to live in my house out there anymore."

"Do you think it was suicide? Rick, I mean." Madison couldn't help but ask, but she briefly thought of Eric when Michael mentioned Rick's fall. "Sorry, I didn't mean to change the subject from your dad. I just have to know though."

"The papers and police reported it as an accident. I never really knew since I was in my studio working on a project of my own. It was a Saturday, and I wasn't at the clinic."

Beads of sweat formed on Madison's brow; she had the sudden urge to leave the room. "I need to go to the bathroom. Can I leave Julie here with you while I go?"

"Absolutely. I'll have the tick out by the time you return." Michael took Julie's leash and eased her up onto the exam table.

Madison found the restroom down the hall. The lighting was dim, much better than the fluorescent ones she just left. Within seconds, splashes of cold water trickled down Madison's face and still the shock didn't wear off. Her image in the mirror reflected her pale skin touched with pink streaks on each cheek from where she lay on the ground after fainting. The realization that Rick was dead, and had been for quite some time, sank in deeper. Nearly three years of haunted worry, nightmares, and fear. In some ways, the pressure was released, yet she also felt a pang of

guilt. As Michael pointed out, she'd aged since the photographs were taken. Time had passed, her location changed, but in all that time, Rick's influence on her had remained. And for what? Why? She stood alone in the bathroom, allowing her thoughts to penetrate before walking back down the hall to the exam room.

"The tick's out!" Michael exclaimed as she opened the door. Madison noticed his eyes light up when she entered the room. "I cleaned up the inside of her ears, too. They were pretty dirty." Michael lifted up Julie's ears to show Madison. Julie looked at Madison with a sense of relief and Michael let her down off the exam table.

"Thanks for doing that. I'm sure she feels much better now, and not that she doesn't listen to me, but I'm sure she'll be able to hear better now too!" Madison was happy to see Julie back in top condition.

"How about you? Are you okay?" Michael asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. A little shocked, but fine." Madison said.

"I wasn't sure if you ever found out about Rick. Obviously, it would've been better if you hadn't learned about it under these circumstances. In a vet's office, of all places." Michael put the tweezers in a jar of alcohol and cleaned up the exam table.

"Well, even though I left him awhile ago, it still hit me in the gut." Madison sat down in the chair and put the leash back on Julie. It was easier than facing Michael. "We didn't have the most, well loving, relationship. In fact, I haven't really settled down from it since I moved here, if you know what I mean." Madison looked down at the floor.

"Yeah, I think you do. I got the impression he would be kind of tough to live with."

"Oh, what you saw was probably his good side. Most people saw that side of Rick, only I was privileged enough to see the other," Madison said.

"I guess we all have different sides to us. Sometimes the ones we love the most are the ones who see our worst side." Michael spoke as though from experience, and suddenly Madison wondered whether or not he'd ever been married.

"So, Seth's gotta be nine or ten by now."

"That's right. If you'd like to see him, I can meet you at the dog park tomorrow. It's up to you," Michael said.

"Oh, that'd be great. I doubt he'd recognize me though."

"You may be surprised. Dogs have incredible memories. How'd you recognize him in the photo anyway?"

"Oh, I'd never forget that ear. The white spot always reminded me of a doorbell for some reason. And his facial markings are so symmetrical; it'd be kind of hard for nature to repeat that more than a few times. But, mostly I just know those eyes," Madison looked at the photo one more time. "He and I used to talk long walks together. Real long walks."

"Well, we can be there about eight, if that's not too early? I need to be here by ten."

"That'd be great. I'm sure he and Julie will get along fine."

"Bring your boyfriend if you want," Michael said.

"He's, uh, out of town right now, but thanks."

"Oh, okay," Michael said. Madison was sure she saw his eyes twinkle again. "We'll see you then. Bye, Julie," he said and disappeared through the door that went to the back of the animal clinic. Madison collected her belongings, took Julie by the leash, paid for their visit, and drove home in a blur of thought. She wondered if she'd be able to reach Olivia on her cell phone at Gregory's house. But, not knowing how she'd begin to explain everything, especially over the phone, she decided to wait and let all that she had learned sink in before trying to explain it to someone else. Besides, her number one priority was to call Phil and let him know about Julie's ear episode. Even with the three-hour time difference, she thought he might be back from the beach for the day...probably working on the computer.

Phil's voice was strong and cheerful when he answered. Yet somehow his voice sounded outdated to Madison. Like the life she had developed with Phil died with the news of Rick's death. She couldn't describe it to herself, and it struck her that everything changed in the moment she splashed water on her face in the bathroom at Mountain Veterinarian.

"Hi! How's it going out there?" Madison asked before the silence of her thoughts lasted too long.

"Well, hello there!" Phil said. "The seals are doing great. They're about to birth, so it's hard for us to get too close. Next week will be exciting with all the pups around though."

"Boy, that's cool. That's what it's all about, 'eh?" Madison sat down on her couch. "Well, I've got some vet news for you on our end. Julie had a big tick so



deep in her ear that I had to take her to the vet." Madison instantly thought about Michael, how his eyes rarely left hers during their conversation. They were a warm blue, warmer than the day they met in the video store. Or was it just that she was seeing them in a different way now? "He was able to get the tick out and clean her ears. We just got home," Madison said.

"Geez, I'm glad she's okay. Thank you for taking such good care of her. I hope she wasn't freaked out by it."

"No, she didn't seem to be. The vet was great with her," Madison said.

"Yeah, Dr. Harrington has been her vet since he moved here. He took the place of the vet she'd been seeing since she was a puppy. Dr. Harrington had just moved here from Colorado when the other vet left. He's a nice guy and seems to be good."

"Where'd the other vet go?" Madison clicked her television on and curled up in a tight ball while she listened.

"He retired and apparently the clinic got a call from Dr. Harrington the same week. He was moving here from Colorado and wanted to know if they had any openings. Carbondale, I think. Anyway, it was perfect timing, and the clinic out there highly recommended him. I found out the whole story from the receptionist. She likes to talk." That was all Madison needed to hear. Michael's story was completely legit.

"Yeah, well, there's more to the story than that," Madison started, not knowing exactly where she was going with her comment.

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“Oops, wait a sec, hon.” Phil’s end of the line went silent for a minute. When he came back he said, “That’s Lisa, one of the other oceanographers, calling me. I’ve gotta take it. I’ll call you later. Love you,” and he was gone. Madison hung up, and for the first time since he left, she felt more than just distance between them. She felt distant.

Phil hadn’t called back by time Madison went to bed. She set her alarm for seven to make sure she wouldn’t be late for the dog park. Seth’s image was the last thing she thought about before drifting off to sleep.

TWENTY-THREE

Being a weekday morning, there were only a handful of dogs at the park. Madison saw Michael in the distance—near him was the familiar black and white face she had been longing to see again. Michael waved to her from across the field, his smile welcoming. She released Julie and stood there, frozen. She watched Seth for a minute. His build was the same, the fuzz around his whiskers a little grayer, but the symmetry was undeniably his. Madison inched her way closer, excited, afraid, and timid all at once.

Seth stood looking around the field. When his eyes met Madison's he stopped and looked. Madison bent down, clasped her hands together, and waited. Waited to see, waited to know. Seth started toward her in a saunter, sniffing the ground and keeping an eye on her. When she called him, recognition set in and his pace quickened—like a car approaching a yellow light that didn't want to stop. His tail swung, slapping either side of him with its white tip. Madison reached her arms out as he closed in on her; tears flowing freely down her cheeks. Smacking into her, his tongue met the drops of salty dew that lay on her cheek. He licked her tear-streaked cheeks as he had done so often in the past, yet those hadn't been tears of joy. Madison and

Seth fell to the ground, landing on the cool grass. "Seth, you dear dog. I thought I'd never see you again."

"I guess your fears of his not recognizing you have been assuaged?" Once again, Madison looked up at Michael from the ground. He stood above her, arms loosely crossed and his mouth smirked. "I knew all along Seth would remember you. I didn't tell you this yesterday, but when I brought Seth's things over from Rick's house I found an old sweatshirt that looked too small to be Rick's. I assumed it was yours and grabbed it. It's been in Seth's bed all this time. He sleeps with it every night."

"What? Really? Why didn't you use one of Rick's?" Madison asked.

"Seemed to me like Seth was missing you almost as much as Rick, if not more. He'd mope around the yard, wouldn't chase squirrels, nothing. So, I thought he'd want something of yours. It was easier for me too."

Madison was overwhelmed. She wiped her hand over her now lick dried face. "Seth? I had no idea...no idea what you've gone through." She rubbed his belly as he sat next to her, panting. Julie joined them, trying to entice Seth into playing with her. "Julie, meet Seth. Seth, meet Julie," Madison said.

"Does he look good to you?" Michael squatted down next to them.

"Absolutely, he looks great. You've taken really good care of him. Thank you for that." Madison sat up and took Seth's face in her hands. Before she stood up, she kissed the end of his nose, and he licked her back.

Julie and Seth played while Michael and Madison sat on a bench. He told her about his move from

Colorado and how Seth sat up front in the moving truck, how he stuck his head out the window, how he met other dogs at rest areas along the way, and how Michael's father took a liking to Seth. The two often took walks during the day while Michael was at work.

"My father moved in with us with the intention of having his own house worked on, but his cancer progressed, which kept the work on the house from progressing. Seth turned out to be good company for him," Michael explained.

"I'm glad to hear that. How is your dad doing now?"

"Actually, he passed away a few months ago."

"Geez, I'm sorry," Madison said.

"It's okay. It was a long time coming. I'm just glad I moved here in time. You know, before he went."

"What're you going to do with the house?"

"I'll finish the work on it. He lived in it for so long, I'd hate to sell it now," Michael said. "You ought to know the house. It's on the Valentine's course. The old red one with the pond." Michael pointed in the direction of the house, even though it was a good ten miles away.

"The one at the turn around point?" Madison looked out toward the mountains. The sea of trees in her view blossomed pinks and whites.

"Yeah. Rumors say it's haunted, but it really just needs a good dusting and a coat of fresh paint. Structurally it's sound though. Dad wanted to add on to it thinking that would increase its value, and that I'd move in with a family some day."

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"To tell you the truth, it spooked me when I first saw it," Madison said.

"Well, don't let it. Neglected, yes. Haunted, no. You can come check it out some time if you want. I'd love some help emptying out the junk and preparing it for paint and some fixing up. We could work out a deal. Vet care in trade for hard labor?"

"You'd have to ask Phil about that. He's the one who pays Julie's vet bill. But, he won't be back any time soon. He's in California studying elephant seals."

"Oh? That's a line of animal care I admire." Michael twirled Seth's leash around his hand as he talked.

"Well, he won't be back for about a month, so I guess I've got some free time on my hands. It would be kind of neat to see the inside of it. We can work out another barter." Madison laughed to herself thinking about how she'd explain this one to Olivia.

"Great!" Michael slapped his hand on his knee and looked at Madison. She saw something in him that she imagined hadn't been there in a long while. "Since the days are getting longer, I've started working in the yard right after work," he said. "I need to start spending some time on the inside though. I can take you over there this weekend if you're up for it," he said.

"Sure!" Madison blurted. "My number is in Julie's file at the clinic. Give me a call and we'll figure out a time." Madison wasn't as shocked by her response; she was excited to get started on a new project and, admittedly, to see Michael again. She gave Seth a good-bye kiss on his snout. "I'll see you this weekend."

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## *Through Hazel Eyes*

Madison and Julie arrived at the red house by nine o'clock on Saturday morning. Michael and Seth were in the back yard clearing away a wheel barrel load of snarled brush.

"Hey! Good morning!" Michael said, standing upright again.

"Morning. That's a barrel load. Taking it to the woods?" Madison asked as she made her way across the yard.

"No, I was thinking I'd burn it out back. There's so much of it, it'll be a fire hazard in the woods."

"Ah, good thinking."

"C'mon, I want to show you the inside."

Michael led Madison toward the back door where hyacinth vines crept up the porch railings; a filter of cobwebs filled the gaps of the wrought iron fence; and a small puddle of water pooled in a trench alongside the heavy metal doors that opened to the basement. Madison hadn't seen a basement since she moved to Virginia. They were common in parts of the west and in the northeast, of course, but not in the south. Some of the new developments that were taking over the farmlands were adding them, most likely by transient builders or in response to transient residents who were accustomed to having one.

Inside, heavily textured cloths covered the furniture. Some required three cloths; others were swimming under just one. Ancient dust lay atop them like snow capped on a mountain range. Michael yanked the wispy window curtains aside, allowing sunlight to dance on the now swirling and floating dust particles. The sun's rays streaked across the floor,

illuminating dingy hardwood floors that needed polishing and a few layers of polyurethane. Bookshelves walled the far end of the living room, displaying an array of literature, framed photographs, textbooks, and hobbyist's guides. The guides ranged from fly-fishing to interior design and were sorted by category.

"As you can see, the place needs a lot of work," Michael said as he walked around the room. "Nobody's lived here in almost a year. I was so busy taking care of Dad and working at the clinic that I just didn't have enough time to invest here." Michael stacked the cloths in a pile by the door. "I'll take these outside and shake 'em out later," he said.

"So, it just sat empty all this time? No wonder people began to think it was haunted," Madison said as she glided her finger across the bookshelf. She was in awe of his book collection and the beauty of the shelves. She wiped the dust that had already collected on her fingertips on her jeans and picked a book of poetry off an eye-level shelf.

"I'd check on it when I'd come out here for a run, but even that was tough to do."

"It's a neat old place though. I can see its potential." Madison helped Michael strip and pile the remaining cloths. "I'm sure your dad would want you to keep it."

The stack of cloths, now almost as high as the doorknob, peaked by the doorway. Madison looked out the bay window above one of the couches and spotted Julie and Seth playing in the back yard. She still felt like pinching herself at the sight of Seth. Seeing him



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playing with another dog in Virginia was not a vision she would ever have guessed she'd witness.

"Do you want to go back outside? The air is a little tough to deal with in here." Michael opened a few of the windows and set a fan aiming outside in one of them.

"Sounds good, but we should open a few more windows and let the house air out."

The downstairs, Madison learned, consisted of the living room, kitchen, dining room, and a study in the back corner. Several of the windows were reluctant to open, while others flat out refused.

"Add those to my to-do list!" Michael said. "The one I put the fan in was new last winter. A branch crashed into it during a storm, so dad just replaced the entire frame and glass. The rest are original to the house."

Once the windows that would open were open, Michael led Madison outside and showed her around the land.

"There are seventeen acres in all, most of them wooded," Michael said. Madison figured that an overhead view of the property would show the undulating hills that softly framed the outskirts, leaving the old house and pond as the center of the image. The pond was Madison's favorite part. Covered in a film of green, the algae had made its home with some of the small wildlife that inhabited its surroundings. "My father loved this pond. He'd sit out here on that bench after dinner and watch the sun settle in before going inside to read." Michael picked up a large stick that lay in the yard and tossed it into the

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woods as they walked around the pond. Madison followed, taking in the beauty of the surrounding land. A warm and tranquil sensation filled her from her toes on up.

"I imagine it was very calming for him to live here." Madison looked up at Michael's eyes, remembering how they'd struck her the first day they met at the video store.

"Yeah. It was peaceful for him. It took awhile for him to get used to life after my mom died though." Michael stopped walking and looked back toward the house. "Let's go back in and see what else we can get done."

The rest of the day disappeared into the work at hand. They moved the living room furniture in order to sweep the floors before Michael brought in a pail of water and Murphy's Oil Soap to scrub them clean.

"How about you start on that side of the room, and I'll start on this side? We'll meet in the middle." Michael suggested.

"Sounds like you might be keeping tabs on who does how much? Okay, you're on."

Rags in hand, bucket in the middle, they began scrubbing the floor on their hands and knees. After ten minutes, Madison stopped scrubbing and said, "Wait. Something's missing. We need music."

"You're trying to get me off task long enough so that you can win. But, that's okay, I'll give you the handicap."

Michael disappeared into another room and returned moments later with an old radio that received only a few stations. Settling on an oldies station, he

returned to his side of the room. "Doesn't look like you made that much progress while I was gone."

Madison looked up at his face, a face that displayed a wide grin and a glisten of sweat on his brow, which he wiped with the back of his arm before squatting back down.

"Yup, that's where a man should be. On his knees with a soapy rag in hand." Madison went back to work, whistling to the song on the radio as loudly as she could.

An hour passed by before either of them approached the middle of the room. Madison glanced up to occasionally check on his whereabouts. He would catch her looking and just smile. Caught up in their game, the competition became silently fierce. Tension in the room built. Madison wasn't sure what kind of tension, but it felt good.

"See, I knew I'd win," Michael announced as he set the last slap of a rag on the wood floor around the bucket, which was the unspoken finishing line. He then tossed his rag into the bucket as though he would gain two bonus points.

"No, no, no. I won. I was at the bucket already when you hit the last spot," Madison said. "I just left it for you."

"Oh, whatever! You know I won." Michael took her rag from her and dropped it in the bucket next to his.

"Oh, sure. Whatever yourself," Madison laughed. Hot and sweaty from the labor, she tied her t-shirt in a knot above her now exposed navel. "I'll let you win, but it's only a battle, not the war. Wait until you see how well I paint," she smirked.

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Madison looked in the mirror above the fireplace mantle and brushed her hair back off her shoulder. It fell to her back, letting the sunlight that streamed through the window catch its auburn tint. She realized how long it had grown since her last cut.

"Painting? That's my specialty, little lady. You'll see. It's a battle you'll be sure to lose."

Madison heard the ring of her cell phone in the other room. "I'll be right back."

"Sure, leave me to finish cleaning up this stuff."

When she pulled her phone out of her purse she saw Phil's number displayed. *How am I going to explain where I am when I haven't had the chance to tell him about who Michael really is yet?* Madison let the call roll to voicemail. She decided she would call him back later from home. A loud thud interrupted her train of thought. She found her way to the kitchen to explore.

"Oh my God! Now that's funny!" Madison had to keep from laughing too hard at the sight in front of her.

"Oh, so it's funny when a bucket of filthy water falls to my feet, splashing every bit of the room?" Michael raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, yeah," Madison said. "I'm just sorry I wasn't here to see it fall. But, something about just seeing the aftermath makes it funny. See, you could make up a great story about what happened. Like, maybe a bear was in here and you tossed it on him in defense?" Madison gestured toward the door, as though the bear had actually come and gone.

"Hardy har-har." Michael flipped the bucket right side up and grabbed a mop from the corner closet.

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Madison reached out and tried to pull it from him. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Just trying to help." Madison's hand was below his on the pole.

"Okay," Michael began to explain, "put your other hand above mine on the pole and whoever's hand lands at the top wins."

"Geez, you're competitive," Madison laughed and took the challenge. Hands flew up the pole in rotation; Michael's thick fists around the pole, topped by Madison's delicate grip, then Michael's again until the last speck of pole was covered by Madison's pinky.

"You win! And the prize is that you get to mop the floor!" Michael announced, but did not let go of the pole. By now they were standing so close Madison could see the reflection of the kitchen window behind her in his eyes.

"Yeah, I guess I won that one." Madison stepped away and waited for Michael to hand her the mop. As she mopped the floor, he went outside to check on the dogs and to bring in the aired out cloths. Madison watched him through the window as she wrung the mop out in the sink, trying not to notice how his jeans clung tightly to his round rear end.

TWENTY-FOUR

Rain beating on the rooftop woke Madison up early on Sunday morning. When she came to and focused on the rhythm, she realized it had been awhile since she heard the pitter-patter of raindrops. Knowledge of a snowfall required opening the blinds and viewing the yard and tree branches, unless she heard the radio announce a snow day before she got out of bed. The rain was undeniable from bed though. The gutter above her bedroom window was clogged and created a waterfall rush over the edge and onto the ledge below. On top of it, the wind chimed in, causing the occasional brush of a branch against the window that completed the orchestra of a storm.

"Julie? Where are you?" Madison called out as she plodded to the bathroom. The clinking of Julie's collar answered the question soon enough. After making her way into the room, Julie followed Madison into the bathroom and lay on the bathmat as Madison went through her morning routine that hadn't changed since Phil left. She had already listened to his voicemail on her way home from Michael's. He wanted to tell her about his day, but was heading out for dinner with the "gang," which was how he referred to the other oceanographers.

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He ended his message with, "I love you, and I'll call tomorrow. Hope you're having fun."

Fun, yes. She was having fun, but was unable to talk to her best friend, let alone her boyfriend, about what had transpired that week. That was when Michael entered her mind again. She still couldn't wrap her head around what was happening, what she was feeling. She allowed herself to be in denial since she hardly knew him, yet she also felt like she knew him better than anyone else right now. Maybe it was because of Seth and the odd connection to Rick. Maybe it was because he was providing entertainment for her during her spring break? But a simmering feeling deep within her knew that it delved deeper than that. She finished brushing her teeth, looking at herself in the mirror. A layer of grief and fear had been erased from her face, leaving a glowing complexion.

Madison agreed to meet Michael at his house at nine-thirty. It was too early California time to call Phil back, which gave her more time to stall. When she arrived at Michael's, his dark blue truck was parked in the rear of the house. She recognized it as the same one she spotted near the ladder that leaned up against the house during the Valentine's Day race almost two months ago.

The house was quiet when Madison entered and Seth was nowhere to be found. However, his leash hung on the railing by the back door. Julie was combing the yard, nose to the ground. "Go find 'em, Jules."

Julie set off into the woods before Madison could finish her command. Inside the house, Madison

discovered a pile of cleaning necessities. Rags, bottles of dusting and cleaning agents, some scrub brushes, and a new mop to replace the one they used last night and that was worn as thin as a paper towel. They sat in the middle of the living room floor, and she nudged her way through the pile before moving on to the kitchen.

Michael stayed after she'd left the night before to finish cleaning the kitchen. A quick glance around indicated that he stayed for quite awhile. The refrigerator door sparkled, the fluorescent overhead light fixtures no longer contained moths that had died a drastic death against the bulbs, and the cabinet facings gleamed with Murphy's Oil Soap finish. The window curtains above the sink were removed, and Madison guessed they were in the washing machine since she could hear it running behind the closet door in the corner of the kitchen.

Upon closer inspection of the windows, the sight of Michael, Seth, and Julie racing across the yard came into view through the now streak-free glass. Julie, in the lead, headed straight past the pond and under the clothesline toward the back door. Seth and Michael trailed, both of them exposing their panting tongues. "Go Julie!" Madison yelled through the window, which she cranked open moments before. Laughing out loud at the pack, she ran outside to join them.

"We had her until the pond," Michael defended. "She had a head start in the woods too." Panting, he grabbed his chest and fell to the ground. "I...haven't...run...like...that...in...ages!"



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"Excuses, excuses!" Madison knelt down, took hold of Julie's head, and gave her a congratulatory pat. "Way to go girl!" Seth and Michael lay still, noses to the sky, catching their breath.

"We had her..." Not able to finish his sentence, Michael closed his eyes and laughed instead.

"Well, you'd better regain your breathing since there's a load of cleaning to do." Smacking his knee, Madison jumped up and ran back indoors. Seth and Julie followed her and settled in by the bowl of water, each slurping up what they could. When Michael joined them, he found Madison in the living room, rags and cleaning agents in hand.

"Good morning, Madison," Michael said, taking up a rag of his own.

"Good morning, Michael. Nice to see you've returned to the living. I thought we'd start with cleaning the walls today. That way painting will be a viable option when you're ready."

"That sounds good, but no competitions today, the dogs already have me beat."

Madison agreed with him and handed him a bottle of cleaner. Her eyes lingered on his well-defined muscles under his shirt until she caught herself and looked away. Flustered, she began cleaning the closest wall.

"So, how late did you stay last night? Or did you hire Merry Maids to clean the kitchen?" Madison asked when she regained her composure.

"About mid-night. The maids were all out partying, so they weren't able to help. Seth kept me company while I listened to the radio and cleaned." Michael

started on a section of the wall nearby. "I was thinking we could move the furniture to the center of the room to make room for painting. Now that the cloths are relatively dust free, we can recover the furniture."

"Whatever you say, Captain."

"Captain, 'eh? Does that make you the first mate?"

"Uh, wouldn't that be Seth?" Madison blushed.

"Yeah. I guess. You can be the barmaid we picked up in the last port."

"Gee, how flattering. I think I'd rather be second mate."

The morning turned into lunchtime by time they finished washing down the walls. Worried about additional dust while painting, Michael wanted to box up all of the books from the bookshelves, but decided that could wait until next time. "We'll move the furniture first, and then prime the walls. Spackling's only needed in a few spots and won't take much time," he said, but to Madison, it sounded like he was just thinking out loud and she waited for his next thought. "Okay, now that this place looks a bit cleaner, and there's ample light, what color should we go with for the walls?"

"Hmm. I can see a light mocha color that would bring out the texture in the bookshelves. Or possibly a pale yellow." Madison held her hand up to her face as she circled the room in contemplation. "I think the mocha is more 'now' though. Pale yellow is kind of passé." She looked at Michael to see what he was thinking, but when their eyes met, it was clear to her that he hadn't heard a word she said. "Mocha, go with mocha," she said.

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Mocha it is. Let's go into town and get the paint. We can grab something to eat while we're there." Michael picked up the keys to his truck. Madison, who was following right behind him, brushed a ball of fuzz out of his hair. He turned and smiled at her then helped her into the truck. Julie and Seth rode in the backseat, each with their heads out of the window, tongues flapping in the breeze.

"So, where's your Beemer?" Madison asked as they pulled out of the driveway.

"It's in the shop. I'm thinking of selling it since I'll mostly use the truck this summer."

The town was too small for a Home Depot, which meant having to shop at the local hardware store. The man behind the counter looked like he'd been there since the day the store opened in 1949, like the receptionist at the vet clinic. T-shirts advertising the store hung in the window, framing everyday yard tools on display.

Michael grabbed her hand and led the way to the back of the store where they found the laminated sheet that showed samples of paint colors.

"Heavenly Mocha, that's the color," Madison said pointing with her free hand to the color at the bottom of the third page of swatches.

"Heavenly Mocha sounds like an early morning drink in paradise," Michael said.

After they paid for the paint, rollers, brushes, pans, and primer, they ventured back outside. A late lunch was now turning into an early dinner as Madison looked at her watch. "Three o'clock already. We better hurry if you want to cover any of those walls today."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"There's a sandwich shop around the corner, we can get something to go," Michael said.

By time they returned to the house, it was nearly four o'clock. Madison had left her cell phone in the car while they shopped for paint and selected sandwiches; and therefore, she didn't see that Phil had called her twice that afternoon.

Satisfied hunger allowed them the comfort to prime the first layer of the living room wall. They alternated between who would roll and who would brush the edges. Occasionally, they worked side-by-side, and at other times they were across the room from the other. But no matter where they worked, Madison had her mind on Michael. *How could I have feared him?*

Madison looked over at Michael, who stood a few steps up the stepladder in the corner by the fireplace. A rag hung from his back pocket, a brush gripped in his masculine hand, and a small patch of sweat around his neck glistened below his tight haircut. As she watched from behind him, he put his brush down and took off his shirt. Baring his strong V-shaped back, he tucked his shirt in the remaining back pocket. His sudden glance over his shoulder startled Madison back to work. Once she faced the wall, she released her contained smile.

"How's it going over there?" Michael asked and stepped off the ladder.

"Oh fine. Just fine. It is a little warm in here though."

"Yeah, I noticed. I can turn the fan up if you want."

"That might help the primer dry faster too," Madison said. Michael made his way to her side of the

room where the fan was. The front of his chest displayed muscle lines that she found herself dreaming about how her fingers would feel on them.

"There. That's better," Michael said.

"Better," was all Madison mustered.

"How's that wall coming along?" Michael stood right next to Madison and gestured at her section of the wall. "Looks like you were right. You're a pretty good painter. There's just one spot that you unnecessarily primed though."

"Oh?" Madison searched the wall for a mistake.

"Right here." Michael placed his fingertip on the center of her forehead and wiped away a spec of primer. Madison looked down at the specimen on his fingertip, then up at his eyes. The previously cool blue tint was now a warm tropical blue that set her heart in a series of thumps.

Michael reached out and touched the tip of her nose with the primer, then leaned over and placed his lips on hers. They paused momentarily, lips on lips, before releasing the tension with a passionate kiss. Madison's brush slipped from her hand to the ground, spattering primer across their feet. She didn't know what she was doing, but she didn't stop herself either.

TWENTY-FIVE

On her way to school Monday morning, Madison wondered how she was going to explain her spring break to Olivia. Luckily, there was a faculty meeting scheduled for first thing that morning that would keep them occupied until the first block bell rang. But, Madison knew that by the end of the day she would have to explain all of it to Olivia. She'd have to tell Olivia how she fell for her alleged stalker, how they worked on the alleged haunted house that is anything but that to her now, and how she was going to handle Phil. She didn't know the answer to the last one herself.

Phil left a brief message on Sunday night about the elephant seals they had seen that day and how consistently beautiful the weather had been since his arrival. He had asked that she call him, no matter how late, to let him know how she and Julie were. He said that he missed hearing her voice. Madison did call back around midnight, which was nine o'clock California time, but got his voicemail.

"I'm fine, Julie's fine. We had a busy weekend, but I'll tell you about it when I talk to you," was all she said. She didn't know what else to say. *I miss you, but now I don't know what to do. I've kind of fallen for a man I thought was a stalker, who Olivia encouraged me to fear. The*

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

*funny thing is, fear is the last thing on my mind when I'm with him.*

Seeing her classroom, the empty chalkboard, her neatly organized desk, and the marked up calendar on the wall brought Madison back to the reality that vacation was over. The transition back to this part of her life was the first step in facing all of the changes that were happening and had happened.

She sat in the chair at her desk for a moment and thought about Rick. She wondered about his burial. Who went? He had lost most of his family well before he met her. She didn't want to ask Michael yet because she wasn't ready to hear more of the details. She was still getting used to the idea that she no longer needed to fear Rick finding her, even though she had woken up the past two nights from nightmares about him, but quickly reminded herself that he could no longer hurt her. His steel gray eyes and their cold look were long gone. Each day, the concept of his passing had become less surreal to her.

"Attention, teachers. Please meet in the library at this time." The announcement startled Madison out of her thoughts. She grabbed a pen and pad of paper to take notes with and headed toward the library. She sat in the corner and smiled at Olivia, who entered the room behind Mr. Whyte. There were no seats left near Madison, so Olivia had to sit across the room next to the biology teacher, Mr. Sampson, known for his outdated handlebar mustache.

Olivia mouthed, "How was break?" to Madison, who just smiled and nodded. Olivia scrunched her face at Madison and Mr. Whyte began the meeting.

"I hope everyone had a nice spring break," Mr. Whyte started. "Now it's back to reality and we have a busy spring still ahead of us between exams, standardized testing, and year end activities." Madison scribbled on her notepad as Mr. Whyte continued; "I remind you to keep in touch with parents during this busy time, especially if a student is falling behind. We want to cut down on the number of grade repeaters for next year." No more mention of Eric. Life inside these walls continued as usual, and when the meeting ended by the shrill of the first bell, Madison returned to her classroom.

Ginny and Meghan were the first to bounce into the room.

"Ms. Ragnar! We missed you, but not school," Meghan dumped her backpack on her desk as though she just returned home from a long trip.

"Holy crap, Meghan, think you can slam that a bit harder?" Ginny asked.

Meghan shrugged and emptied out half of the pack's contents and proceeded to pick through what she needed.

Jonathan darted into the room behind the two girls. "So, what'd you do for brake Ms. R?" he asked.

"I helped a friend work on his house. It was fun, lots of cleaning and painting," Madison answered. "Can one of you put the journals out on the desks? We had a faculty meeting this morning, and I haven't had a chance to write the prompts on the board."

"Sure!" Meghan handed Ginny half of the journals to pass out while Madison wrote on the spotless blackboard. The rest of the students arrived, some



## *Through Hazel Eyes*

grumbling about being back in school, but were clearly happy to see their friends again. Madison let them talk about their vacations before having them settle in and pay attention to their journal entries.

"Ms. Ragnar," Amanda started, "what are we doing for the rest of the day?"

"You mean the rest of the school year!" Jonathan chirped.

"I graded your *To Kill a Mockingbird* papers over break, so you'll be getting those back after you finish your journal entries. We'll be spending time on poetry and preparing for your final exams in the coming weeks."

"Ugh."

Madison wasn't sure who let the groan out, but she continued, "I was very happy with your papers. Some of you need work on outlining and theme development, but overall they were terrific. You should be proud of your work." Turning toward the chalkboard, Madison pointed up and said, "Go ahead and get started with the prompts on the board."

Writing began while Madison sat at her desk and made sure each of the grades for their papers were recorded in her grade-book before she handed them back to the students. Most of them smiled and tucked their papers into their backpacks. The rest grumbled and folded them up, not quite sure what to do with them.

"I'll be meeting with those of you who need help. You'll have to have the outlining and theme development down for your final exams." After that announcement, Madison asked Ginny to read the first

poem on their poetry list. As she read, Madison looked around the room. The empty seat in the corner was not forgotten, but not dwelled on anymore. Thoughts of Eric had subliminally popped up in each of the student's papers. To her, knowing that they had grown and learned from the tragic event was the most vital aspect of their papers.

At the end of the day, Madison headed to Olivia's room and braced herself.

"Hey!" Olivia exclaimed. "How'd your vacation go?"

"It was good, but I want to hear all about yours first. How's Gregory?"

"Oh, he's fine. We had a good time in South Carolina. The weather was great. Traffic sucked, but that's spring break for ya." Olivia picked up her backpack and headed toward the door to walk out with Madison. "I think his parents were more than ready to get rid of us by the end of the week. It's a long time to stay with family, but they were terrific. That's enough about me. Have you heard from Phil?"

"Oh yeah, he's called quite a bit. It's been tough to connect with the time zone thing. Three hours makes a big difference. He's up and at work early and they all seem to stay out late at night." Madison leaned against the door wondering what to say next.

"Well, let's get out of here and go for a run. Are you up for it?" Olivia asked.

"Sounds great."

The traffic on Madison's road was busier than it had been. The nicer weather seemed to draw people out of

their homes, or away from their offices, earlier than usual. Because of the traffic, they had to run the first mile single file and couldn't talk. Once they turned down a side road, Madison opened up the conversation. "So, I've got some news for you."

"Oh? What's going on?"

"Well, something happened over break."

"Huh? What?" Olivia stopped in her tracks at the end of someone's driveway.

"Well, I ended up spending a lot of time with someone and now I'm really confused."

"Whoa! Slow down. What do you mean? Who?"

"Michael." Madison waited for Olivia's head to spin, smoke to emerge, and for her eyeballs to pop out. But they didn't. Olivia just stood there blank-faced and motionless while Madison spoke. "Michael. You know. My so-called stalker. He's actually a veterinarian who helped me when Julie had a tick in her ear. It gets more interesting though."

"Keep going." Olivia sat down on the ground and hugged her bent knees.

"As it turns out, he knew Rick."

"What? Rick? How'd all of this come out?"

"I told you, Julie had to go the vet and he just happened to be the vet that Phil takes Julie to. We got to talking."

"Why am I just hearing about it now? You coulda called my cell."

"Because I knew I couldn't tell you over the phone. Anyway, we've been busy working on his dad's house."

"Now I'm really confused. Back up a minute. How does he know Rick? Finish that part first. Geez, I leave you for one week."

Madison sat down beside Olivia. "Michael knew Rick in Colorado because Rick was the carpenter who was remodeling his house around the time that I left."

Olivia cocked her head, "I don't remember that part of your leaving Colorado."

"I never met Michael, but I knew Rick was working on a neat old house outside of town. He was reading the blue prints when I told him I was leaving."

"That's weird!" Olivia rocked back on her elbows.

"It was the last job Rick had. Rick and I weren't talking much at that point. Anyway, according to Michael, Rick fell off the roof shortly after I left." Madison took a deep breath. "He died from the fall."

"Oh my God!" Olivia clasped her hands to her mouth. "He's been dead all this time?"

Madison nodded, "Yup. Michael helped to empty out the house, that's why he recognized me. Apparently Rick still had a bunch of pictures of me. Michael took in Seth, Rick's Border Collie mix. He still has him. Olivia, it was so great, Seth recognized me after all this time!"

"You've seen the dog?" Olivia asked.

"Um, yeah, we've spent a lot of time together. Mostly at his dad's house. Julie and Seth get along great."

"Oh God, Madison. What kind of time are you spending together? What about Phil?"

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"I don't know. I've really fallen for Michael. He's really so kind and funny. And he's a great kisser." Madison shut her mouth, but it was too late.

"Oh great. Now you're locking lips with him and you haven't broken up with Phil?"

"It just happened. His dad owns the haunted house on the Valentine's race route. Michael moved here to take care of his dad until he passed away. We started cleaning up the house and painting the interior." Madison stood up. "C'mon. Lets keep running before it gets too dark. There aren't any other shocking details."

"Wow. You sure know how to spend a spring break. What are you gonna to do now?"

"I guess I need to talk to Phil." Madison knew in her heart what she wanted.

"I don't envy you," Olivia said.

Madison spent the rest of the run telling Olivia about the house, and how she fainted when she saw Seth's picture on the wall. They finished their run and Olivia wished her luck with her call to Phil. The call Madison promised she would make.

Madison's fingers trembled as she dialed Phil's number that evening. Staring blankly the bedroom wall, she listened to the phone ring. When his voice answered, "Hello?" Madison felt her stomach turn. Sweat accumulated on the inside of the hand that was holding the phone. Then she went into autopilot.

"Hi."

"Hey, there's my girl. How have you been? How's Julie?"

"We're both fine. How're you doing?"

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Great. It's been an amazing week. We got tons of data and spent most of today inside compiling it. We'll be back out on the beach tomorrow though."

"Wow, that sounds great. Glad to hear it."

"You sound different. What's up?"

"I'm tired, but we need to talk," Madison swallowed what felt like a dust ball.

"Okay."

"Remember the conversation we had awhile ago about karmic debt? You explained to me how that all works."

"Yeah," Phil replied.

"I think I figured out what the lesson was that I was supposed to learn from you," Madison didn't quite know where she was taking the conversation and was surprised by her words as they flowed freely from her mouth. "I learned to trust and to care again because of you."

"That's great, honey. I'm glad I can give that to you."

"Yeah, so am I. I'm really glad. There's just one thing though," she sighed. "I'm just not as totally in love with you as I thought I was. I thought I'd fall deeper, but I just don't know." Madison sat silently and waited to hear more than his breathing on the other end. "Are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. So, what are you saying, Madison?"

"I just wanted you to know all of this because I have to be honest with you. The time and space the last few weeks made me realize that part of the attraction to you was that I was finally able to trust someone again."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

But, for me some of it felt a little forced, and I don't think it should be. I want to be fair to both of us, ya know?" By now Madison's eyes were welling up with tears. Tears of guilt and of sorrow. "Ya know, I'm always telling my students to follow their hearts, to be their own biggest cheerleaders. I just can't tell them one thing and do another. I have to believe in my conviction. I really do care about you, Phil. You taught me much more than you'll ever know, but this is something I'm sure about."

"I guess I can't argue with conviction. Are you sure that's it? There isn't someone else, is there?"

Madison's silence lasted longer than she wanted it to. She was not prepared for that question, yet incapable of lying to him, she said, "Well, sort of. I'm sorry, Phil. I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't expect this at all."

"Well, that explains why you're not returning my calls lately. Who is he?"

"No one you know. It all just happened so fast. So unexpected. I really don't know what else to say. Julie is still here, of course, and is in good hands. I promised to take care of her until you return, and I'll do that. She's been great to have around."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"I guess not."

Madison didn't know how to end the call and sat in silence until Phil said, "I ought to be home in about three weeks. I'll let you know when I pull in so I can pick Julie up from you." On that note, the phone went dead and Madison's heart sunk to the floor, however

she was relieved that she'd been honest about her feelings. There was no point in mentioning Michael's name. She cared about Phil, and dating him had been a big step for her. As was the phone call she just made.

Surprisingly, the next day Madison woke up feeling recharged and lighter. She slept peacefully after several sleepless nights; nights filled with nightmares about Rick and worries over Phil. But now her oatmeal didn't taste like paste, and the drive to school felt less monotonous. She knew she was going to see Michael after school, and that certainly had something to do with her elevated mood.

Olivia was in her classroom when Madison walked in and took a seat on one of the student's desks. "Well, I may as well tell you. I talked to Phil last night."

Olivia put down the papers that were in her hand and looked up from her desk. "Whoa. How'd that go?"

"I told him that I'm just not in love with him like I tried to convince myself I was."

"Geez, Maddie. I hope he's okay. He hadn't dated in a long time either ya know."

"I know, but I'm hoping he learned something good from this. Like I did. You know as well as anyone that I wouldn't of considered dating anyone a year ago. Christ, not even six months ago. He really changed that for me."

"Well, I hope you won't regret it later."

"No, I know I did the right thing."

"Did you tell him about Michael?"

"Only that I met someone else. He doesn't know who it is though. There was no point in going into that."



## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"Okay. Do you want to run after school? Talk about it some more?"

"I can't. I'm meeting Michael to put another coat of paint on the walls while it's still light out. It's better to do it with daylight."

"I see. You two are becoming quite the home remodelers, huh?"

"He knows a lot about it, and I just follow directions well. We can run tomorrow though, and I'll see ya at lunch."

Madison continued down the hall to her classroom. Mr. Whyte passed her, directing a student to his office. *Already in trouble.* Once in her classroom, she prepared the lessons for the day and the thought of seeing Michael that night caused a smile to sprawl across her face. She realized that it was one of the few times in a long time that a mere thought of someone had caused her to smile that big. Yet she knew in her heart the thought was anything but mere.

When she pulled into his dad's driveway several hours later, Julie clamored to get out of the car. Madison could see that Julie was getting used to the visits and that she enjoyed playing with Seth almost as much as Madison enjoyed playing with Michael. However, Madison felt a twinge of guilt bringing Julie to Michael's, knowing that it would likely hurt Phil's feelings. But, leaving her at home was not a fun option for Julie. As soon as the car door opened, Julie catapulted into the driveway and across the yard to where Seth was chewing on an oversized branch.

"Well, hello there pretty lady." Michael was on the front porch, a cup of coffee in hand.

*Through Hazel Eyes*

"I thought you'd be inside painting already."

"Nope. I waited because there's a dilemma."

"Oh?"

"I can't decide if you should paint your second coat over your original or if we should switch."

"And that matters, why?"

"Well, I thought it would be kinda nice if we painted over each other's coats. Kinda romantic in a way."

Seeing his slanted smile stopped her in her tracks.

"I see. And what does your gut tell you?"

"That we should do it that way. But, I wanted to clear it with you."

Madison stepped up on the porch and stood so close to him that a few loose strands of her hair flickered on his cheek. Her ponytail was tight, but there were always a few stray hairs dangling from her brow. Michael brushed the hair back onto her head and rested his hand behind her neck. They kissed before she could tell him the answer to his dilemma.

"Mmmm. The coffee you're drinking tastes good," she said after they stepped back and held hands between their bodies. "I say we paint over each other's first coat. That's kinda cool."

Michael had the paint cans and brushes lined up and ready to go before Madison arrived so they could jump right in. The first layer created an artistic aura. The early evening sunlight warmed the mocha-tinted walls with its strokes of reds, oranges, and pinks.

"This is going to look so great with the final coat and with the bookshelves back in place," Michael said as he handed her a brush. "I only wish my dad had

lived long enough to see it transformed. He'd of loved it."

"The furniture will really stand out too. This'll be an incredibly cozy room. The ambiance that a classic fiction writer would want to work in," Madison said. The furniture was still covered in blankets and sheets while they painted. It would be unveiled and moved after the final coat dries.

"Ever the English teacher, are you? Imagine the first snowfall. Sitting on the couch, reading a book and looking out to the pond." Michael stared out the window that overlooked the pond, "This is one of my favorite views. My other is the master bedroom's bay window." Grabbing her hand he said, "Come with me."

After leading her upstairs, they were able to catch the sunset over the mountain range. The bay window boasted a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the seasonal and weather related changes created a picture book of images.

"My father didn't sleep up here much. The climb up the steps became too much for him, so he slept in the downstairs guestroom until he moved in with me. I sometimes stayed here with him and took advantage of being able to sleep up here."

"Wow," was all that Madison could utter. Holding hands, they sat on the ledge of the windows and shared the view in peace.

TWENTY-SIX

After finishing her pasta dinner and loading the dishwasher, Madison called Michael. He was working the late shift at the vet's office.

"Hello my pretty lady," Michael said when the receptionist put her through. She was still adapting to hearing so many compliments.

"Hi. Are you almost on your way home?"

"You caught me just leaving the office."

"I've got some left over pasta if you want to stop by."

"Now that sounds tempting. I was gonna pick up Chinese on the corner, but your offer sounds better."

"Okay then. I'll see you in a bit."

Madison went up to her bedroom and changed into a comfortable pair of jeans and a square neck linen shirt, her favorite from Banana Republic. She let her hair out of its ponytail and allowed it to cascade to her shoulders. Her makeup sat on her sink in the corner by the cotton balls and Q-tips. The cool water felt good on her skin and she allowed the moisturizer to soak in before putting on foundation, eye shadow, eyeliner, and mascara. Simple and natural.

Before going back downstairs, she ran a vacuum over the steps. Her neglected housework was slowly disappearing, as she spent several minutes each day

catching up on it. The doorbell rang over the rumble of the vacuum, which she unplugged and stuffed back in the closet. Excitement filled her as she opened the door and found Michael standing there. He pulled her into his arms, and she stood on her tiptoes and nuzzled her face into his. They kissed passionately on the front porch until her toes started to numb.

"I missed you," he said.

"Yeah, I missed you too."

Hand in hand, they walked to the kitchen where Michael sat at the table and watched her dole pasta onto a plate for him.

"What would you like to drink?" she asked.

"A good 'ol fashioned glass of milk would be great."

"That I can give you," she said and made her way to the refrigerator. Never having been a fan of soda, she kept the fridge stocked with juice, lemonade, Gatorade, and milk.

"Hey, I've got something at my dad's house that I believe is yours."

"Huh? What could you possibly have that's mine?"

"You'll see. It's a surprise," Michael smiled a milk-moustache smile at her and went back to eating his pasta.

"Ah, c'mon! Tell me!"

"No. You'll have to be patient."

"Can we go tonight?" Madison jumped up and down like one of her students, "Puhlease?"

"I don't know; it's kinda late." Michael kept his eyes on his plate and took another bite of food.

"No its not. I'll drive."

*Through Hazel Eyes*

"Boy, you're worse than a kid on Christmas morning!"

"So we can go?"

"Okay, okay. You win, but let me finish dinner first."

Madison ran upstairs, grabbed her purse off her dresser, and checked her make-up in the bathroom mirror while Michael ate. When she returned to the kitchen, he was putting his plate and glass in the dishwasher.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah, not that I have a choice." Michael grabbed her and kissed her once again. "You are too cute when you're excited," he said.

"C'mon, let's go." Madison yanked on his arm, pulling him toward the door. Julie stayed on her dog bed, thumped her tail, and went back to sleep.

Madison drove and when they arrived at the house, she scurried out of the car and ran to the door. "Hurry up! Open the door," she begged.

"You don't even know where it is in the house."

"That's okay, I'll sit in the living room with my eyes closed and you can bring it to me."

"No, it won't work like that."

"Huh?"

"You'll see." The door opened and when they stepped inside, Michael took Madison by the hand, told her to close her eyes, and led her through the living room and down the hall.

"Where are we going?" Madison squeaked with glee. She held her other hand out and felt the freshly

painted wall alongside her as they made their way down the narrow hallway.

"Hold on, we're almost there."

Madison heard a door opening. It creaked, which made her wonder what door it was. She was certain they had oiled all of the downstairs doors after they finished painting the living room. Her eyes were beginning to hurt from squeezing them tightly shut.

"Okay," Michael said. "Just stand still here for one minute while I turn on a light." The darkness was replaced by light, but her eyes remained closed. She heard a slight rumble on the floor and the slightly musty odor of the room indicated that it hadn't been painted.

Michael's hand took hold of hers again, "Okay," he said, "open your eyes."

Once she adjusted to the light of the room, Madison's eyes lit up at the sight that stood before her. She reached out and ran her hand across the wood, which had been restored to almost new. Each nook and cranny gleaned in the light. Her grandmother's antique desk was as gorgeous as she remembered it to be. Eyes filled with tears, she stood speechless and admired the beauty of the desk that she had missed for so long.

Eventually, "Holy cow" came out of her mouth and she hugged Michael as tight as she could. Her lips reached up and met his, mouthing, "Thank you."

"I thought you'd want it back. Since I had no idea where to find you, I worked on it a bit in Colorado and finished it here. There was just enough room on the moving truck for it. I don't really know why, but I just felt like I had to keep it."

## *Through Hazel Eyes*

"How'd you know it was mine and not Rick's?"

"By this." Michael opened the top drawer and inside sat a letter addressed to Madison. "Go ahead, open it. It's addressed to you."

Madison sat down in the chair, hands trembling; she took the envelope from the drawer and gently tore it open. The return address was faded, but recognizable as her grandmother's.

"July 12<sup>th</sup>. Dearest Madison, My cancer has taken its toll on me, and I wanted to write you this letter so that you'll have it when I'm gone." Madison's throat swelled almost completely, certain that the pressure squeezed the plump teardrop from her eye and onto the letter below where it burst across the top of the page. Gripping the paper between her sinewy fingers, she continued to read, "I know from our conversations that you are having more than a rough time. I hear the pain in your voice when we talk on the phone, and I know that you desperately want to leave Rick. I know you feel as though life doesn't seem fair at times. But please remember, my dear, that your life is just that – yours – no one else's. No man is worth shedding tears over, unless they are tears of happiness. Remember these words, words that I lived by (and it worked for me)...don't choose the one you can live with; choose the one you can't live without. Life has a lot of sweet things to offer you when your soul is ready to pluck them from the branch. Love, Mima. p.s. I'm glad the desk made it there safe and sound, and even more glad that you will have it when I'm gone."

Madison reread the letter one more time before she turned around in the chair and realized Michael had



left the room. She sat and cried freely, wondering why she hadn't received the letter before now. But, in her heart, she knew the answer to that question.

Michael returned a moment later with a cup of tea for her. She wiped her eyes while he put the tea down on the table next to the desk. It was a sweet raspberry tea and she noticed a swirl of honey dissolving along the bottom of the mug. He cupped her face in his hands, bent down, and kissed her tears from her cheek. Madison touched her hands to his face then pulled him down till he sat in the chair beside her. She climbed over and into his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Where'd you find it?" Madison asked.

"Wedge between two of the drawers. I don't know how it got there, but it was clear it hadn't been opened, just shoved into the spot where I found it."

"Yeah, well Rick may not have opened my mail, but I guess he didn't want me reading it either. It would've arrived right around when I left him." Madison took a deep breath, picked up the letter again, and stroked her finger across the return address on the envelope. "She died that August," she explained, dropping her eyes to the ground. "I was so busy with school and getting settled here that I didn't talk to her very often. When I did, it was mostly about her health." Madison put the letter in her lap and looked back up at Michael. "Thank you for saving it."

"I wanted to keep it with the desk as part of its history." Michael gingerly took hold of her hand, as though it could break with the wisp of the wind.

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Madison rubbed her other hand across the top drawer, admiring his work again. "It looks gorgeous. You did a great job restoring it, you know." She twirled her fingers in his with the hand that he still held. The warmth from having carried the hot teacup radiated from his brawny fingers, making her not want to let go.

"Thanks. I did most of the work at night while my father slept. I wasn't getting much sleep at the time and the morphine had him out pretty much 'round the clock at the end. The restoration work was a good distraction for me," Michael said. "So, what do you say we move it back to your house this weekend? We can load it in the truck. Lord knows I have enough drop cloths to protect it."

"That'd be great." Madison took a sip of her tea and placed the letter back in the desk's top drawer. A sense of peace fell over her like the rising sun on a spring crop. Together they stood up and walked out of the room.

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By early June, Madison and Michael had finished painting the house and placed all of his father's furniture back in its rightful location.

"What do you think of this?" Madison asked after setting a lamp on an end table by the fireplace.

"Hmm. I like it, but I think it needs a brighter bulb if it's going to be a reading light." Michael left the room and returned with a bulb in hand.

"There. That just about does it." Madison smiled after replacing the bulb and flicking on the light. The colors on the walls throughout the house remained

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warm and welcoming, and the house took on the feeling of a home with their final touches.

"Yeah, now I just need to pay the movers."

"We need to celebrate," Madison announced.

"Celebrate?"

"Yes, celebrate months of hard work and your finally being able to live here. How 'bout I cook up some Thai food."

An hour later, they sat at the kitchen table, plates filled with curry vegetables and tofu. A bottle of wine stood at the center, and each of their glasses were half full.

"I know I've said this a hundred times, but thanks again for all of your help," Michael said, lifting his glass to her.

Madison raised her glass to his and took a long sip from it. After dinner, and a few more glasses of wine, Michael said, "Let's go up and watch the sunset."

They took their wine glasses and sat on the ledge by the bay window. "The view is stunning every time," Madison said.

"I'd like it to be our view, Madison," Michael said. "I want you here with me. Always. You put your heart and soul into this house as much as I did, and you've captured my heart. Please say you will."

Madison smiled, lifted her glass to his then took his hand in hers. She curled up against him on the ledge, and they looked out to the Blue Ridge Mountains while Seth slept in his dog bed at the foot of the sleigh bed.

***THE END***

PathBinder Publishing  
and Heather Hummel  
hope you enjoyed reading  
*Through Hazel Eyes.*

Heather's second novel, *The Universe is My Sugar Daddy*, is forthcoming in the summer of 2009.

Following is the first chapter. Enjoy!

# THE UNIVERSE IS MY SUGAR DADDY

## Chapter One

The crimson and golden-amber leaves lay on the ground beneath Samantha's bedroom window in a heap. Gentle fall winds stirred the leaves, delaying them from rotting—dissolving too quickly into the ground only to eventually be replaced by next year's batch. Year after year introduced the same process—grow, fall, rot. Quite possibly the first snow fall would arrive early and take care of the leaves, burying them in caps of white powder or heavy flakes laden with moisture. Upstairs in the loft, which consisted entirely of the master suite of the cabin, Samantha rolled over, reluctant once again to face the day. Her eyes still swollen from the flow of heavy tears shed the night before made them difficult to open. And now that the nights of crying herself to sleep and the mornings of puffy eyes had blurred into a few weeks, (or was it a month already?), she grew used to awakening slowly. She lost track of the days of the week ever since the day after her life changed. The day Robert left her and the next day when she quit her office management job marked the beginning of time when she didn't keep track of time anymore.

Having freedom from keeping to a watch and attending management meetings would normally be considered a beautiful thing, but for Samantha it

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represented a vast canyon of darkness and uncertainty about her future. Despite her abruptly exorbitant amount of free time, the alarm clock on her nightstand was now coated with a thin layer of dust. Hair and dust bunnies danced across the carpets, and downstairs the dishes made a nightly attempt to crawl out of the sink. Laundry was the worst of the chores—lifting the basket of clothes consumed every ounce of energy her body could muster. It wasn't supposed to be so physically draining. The end of a relationship didn't normally suck the life out of her like it did this time. She'd quit jobs before and never experienced the lethargy that consumed her body, mind and soul. The emotional tax she knew would be there, but she hadn't expected the physical weight she felt in every move of her body. Even brushing her teeth, when she finally pulled herself from bed and made it to the bathroom, meant lifting an arm above shoulder height. Dread.

Collapsing into a pile of sorrow under her covers at night took the least amount of effort. It meant she made it through another day. Another evening. Now all she had to do was find a way to sleep, but closing her eyelids—that she could do. Her recurring nightmares, when sleep dominated, immersed her body into deep wild rivers. In each dream, she'd clamor, drowning alongside the edge unable to reach the crest of the river's bank. Reaching out, she'd barely feel her way through the murky, tumultuous water for the edge in the hopes of grabbing hold of a random jutting branch that might ground her, hold her weight, even if she remained under water. It would be a place to start.

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Each time she awoke, normally in a sweat, from this particular dream that repeated itself during many endless nights, she feared drifting back to sleep in the off chance that the dream picked up where she left off—drowning. A dream's continuance seemed to never happen when they were good dreams. Those dreams escaped consciousness when she awoke, leaving her with only a memory of something good, something hopeful. However, it had been a long time since she experienced a dream that she wanted to resume after awaking. And last night's nightmare was no different.

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Samantha shocked her therapist, Ragnar Axel, when she announced to him later in that memorable week that she quit her job without giving the standard two weeks notice.

"They can fire you on the spot, so why can't I quit on the spot?" she defended. She hadn't seen him since the duo of life-changing events. "And, Robert broke up with me on the spot. Why should I owe anyone any courtesies?"

Ragnar sat in his chair and stared at her with disbelief stroked across his face. No matter how hard he tried to hide it and remain professional, Samantha read the writing in his pores. She had never before experienced him at a loss for words. This was a side of him that she would have found almost entertaining if she hadn't been clutching a Kleenex box with one hand and a wad of damp tissues in the other.

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The name alone, Ragnar Axel, was what first drew Samantha to him. Asking friends or neighbors for a therapist referral is like asking to borrow their underwear, she believed. So, she only had her gut instinct to go by, and her gut loved his name. The way it sounded when she said it, so official and stoic. “Ragnar Axel,” she said out loud, looking at his ad in the yellow pages months earlier. There was no photo of him in the ad, and when she met him she wondered why he didn’t use one. He was handsome in his own right, even at his nearing retirement age. Some people, she knew, grew better looking with age and although she hadn’t known him until now, she imagined he was one of them.

“Kind of like Sean Connery,” Samantha told her best friend, Amanda, after the first session with Ragnar. “Not his looks, but the better with age concept,” she further explained.

Although, he did have salt and pepper hair that he kept short and intriguing blue eyes that questioned you before he spoke. So, yes, the name was a start.

Little did Samantha know that when she started therapy she would meet Robert shortly afterwards. While starting therapy may have been the catalyst to meeting him, it wasn’t the only reason. Her reason for calling Ragnar was to explore her history of failed relationships. By the time she dialed his number, she had tired of never making it to love, let alone the altar. In her mind she envisioned two paths—one to her version of what happiness represented, which was the one everyone else seemed to have, and the version that was her own personal reality. At least her friends and



family made their peace with her situation a while ago, realizing that trying to talk “sense” into her proved fruitless.

Some of Samantha’s relationships began with a bang only to end abruptly for no apparent reason, or they’d fizzle in and out due to lack of effort and interest from one or both parties. Once or twice the man *de jour* moved on before Samantha was aware the relationship had ended. Her plan when she called Ragnar was to delve into therapy before the next relationship came along so that she could resolve her issues and be better prepared for when it happened. When she first met with Ragnar, he insisted she call him Ragnar, he asked if she felt as though she jumped into relationships too fast, possibly intimidating her mates.

“In all honesty, no, I don’t believe I do,” Samantha said.

“Are you the jealous type?” he asked, continuing to probe her like a tooth until hitting a sore spot, causing a grimace.

Samantha wrinkled her face. Off hand she couldn’t think of a scenario where any one of her boyfriends had given her reason to be jealous, only hurt and abandoned when they left, or nothing at all in some cases. Well, maybe a pang of guilt once or twice when she was the one who ended it.

“Maybe,” a potential incident finally came to mind, “with Adam. His previous girlfriend called him a lot when we first started dating. It didn’t bother me at the time. He treated me like a princess and convinced me quite easily that he was no longer interested in Tracy. But, I found out later that my entire relationship with

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him was just his trying to make her jealous, which of course worked and he went back to her.”

“Did that bother you? Finding out he used you?” The dental pick dug deeper.

“Not really, but then again I haven’t been tested much with that. Either I didn’t care enough about the guy, or there was simply no reason to be jealous. Maybe that’s part of my problem? What if I never cared enough to be jealous? That is until Robert, but that didn’t end in jealousy.” She shocked herself with her own epiphany.

Ragnar noted that her time was up, and Samantha left his office with enough to think about.

Curled up in bed that evening, she wrote in her journal.

*October 25<sup>th</sup> – Met with Ragnar today. We continue to delve into my past relationships – the drudges of breakups, the emotions around jealousy, longing, and abandonment when they leave me...or my lack of emotion when I break up with them. They all bundle together in one big mess called “Samantha’s Relationships.”*

Within the walls of his office, Samantha and Ragnar continued to discuss other possible reasons for the demise of her relationships.

“Can you pigeon hole the type of men you’ve dated?” Ragnar asked one week. He tapped his foot against the coffee table between them, a habit of his that Samantha was growing used to and didn’t take personally.

“Don’t think so.” she answered. “They’ve been all across the board. I’ve dated poets to brokers. Some rich,

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some poor. Most of them were nice, at least in the beginning. I don't think I can pigeon hole them into categories like 'I only date jocks' or 'I only date white collars.'"

In the next session Ragnar went back to focusing on the reasons for the endings, and it was the very next day when Samantha met Robert. She and Amanda were leaving Ben and Jerry's and Robert was entering through the same door. Amanda held the door, waiting for Samantha who was grabbing a napkin from the holder.

"Hold on to your britches," Samantha said. "You know I can't eat this before it starts to drip all over the place."

"Let me help you with that," Robert said. He adeptly held the door open, relieving Amanda, and held on to the napkin container so it wouldn't slide across the counter as Samantha yanked a clump of them with her one free hand.

"Thanks," Samantha said. Robert let the door close, leaving Amanda outside with her cone watching the events unfold inside. Robert and Samantha struck up a conversation and before she left they exchanged phone numbers.

"Are you nuts?" Amanda asked when Samantha emerged from the store. Amanda held her ice cream cone in one hand and waved a motherly finger at Samantha with the other.

"What?"

"Getting the phone number of a guy you don't know."

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“Why not? He’s cute, polite, and likes ice cream. What’s not to like so far?”

Samantha found out later what was not to like. To start with, his oversized purebred German Shepherd slept in the bed with him. There were nights when she woke up to two brown eyes looking down at her, which normally would have been romantic, but in this case the snout between the eyes was furry and the breath unbearable. Prince, as the dog was named, enjoyed nesting in the blankets. He dug them into a not-so-neat pile, circling until he was ready to make his landing, at which time he plopped his ninety-pound furry existence against her hip, and her back for that matter. Robert would go to bed joking, “Prince, you’re my man. Make room for me though!” and then proceeded to squeeze his own one-hundred-ninety pound body between Prince and Samantha. Not even his king sized bed was sufficient for the three of them. But, Robert kept saying, “Isn’t this great?” while cuddling in close to her.

She often wondered if he would cuddle with her as much if he weren’t forced to have his body pressed up against hers. But, she had already fallen for him and since she waited a while to sleep with him, establishing that she had feelings for him, she didn’t know that Prince would be a bed companion. She wondered how many girlfriends he’d lost because of the hairy bedmate. Due to her fear of failing in yet another relationship, and the way she felt about Robert outside of the bedroom, she tolerated Prince and almost grew accustomed to it to the point that she would sleep through the night, a great accomplishment.

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Ragnar refrained from chuckling when Samantha sat in his office one afternoon relaying her stories about Prince. She was in tears of depression, but managed to use animated gestures in her description that nearly led Ragnar to tears as he fought back the urge to laugh. Samantha knew all along that he was fighting it, and actually played up the scenes to see if he would break. Keeping his professionalism in tact, he didn't. Instead he asked, "So, why do you think you allowed this behavior to continue for so many months?" and they would go round and round about her off the charts low-self-esteem issues. At one point, when Robert first broke up with her, Ragnar contemplated prescribing anti-depressants, but Samantha wouldn't hear of it. She was bound and determined to work through her issues while keeping her faculties intact and Ragnar respected that. She believed she was one of his more entertaining clients and didn't want to show up drugged up and unable to remember their sessions, which is how she perceived being medicated would be like.

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Now, waking up for the umpteenth day in a row after crying herself to sleep, the idea of medication tempted her. She curled up in as tight a ball as she could make herself into, disappointed that she couldn't disappear completely. Lifting one eyelid she looked ahead to the wall on the other side of the room. It held a stream of light across it. *Morning*, she thought. *Do I want to face this day?*

Now that she was unemployed, although becoming a writer shouldn't mean that, she could spend the

entire day in bed and nobody would be the wiser. Wallowing in her misery was as tempting as the medication. Then she thought about her novel and where she left off with it. *Winter's Truth* was fast becoming her best friend and her sole purpose for stepping her feet on the area rug next to her bed each morning. It was the one thing in her life that could lure her out of bed now that she didn't have a man to lure her into bed. The issue of being in a bed at all was a constant dichotomy.

Surrendering to the day's beckoning, she squeezed herself out from under the covers. Her sheets were still the thin, cotton ones of summer. She meant to replace them with flannel ones, but hadn't mustered the energy and with the recent Indian summer, she had an excuse not to. After padding to the bathroom, she weighed herself on the digital scale in the corner, a habit she formed back in college in fear of gaining the noted freshman fifteen. Weight fell off her in the past weeks, but she figured much of it was water weight from the tears. She never gained or lost beyond a narrow margin of seven pounds since high school. Now in her late thirties, she was thankful for at least being able to maintain her physique over the years. Her hair was another issue. It had thinned since the days of being a teen with long, thick ponytails. But considering it was quite thick before, the thinning now actually allowed her more flexibility with styles and layering that she couldn't manage before. It was the infiltration of grays into the once beautiful auburn tone that she battled, and often lost except for the few weeks after a coloring,

which never matched her original color that she adored.

Someone once told her, "It's not wrinkles, but gray hair and yellow teeth. Those are the two things that'll age you." It wasn't long after that when Samantha splurged for the whitening formulas at the drug store and spent an hour a day unable to talk because her mouth was full of gooey strips filmed over her teeth. She noticed a difference in a matter of days, but with all the coffee and lattes she drank, it defeated the purpose and she couldn't be bothered to brush her teeth after each cup. She did, however, continue to indulge in the whitening process when she had extra cash and the patience to endure the goo. Since she never spent money on pedicures or manicures, teeth whitening was one luxury that she allowed herself. That and therapy were her two biggest nonessential expenses during this time in her life.

On this morning she would face neither, nor would she worry about her finances. Her sanity depended on finishing and selling her novel. The race against that clock was stronger than the race against her biological one. She gave up on the idea of being a mother a while ago and rarely revisited it because the indulgence in the thought was too discouraging. However, the possibility of not having someone special to share the glory of being a published author when the time came hung above her head. She dreamt of having a handsome husband swing open the front door to their home as she flew in stating in elation, "It sold! My book sold!" Naturally, he would scoop her up in his arms

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and tell her she was the most amazing literary genius of this century.

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"So, what are you going to do for work?" Ragnar asked during one of her post-breakdowns, also classified as an early midlife-crisis, sessions. He tugged on his beard and watched as she picked a blade of grass off the bottom of her shoe.

"I haven't told my family or friends this yet, so you're the first to know," she said. She reached over and grabbed the cup of water on the end table next to the leather couch she was sitting on—this after putting the grass blade in the garbage can between the couch and the end table. She sat on the couch because the traditional process of lying down during therapy gave her the creeps, and she imagined not many people did that anymore. While sipping the water, Samantha looked at Ragnar, noting his patience in awaiting her answer. They hadn't spoken much about her career dreams and aspirations because of the initial focus on her string of failed relationships. Actually, she felt it was more of a rope than a string. Or possibly a thread, since a thread is more fragile than a string. But, rope defined the difficulty through the nature of its thickness, heaviness.

"I'm following my dream," she started after taking one last sip and replacing the cup on the wet ring it left on the table's corner.

"Dream?" Ragnar raised an eyebrow at her. Obviously his interest was more piqued than it had been prior to the water sipping delay, and in hindsight,



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Samantha wished she had waited until this moment to sip it. To drink it now though would have been too obvious that she was toying with him and a waste of time and money. After all, she was paying cash for her appointments since she gave up her medical insurance when she quit her job. It wasn't that she enjoyed egging him on, but it was a bit of a game that she had developed to keep him on his toes, quite possibly because he was one of the few men that she had undivided attention from and because she was able to control the outcome of their time to a degree. As a therapist, he was interested in her and she wasn't used to that, even if she was paying him.

"Yes, my dream. I've wanted to be one since I first learned how to do it."

"And that would be?" Tap, tap, tap of his foot.

"A writer. I've always wanted to be a writer." Samantha sat and waited for the debate to begin. The one she had with her family in high school when she announced she wanted to be a photojournalist. Their lack of support left her confused and sent her off track, never quite recovering her balance. Until now.

"You'll never make it," they had said, "the shot of making it big is one in a million." And that was the response she waited for from Ragnar.

On some level she looked forward to the debate because even in her fragile mindset she was determined to turn the desolate outcome that all had predicted and to rewrite her future. Proving Ragnar and the others wrong was only part of it though. Writing was her passion and it was what had kept her sane over the years, kept her off the medications.

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"How can I focus on my writing if I'm on medications?" she would ask Amanda, a pediatrician, rhetorically. "Even over-the-counter cold medications leave me disoriented." Samantha's resilience to medication was too low, and her dream of being a writer was too high. She wouldn't succumb.

Instead of the refutation she expected, Ragnar said, "Good! That's a terrific goal. What makes you love writing so much?"

Stunned by his response, Samantha had to think for a minute before answering him. No one had ever asked her why she loved writing. A formulated answer didn't exist and she needed time to consider how she would explain her innate love for the written word. She only knew it in her heart and her love for writing hadn't mattered enough to anyone else before. She reminded herself that he was there for the purpose of caring, but still, his response seemed genuine and so her answer must reflect as such.

"It's just something that I feel I'm good at, that I love doing, so that's a start. But, it also takes me to places outside of my own life. You know? Except for when I journal. That's too much of a reflection of my own life at times. They can be pretty scary to go back and read." It was the best she could come up with under the circumstances of his response.

"Has it helped? The journaling?"

"Yes, it's insightful I suppose. I don't go back and read my entries unless I'm having a good day though. Sometimes I laugh at how down I was a month ago or a year ago on a particular day. But, most of the time it just saddens me."

"What else do you write?"

"I've started a novel. But other than that, just some poems and short stories since those are what I've had time for while working a desk job."

"That sounds great. What are your plans for making this a career?"

She knew that question was coming. The doubt had to ease its way into the conversation at some point. The idea of making an actual living as a writer always loomed in people's minds. Just once she'd like for someone to not doubt her, even with the underlying questions such as this one, which she translated as, "So, just how are you going to make money doing this writing thing?" and it frustrated her.

"I'm working on it. I'm taking it one day at a time since I kinda just broke up with Robert *and* quit my job. All I know is that this is what I have to do. It's all I want to do."

What she wanted to do was scream, "I'll write my books then I'll sell my books...how else!" but she kept it to her in-the-box answer. The energy to defend was too much for her at this point, even if it was directed at her therapist.

"Okay. Well, maybe it's a good idea to take some time and focus on your book. Then you can go back to work when your head's clear and you're ready." Ragnar made yet another note on his pad of paper.

"Weren't you listening?" Samantha squealed. "This is my new work. I'll never step foot in an office as an employee again." This time Samantha surprised herself with the tone of her voice. Looking down at her feet, she was sorry she lashed out at him. "Sorry. But, you're

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the one person who's supposed to believe in me. If anything because I pay you to."

"You pay me, yes. But your welfare is also my best interest. We'll continue this next week. Time's up," Ragnar said.

"Next week." Samantha hoisted herself from the couch. Moments later she walked out onto the sidewalk. She felt a sense of freedom after having shared her secret with confidence, despite Ragnar reluctance to have faith in her. He would just be one more person she'd have to prove herself to. But, the voice in the back of her head reminded her that proving her goal was no one's business in the end.

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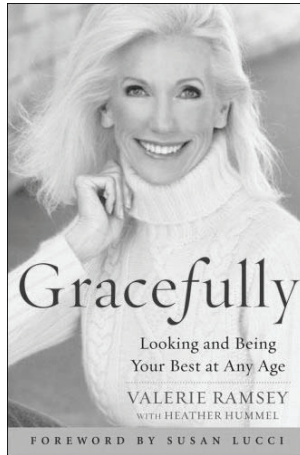
Heather Hummel (PathBinder Publishing) is  
forthcoming in early 2009.

Check Amazon, Barnes & Noble or  
[www.PathBinder.com](http://www.PathBinder.com) for details.



Heather Hummel is an author who specializes in the genre of Body, Mind, & Soul with an emphasis on life transitions. Her previous book, *Gracefully: Looking and Being Your Best at Any Age* (McGraw Hill, 2008), was coauthored with her mother, Valerie Ramsey. Heather's spiritual essays have been published in *Blue Ridge Anthology* and *Messages of Hope and Healing*.

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# ***BE THE WRITER***

## **ADVICE ON BECOMING A WRITER**

**Heather Hummel**

**O**ther than "What do you write?" I am often asked "*How did you succeed?*" Besides being an author, I fill the role as an editor and a writing coach to aspiring writers who look to me for answers to the latter question. Some of them come to me feeling defeated while others are newbies with high expectations. Yet, my response to both is the same, "**Be the Writer!**"

Easy to say, "Be the Writer" and really not that hard to do if your heart is in it.

To help *you* put *your* heart in it, here are some tidbits I learned along the way:

### **1. Be creative when finding places for your work.**

- **Newsletters:** I started out as the Editor-in-Chief of a University of Virginia alumni newsletter. I did everything from writing the articles to the design/layout and distribution. Having "The University of Virginia" on

- **Regional magazines:** These magazines hire freelance writers all the time. Check the websites of your local regional magazines for submission guidelines. This is a great place to build your "clips" because no matter

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what you *want* to write, building your portfolio counts. If the editor likes your work, they will keep you busy!

- **Contests:** Enter contests! Follow the guidelines, polish your work, and be willing pay the entry fees. You never know, and if you win or receive any recognition it can carry a lot of weight. There are several contests per year and many are listed in the Writer's Marketplace.

- **Join Writing Groups and Attend Conferences:**

Writing guilds and organizations (such as the International Women's Writing Guild, or regional venues such as Richmond, Virginia's *James River Writers*), put you in contact with other writers. There are several annual conferences nationwide that give you the opportunity to meet other writers and to pitch your work to agents.

## **2. Build your platform.**

These words make every new writer cringe. And then there are those who aren't familiar with the meaning or significance of the word "platform." No matter how unfair it sounds, having a platform (your credentials and beyond) matters.

Fiction and nonfiction are two different beasts. For fiction, winning those contests (especially the notable ones) helps tremendously. For nonfiction, who and how many people you know, your venue, how well you know your topic (expertise), and being in the public eye matters. One angle I used to build my



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platform was approaching literary festivals about being a guest author on their panels. What was so great about being on a panel was sharing the stage with other authors. The spotlight wasn't completely off me and our energy fed one another. The more speaking engagements about your topic you do, the more comfortable you become doing them and at the same time you can add the credits to your queries and proposals. Keep your website and blog up to date with your calendar.

### **3. Write a great novel or an awesome book proposal - then know where and how to shop it.**

Do your research. Again, Writer's Marketplace is a tool that should be on every new author's desk.

- Know that the majority of publishers (especially the big houses) only accept submissions from agents (i.e. you need an agent).
- Know that a novel must be complete and as great as you can make it before you query agents.
- Know that nonfiction requires a well constructed book proposal and sample material, but the manuscript does not need to be complete.
- Know that every agent has different submission guidelines and represents different genres. Respect their guidelines and the genres they represent, or you will likely be rejected. (Most have their guidelines posted on their website.)

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It's no secret that agents have about a 91 to 96% rejection rate, and I would venture to guess that the majority of these rejections are simply from writers not doing their homework. Don't spend hours, months, years working on a book and only minutes preparing it for an agent. Your work deserves better than that and your agent deserves your respect. Know the guidelines, make your manuscript sparkle (hiring a professional editor is worth every penny), and be professional...always.

### **4. Attitude is everything.**

Despite everything I listed above, the number one success tool you have for becoming a writer is your attitude. A positive attitude (without arrogance) will take you places you never imagined you could go. This goes for all aspects of life, not just being a writer.

### **5. Think Body, Mind and Soul.**

**Body** - write! Find time to write. I don't believe in writer's block, and as such I've never experienced it. There is always something to write about. Not only is my license plate (on my antique Volvo P1800E that was my grandmother's) **2KWPD**, but that's my goal as a writer - to write or edit 2,000 words per day.

**Mind** - be creative in all aspects of being a writer. Use your brain not only with your work, but where and how to find a home for it.

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*Soul* - the essence of being a writer means you feel it to the core of your being. I know, what you're thinking - sounds hokey - but I have to tell you, it's true!

Apparently George Martin (Beatles producer) was once asked, "What advice do you have for those pursuing a career in the music industry?"

George responded, "I would discourage them."

"Why? Look at what a great lifestyle you have?"

continued the inquisition.

"Because those who *can* be discouraged *ought* to be discouraged," George said.

*Think about it.*

Writing has always been my passion. My grandmother was an author and freelance writer, and as a teen I used to send her short stories that she critiqued and mailed back to me. Originally I wanted to be a photojournalist, but I was always a better writer than photographer. At the very least, I've kept a journal since eighth grade and took writing classes along the way, including the Institute of Children's Literature (in my early twenties).

I resigned from teaching (high school English) to become a writer in early 2005, my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday present to myself. At the time I didn't know much about being a writer except *how* to write. I spent the next two years eating, breathing, and reading about the business end of being a writer. I read books like *Publishers Marketplace*, *Write the Perfect Book Proposal: 10 That Sold and Why*, and every issue of *Writers Digest* magazine (of which I had been a subscriber of for decades). To hone

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my writing skills, I joined writing groups and took workshops through the Charlottesville Writing Center (for more information on participating in writing workshops, see [Writing Workshop Etiquette](#) on my website). I even enter the National Novel Writing Month contest every year ([NANOWRIMO](#))!

I landed an agent by writing a knock-out book proposal and being positive, pleasant and professional. We sold the book to McGraw Hill within a short amount of time based on my mother's platform. She had already proven herself as a 67 year old model, but I still had to prove myself as a writer who could make it at this level. And I did. I wrote the book in the time promised without sacrificing quality. I communicated with the editor professionally and responded to all of his requests. In the end, he was thrilled with the final manuscript and I was validated in what I already knew - that I was a writer.

Everything I did during those years was about becoming a writer. That's what I mean when I say, "**Be the writer.**" You have to care, you have to crave it, you have to want it more than anything, and most of all, you have to believe in yourself.

Several of my clients have succeeded in finding an agent or publisher, while others are well on their way. Ask any of them (or [read their testimonials](#) on PathBinder Publishing's website) and they will surely tell you that besides the edits, besides the proposal tweaks, I teach them the importance of positive thinking. Fortunately, they've been quick learners or

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came to me with the right attitude already, which has been what makes being a writing coach extremely rewarding!

When I tell them, "**Be the Writer**" they understand it and for each, the persona of "writer" is quite different. That's what makes this such an amazing field to be in. Everyone has a story about how they made it - the stories are as different as the number of books out there. Make your own story.

**For More Information on Heather's Coaching for Writer's Program, contact Heather Hummel at [Heather@HeatherHummel.net](mailto:Heather@HeatherHummel.net)**

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