

An excerpt from ... A Mystery in Eastview

by

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Chapter One



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How could anybody concentrate on work when spring had finally made its first appearance in New England? I leaned back in my office chair, propped my feet up on the desk, and let the long-awaited mild air drift through the open window that had been tightly shut all winter. My thoughts roamed somewhere between, will the Sox have a chance this year and what should I have for lunch this afternoon, when a knock came at the door.

Before I could say come in, get lost, or anything else that sprang to mind, in walked a young woman whose stunning green eyes left me so transfixed they rendered me speechless. Which was extremely rare.

“Excuse me,” she said, closing the door behind her. The voice matched the lovely face. There was a little girl quality to it, along with a hint of sophistication. Or maybe it was just my imagination. Regardless, I was intrigued. My faithful Golden Retriever, no longer curled up on the rug beside me, was equally enamored, carefully sniffing this interesting stranger as she added, “I’m looking for a Mr. Rocco.”

“That’s what people call my father,” I said. “My name’s AJ. This guy is Strider. Please have a seat. And, Strider, back off, OK?”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “He’s adorable.”

She was maybe 5’3” at most, at least half a foot shorter than I was. Her dirty blonde hair was wavy and fell just below her shoulders. I loved the way she swept it over her eyes with an almost imperceptible move of her hand when she sat down in one of the two visitor’s chairs in front of my desk. Of course, the last time I’d had a visitor was about a year and a half ago. I leaned over my cluttered desk to shake her hand. Dumb, awkward move on my part, but she went along with it, pretending (I think) she didn’t notice.

“Sorry for the mess,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

With a shrug she said, “Don’t worry about it. Most men have no idea how to keep a place clean.” She reached down to pet Strider’s soft fur and he wagged his tail appreciatively.

She was wearing a light blue, short-sleeve shirt tucked into a pair of jeans. Casual. I liked it. Trying not to stare into those eyes, fearing I’d get hopelessly lost, I switched into professional mode. “So, what brings you here today, Miss...?”

With a quick smile (perfect teeth, I knew it!) she said, “Monroe. Heather Monroe.”

Just because I love trivia, I almost made a pointless joke about the Monroe Doctrine, but it wouldn’t have been a good idea to spoil professional mode so early in the conversation. “Most people call first, or send an email,” I said.

“This isn’t something I can really discuss on the phone,” she told me, tensing up a bit. Then she asked, “You’re a ghostwriter, right?”

“That’s correct. I’ve been at this for a number of years.”

Heather looked like she was appraising me, and not necessarily with a favorable assessment either. Finally, the silence getting awkward, I gestured with my hands. “What?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” she said, “but you look more like a middle linebacker.”

That one caught me by surprise. “A middle linebacker?”

She wrinkled her small nose, almost too fast to notice. Too damn cute. “Well, I don’t know, some kind of football player. Maybe even a wrestler. Not really the writer type.”

“Sorry,” I said. “You want me to put on a bow tie and smoke a pipe?”

Heather laughed, took a deep breath, and then became serious again. “That was stupid of me,” she said. “I guess we all have preconceived ideas and expectations about people.”

“Sure,” I said, my tone neutral now.

She took another deep breath. As much as I enjoyed looking at her, I was hoping she’d finally get to the point. And she did. “I’m trying to write a book about my cousin. Her name was Julie. I did my research and I heard a lot of good things about you, and then I saw on your website that you’re right here in Eastview.”

“Pretty convenient, huh?” I said. “And with lovely corporate headquarters on the second floor above a small-town pizza shop.”

I was again graced with another one of those quick but fabulous smiles. Then she said, “The problem is, this book will be kind of complicated.”

“Oh?”

It seemed like she had planned out what to say beforehand, but decided to veer off the script. “Look, there’s so much I could say, but here’s the bottom line. My cousin was a remarkable woman. She was only 28 years old when she died...but she really helped so many people in such a short time.”

I noticed a change in her voice when mentioning her cousin’s death. “You two were close.” I said it like a statement.

Heather started petting the dog again, which seemed to comfort her. “I never had a sister, neither did Julie. She was a year older than me, and like the big sister I never had. I have a brother, but it’s just not the same, you know?”

“Of course,” I said, hoping she wasn’t going to start crying. But she showed no signs of that, and I could tell she wanted to stay strong in front of me. “And this book will be your tribute to her, right?”

She was nodding her head. “Absolutely,” she said, “I want the world to know who she was. I don’t want her to just be forgotten like yesterday’s news.”

“Well, I’ve worked on lots of biographies,” I assured her, “so I’m certain I can help you put together—”

Swallowing hard, she averted her gaze from me for a moment and looked down at the dog, who responded immediately with a friendly wag. Heather then straightened up in her chair. “This is about more than just a biography,” she said.

I had no idea where she was going with this. I didn’t want to say “tell me about that” like some kind of shrink, so I just nodded ever so slightly the way I’ve seen professors do when they want you to continue without them saying anything.

She fumbled for the right words. “I also want to, well, there is a lot more to her story, I think...no, I know, than meets the eye. The thing is, it just feels very strange talking about it with, you know, somebody ...no offense or anything – but I mean, a person I just met.”

Her rambling was disconcerting, because she seemed like the well-spoken type who was articulate and never at a loss for words, but now she was bordering on incoherent.

“Heather,” I said, hoping using her first name would make the atmosphere more genial, “I’ve worked on almost every kind of book you can imagine. And I want you to know that anything you tell me

will always be strictly confidential until and unless you say otherwise.” That was sort of my standard introductory speech for prospective clients, and I felt annoyed at myself when I finished delivering it. I wanted to say something more personal to her, but I was afraid I might be crossing some sort of line.

She regained her composure much more readily than I would have expected. I don’t know if it was forced or not, but she seemed determined to just get down to business. “So here’s the thing. I want the book to be about how she lived. She was not only a dedicated social worker, she was a vocal advocate for battered women as well. But it has to go beyond that,” she added solemnly. “It must also be about how she died.”

I noticed she had reached down to pet Strider again, waiting for my response. “I’m sure I can do that. She was very young, so...there’s no easy way to ask this,” I said, “but how did she die?”

Heather looked at me directly, and there was such sadness in her beautiful green eyes. “Suicide.” The word sounded painful as it left her lips.

“God...I’m so sorry.” I never know the right thing to say when someone tells me something like that. Probably because there is no right thing to say. A born interviewer, normally I would ask some probing questions to get the additional details I needed. But I decided against that, and waited quietly until she was ready to proceed, feeling the soft, mild late morning breeze caress the back of my neck as it made its way through the old window screen that had probably last been replaced shortly after D-Day.

I didn’t have to wait long for her to pick up the story. “To make it even worse, I was the one who found her there, with a single gunshot wound to the head.” There was no hint of tears; she was still emotional, but now the prospect of falling apart seemed to have been replaced by a steely resolve to get the ball rolling on this project. It was as if she was on a mission and she was determined to complete it.

“Are you going to be OK telling that part of the story?” I asked. I didn’t want to even think about how awful it would be for her to have to relive it.

“Yes. Whatever it is that I have to do. But I won’t be the only one telling her story,” she said.

“There are other people involved?”

“Not really,” she said. “I mean, maybe my aunt and uncle, her parents, but that’s not what I meant. It will be like Julie herself is telling the story. You see, I also have her diaries.”

The biographer in me perked up. “Primary sources. That’s great,” I said. “How were you lucky enough to end up with them?” Then I noticed some sort of hesitation as she shifted in the chair and crossed her legs. “Did she leave them to you as part of her estate?”

“Well, not exactly?” she replied.