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The Englewood Medium: Shaken But Not Stirred

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Chapter One

Haley Meyers stepped in front of the burly moving man before he reached the outside stairs to her second-floor apartment. She firmly grasped the antique Martha Washington sewing cabinet in his hands and took it from him. “I’ll take care of this.”

It was two feet wide and lightweight. She had picked it up plenty of times. Given to Haley by her grandmother, the table was more than one hundred years old. Even though it was shrink-wrapped, she was still afraid of getting it scratched.

“Need some help with that?” Daylon Jasper called as he lightly descended the steps. Her new downstairs neighbor had a full head of gray hair, but still managed to seem like a kid. Maybe it was that ironic glint in his blue eyes.

Haley leaned back a little as she hitched the small table higher to clear the bottom step. “I’m okay. Thanks.”

The men retreated to the truck. Her shrink-wrapped sofa had their full attention.

Haley had rented the upstairs of a wide two-story house with an apartment on each level. Each unit had its own verandah, a Southern style unusual in northern Pennsylvania.

At the landing where the stairs turned left, the toe of Haley’s sneaker caught on the step. She lurched forward. Her hands flew out to grab the railing.

The table bounced down the stairs and landed in a heap. One of the legs had broken off and poked through the ripped plastic. One side of the table had a deep gash.

Unable to move, Haley sat on a step and stared down at the disaster. *What was she thinking?* For a long moment, she couldn’t breathe.

Her sister, Linda Blankenship, appeared at the top of the stairs. She gasped. “Haley! What did you do?”

Haley shook her head. She had no words.

“Grandma’s table!” Linda burst out as she brushed past Haley. She knelt down for a closer look, then glared up her sister. “What a crock! How could you be so stupid?”

Sighing heavily, Haley joined her. Both women were blond and forty-something with the classy aura of career women. Linda was a medical doctor and Haley a psychologist. That’s where their similarities ended. Linda had the taut body and edgy vibe of an athlete—which she was. Haley liked to say she loved her soft curves—which she did.

Daylon called out, “I know a guy who can fix that. I’ll text you his number.” As the two movers positioned the sofa on the electric lift, Daylon grabbed two boxes from the sidewalk and headed up the stairs.

Haley slowly shook her head. “I guess that takes care of that,” she said.

Muttering under her breath, Linda picked up the broken table leg. Haley bent down to carefully gather the plastic around the fragments of wood, so none would fall out.

Working with the ease of people who have been together forever, they carefully placed everything in the trunk of Haley’s car and headed back inside.

“Anyone care for a drink?” Haley asked when she reached the front door. She looked into the fridge. “I’ve got cherry, raspberry and orange electrolyte drinks, iced tea, cola...” She glanced at her sister. “...or wine.”

Linda grimaced and let out a deep sigh. “Too early, sad to say.”

Haley tried to give Linda’s outbursts a pass. With a busy medical practice and three kids, Dr. Linda was always exhausted and on her last nerve.

Haley passed around beverage bottles, then looked for a place to perch. Everything was wrapped in plastic. Finally, she sat on the floor with her back against the living room wall and took a long drink of peach tea.

A minute later, the sofa made its way into the room, and she was back on her feet giving directions.

For the past four years, Haley had lived in a five-bedroom house-share across town. Professional women came and went almost monthly. They were cordial to each other, and the arrangement worked. One day, two of her housemates had a disagreement over the fridge that soon launched into a full-out feud. Neither of them was willing to end it by either apologizing or leaving.

Finally, Haley had enough and started looking for another place. With a small trust fund left to her by her father as well as income from her counseling practice, she could well afford her own apartment. She was in a house share because she didn’t want to live alone. Now, living alone was her top priority.

When she told her friends at the Healing Circle that she was looking for an apartment, Sonia Summers told her this upstairs unit was under renovations and would soon be available. Fresh and gleaming, one bedroom and one bath, minutes from her office—Haley couldn’t ask for better. The only drawback was the stairs, but Daylon seemed eager to help, so that worked out, too.

Linda’s husband, Scott, and Daylon pushed furniture around to Haley’s satisfaction. Unpacking photos, Linda turned one toward Haley. It was their parents’ wedding photo. They were both gone now. “Where do you want this one?”

“How about a grouping in the hall?” Haley said. “Set the photos in a row along the wall, and I’ll put them up later.”

Linda lifted a stack of gold frames. The top picture showed Haley’s son at his college graduation, squinting into the sun next to Haley and her daughter, the older of the two.

An hour later, Daylon paused next to Haley. He waited while she pressed her house key across a line of packing tape and pulled the top of the box open.

“I’ve got to run. If you need anything, text me.”

She smiled. “I appreciate the help, Daylon. Thank you.”

He put his two fingers to his temple in a loose salute and left.

As he strode past the wide living room window, Linda whispered to Haley, “Wow, I’d say you lucked out.”

Haley looked doubtful. “Sonia told me he’s a retired Marine officer. He’s probably used to barking orders. Not my type. At all.” Haley’s phone chirped. She glanced at it.

“What’s that?” Linda asked.

“It’s a notice from SeniorsMeetup.com. Eli Loomis, the guy I’ve been dating, just messaged me.”

“C’mon. Let’s see him.”

Haley touched the screen a few times, then showed her an image of a shirtless bald guy with a giant gut. He was holding up a fish.

Linda’s lips twisted. “And you’ll take that instead of the hunk right under your feet?”

“There’s more to think about than looks,” Haley said. “Like loyalty.”

Linda’s mouth tightened. Before she could reply, Scott came out of the bathroom. Haley slid her phone into the back pocket of her jeans.

“Are you ready?” he asked Linda. He had a perfect jawline and an effortless swoosh to the front lock of his dark hair.

Linda put her hand on her stomach and groaned. “I’m starving. Let’s get some supper.” She grabbed her purse off the table. “We’ll be back!” she told Haley, and they headed out the door.

As they passed her bare front window, they waved at her. Suddenly feeling exposed, Haley decided her next task was to cover that window with a curtain. She didn’t want to sleep in here with it wide open like that.

Digging through the jumble in one corner of the living room, she found the bundle of curtain rods. Her electric screwdriver lay on the table, and the stepladder was in the kitchen. She’d have this done before they came back.

On the second screw, she hit something behind the wallboard. No matter how hard she pressed, the screw spun in place. Sweating and frustrated, she imagined the wasted time and expense of hiring a handyman for such a small task. When it came to things like this, Scott was useless. She wouldn’t even ask him.

Asking Daylon for help with something this trivial would be humiliating. She was not a helpless female. She’d rather hire someone. To put in a screw? *C’mon!*

Suddenly, she felt her father’s warmth around her. She had a burst of strength in her right shoulder, and the screw went straight in. She felt Dad’s satisfied smile, like he used to smile when one of his endless projects came out perfect.

Whoa. What just happened?

Holding the screwdriver, she came down the ladder, took two steps back and sat in a chair.

“That was easy.” Her dad mellow voice sounded clear and strong.

She gasped and jerked around to see him leaning against the wall, grinning at her. He was younger, like he looked when she was in grade school, thirty years ago.

She stared at him, her mind completely blank. She must be going crazy. Even crazier, she wasn’t the least bit scared.

“Sorry to startle you,” he said. “I didn’t know how to do this without causing a scene.”

“You’re wearing your Penn State shirt,” she gasped.

He looked down. “It’s my favorite.”

“But... do ghosts have closets?”

“I prefer *disembodied spirit*,” he said, then he threw his head back and laughed, exactly the way he used to. Exactly the sound she had missed so much these past four years. She had an urge to jump up and hug him, but she stayed rooted in the chair.

He took a seat on the sofa. “Finally, you moved near an electrical substation, and I can pull enough energy to show myself to you.”

“Where were you in the meantime?”

“I’ve always been with you and your sister, but not really with you. It’s complicated. Let’s just say, I’m glad to be here.”

“What about Linda? Have you shown yourself to her?”

He shook his head. “She doesn’t believe. I don’t want to scare her into a nervous breakdown.”

“And you’re not scaring me?” Haley felt heat rising in her throat. “Dad. I just about passed out.”

“But you didn’t, Haley my girl. You didn’t.”

At that moment, Linda appeared in the front window carrying brown paper bags. Haley looked up to return her wave. When she looked back at the sofa, Dad was gone.

Linda bustled in. “Scott dropped me off and took dinner to the kids.” They had three children, all currently in middle school.

As she unpacked food cartons, Linda glanced at Haley still seated in the chair. “What’s going on?”

“I just saw Dad.”

Linda’s eyes narrowed. Instantly she transformed from a helpful sister into a family physician.

“He was right there...” Haley nodded toward the sofa. “...talking to me.”

“I’m giving you a referral to a neurologist,” Linda said, pulling a pen light from the side pocket of her purse. “How long has this been going on? Do you have double vision, dizziness?” She bent over Haley, shining the light into her eyes.

Haley pulled away and put up her hand.

“I’m serious!” Linda said. “You have to get checked.”

“No, I don’t. I must have dozed off, and it was a dream.”

“Has this happened before?” Linda demanded.

“No.” Haley stood to end the conversation. “What did you bring? Let’s eat.”

The subject dropped, and Haley didn’t pick it up again. After they finished eating shrimp fried rice, Linda helped put up the living room curtain, and they called it a night.

As far as Haley was concerned, once she had emptied her suitcase and located the coffee pot, she could take her time in unpacking the rest.

Monday morning, Haley left a few minutes early for the office. She had a therapy practice at Alexion Acupuncture on State Street, the central avenue in Englewood. That meant she rented a room and shared a receptionist with several other practitioners. She was on her own for building her client base. Over the years, she had developed a referral network of medical doctors, coaches and energy healing practitioners who handed out her cards. Most of her clients came from them.

A high school science teacher for ten years, Haley completed her first Master’s degree in education and her second Master’s degree in psychology. She passed her boards on the first try and opened a therapy practice shortly afterward. That was six years ago.

Digging into her leather shoulder bag to locate her chirping phone, she stepped outside her front door and locked it. She finally found the phone and glanced at the screen. A tiny red heart blinked in the top left corner. Someone on SeniorsMeetup.com wanted to meet her.

“Your boyfriend texting you?” a deep voice called from below her porch railing. Daylon peered up at her with a teasing grin.

She pressed her lips together to squelch the smile filling her mouth. “And that is your business, why?” she asked. She carefully planted her foot on the first step down.

“Good morning to you, too.” He went to the back of his blue pickup truck and opened the tailgate. He wore a red buffalo-plaid jacket. Daylon was the brother-in-law of Martin and Sonia Summers, who owned this property, although Haley wasn’t clear whether he was related to Martin or Sonia.

Haley’s pumps clicked on the wooden steps. Her black skirt felt tight around her knees. Inside her car, she paused to take a quick peek at her new prospect on SeniorsMeetup, someone calling himself YoMyMama.

Online dating had become like a gambling game to her—tantalizing and addictive. You never knew when you'd hit a triple and win big. Or something like that. So far, she couldn't get lucky, but she kept trying. Why not?

YoMyMama happened to be a guy on a motorcycle with a blue bandana tied around his head and a bleary look in his eye. She put her phone down and turned the key in the ignition.

Nothing happened.

What?

She tried again.

Nothing.

How could that be? The car was working fine last night. She'd come home from her date around eight o'clock. If you could call that a date. Actually, it was a break-up dinner, followed by a quick escape.

She rolled down her window and called to Daylon, "Can I ask you a favor?"

He came around the side of the truck. "What's the trouble?"

"My car is dead."

"You don't say." He came closer. "Try it again, so I can hear what happens."

She turned the key. Silence. "I just did," she said. "It doesn't make a sound."

"Can you pop the hood?" he asked.

She bit back a smart answer and found the button under the dashboard.

Two minutes later, he came to her window. "It's the battery."

She didn't believe him. "I just replaced it last winter."

"I have jumper cables in my truck. Ten minutes, and you'll be on your way."

She tapped her fingers on the soft steering wheel cover. A dead battery could mean a lot of hidden problems. She'd have to get a mechanic to check it out. Since she became single, at the first sign of car trouble she didn't let one day go by before taking her car to the shop.

When she told Daylon she wanted to drop the car off, he said, "I'll follow you and take you to your office." He disappeared under the hood. "Try it now," he called.

The engine roared to life. So did the headlights.

Daylon removed the cables and dropped the hood into place.

"I know I didn't leave the lights on," Haley told him.

He nodded. "They were off when I came in around nine o'clock."

He looked at his blackened hands. "Give me a minute to wash up, and I'll be right with you."

Englewood, Pennsylvania, (population 8,486) had three auto repair shops. One of them was just down the street, so dropping off the car was a quick process. Going most places in Englewood was a quick process.

Haley and Daylon barely spoke during her time in his truck. In less than ten minutes, he pulled into the lot behind her office building. He gave her a quick nod as she closed her door, and his truck disappeared down the street.

Haley headed to the back door of her office. In less than ten minutes, Flo Yeager would be coming through the door.

A single mom in her mid-thirties, Flo became a client after a disastrous year completely dismantled her life. First, she lost her sixteen-year-old son Freddy to a terminal kidney disease, followed by a nasty divorce and custody battle over Fleeta, Freddy's twin sister. Flo and her ex ended up with joint custody. In their case, the fight never stopped. Sometimes Fleeta came with her mother for sessions, and once Fleeta had come alone. Poor kid. She had been through a rough time, too.

Once inside the building, Haley drew up when she spotted Flo sitting on a loveseat in the waiting room. Her sleek black hair hung half out of its clip. Her makeup was sliding off from crying.

Haley hurried to her.

She had heavy dark shadows under her swollen eyes. When she caught sight of Haley, she gasped, “Pauly...” and lost her breath in a sob. Pauly was Flo’s boyfriend. Haley had met him twice when he dropped Flo off for her appointment. He usually left Flo in the waiting room, then strolled down State Street while she had her session.

Haley reached for her. “Let’s get you settled on the sofa, and I’ll make you some tea, okay?”

Pressing a wad of tissues to her face, Flo nodded.

Twenty minutes went by before Flo calmed down enough to talk. Haley pulled out her secret recipe for calming a meltdown—lotion-filled tissues, a pink furry throw and hot tea.

With Flo quietly sipping tea, Haley kept her body language relaxed in her wingback chair. She had her yellow legal pad on her lap. “What started this whole thing?” she asked gently.

“Yesterday afternoon, I told him it was over.” Flo murmured. “For real this time.” She drew in a shaky breath. “I told him he couldn’t come around my place anymore.”

“How did he take that?”

Flo brushed at her right cheek and left a wet streak. Even with mascara over half her face, she had that magic something women spend thousands of dollars to achieve and still fall short of.

Her voice wavered. “First he screamed at me... then he started crying and peeled out of the cul-de-sac in his truck.” She rubbed above her left eyebrow. “A couple of my neighbors came to their windows.” She winced and more tears flowed. “Humiliating.”

Flo’s hectic relationship with Pauly Hammond had taken up most of their sessions for the past six months. They made a cute couple, both of them about 5’2”, with olive complexions and dark hair, like two peas in a pod. Pauly adored Flo, but they couldn’t seem to resolve their conflicts. Over the past six months, Flo had broken up with him three or four times, then a few days later she’d take him back.

After all this lovely, sensitive woman had been through, Haley wished so much that Flo would end the chaos. However, Flo was in the driver’s seat. It was her life. Haley could only offer suggestions and support. Flo had to do the rest.

Snuggled into a corner of the sofa, Flo sipped tea. “It’s for real this time, Haley. I need to get settled down and start a new life where I can be who I want to be.” More tears. “I love Pauly. I really love him... but he’s not good for me. He keeps everything stirred up, and I can’t get stabilized.”

Haley nodded. “You’re a strong woman, Flo. You’re smart enough to know what’s good for you, and you have the courage to follow through.”

Flo’s mouth pulled sideways. “I feel like a bawling kindergartner.” She yanked three tissues from the box next to her and made a wide swipe across her face as though wiping away her grief. When she sat back, she had a look of quiet resolve where the pain had been before. “I have to do this. It’s my life, and I’m taking it back. I have to for...Fleeta’s sake.”

Haley nodded. “Here...” From her desk drawer, she pulled a round black stone with *Power* engraved on it. “I picked this up when I was at the shore last year for a time like this.”

Flo took the stone from her and rolled it in her hand, looking at it from every angle, feeling its smooth surface.

“That’s who you are, Flo. Powerful.” Haley set her notepad aside. “Are you ready to rest back and close your eyes?”

Placing her cup on the coffee table, Flo nodded. For the next twenty minutes, Haley led her through a calming and clearing meditation.

When the timer on Haley's desk sounded, Flo collected her wadded tissues and dropped them into the tiny wastebasket nearby. She said, "Next week I'm going to visit my brother in Bayard. I'll have to miss that session and pick up in two weeks."

Haley made the correction to the online calendar. She pulled a book from her shelf. "Here's something for you to read in the meantime."

Flo opened the front cover showing Haley's business card taped inside. "I'll get it back to you when I come in next time," she said.

Haley stood, signaling the end of the session. "Email me if you need me," she said.

"Thank you, Haley. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Smiling gently, Haley watched until she exited the back door, then she opened her laptop to write up her notes. Her next client was due to arrive in ten minutes—another woman with an abusive, controlling husband. If not for her own calming and clearing process, Haley would have never lasted this long as a counselor. So much pain...

Chapter Two

Shortly before noon, Haley was at her office desk typing patient files when a gentle knock sounded at her door. Scooting the rolling desk chair and leaning to the right, she turned the knob and opened it to see a cloud of fluffy red hair.

“Hi, Cheri,” she said, pushing the door wide open before scooting back to her desk.

Cherie Alexion owned this office building. She had an ethereal presence and sort of floated along instead of connecting to solid earth like regular people did. Today, she had on a flowing white skirt with a flowing white tunic, all cotton muslin and a fringe dangling from every edge.

Alexion Acupuncture offered acupuncture, Chinese medicine, crystal healing, aromatherapy and a host of other things, but most of all Cheri was a tapped-in, turned-on psychic. She swished inside and brought the smell of blended essential oils with her. “I’m heading over to the Healing Circle,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Haley pulled the top of her laptop down. “More than ready,” she said, grabbing her yellow shoulder bag. It was big enough to hold her laptop, although she rarely took the computer out of the office. She’d rather lock it into a filing cabinet.

“What’s the matter?” Cheri asked, looking at Haley more closely. “You look a little stressed.”

“I do have a story to tell,” Haley replied, “but I’ll tell it to everyone at once.” She led the way toward the back exit. “My stomach is getting cranky. I wonder what leftover goodies Barb has for us today. I haven’t seen her all weekend. She’s been catering a wedding.”

Every Wednesday at noon, the Healing Circle met in the back room of A Summer Place, the bookstore across the back alley from Alexion.

Sonia and Martin had opened A Summer Place twenty-five years ago and had managed to keep the store thriving despite the massive popularity of Kindle and Audible. Now retirement age, the Martins were still going full speed ahead.

Crossing the alley, Haley and Cheri entered the back entrance of the bookstore and took an immediate right into the meeting room.

The makeshift kitchen area had a long counter holding a microwave, hotplate and coffee maker with an ancient fridge in the corner. On the other side of the room, two green vinyl sofas faced each other—upcycled from a teacher’s lounge.

At the counter stood Haley’s best friend and the town’s most popular caterer, Barb Morales, unpacking foil containers from a large thermal case. Barb was small, Cuban and all business. She had tied a red-and-blue silk scarf as a headband with a messy bun showing from the top of it. She wore a white chef’s coat and blazing red lipstick.

Barb and Haley had been best friends since third grade. Barb was the real reason Haley moved to Englewood four years ago, although Linda didn’t know that.

“Hey, Baby Barby,” Haley said, giving her a sideways hug. “What’s on the menu today?”

“Lots of mac-and-cheese, a little sliced beef, and a ton of broccoli salad.” Barb glanced up. “Hi, Cheri,”

she said.

Cheri looked over the spread. “Anything a vegan can eat?”

In one swift move, Barb dived into her bag and pulled out a Chinese food carton. “I saved you some tabbouleh,” she said, triumphant. “Just in the nick of time, too. Someone on the cleanup crew had her eye on this, but I nabbed it for you.” She handed the carton to Cheri, who happily plucked a metal fork from the nearby rack and headed to her favorite spot on a sofa.

Haley smiled inside. Typical Barb, remembering what people loved.

“I’m starving!” Haley grabbed a plate and didn’t hold back in piling on the mac-and-cheese.

Two more members arrived and lined up to fill plates. Everyone looked forward to the leftovers from Barb’s events. They munched in contented silence for a few minutes, then Cheri opened the meeting by saying, “Haley has something to tell us.”

Barb grinned. “Don’t tell me. You’re sure he’s The One.”

“Actually, we had The Breakup Talk.”

Sympathetic moans all around.

“What happened?” Barb asked, always eager for the down-and-dirty details.

“That’s old news,” Haley said, with a wave. “The real news is that my dad showed up in my living room.”

“What?” Barb gasped. She glanced at Cheri. “He died four years ago.”

Immediately, she had everyone’s full attention. Haley gave an overview of what happened, ending with, “He said he has to stay within range of the power station in order to appear. I didn’t understand it.”

Cheri nodded. “Non-physical humans can draw energy from electricity. That’s why they often appear in homes near large powerlines.”

“Where does he go when he’s not visible?” Haley asked.

“He’s still around, maybe fully conscious of everything or maybe not. I’m not sure about that myself.”

“I haven’t seen him since then,” Haley said. “Maybe he just popped in to say hello and that’s it.”

Cheri closed her eyes for a second. “He’s watching over you,” she said. “You might not see him all the time, but he’s watching over you.”

The meeting moved into the healing phase where everyone takes a turn at receiving help from the group. The Healing Circle had provided Haley with a place to clear away the worries and weights of both her practice and her life. She only missed Healing Circle meetings if she had to be out of town.

At the end of the meeting, Cheri called out, “Don’t forget, tomorrow night—Naked Yoga.”

Everyone laughed. Two years ago, Sonia Summers had started a women-over-fifty hot yoga class at Alexion. Shortly afterward, she remarked to the group that it should be called Naked Yoga, because everyone ended up pulling off their clothes by the time class was over. From that point on, hot yoga became Naked Yoga to the Healing Circle. Haley wasn’t into yoga.

After the meeting, Barb met Haley outside the back door. “So, you had The Breakup Talk?”

Haley nodded. “It wasn’t cordial. He showed me how right I was to call it quits. End of story.”

Barb handed over the remaining mac-and-cheese.

Haley hefted the foil pan, gauging the weight of it. “I won’t be able to finish this in a week.”

Barb laughed and moved toward the alley. “Rumor has it, you have a handsome man in the apartment downstairs. He won’t refuse to share it with you. Will he?” Walking backwards, she laughed at Haley’s dismayed expression. “Call me!”

Shaking her head and chuckling in spite of herself, Haley picked up her phone to call Linda. The

blabbermouth.

Later that afternoon, a text from the garage gave her good news. Her car was fine. She could come and pick it up.

After her last client, Haley paused in the doorway of Cheri's office. "Do you have time to give me a ride to the garage? I need to pick up my car."

Cheri came out of her seat with a wide smile. "Of course." She gave Haley's arm a playful pat. "I knew you were one of us! So, your father showed up to chat, did he?"

"Scared the living crap out of me. I told my sister Linda, and she thought I was hallucinating. She was shining a light in my eyes in less than ten seconds."

"It's a gift," Cheri said. "An honor."

"Is he watching me in the bathroom? What if I decide to have an overnight guest sometime? What then?" Haley flexed her shoulders. "It's creepy, Cheri. Admit it. It's creepy."

With a knowing look, Cheri chuckled and reached for her purse. "You'll get used to it."

Twenty minutes later, Cheri dropped Haley off at the shop. Soon afterward, Haley arrived home, eager to kick off her shoes and enjoy a cold wine spritzer.

Her apartment had a simple layout with a central hall. The bedroom and ensuite bath were on the right with their door toward the back of the apartment. The open concept living room and kitchen were on the left with the wide doorway near the small entry.

Her soft sofa had a floral pattern with wide arms and a rounded back. It had found its home beneath the wide living room window with a lounge chair at its left and a low coffee table in front. An oval dining table took up a large part of the central area with the kitchen along the back wall.

Haley was at the kitchen counter with her back toward the room, pouring Riesling into a glass when Dad's voice came from the living area. "Hard day at the office?"

Startled, she managed to set down the bottle without spilling before she turned around. He was sitting in the lounge chair.

"Can you give me some warning before you pop in? Whistle or something?"

He whistled the opening bars of the theme from *The Twilight Zone*. "Like that?"

"Not exactly. You got anything a little less..."

"...spooky?" He laughed and did the bird call of the Bob White.

She grinned and opened the fridge to pull out a bottle of lemon-lime soda and finish making her spritzer. "That I can live with." Sipping, she sat sideways on the sofa with her bare feet stretched out.

"Do you always hit the hooch right after work?" he asked.

She took another sip. "Not always. Today was..." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, "...one of those days."

"I'm glad your car's okay," he said.

"You saw that?"

"Sure."

"What else do you see? Should I wear my bathing suit in the shower?"

"All you have to do is send a mental message that you want privacy. I'm happy to honor that."

"You mean you can read my mind?" She winced. "All the time?"

"There's no judgment, Haley. Things are so different on this side of the veil. Love is all there is. All there is."

She felt a gentle warmth in her heart. It relaxed her as it spread throughout her being.

“How are you, sweetheart? Are you enjoying your life?” For the first time she could remember, he asked questions like he was truly interested. They talked for more than an hour.

Finally, she said, “I’m going to nuke my takeout box from last night. I don’t feel like cooking.”

“What is it?”

“Cioppino.”

“Don’t tell me. With mussels and little neck clams?” He moaned. “I miss food so much!” He followed her to the kitchen. When the smell of tomato and basil filled the space, he sighed. “You want to know something really crazy? I can still smell. I can see, hear and smell. I can’t taste or feel anything.” He drew in a long savoring breath, then said, “Get some rest, honey. Daylon is in his workshop, and I’m going to see what he’s up to.” His image faded, and he was gone.

Sitting alone at the table, Haley savored her dinner with that warm feeling lingering in her middle. She remembered her dad when they lived in their old house in Oak Park. He had the stocky build of a man who worked with his hands, a quiet man who loved to tinker.

While Haley and Linda were growing up, he would happily spend a Saturday afternoon tuning up his car until it hummed like a sleepy kitten or building a squirrel-proof bird feeder from a pattern in a magazine. He always had a project.

Haley loved to go outside and watch him work. They hardly spoke, but she soaked in his comforting presence. She didn’t realize how much she depended on him until he died from colon cancer. He got the diagnosis in July, and he was gone by early September. Haley’s youngest child left for college around the same time. That was a cold, empty fall and an even colder winter. She filed for divorce that spring.

Over the next few weeks, life in the new apartment slid into a loose routine. She found a couple of area rugs at a consignment mall along with a brass lamp. When she clicked the living room lamp on, her move in was complete.

One morning, she came outside to see Daylon on a ladder outside her verandah, cleaning out the rain gutters along the edge of the roof. “Morning!” he called as she passed him.

Without looking up, she said, “Good morning.” She had a full day ahead, and she was in a hurry. She clicked the unlock button on her key fob. Reaching for the car door, she pulled her hand back like she had received an electric shock.

A furry black body lay in the track where her windshield wipers were.

A dead rat.

Whether she screamed or not, Haley didn’t know. For whatever reason, Daylon was down the ladder and beside her before she caught her next breath.

“Who could have done this?” she demanded, as angry as she was shaken. “What kind of twisted...”

“It’s a kid’s prank,” Daylon said. “Immature and senseless.”

She stared at him. “A dead animal could mean a lot of things—a warning that I’m next, a threat of worse things to come—a lot of things. He didn’t jump up here by himself.”

He squinted at her. “Do you have enemies? Disgruntled employees? Information that could put someone in jail?”

“I’m a marriage and family therapist. I know a lot of stuff about a lot of people, but nothing about criminals. I don’t have any employees either.” She looked away with a grimace. “How awful.”

“I’ve got gloves on. I’ll take care of it.” He lifted the creature by the tail and headed up the driveway toward the trash bins.

This was an old neighborhood, established in the early 1900s. Although many of the homes were the

Arts and Crafts style with a porch topped by a wide gable, this house was the only one of its kind, a Southern style with stacked front porches. The front of the house faced the side of the driveway. The end of the house toward the street had one small window on each level, with a giant fir tree hiding most of it.

The yard was large enough to offer some privacy but small enough to hear dogs barking and party music from the neighbors now and then.

With the rat taken care of, she got into her car, and the engine roared to life. *Whew*. At least it started. She shifted into reverse and stretched to look back.

Two taps on her hood brought her around.

Daylon was at her window, waiting for her to lower it. His hair was cut close on the sides with the top long enough to blow in the breeze. “If you have an idea who might be doing this, I have a private investigator license. I can run background checks,” he said. “It costs me forty dollars, so if you can cover that I’ll take care of it for you.”

“Thanks, Daylon,” she said, surprised. “I appreciate that. I’ll let you know.”

Her heart thumped in her neck. She had a sick feeling in her stomach. For the entire ten-minute drive to work, she concentrated on breathing slowly and deeply to calm herself. Who wanted to scare her? Without a message, the rat couldn’t be a warning, could it? She had no enemies that she knew of. Her clients were currently all female, and not one of those women would get within a mile of a dead rat.

Who else? An old boyfriend? A client’s ex-husband who blamed Haley for a breakup? Well, to be honest, that was possible. She tried to save relationships, but sometimes splitting up was the best option, and she was duty-bound to say so, especially when abuse was involved.

Her phone chirped. At the next red light, she picked it up for a quick peek. Another match from SeniorsMeetup.com. She dropped the phone. No time to look at it now.

Would Eli Loomis do something like this? They hadn’t dated long. He had a knack for picking great restaurants, so once or twice a week, they went out and had a nice meal or a movie. He would always fill her in on his problems with his ex and their disagreements on how to raise his seventeen-year-old son. His ex-wife wanted the boy to stay local for college. Eli was more concerned with Ivy League ratings than keeping his child in town—all incredibly fascinating to Haley who had never met the boy or, thankfully, the ex. Haley soon grew tired of him.

One thing about Eli that stuck in Haley’s mind was his pinky ring. Hardly anyone wore pinky rings any more. This one was a signet ring made of yellow gold with a flat top engraved with a letter—too worn down to tell which letter.

The car behind her honked. Startled out of her daydreaming, Haley launched her car forward. Parking behind her office, Haley found her notebook inside her shoulder bag. She kept careful notes about her online dates. Actually, she collected information on everyone she met on the site—part of her professional training for staying safe. It was a wacky world out there. She knew that better than most.

Finding Eli’s page in the notebook, she scanned the record. She had enough information to do a background check on him.

Turning pages, she looked at two others who were fairly recent. One had seemed weird from the beginning, but they had some great conversations, so she had agreed to see him again.

The other guy had recently lost his wife. Not a chance that he would do something like this. He was still grieving, although it had been two years since she died. Poor guy. They had been together and in love for forty years.

Of the three, Eli was the youngest at forty-five years old and definitely the most likely to act out.

At their last date, they were at a back table in Rubio's side dining room, when Haley launched into The Breakup Talk. "This has been fun, Eli. You're a wonderful guy, but I think this is our last date."

"What do you mean?" he said, his wide face turning pink, "Have I offended you in some way?"

"It's not that," she said. "You've been great. I just feel like we're in the friend zone." She held out her hand to him. "I've enjoyed spending time with you. Truly, I have."

He stared at her hand for a full second, twisting his lips as though wanting to say something but not sure where to begin. Suddenly, he got to his feet and strode out of the restaurant, leaving her to pay the entire bill. They usually split the cost. Rubio's was the most expensive place in the area.

That's the last she saw of Eli Loomis.

Would he resort to this kind of bizarre behavior to get back at her for breaking off with him? That didn't make sense, but who else could it be?