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Four-Thirty

Elizabeth Luker

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To this day she didn’t know what color Neil’s eyes were. It seemed funny to think about this and to remember that she had never known. She could see his eyes in her mind, behind his glasses, and seemed to recall that they were dark, but she couldn’t say for sure. Sometimes she decided they must be blue, to match his light coloring—but come to think of it, Julie didn’t really know what he looked like at all, despite the fact that she could see him in front of her as plainly as if he had just walked through the door.

She tried not to spend a lot of time thinking about Neil. She was too busy getting up in the morning and going to bed at night, scrambling eggs and buttering toast, dancing in the kitchen, singing in the shower, or even reading a good book while curled up on the couch with a bowl of popcorn sitting within easy reach on the coffee table. Too busy living life to spare a thought for Neil. It was only once every few months that he would suddenly come into the kitchen, letting a breeze in through the door with him, and stand and look at her like it hadn’t been twelve years since the last time they’d actually met. The scene had played itself out so many times in her mind that she knew exactly what she’d do when it really did happen.

She’d continue with washing the dishes or cutting potatoes and say, “Hi, honey,” conversationally, without ever looking up. She’d dry her hands on the yellow dishtowel hanging from the refrigerator door and ask
him how his day went, just as if they'd been happily married for fifteen years with three kids, ages twelve, nine, and three in the front room playing or reading or doing homework. Then she'd turn around and give him her full attention and stare directly into those eyes and find out once and for all what color they really were.

Today had been one of those days.

She could think of no good reason for Neil to visit today. She'd been trying all morning to write more of her novel, hoping that being busy would keep her mind off of his impending arrival; but the pages were lying in piles spread out on the floor, very much the way they had looked yesterday, and the day before that too. It had been a while since she had last been able to really concentrate on her work. Little visions of him kept pulling at the corners of her eyes and the back of her mind. Who could write when Neil was putting around in the kitchen, banging pots and pans and cutlery together as he made dinner for her? Or when he came and stood in the doorway, just grinning and watching her think? Or at night when he reached over to grab her hand while she was sleeping to see if she was really there? Even though Julie knew it was just her imagination, she still had to go look and see every time to make sure.

So this afternoon she had set down her pen and given up the pretense of diligence. She made a cup of hot chocolate—Neil would have had black coffee, but she could never stand the taste, although she did like the smell—and simply sat there, remembering him. And she had started by remembering his eyes.

She had never known what color they were because she had never actually looked him straight in the eye. She had always studied him sideways instead, so that he wouldn't be able to tell she'd been looking at him if he turned around suddenly. Julie knew she wouldn't have been able to return his gaze—she would have blushed too hard.

They'd known each other for what seemed like forever—had grown up together, talked together, walked together, laughed at old movies together, and even gone to a few dances together. She couldn't remember one minute of the entire span of their relationship that she hadn't known clearly that she loved him and felt just as clearly that he thought of her only as his best friend. So it made for an awkward moment when she had heard his voice on her answering machine three days ago.

"Hey, Julie!" The recording was fuzzy so it was hard to hear him unless you listened carefully. "I think this is your number. I hope so, but
it's been so long I wasn't . . . Anyway, this is Neil. Maybe you don’t remember me after all these years,” he gave a little chuckle, “but I’m in town this week for a business conference and wondered if I could drop in Friday afternoon sometime around four, if you’re free . . . assuming you really do live here,” another nervous chuckle. “Just to, uh, talk about old times. Um, let me know.” She had jumped to grab a pencil to write down the name of his hotel, then had listened to the recording several more times to make sure she wasn’t dreaming this time.

But the recording was real. Neil was coming, really coming this time. And she had no idea what to do with herself after she had sent a note to his hotel room saying, “Friday’s fine, four’s fine, thanks for calling, see you then.”

She hadn’t been able to think clearly since.

She glanced at the clock. Three forty-seven. Thirteen minutes to go. Neil would be prompt, as always. She knew the doorbell would ring at four o’clock on the nose and not a moment sooner or later.

Twelve minutes.

It had been twelve years since they’d last seen each other face to face, at the airport when she was leaving home to move to Seattle. She’d told herself she was going because she needed to get out and get some experience in the world. She knew it was really so she wouldn’t have to stick around for Neil’s wedding, whenever it happened. Not that there had been any immediate danger, but Julie knew that it would have killed her to hear about his engagement and to have to go to his wedding and smile and pretend she was happy. So she ran away.

At the airport, he had given her a little box. “For good luck,” he said, then kissed her cheek and moved back as she murmured, “Thanks,” and picked up her carry-on. As she walked up the ramp she turned and called back, “Good luck to you, too!” And then was gone.

Safely in the air on the way to Seattle, she had opened the little box and found a small ring: a thin silver band with a tiny amethyst, her birthstone. She remembered the time they’d been walking downtown, three years before, and had seen such a ring in one of the shop windows. She had mentioned then that she would like a ring like that someday.

“What for? You mean, like an engagement ring?” he’d teased.

Flustered, she’d answered, “Not necessarily. For anything—for luck, maybe.”

He’d looked sideways at her with his eyebrow raised but hadn’t pushed the matter further after commenting, “I’d prefer aquamarine, myself.”
She had laughed and they walked on. “That’s because it’s your birthstone, silly.”

And so he had given it to her three years later, for good luck. It made her want to cry, get off the plane and go back and tell him everything. It was too late for that, though—Neil was miles behind her now. So she put the ring on the third finger of her left hand and imagined what might have been as if it really had been an engagement ring. And that had led to the three children, the yellow dishtowel, and the fifteen years they hadn’t been married.

Remembering these stories as she waited, Julie started twisting the ring around and around her finger. What had she been thinking, letting him come? Twelve years with no contact at all—come to think of it, how did he find her address? She had purposely not given it to him when she’d left, so that she couldn’t be reached with a wedding announcement.

When the doorbell rang, precisely on time, she stood and unlocked the door, arranging her face to greet him without betraying just how many misgivings she was having about seeing him at all. When she opened the door her smile was bright enough to blind anyone not wearing sunglasses. She was surprised he didn’t shield his eyes—which she still couldn’t meet as she casually said, “Hi, Neil. It’s been a long time.”

He laughed and stepped inside as she held the door open for him. “I’d say a bit too long. It’s good to see you again, Julie.” He gave her a quick hug. She couldn’t help stiffening up a bit at the unexpected closeness and closed her eyes to get her bearings again. He misinterpreted her silence and let go quickly. She opened her eyes again, but he wouldn’t meet her gaze, and the moment stretched out a little longer.

Julie broke the silence before it could become panicky, grabbing at random small talk. “The weather outside today, you must be freezing. Would you like something—hot chocolate, maybe?” She knew he didn’t like hot chocolate. “Or I could get you some coffee, warm you up a bit.” She was already busy getting mugs down as she spoke, starting up the coffee maker.

Neil laughed and took a seat on the couch. The tension had passed. “Yeah, it doesn’t rain this much in Southern Utah, usually. It’ll take me a week to dry out once I get back home.” He glanced around her apartment as he spoke. She looked too, seeing it as he saw it: white walls, mostly bare except for the print of Monet’s garden above the loveseat. A dusty piano in the corner. The green stuffed pillows. The papers of her manuscript in piles on and around the desk in the opposite corner. A few
dirty dishes in the sink and crumbs still on the table. “I didn’t think you liked coffee enough to keep it on hand,” he continued with that little crooked grin she had always loved.

“I keep it here for my guests. Most people seem to prefer the stuff to hot chocolate, don’t ask me why.” She didn’t say that her husband, Neil, drank coffee and that was why she had it there.

He accepted the mug she held out to him, looking at her with his eyebrow cocked upwards. She interpreted that look to mean that he knew she didn’t entertain much. One look at the place had been enough to show him that she was nearly a hermit now, which was true enough; but she wasn’t sure she wanted him to know that. He was practically a stranger to her now, after all. She didn’t have any clue what he’d been doing for the past twelve years or even what color his eyes were.

She tried to find out the latter, at least, by covert glances over the rim of her cocoa mug. No good. He wasn’t looking at her. She finished her drink, set the mug on the coffee table, and sat on her hands, trying not to fidget or draw any more attention to herself than absolutely necessary. She wished he would leave but wished even harder that he would stay long enough for her to work up the courage to tell him everything. She chewed on her lip, trying to decide what to do.

He spoke suddenly, bringing her back to reality with a jolt. “Listen, Julie. I have to apologize first off for . . . I mean, I know you seemed to want no contact with me, but, I really need to ask you a question, so I whined and pleaded with your mother until I got your address out of her.” He ran his hand through his hair as he paused, collecting his words. The movement caused the light to catch a glint on his left hand. Gold. Her heart sank and she knew she couldn’t tell him anything.

Not wanting to hear what he was saying, she began to babble inanely, chattering about his business conference, offering him food. He was married. She started fidgeting with her ring again, trying to slip it off her finger before he noticed it, but it was stuck. Overwhelmed with embarrassment and frustration, she stood up to get the bread and hide her face so that she wouldn’t start to cry. For goodness sake, I’m a grown woman, thirty-four, this is ridiculous. He’s thirty-six, why shouldn’t he be married?

He grabbed her hands as she stood up, startling her and derailing her train of thought so that the string of words died away. “Julie, I know it’s been a long time since we’ve talked, but I wanted to . . .” He trailed off and she followed his glance to her left hand, where the ring was still
there on her third finger. His ring. She blushed, knowing what he must be thinking. How could she ever explain to him? He’d only laugh, and it would make things even more awkward than they already were, with the two of them standing there in her front room, him clutching her hands so hard it was cutting off the circulation and her blushing and sniffling like an idiot.

“That’s a pretty ring.” He spoke slowly, in a tone she didn’t recognize. “Where did you get it?”

He didn’t even remember giving it to her. With a small catch in her voice, she tried to laugh it off, disguise the hideous irony of the moment. “Oh, a friend gave it to me.” Don’t you remember, it was your goodbye present. For good luck, you said. You don’t even remember. “Do you like it?” she finished weakly, trying to prod him into speaking again. He might as well finish what he was trying to say to her now.

He didn’t glance up from her left hand as he answered. “Yes.” She waited, but he didn’t volunteer more information. She tried to relax but all her muscles had clenched up. Her heart was pounding, and each pulse felt like a sledgehammer striking against the outlines of the world she had lived in for the past twelve years, breaking up her carefully constructed fantasy. And he still would not look up from her hand or say a word. Why couldn’t he just go and leave her to pick up the fragments of her life and move on? At least let go of my hands so I can wipe my eyes before my mascara runs all over. A small sob escaped with a squeak.

He did drop her hands then, and she tried to disguise her anguish by moving to the kitchen area. A dishtowel was on the counter, and, gratefully, she buried her face in it, gradually getting her breathing under control. Clutching the towel like a lifeline, she asked the space between them, “How long have you had your ring . . . I mean, how long have you been married?” The sound of her voice was startling and she realized he’d been holding his breath as he let it all out in a sigh.

“Fifteen years.”

Pause. “Me too,” she said.

He turned to go. As he reached the door, she asked on impulse, “What was it you wanted to say to me?”

He shuffled his feet. When he spoke, it was to the door, not to her. “Have you ever dreamt . . . imagined . . . wished for something so often that you began to almost believe it was really true?”

This was so completely unexpected that at first she had no reply to give. She simply stood there, staring at the floor by his feet, wondering
how he could always read her mind. Not wanting him to see how close to the mark he’d hit, she tried to brush it off. “Wouldn’t that be classified as hallucinations or something? I’m not quite as crazy as all that!” Her laughter was forced and harsh in her ears.

There was a long pause as he rested his hand on the doorknob and jiggled it slightly, as though he were debating what to say. It was as if he hadn’t heard her remark. Finally he spoke, but softly, as though to himself. “You know it’s impossible to hope for it, but you just can’t help it. It comes little by little and builds upon itself until your dream becomes more tangible than your reality . . . and then you convince yourself that you could make it reality, but instead of fitting together like a puzzle, your two visions meet in a high-speed collision and . . . the dream lies broken on the ground as reality tears off in the opposite direction.” He came back to himself with a small start and his eyes focused on Julie again, then flicked away, ashamed. “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

His ring caught the light when he finally turned the handle and opened the door to leave. The flash made her notice the stone for the first time. Aquamarine.

Their birthdays had been close—hers in late February and his in early March—so they’d usually celebrated with one big party on the twenty-eighth. After they’d had the conversation in front of the ring shop, fifteen years ago, she’d given him that gold band with an aquamarine for his birthday present. For good luck, from your best friend, she’d written on the tag. He’d given her the same little crooked grin when he opened it, and said, “What more luck could I need?”

“Neil.” She choked out the one syllable.

He stopped in the middle of the doorway. She was having trouble breathing because of all the words she wanted to say that were crowding themselves up against the back of her teeth. She felt an inexplicable urge to laugh.

He turned around to face her. He must have recognized something in the tone of her voice calling his name, because he gave her a look, just as if it hadn’t been twelve years since they’d last seen each other and just as if this last horrible half hour hadn’t happened. Julie wiped her hands on the dishtowel and asked him, in her normal voice, how his day at the meetings had gone.

He just stood there, grinning, watching her think. And then she did the boldest thing she had ever done.
She walked over to him, slipped her arm around his waist and met his gaze squarely.

His eyes were blue.