



When
I Close
My Eyes

A Novel

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This story is dedicated to my firstborn grandson,
Jesse Andrew Musser.
You made me a grandmother,
and it has changed my life,
filling it up with more love than I thought possible.
What a joy to watch you grow up!
I love you and I like you,
Your Mamie

The clouds hang low, a mist caught between the carpet of mountains. I stand at the top of the lookout and gaze into a never-ending motion of undulating valleys and peaks. On and on, seemingly forever, they rise and fall in lush green hues and deep blue ridges that span past history. The mountains hold my imagination, and I feel a call to their beauty. Then they fade out of view as the mist floats above and around them, like puffs of smoke. I hover in the mist; I feel the calling of the dawn. I see the first ray of light piercing through the mist and I know. I am forgiven.

These Mountains around Us, Josephine Bourdillon

PART ONE

The Beginning of the End

CHAPTER

1

OCTOBER 2015
FRIDAY

HENRY

The lady came out of the bookstore—it was all decorated for Halloween, all sizes and colors of pumpkins making faces at me from where I watched across Haywood Street in downtown Asheville. She walked along the sidewalk, with that big church with the fancy domes in the background, then turned down Walnut Street. I crossed the street and followed her at a distance. Not many folks around for a Friday afternoon, and nobody else in the private lot where she'd parked her car, a real nice Mercedes. Seeing her close up made me hesitate—she didn't look like a criminal to me, just a nice-looking middle-aged little lady carrying a black computer bag in one hand, walking along at a clip, like she knew exactly where she was headed and needed to get there quick.

I slipped into the narrow alleyway beside the parking lot, steadied my Glock, and took aim. As she clicked her key and went to open the Mercedes door, I pulled the trigger.

In the same moment I heard a voice at the end of the alley call out, “Ms. Bourdillon! You forgot—” and the lady turned as my bullet raced its way silently through the air, so that it hit her on the right side of the head instead of full force in the back, as was my intent. But I saw her fall to the ground, lying in a puddle of blood, as the voice turned into a piercing scream. I disappeared around the corner and through another narrow alley to where I’d parked my pickup, out of sight. Nobody saw me—they were all hurrying to that poor lady, I imagine. And I would’ve congratulated myself if I hadn’t been trying my best not to retch all over my truck.

SATURDAY

I walked into the store like Pa told me, bought a soda and some chips like any lazy teenager, and then Pa came in with a stocking over his face and pointed his gun at the terrified cashier. Who musta been calm enough to punch an alarm button, because the cops came in a second later and blew Pa’s brains out right in front of me.

I woke myself screaming. If only it were just a dream, and not a memory.

On my way to the john in the motel room, I flipped on the TV, only half-awake after last night’s binge. I had drunk myself into oblivion after the kill. I called it that in my head, a “kill,” like Pa did when I downed a deer or even one time a bear. Except this time it was a once-living-and-breathing human being. My head felt like *it* had received the bullet, and I threw cold water on my face. I looked into the chipped mirror at my red eyes and stubble, ran my hand over my chin, and said out loud, “Well, that’s over, and the money’ll be in the account soon.”

I tried to crack a smile but instead watched my eyes get all teary. I swore. Threw more water on my face. My doc kit lay by

the toilet, its contents scattered on the stained linoleum floor. I reached down and fumbled for a couple aspirin, swallowed them down, and then got out my razor and shaving cream, letting the spigot run the water warm. From the bedroom I heard the jingle of the morning news.

“Today’s top story: Beloved author Josephine Bourdillon still lies in critical condition in the Neuro Trauma ICU at the Memorial Campus of Mission Hospital in downtown Asheville. . . .”

I dropped the razor, heard it hit the sink. Then I grabbed the thin white towel and rushed back to the TV, wiping shaving cream off my face as I listened to the reporter—a blond girl who hardly looked old enough to be out of high school—standing outside of some hospital.

“Police are calling it an assassination attempt. Ms. Bourdillon had just left Malaprop’s Bookstore, where she was doing a reading and book signing, when she was shot. Police have released no other details. . . .”

I felt my stomach twisting, felt last night’s alcohol and pizza churning up inside, and hurried to the john to throw up. Then I yelled, way too loud for the thin motel walls, but stopped myself before putting a fist through one.

Now what?

You’ll receive the second half when the job is done, cash, four days after.

I turned back to the screen where the reporter was listing this lady’s accomplishments, but I couldn’t pay attention to what she was saying. All I could think was: *You gotta die, lady. You gotta. Or I won’t get the money for my son. I’m sorry, lady. But you’ve just gotta die.*

Then I put my head in my hands, unable to process the horrible mess I was in now. *What were you thinking when you agreed to murder, Hughes? What in the world were you thinking?* And the tears just came while I remembered. . . .

It was two weeks ago, right after Libby called me at work with the bad news. At the end of the day I left the printing plant and stopped off at the bar with a buddy. No way could I go straight home to Libby. Not till I'd thought of a solution.

The third beer got me to feeling better, loosened up a bit so I felt like telling Birch my problems. "It's my boy, Birch. They say he needs another operation on his heart."

Birch still wore a crew cut, his hair almost as blond as mine. We shared the same tattoo on our right forearm. Got it done in a parlor when we were on leave in Fort Bragg. Used to shake hands every day when we were serving in Afghanistan together, just to show off the tattoos. It made us feel real close. Connected.

Now I stared at the image of the sun on Birch's forearm. "Sun ain't risin' in the Hughes family today, Birch. In fact, feels like it might be settin' for good. Jase needs surgery and boss's acting like he might let me go if I miss work again."

I took another gulp, finished the beer, ordered another.

"Tough break, Hughes."

"We've not got money enough for rent and groceries, much less another surgery. Being already so far in debt makes all the nightmares come back in full color. Screaming sound effects too."

Birch knew all about my childhood, and we'd witnessed the Afghanistan horrors together.

"Libby still working?"

"Yeah."

"You'll find something else to bring in more cash—you always do."

I shook my head. "Don't you sometimes just want to give it all up?"

"You know it."

"I've screwed everything up for Libs and Jase."

We sat there, just drinking and not talking.

“Just need to win the lottery or something,” I threw out after a while.

“You still got your guns, Hughes?”

“Of course.”

“You were the best shot in the platoon. Best shot of anyone I ever knew.”

“That ain’t gonna get me a job, Birch.”

He hesitated, ordered another beer, then said, “I might have something for you. Not the lottery, but pay’s dang good.” He lowered his voice so as I could barely hear him over the noise around us.

The more he talked, the more I told myself *No way!* Wouldn’t ever have agreed without the help of four beers and the desperate feeling way down in my gut.

“I know the guy—he’s good for the money. He’s the middleman. You never even have to know who hired you.”

“You already done a job like that?”

Birch gave a shrug. Looked up at me. “Doesn’t have to be a career, Hughes. But it’ll give you some fast cash. You could try it, this once.”

He reached over to shake my hand, nodded down to the tattoo. “You’re real good with the gun. Might as well use what you’re good at. Might let you see the sun a little too.”

It sounded like a good idea at the time. . . .

PAIGE

She lay on her back, her mouth half-opened, the tube inserted, a string of drool escaping beside it, which was, excuse me, just gross. Her head was shaved on the right side, where the bullet had penetrated, and now she resembled a corpse beginning to be mummified, her head swathed in white gauze that ended right at her eyebrows. The rest of her face was very pale. The

labored breathing, done by machines, reminded me of the even drone of the ceiling fan in my parents' bedroom. Pretty spooky.

I sat beside the hospital bed and stared, blurry-eyed, at the apparition of my mother. My soft and kind fifty-something mother, petite, with dark brown eyes that either filled with compassion or fantasy, now closed. I wondered if they'd ever open again.

Coma. The word struck terror in my soul. The thing that most people did not emerge from or, if they did, emerged as vegetables. That my mother lay in this state, so still, so unalive, so lost from me, I could not grasp.

Yesterday we'd watched the sunrise from the porch of our home on Bearmeadow Mountain, both of us speechless as always before the vista of mountains spread out like a rippling carpet on every side.

"We live in a paradise," Momma had said. "We get to watch God painting the mountains day after day after day."

In the spring the mountains looked green and soft as velvet, but when October came around, the velvet blanket turned into an intricate tapestry of reds and oranges and deep yellows.

I blinked back tears at the memory, a sharp contrast to my surroundings. The hospital room, white and sterile, was filled with sights and sounds that came not from nature but from technology, and were indispensable in keeping my mother alive.

Yesterday, before I rushed off to school, I gave her a high five after reading her the latest letter from an adoring fan, an elderly woman who had found hope in one of Momma's stories.

When I turned sixteen last year, I took over the job my older sister had been doing, answering the fan messages that came through her website or Facebook or email, doing the social media stuff. Momma paid me for it, of course. She was embarrassingly hopeless with technology. Her job was to write. And write. And write.

It was beyond fathoming that someone had deliberately tried to kill her. An assassination attempt, the police were calling it. As if Momma were the president of the United States. Who assassinated a middle-aged novelist? I suppose if she wrote horror stories or trashy novels or something defaming a religion, someone might wish her dead. But my mother wrote historical fiction. Sure, some of her stories made white people feel uncomfortable, even guilty, but the issues she raised had been decided by a president who got himself assassinated a long time ago.

Well, it wasn't quite beyond fathoming. We'd enjoyed reading that letter yesterday, but I thought about a couple of other letters that had arrived about three weeks ago, handwritten in big bold print. Just some wacko, I'd thought. But I never should have shown them to Momma.

Wackos are exactly the type of people who kill their heroes, right?

My line of reasoning was interrupted by my father coming into the hospital room.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, Paige,” he greeted me, and we hugged tightly. For a long time.

Then he tiptoed over to the bed, as if he might wake Momma—oh, if only he could—with his footfall. Daddy was tall and lean, with black, black hair, even in his fifties. He had only an edging of gray around his temples, which Momma liked to say gave him a debonair look. They were both aging well, my parents. Or had been.

Now the word *gaunt* flashed through my mind—Daddy's ashen face, always clean-shaven, was now covered with a salt-and-pepper beard, and his eyes looked hollow. He hadn't slept at all, had only left me alone with Momma long enough to get a cup of coffee in the ICU waiting room down the hall. Now

he stood over the bed looking displaced, as if he had somehow ended up in the wrong room, staring at someone else's wife.

"Any more news?" I asked.

In truth, I didn't think I could stomach any more. Last night, barely three hours after the shooting, the doctor had called Daddy and me into a room.

"There are two scales we use for measuring the severity of the coma and tracking the patient's progress," he'd explained, "the Glasgow Scale and the Rancho Los Amigos Scale. A three means very little hope of recovery. A fifteen means normal."

He'd lowered his voice. "Mrs. Bourdillon's combined score upon arriving at the ER was a four. That is normal with a traumatic head injury. The first job was to stabilize her. We've put her on a ventilator, and we're draining the fluid—the swelling is putting too much pressure on the brain. Hyperventilation may also be performed to help relieve the pressure. She's also on antiseizure medication. . . ."

Now Daddy shook his head. "I don't think the police have any new leads, although they found the bullet"—the bullet that had passed straight through Momma's brain and onto the parking lot pavement—"so they'll be able to identify the type of gun."

But Daddy's mind was not on finding the shooter, I knew. His mind was on how to get Momma back.

He sat down beside her bed, reached under swaths of white sheets, and took her hand. "Feeny," he whispered to her. "Can you hear me, Feeny? Squeeze my fingers if you can hear me."

His voice sounded so desperate, so broken, so different, that I sucked in air. I rubbed my head, feeling the throbbing beginnings of a glorified headache, and said, "I'll leave you two alone for a while," the knot in my throat causing my voice to sound as strange and foreign as his. I pecked him on the cheek and stepped into the hall.

Just like that, our lives had turned upside down and inside out.

I went down to the cafeteria on the second floor—Café 509—and was standing in front of the hot entrées when the sound of my own voice shocked me. It blared from the TV across the room.

“We can’t imagine why anyone would possibly want to hurt my mother,” I was saying to the reporters, who had accosted us early this morning outside the hospital. “We just don’t know.” I ducked my head, but a woman stuck her mic right in front of my mouth.

“Your mother’s latest novel, *These Mountains around Us*, describes lynchings. Do you think this could be the case of a deranged reader taking out his frustrations and disagreements on your mother?”

“Her last novel? Um, it takes place a hundred and fifty years ago. . . .” My voice sounded so far away, and I looked really horrible—I hadn’t had time to wash my hair or put on makeup or anything—and Daddy had reached out his hand to shield the cameras from my face as we walked inside the sliding glass doors. But in my mind I was thinking, *Well, we can’t imagine anyone except for some crazy person who wrote a couple of awful letters a few weeks ago.*

I kept my head down as I plucked from the shelf the one thing that had caught my eye—a chocolate-chip cupcake. I ordered a cup of chai and slid the off-white tray along the steel bars, barely lifting my eyes to inspect the other entrées—which nonetheless looked a lot more appealing than the food at my school cafeteria. I couldn’t stomach anything else.

“Investigators are asking anyone who has any clues about the case to call . . .”

JOSEPHINE

1966 . . . The house was brimming with people, important people, laughing and talking, their tall, skinny glasses bubbling

with the golden liquid that made them happy. They were so noisy! Terence, dressed in a black tux, came over to Josephine.

“Hello, there Miss Josephine. My, ain’t you looking pretty tonight. Can I get you something to drink? A Co-Cola, maybe?”

“Hi, Terence. I’m glad you’re here.” She reached out and took his hand and followed him back to the makeshift bar, where Daddy had all the drinks. “Could I have a ginger ale?”

“Sure ’nuf, angel.”

“Terence, do you like to dress up like this and go to the parties?”

“Can’t say that I mind, Miss Josy. I like to change from my overalls into this tux.” Terence worked for her parents during the week, making the yard look as if he’d gone over it with a comb and brush and emery board. Every blade of grass in place, every shrub trimmed and even. And twice a year he acted as the bartender at her parents’ parties.

“Do you like to watch the people get drunk?”

“Miss Josy, you ask such interesting questions for a six-year-old. You know as well as I do that not all these fine people are getting drunk. Most of them are just enjoying themselves and having a little alcohol.” He handed her a tall clear glass with a gold rim, filled with ice and ginger ale. “Here ya go, angel.”

Terence always called her angel, and he always looked out for her at the parties. She didn’t know why the parties frightened her. Why so many fancy-looking people in fancy-looking clothes and drinking fancy-looking drinks made her stomach cramp.

Yes, she did.

She shut her eyes, and in her mind she heard the screech of the tires and Mommy’s scream, remembered how she and Kit had been flung against the front seat.

Daddy had cursed, rubbed his temples, looked around, his eyes red and wide and terrified. “Everyone okay?” he mumbled.

Kit had grabbed her hand and said, “We’re okay, Daddy,” but Josephine tasted blood in her mouth where she’d bit her lip. She’d started to cry, but her big sister frowned and shook her head. “We’re fine.”

1968 . . . Josephine didn’t want to go to camp. Not that spend-the-night-away-from-home camp, not any camp. She didn’t want to take riding lessons. All she wanted to do was stay in her room and read Nancy Drew mysteries and write her own stories. She loved to close the door and lose herself in another world where her pencil scribbled the words that were so jumbled in her head. So many stories! How would she ever get them all down?

“Josephine, it’s dinnertime.”

“But I’m not finished—”

“Josephine! Now!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She traipsed downstairs, talking to herself, repeating the scene in her mind so that maybe she’d still remember it after dinner and the news. . . .

But later, Josephine wound herself into a protective little ball on her bed and tried to hide from the world. Such a dark, scary world! Why did Mommy and Daddy have to watch all that news on TV? People were blowing each other up in some country far away, but it could happen here. It could happen in her neighborhood. Why last month, two hooded men had burst into Francie Lewis’s house and held a gun to her mother’s head.

Every time they watched the news, more stories filled her mind—scary, sad stories that she didn’t want to write. But it could happen. It could. She crawled under the covers and shut her eyes tight, but she could still see the black-and-white images of soldiers and hear the missiles exploding and the screams. She could imagine the little boy back home whose

father just got blown to smithereens. She could practically feel him inside her head, and it made her want to run. Or hide. She'd hide.

HENRY

The TV was still blasting out the news in the motel room. I hadn't known anything about the person I was hired to kill. Just enough details to get the job done. And now, turned out this lady was a dang-blame-it bestselling author. I didn't know what she wrote, but it didn't sound like something that should get her killed. She wasn't any Stephen King or some crazy terrorist either.

That's not your problem, Henry.

No. My problem was that if Miz Josephine Bourdillon didn't die, I wouldn't be receiving another envelope in three days with all that cash inside. Jase's surgery was scheduled for two weeks away. It made me feel weak to think about all the money we already owed. We were so far in debt we weren't ever gonna get out.

Jase was born with a hole in his heart. Three major surgeries had kept him alive for almost seven years, but after each one he'd have a complication. The doc said this surgery might fix his problem permanently, but it couldn't wait any longer. I closed my eyes and could see Jase's skinny, freckled face, his green eyes—pretty like Libby's—all lit up with World Series hype. Then he was doubled over and wheezing, and I was rushing him out to the pickup.

I squeezed my eyes shut, squeezed that crushing pain away.

I knew I needed to get home quick, before Libby started on one of her worry fits. She got anxious when I was away for too long. But before driving home, I stopped off at a Books-A-Million. Nobody would have guessed from looking at me that I liked to read. Once my boss, Mr. Dan, saw me with a

book while I ate my sandwich at lunch and said, “You a reader, Hughes?” He looked surprised.

My last year in school, eighth grade, I was soaking up the books in my English class, to my own surprise. But then Ma got sick and died, and Pa took me out of school. If he’d ever seen me sitting in a chair, reading a book, well, I reckon he’d have taken the Remington and shot right through the book into my chest.

I didn’t have the time or money to do much reading now. But the thing about books was once I got started on one, if it was really good, well, I couldn’t put it down. I liked going into the big bookstores and zigzagging in between all the shelves, touching the covers of the books out on the table, wondering what kind of stories the authors had hidden inside.

I found Josephine Bourdillon’s novels back in the historical fiction section. Bunch of them. *Maybe I should read her stuff*, I thought, and I almost pulled one off the shelf. But then I thought, *Are you crazy?*

Yes, crazy, but not stupid. I always got a bit reckless when I stopped taking my meds cold turkey. I ducked my head and pulled my baseball cap down low, hands deep in my pockets, and went back to the pickup.

I scrolled through the messages on my phone. Libby’s message read, *Jase is at the ER. They have to move the surgery up*. I cursed. But no message from my contact. No. Of course not. My job was to finish my job.

But how was I gonna do that, with half of America’s attention focused on a middle-aged lady lying in a coma in a hospital room somewhere in the mountains of North Carolina?