

HANNAH LINDER

THE
REASONS
YOU
STARED



The Reasons You Stared

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THE REASONS YOU STARED

Dear Mr. Pickens,
You watched me. From the time I was eleven years old, summer of '79, a week after the smoke stopped hovering above the pines, I noticed. That first day was terrible.

Daddy yelled that I ought to wear my Sunday school dress, but even though I smoothed the wrinkles, I didn't feel clean. I still had soot under my fingernails.

Funny, ain't it?

The things you remember as a kid.

I recall walking that muddy driveway from the camper to the mailbox, then standing there—popping my Bazooka gum, chewing so hard the bubblegum flavor made me sick.

Seemed odd, the farmhouse not being across the road. Chickens still pattered about the singed grass, ashes floated on shafts of sun, and Mrs. Pickens's watering can sat where it always did—oddly unmolested and peaceful, as if she'd come trotting out of the shed in that floppy hat and those blue-checkered gardening gloves.

Then I saw you.

Shoulders stiff, you walked out to your farm-use pickup, all sleek in your gray suit and brown shoes. I'd never seen you like that. Not even at church.

Like a worm, an itch crawled my neck.

Guess it was the way you looked at me—head rigid, brows furrowed, something pensive and prickling about your eyes. That stupid gum slid down my throat. Nearly choked me.

You stared all day.

Even at the funeral.

I wish Daddy would have moved away after that. The first month or so, I'd climb into his sweaty hammock, on those hot summer nights, after he'd had enough beers to make him watery-eyed. "Let's go back to Granny's," I begged him. "I don't like it here."

"You got schooling."

"Granny can school me."

"Stop your whinin' or I'll give ya something to whine about."

So, we stayed. All summer, the air echoed with the droning pound of your hammer and the hum of workers helping you rebuild the house. I paid as little heed as I could. Even lugged our moth-eaten tent into the woods, so I'd be farther away from you.

But when the mountains turned golden and red, and Daddy had to plug in the electric heater in the camper, I didn't have a choice. I'd wait at the end of the driveway every morning for the bus, frost nipping my nose, wearing my yellow corduroy. The left leg needed a patch, but I didn't know how and Mrs. Pickens—

Well.

She wasn't here anymore.

I think that's why you stared at me, from the front porch of your new house, as you played old-time tunes on your clawhammer banjo. I never waved. You didn't either. We just looked at each other, all through sixth grade and summer and then seventh grade too.

Odd, growing up like that.

Knowing every time you step outside, or get the mail, someone's watching you. Remember my eighth-grade track game? You sat in the bleachers in your overalls, and I was so upset I almost puked before the run. And that time I broke my arm? No one came to sit with me at the hospital. Guess you knew I'd be alone 'cause you showed up and read a magazine until the nurse came.

I know you blamed me.

Daddy said it wasn't my fault. But that's what he said about himself when Mom left (even at five, I knew *that* was cockamamie bull). Guess that's why I started doing things.

Like sneaking out at night and necking John David at the old creek mill.

Or snatching cans from Daddy's six pack.

Sometimes, I told myself it helped. I didn't think about skipping down to Mrs. Pickens's house for lemonade. Or how I'd asked her to help me make a bridal Halloween costume.

That day, she wore a frilled apron as we ventured into the attic. We unpacked totes and rummaged through quilt patches, until we found a fabric bolt of white cotton. "I'll look for my pearl buttons," said Mrs. Pickens. "They're up here somewhere." Why was she always so eager to help a crusty-sleeved kid like me? "Holly, you run down and look under my bed. I keep my old wedding veil down there. It'll be perfect."

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Downstairs, I was three boxes in when I first noticed the swirl of smoke. I was never quite sure why I did this. Probably could have darted for the window and busted out.

But as the flames started licking around the bedroom door, I shrunk further under the bed and started screaming. Seemed like no one would ever come. I kept praying Daddy would, but when a hand finally seized my foot and dragged me out, it was you.

Your flannel shirt smelled like hayfields, and I can't recall anyone holding me so tight, as you ducked through the flames. Everything flashed and hissed. By the time you stumbled outside, my lungs stung and your cough fell in panic across my forehead. Timbers crashed. Then sparks popped into the air as the farmhouse caved.

Through a haze of shock, we both glanced up and saw Mrs. Pickens.

She banged on the attic window.

Then she was gone.

The older I got, the more I hoped you'd forget, but ninth grade was worse. That time I got arrested? Next morning, I saw your rusty pickup across the street, but I was too busy trying to nurse my hangover and figure out who bailed me out to care. I ignored you. Even at graduation.

Then, the second I turned eighteen, I ran.

I left Daddy, left my mistakes—and better yet, left you. I never missed these dusty Gilmer County roads, as I got caught up in the pace of suburban life. Between trying to be less like Daddy and working two jobs—and finally, marrying a kind-voiced teacher named Kenneth—I'd almost got the stench of house fire out of my nostrils.

Until someone mailed me this package.

Must have been a week ago now that you passed away, and why anyone would send me your Bible, I have no idea. I was angry. Even in death, were you taunting me?

When I flipped to the last page, I noticed a line that dropped my stomach. The words were smeared, as if they'd been cried over:

"Dear Lord, you chose to save Holly over my wife. Reckon You know best. All I want is to watch that little girl make something good of herself. Every time I see her, for the rest of my days, I'll pray she does."

You're dead now, Mr. Pickens, and yesterday, I drove back to these old West Virginia foothills. I visited the camper, the farmhouse, and the school where I'd gotten into so much trouble. Then I found your grave.

I'm leaving the letter here, wedged inside a plastic vase of flowers, and I know God will read it to you from Heaven. I hope He'll tell you that I married well. That I visit Daddy sometimes in the nursing home, but I don't act anything like him. That I take my little babies to church every Sunday, and that we all hold hands and pray every evening at supper.

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If you'd ever come visit my house, you'd noticed the flower beds look a lot like the ones Mrs. Pickens's was always watering in her floppy hat.

I have a good life, Mr. Pickens.

Your prayer was answered.

With love,
Holly

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hannah Linder resides in the beautiful mountains of central West Virginia. Represented by Books & Such, she writes Regency romantic suspense novels filled with passion, secrets, and danger. She is a 2025 Carol Award winner, a five-time Selah Award winner, and a member of American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW). Also, Hannah is an international and multi-award-winning graphic designer who specializes in professional book cover design. She designs for both traditional publishing houses and individual authors, including *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and international bestsellers. She is also a self-

portrait photographer of historical fashion. When Hannah is not writing, she enjoys playing her instruments—piano, guitar, ukulele, and banjo—songwriting, painting still life, walking in the rain, square dancing, and sitting on the front porch of her 1800s farmhouse. To follow her journey, visit hannahlinderbooks.com.



