



RAPID READS



THE  
MIDDLE  
GROUND

ZOE WHITTALL

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RAVEN BOOKS

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**Summary:** Missy Turner's ordinary life is turned upside down when she is taken hostage in a botched robbery at the local café, and she finds herself questioning the validity of everything she's always believed in.

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*For my small-town girl*

## CHAPTER ONE

**W**hen he put the gun to my neck, I closed my eyes. A simple reflex. I imagined the cold metal tip was really just a magic marker, a wet cat's nose, or the small superball my son was always losing behind the couch cushions.

What happens when you feel the graze of a gun against your skin? Either you die or your whole life is changed.

I'd been doing this thing while drinking black coffee. I would close my eyes so I could pretend it still had cream in it. Apparently, you can lose five pounds in a

month just by giving up the half-and-half. I'd been trying to psych myself out. Eyes shut, I'd imagine it all differently.

It didn't work with the gun either.

It could have been any ordinary day, really. It started out that way. I poured a cup of coffee into my favorite *We Can Make a Difference!* mug. I spooned a lump of cat food into a dish for Simon. Balancing both cup and dish, I kicked open the screen door. It was one of those beautiful summer days that promised perfect photographs. Idyllic after-work swims in the river.

"Siiii-mon!" The cat jumped from his oak-tree perch in the backyard. He waddled up, his one eye sparkling up at me.

I rescue stray cats. They come and go. But Simon has always stayed close. Ever since I found him. A tiny orange-and-white kitten hiding under our overturned canoe in the backyard, bleeding from his left eye.



That was thirteen years ago. I nursed him back to health, and he never left. Simon knows about loyalty.

Until that day, I thought I did too.

I stood on the chipped brown deck that Dale was always promising to restrain and sipped my coffee. My bare feet were dirty and tanned. A white V from my flip-flops stared up at me. Next door, Lydia was sitting in her fold-out chair, having a morning cigarette before waking the kids. Like always.

I remember everything about that morning, though it was like so many others. Maybe that's why I do.

"Morning, Missy." She nodded, inhaling.

"Gonna be hot today, eh?" I'd answered back. What I was really thinking was, *Our houses are too close together.* That and, *She must have had her tits done.* Nipples don't point skyward like that after three kids are finished pawing at them. Her legs were

shiny and perfectly tanned. She uses a fake oily color cream on them that I instinctively distrust. She tried to convince me to use it anyway. I tried it once. For two weeks my legs looked like someone colored on them with orange highlighter.

Still, there wasn't really much pretty about Lydia. Maybe from ten feet away she looked pretty. But up close, her features were awkwardly placed and covered in too much concealer.

We both stared out into our yards. I'd hoped she wouldn't want to talk. It was too early. Anyway, she really only liked to talk about herself. And she wasn't that interesting. In high school she was really geeky. She wore thick round glasses and played the trombone. She wasn't all that smart or anything, like some of the other nerdy kids. Then she went away to college. She came back all sex and confidence. Sometimes though, like when she smoked

in the mornings, she still looked the picture of grade-nine awkwardness.

Behind our row of postwar bungalows and former farmhouses was what we used to call Conner's field. Now, two rows of identical pink brick duplexes filled the land between our street and the highway overpass. We used to live in a small town. Now the city stretched so far we were almost a suburb. The people in the pink houses took the train to the city to work and shopped at the new superstore on the edge of town.

Main Street, where I worked, was the same old stretch of stores. In many ways we were still a small town. People talked to each other. And everyone knew everyone else's business all the time. Like I knew all about Lydia's husband, who runs Jonny's Gas Bar. He cheated on her with a woman who moved to town and opened a yoga studio in her basement. To get back at him, Lydia slept with the gym teacher from the

high school. That was Mr. Ronson, one of the fifty or so Ronsons in town. Now Jonny and Lydia are back to being “so in love.” Or so Lydia exclaims any chance she gets. They spent a weekend at a couple’s retreat in the mountains where they had to “concentrate on their essential oneness.”

But I don’t mind the gossip. Mostly because no one has ever had an excuse to talk about boring old Missy Turner anyway. Maybe in high school they did. When I got pregnant before graduation. But now, I’m just like everyone else.

I was never one of those girls prone to dreaming about getting away. Why leave somewhere quiet and comfortable? Where someone you love was always within arm’s reach. Until that day, I thought I was pretty happy. My husband was mostly wonderful. Besides occasionally cutting his toenails in my presence, he wasn’t half bad to have around.

## The Middle Ground

Dale and I fell in love in the last year of high school. We both worked one of the concession booths at the fall fair. On a sugar high after too many green and pink slushies, we giggled into each other's arms. For our six-month anniversary, he took me to Lollapalooza. Six months used to be such a long time.

After Courtney Love's tearful elegy for her recently deceased husband, I lost my virginity in the parking lot. There's a photo of us standing outside the van afterward. Him wearing the red wool hat with the Beastie Boys patch on it. My hair bleached and puffy with little pink barrettes holding the mess back. I was wearing a plaid dress. Both of us were in combat boots. We look like babies in those photos but thought we were so tough, so old.

Eight months later Michael arrived. Early and so tiny, red and screaming. Despite all the pamphlets claiming my

life was over, despite both of our parents urging me to give our son up for adoption, we opted for parenthood. It was probably the first instinctive thing I'd done in my life. And it worked out. Sometimes things do. For a while anyway.

When Mike was two, we tried living in the city for a year. Our apartment was one room on the sixteenth floor. I hated how the paint in the bathroom peeled, and the tap trickled constantly. And someone, somewhere, was always screaming. We were cramped. I worked at night in a café. Dale went to school during the day. We never saw each other. I don't think I've ever been so lonely, with only the company of a toddler.

When we came home after two semesters, we felt so broken. We came close to breaking up. Our families stepped in and helped out. Dale decided to get a job at the plant where his dad worked. We settled

into my great-uncle's house after he went into a nursing home. At the end of our first summer, we no longer felt like we'd failed. We decided we'd just the made right choice. It sounds corny, or boring, but seriously, I feel lucky.

My parents live two miles away. We get together every Sunday. Our house is paid off. Michael is fifteen and he isn't making online hit-lists or doing meth or impregnating the girl down the block. He's smarter than we were as kids. He likes the outdoors. He plays guitar and watches lots of movies. Very normal. I think maybe he turned out so sweet because I *was* so young. I could still remember being a kid. I didn't talk to him like he was an idiot just because he was young. I read to him and made sure he knew he could be whoever he wanted to be. But for all my efforts, there was probably a lot of luck involved.

Mike was heading off to camp that day. Leaving home for the first time by himself. A wilderness adventure camp called Out of Bounds. According to the brochure, it was a place where teenagers *battle the wilderness and try to survive!* It promised to *build character* and *make lifelong friends*. Mike had been packing and repacking his oversized backpack for a week. Finally the day had arrived.

For weeks I'd been telling everyone how happy I was going to be to have the house to myself. I wasn't going to miss the sound of zombie-killing video games or the persistent stink of gym equipment. But you want to know the truth? I was feeling like a suck. One of those mothers who tear up thinking of her baby out in the world alone. My little wolf cub! I thought. I annoyed myself with those thoughts. Most of the time I still feel like I'm seventeen. Really. But somehow I'm thirty-three.



I've become one of those mothers I used to make fun of. I'm *my* mother. I understood her now. The way she used to cry when she dropped me off at the lake for two weeks of bible camp in the summers.

\* \* \*

I'd decided to make a bowl of oatmeal for Michael. I dotted it with fresh blueberries. When I went downstairs to wake him, he was already up.

"I've been researching what to do if we encounter a bear," he said. In the cave of his basement bedroom, the only light emanated from the glow of his computer screen. Until he was thirteen his bedroom was upstairs beside ours. Suddenly he proclaimed it a baby's room. He decided he'd "have the whole downstairs now, please." We didn't really mind. For years it was supposed to be a sewing room for me and a workout area for Dale. Neither got much use.

Last summer Mike worked in the fields for six weeks corn-detasseling. Our area is big on agriculture, the unofficial corn capital of the country. He wised up this year with the camp. Applied in spring to be a counselor-in-training. Smart, my kid, avoiding the 5:00-AM wake-ups and the brutal heat of the fields. I know that eventually he's going to want to go away to university and live in the city. He's told me often that he can't wait to see the world.

"Well, it's good you're prepared," I mustered. "Now come up and eat your cereal."

Upstairs, he patted down his oatmeal with thick spoonfuls of brown sugar. I tried to pretend I was happy to have him out of my hair for six weeks. He picked all the blueberries out and dropped them on a pile of napkins.

"Pass the milk," he mumbled, like always.

"You nervous?"

“No way...whatever. It’ll be fun.” He looked nervous, oversized limbs shaking under the table. He picked up two berries and ate them.

“Eat some fresh fruit,” I said, pushing half a banana and some apple slices toward him. “You’ll probably be living on the dried stuff all summer.” He took some slices to appease me.

Dale had said goodbye to him the night before, on his way out to a midnight shift at the plant. He was due home at eight thirty. I could go days without seeing him when he was on a night rotation. Just traces of toothpaste on the sink, socks in the hamper, dregs of coffee in a mug in the sink.

The last time we spoke, I could tell Dale was a little worried for Michael. Though he tried not to show it.

“I can’t believe he’s old enough to go off on his own,” he said. “Do you ever think

about the freedom we're going to have in a few years? It kind of blows my mind."

I was trying not to think about it much. Dale seemed excited. "We could travel! We could take that trip across the country like we always planned. I could turn the basement into a jam space, maybe get some recording equipment."

I wanted to get excited about it too, but I couldn't stop feeling sad whenever the future came up.

We packed up the car, and I dropped Mike off at the school parking lot. One of many parents embarrassing their kids with too-long hugs. "Mo-om." My name had become two syllables lately. "I'm not going off to Afghanistan."

Ever since our cousin James went off to Afghanistan, it was Mike's retort for everything. "Let me learn how to drive. I'm not going off to Afghanistan."

By the time I got to work, my tears had dried, and I told myself to buck up. Worst part of the day is over, I thought.

Not so.

\* \* \*

For ten years I'd worked at Harlowe's Hardware, a family-owned business where I knew all the customers. I was known around town as Missy from the Hardware Store. Mr. Harlowe usually only came in on Saturdays to sign checks. I managed the staff and did the accounting. I kept the back office running and the customers happy. My favorite part of the job was teaching people how things worked. Especially women who had no idea how to hammer in a nail. I felt useful. I like working with my hands and understanding the mechanics of things.

That day, however, Mr. Harlowe was standing behind the counter when I got in.

No one else was there. Instead of greeting me with a grandfatherly hug and some terrible new joke, he avoided eye contact. His face looked apologetic.

“Missy,” he said. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

Laid off. It sounded so passive. Like someone gently pushing you onto the couch to reimagine your life in some other way.

It was happening a lot lately to people I knew. *The economy*, the newspapers said. People around here will always need hammers and nails, I’d thought. No one will ever stop needing to build things. I’m safe.

Not so.

I could see Mr. Harlowe’s lips moving and I could hear the occasional series of words. “Selling to a developer” and “getting older, Mona’s had the stroke, you know.” “Happy to write you a stunning reference letter.” “You’re still young...Lots of options.”

\* \* \*

Then I was back in my car. I just sat there for a few minutes. Soaking in the shock. I resisted heading straight over to the corner store to buy cigarettes to smoke my brains out. I'd quit three months ago and had just started to find it repulsive. Instead, I drove to my sister's place. She runs a day care out of her home in an even smaller town just north of us.

It took three tries to get her to understand *I Lost My Job* with the screaming and crying of the Denver twins, who do everything, including throwing up and screaming, at the same time.

Jackie looked at me over the fuss and mess of four kids and shrugged. "Maybe this is your big chance to do something different with your life."

The girl twin threw up again. I cleaned up the mess while Jackie calmed her down and called the kids' mother.

“But I don’t want another life. I like things the way they are.”

“Everyone can see, Missy, you need some adventure. My god, try something new for once. Dale has a good job, it’s not like you’re gonna be homeless. When one door closes...”

“Oh, for god’s sake, I wanted to get some support, not some kicky optimistic bullshit. I can’t believe you’re not being understanding. This is very upsetting!” My voice cracked. I couldn’t believe how worked up I was feeling. A big change, and I had no control. I stole a cigarette from Jackie’s pack on the table and left her with the screaming and crying.

I drove back into town on the road that winds along the river. I smoked half the cigarette before quitting again. The shops on Main Street suddenly seemed to have a different look to them. I parked in the lot behind Callie’s Café, where I usually went



for take-out on my lunch break. I went in through the back door and checked the bulletin board by the bathrooms for job ads. There were none. Just lost kittens and notices for the summer church picnic. I sat up front at the counter, where I assumed single people usually sit. I couldn't remember the last day I didn't have every moment planned.

As I opened up the newspaper that lay on the counter, I glanced at Harlowe's across the street. There was now a large CLOSED sign on the front door. Customers walked up, stopped and tried the door over and over, despite the sign.

The only other customers at Callie's at ten thirty in the morning were a couple of seniors in a back booth. The waitress, my youngest cousin Christina, brought me a cup of coffee and a menu. The place was sort of a hub in town. You could buy a sandwich, rent from an assortment of

DVDs behind the counter, or sit and read a newspaper all day in one of the burgundy booths that lined the perimeter. In one of them, *Led Zeppelin Rules* was carefully inked onto the tabletop. I swear it was there when I was four.

Christina moved a strand of her long black hair out of her eyes and handed me a spoon for my coffee. “You’re looking a little rough, Missy. What’s up?”

“I got laid off.” It surprised me to say it.

“Oh man, that sucks.” This was Christina’s answer to most things. She used to be a beautiful girl until she started reading vampire novels. Now she has black hair with a blue streak. She dresses like Dracula and saves all her tips, intending to move to the city to find her vampire prince.

I scanned the classifieds. There were two notices. One for a forklift operator, another to be in medical studies. I turned back to the front page. The cover story

was about the upcoming summer fair. Nothing ever happened in our town. It was a wonder we even had a newspaper.

“The trouble is, I don’t know anything else I’d like to do.”

I took two coffees to go, thinking Dale would want one before he went to bed around eleven. He was one of those people who could drink six cups a day and still sleep like a baby. Perhaps, I thought, I could turn the day around with morning sex and a little afternoon gardening. After all, there was no risk of Mike coming home.

Sounded blissful, actually. Perhaps we could have another kid, and I could be a stay-at-home mom for a few years. Or I could start my own business—catering, or a line of natural soaps. The possibilities are really endless. Maybe Jackie is right, and I just have to calm down a bit to realize it. By the time I pulled into the driveway, my brain was positively on fire with the

possibilities of my new life. I wanted to run through the front door and grab Dale, energize him with all the ideas I had for us.

But when I turned my key in the door, my gut sensed something was off. Things in the house didn't look the same. I could hear voices in the kitchen. I thought perhaps it was the oddity of being home on a weekday or the lack of Mike's presence. But when I walked into the kitchen from the living room, holding my tray of coffees, I couldn't have been more surprised if I'd found a family of aliens sitting at the table.

I dropped the coffees on the floor.