

RETURN TO CRUTCHER MOUNTAIN

Cedar Hollow Series, Book 2



by

Melinda Clayton

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USA

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Dedication

This book is for my brother, Sam, who has inspired and influenced all of us more than he'll ever know. This book wouldn't exist without you.

Acknowledgements

I would be remiss if I didn't thank my parents for their patience, input, and advice throughout the writing of this book. It wasn't until they gave it the seal of approval that I was ready to submit it for publication.

And always, to the loves of my life: Donny, Caleb and Isaac, thanks once again for putting up with me while I holed up in the office, hunched over the computer tapping away on the keyboard.

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How to Talk to Grownups

You can't be too smart.
They don't like that.
It makes them mad
because they like to think they know the most
about everything.

They won't understand you anyhow,
so it doesn't really matter how you say stuff.

Sometimes one will understand
and not care about feeling stupid,
but that is very rare.

I have only known one or maybe two
like this, and not at the same time.

I keep looking for more, but maybe that is not fair.
The first one I knew was too special
for anyone else to be like him.
The second one I am still not sure about.

Tracy R. Franklin
Author of *Angst, Anger, Love, Hope*

Chapter 1

Monday

The day it began started like any ordinary day. My first thought upon being jarred awake by the blaring alarm clock was, *Oh, no. Not again.* My first reaction upon realizing my first thought was to wince. This awakening thought was a relatively new one, creeping uninvited over the past few weeks into my fuzzy brain when defenses were down, before the routine of the day asserted itself and wiped out the cobwebs. I didn't know the reason behind the thought, and I put no effort into discovering it. Instead, I banished it from my mind.

I briefly considered turning over and going back to sleep; I was, after all, on vacation. But I needed my morning run, not only because I'd put on five pounds over the last few months, but because without it, I had a tendency to fall into a mental funk. Running was one way of keeping disquieting thoughts at bay.

Reluctantly, I dragged myself out of the tangled warmth of the bed, gathered up the trailing sheets, and tossed them back onto the sleeping form of Michael, who snorted and rolled over under the added weight. I paused for a moment, studying him as he slept. Six months into the relationship I still had no idea where it was going. There had been plenty of men in the years since the divorce, but none I cared to know beyond a few shared dates and fun evenings.

Michael Bell was a respected independent film producer, well on his way to the top. I met him at Sundance, shortly before he won his first award. Having once been an independent film producer myself, I knew the talent showcased at such events and made it a point to attend as many as my own hectic schedule would allow. Michael had been an unexpected treat. He was a nice enough guy—too nice, probably—and extremely talented in his field. We certainly had common interests, and conversation came easily.

Taking in his muscled back and broad shoulders as he sprawled across my bed, I had to admit that he was also quite handsome, with his salt and pepper hair and dimpled chin. But handsome older men are a dime a dozen in Los Angeles, even for middle-aged women such as me. All in all, Michael was turning out to be a decent guy. More than decent. Still, I found myself slightly annoyed that he was snoring in my bed.

Shaking the troubling thoughts out of my head, I stumbled across the dark room and flipped on the bathroom light, squinting in the sudden brightness, and peered at the face staring back at me from the mirrored medicine cabinet. I had a fleeting and not at all pleasant memory of my mother, not the one who had raised me, but the one who had birthed me and then abandoned me at the age of ten.

In the memory my mother is clothed in a tattered blue polyester housecoat, sitting at a scarred and pitted Formica table in a ramshackle cabin in the mountains of

Appalachia. She's swigging coffee and puffing on a cigarette, as she is in most of my memories. Her bleached hair is wild about her head and sleep lines scar her cheeks.

Jessie, she is saying, closing her eyes and delicately rubbing her temples with the ring fingers of both hands, cigarette held precariously between the first two fingers of her left, *git the baby. He needs changin'*.

My mother had been young when she left, not even thirty, but she'd lived a hard life that had aged her beyond her years. At the age of forty-seven, the resemblance I saw in the mirror was irrefutable. Strange how I'd never seen it before.

I leaned closer to inspect my face. I'd made a lifelong habit of avoiding bouts of introspection, but I found myself oddly curious about this sudden resemblance to my birth mother. I hadn't thought about Lindy in years, and it was somewhat shocking to see her image reflected back in the bathroom mirror at six o'clock on a Monday morning.

I tilted my head to the left in the light from above the mirror. In spite of the mark of years, mine wasn't a bad face; it was angular, the nose a little too sharp. Deep lines were just beginning around eyes that were green with specks of gold, the color highlighted under the glaring bathroom light.

Overall, it was a respectable face, some had even said a beautiful face; it just wasn't the one I wanted. This face belonged to someone else, someone in a dingy blue polyester housecoat sitting at a scarred and pitted table drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while a baby screamed in the background. I felt no connection to this face.

I didn't blame my mother for leaving. Lindy's husband, my stepfather Roy, had been an evil man. Drunk more often than sober, he had terrorized all of us, me, my mother and my half-siblings, keeping us isolated in a tiny little hunting cabin high in the mountains of West Virginia. No, I didn't blame my mother for leaving. I blamed my mother for leaving *me*.

You can fend for yourself, but the little ones cain't, she'd said. *Lenny Sue ain't but six and Leroy's just a baby. Besides, someone needs to look after your stepdaddy*. She had paused to spit-wash a spot of dirt from Leroy's face, creating one clean spot on the otherwise filthy infant.

Roy done raised you all these years, she'd said, rubbing the baby's face raw while he tried to squirm away. *I reckon you owe him that*. Then she was gone, dragging my half-siblings behind her as Lenny Sue reached towards me with her grimy little hand, her eyes never leaving my face. That was the last time I saw them, either my half-siblings or my mother. In the words of my mother, I reckoned I had paid him what I owed, and then some.

Lost in thought, I pulled my hair back from my face for a better look. Unlike my mother I kept my hair natural, the dark waves falling to my waist, tangled from sleep. In the harsh reflection of the lighted mirror I saw with dismay that the strands of gray noticeable at my temples seemed to have multiplied overnight. The vision of my mother's stiff, bleached hair flickered again in my memory. A cut, maybe, or a hat, or even a chador. But no dyes, highlights or bleaches. Period.

Impatient and uncomfortable with my wandering thoughts, I turned away from the mirror, bypassing the scale altogether (this was obviously not a good day for *that* exercise in torture) and dressed for my morning run.

An hour and a half later, fresh from the shower and dressed in a faded red flannel robe, I stood in front of the open refrigerator peering past day-old takeout Chinese food,

hoping for something quick and reasonably healthy to eat. I envied women who turned cooking into a form of art, but I'd accepted long ago that that would never be me. I ate because I had to; the style the food came in made little difference to me.

Michael was gone now, after having given me a perfunctory peck on the cheek. "Call me later," he'd said, "if you want to meet for dinner." I wouldn't call. I never did. Although Michael seemed intent on denying it, he was just one in a string of men that I found temporarily interesting. Reckless? Maybe, but safer for me than the alternative.

While he was nice and undoubtedly intelligent, I had no intention of committing to anything that might resemble a relationship with Michael. Relationships did not work for me. I wasn't sad about that fact, nor was I angry. I knew the blame was solely my own. I also knew that at my age, I was no longer willing to attempt to be someone I wasn't. It never worked, and it was misleading to whatever man I happened to be entertaining at the moment.

Finding a pint of relatively fresh strawberries in the refrigerator, I grabbed a fork and stepped out onto the balcony of my Los Angeles condominium. It was late fall, and my unit overlooked the private gardens of the Association. Oleanders swayed in the gentle breeze, their colorful blooms faded in the heavy smog of Los Angeles' morning air.

Traffic sounded in the distance, impatient horns blaring and an occasional squalling of tires. The temperature was cool, low sixties that early in the morning, and I pulled my faded flannel robe close around me. *Nothin' like flannel to beat the cold*, I heard echoing through my memories, and I smiled. Billy May.

At forty-seven, my life had been anything but easy. Indisputably, climbing the entertainment ladder in any part of the world would be difficult, but much more so in the entertainment center of the world. Yet I had done it. As a renowned producer of big screen historical dramas, I had a well-earned reputation as a hard-nosed perfectionist, a take-no-prisoners workaholic. Many of my colleagues considered me detached. Still others considered me cold. I, however, simply considered myself a survivor.

The product of a teenaged mother and an unknown father, the victim of horrendous abuse dished out regularly by my stepfather, I had finally found safety one stormy night in an ancient hunting cabin on top of Crutcher Mountain, just outside the tiny coal mining town of Cedar Hollow, West Virginia.

Since then, I had used the challenges of my past to build stepping stones to a future, and if that made me seem cold and callous, so be it. I had not only survived; I had succeeded. By all modern measures of success, anyway. I pulled my robe closer, burying my nose in the soft, cottony smell of flannel. *Jessie girl*. Billy May's voice echoed in my head, and the sorrowful tone disturbed me. *Bí comfórted, beag amháin*. Be comforted, little one, a remnant of her father's native language. I blinked away sudden tears, angry with myself.

Billy May Platte, the half-Irish, half-Cherokee mountain woman who had rescued me from a lifetime of abuse had died eight months ago, and I had yet to come to grips with her passing. Los Angeles was about as far as I could get from the memories of my childhood, both literally and figuratively, yet every glimpse of the Santa Monica Mountains reminded me of home, and the warm smell of flannel propelled me instantly into the arms of Billy May.

Billy Momma, I had called her. It was a torturous exercise, this inhalation of flannel, but I couldn't help myself. Since her death, I'd both craved her nearness and

pushed away her memory. My ex once told me, during one of his many moments of frustration, that I'm a woman composed solely of opposites. In that, he was right.

Standing on the balcony overlooking the garden, I set the pint of strawberries onto the patio table and swallowed against the lump in my throat. While the world I had created for myself was built on calculated indifference, my world with Billy May had been anything but. No genetic history had bound me to Billy May, yet she had been my mother, both in my heart and in her actions. The loss of her was still fresh and raw, sneaking up on me sometimes, summoned by me other times. Just as the sadness reached out to overwhelm me, the phone rang.

I entered the warmth of the condo, leaving the strawberries behind, and snatched the cell phone off the counter, impatient with the intrusion. Who could be calling this early in the day? I was enjoying a rare break in my usually hectic schedule after celebrating the release of my latest film, and I had hoped the frantic early morning phone calls regarding funding crises and wayward actors would cease, at least until the next film. The older I got, the more my work bored me, the outrageous antics of spoiled actors and actresses no longer titillating but simply vulgar.

Irritated, I glanced at the screen. A 304 number. I stared, frowning at the display; goose bumps pimples my arms. Cedar Hollow was calling.