

THE
MULLIGAN

TERRI TIFFANY

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

THE MULLIGAN

COPYRIGHT 2014 by TERRI E. TIFFANY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given away to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Harbourlight Books sail and mast logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2015

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-403-9

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-402-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my husband, Curt, who encouraged me to follow my dream and to Peggy Evans and Kelly Sheridan who cared enough to believe.

1

My twenty-two-year-old twin brother knows me better than anyone else. That's why he forces a smile when I enter the hospital room.

"It isn't your fault," he says. His voice cracks.

I want to run from my place near the door but I remain rooted, my feet frozen like two ice pops.

His broken and burned body is covered with a white hospital sheet. I can't see his legs, but the doctor told my parents this morning they'll never be the same. The beam that fell on him crushed too many bones. My lips quiver and my fingers twitch at my sides willing me to touch his arm. I edge closer. "I'm sorry, Robert."

"It isn't your fault." His hand is clammy but he grips mine with his. "I chose what I did."

I squeeze his hand, my time with him running short. Soon my mother will take her turn at his bedside in ICU.

His eyelids waver. I drop his hand and back out of the room where I meet my disheveled mother. She's still wearing her same sweatshirt and jeans from yesterday. The waiting room is empty except for her and Grandpa, who is snoring in a vinyl chair in the corner.

"Where's Dad?"

"Waiting to talk to you." She glances toward the hallway.

"Has he calmed down any?"

She raises her gaze to meet mine. Fresh tears form on her lids. I want to hug her, but I'll need all my remaining strength for my father. "Try to understand, Bobbi. Robert was his future."

"You are his future, Mom. He should know that."

She looks away, shoulders slumping. Sometimes I can be too blunt. By now I should know she won't ever go against him.

"Go inside," I say. "Robert's about ready to fall asleep."

My father is waiting for me next to the soda machine, a can gripped in his thickset hand. His wedding band rides between two rolls of flesh. A bandage covers the burn on his other hand. He snaps the can into the trash container. "What were you thinking?" His jaw barely moves as his accusation snarls past his lips.

"It was an accident, Dad. My studio was cold. I didn't mean to knock the heater over."

"Didn't mean to..."

He steps closer. I can smell the soda on his breath. "Then call the police. Call the fire department. Call the whole stinking town. But why did you have to send your brother in there?"

"I wasn't thinking. I was worried about my paintings."

"Your paintings? You almost killed Robert. Do you realize you've destroyed his golf career? He'll be lucky if he can use the bathroom by himself."

My chest tightens. A part of my mind reminds me I'm in the hospital. If I pass out or have a heart attack, I could end up in ICU. Maybe that's where I belong, instead of Robert. "I'm sorry. I really am. I'm going to make it up to him...to you."

His snort makes me jump.

"No one can make up for what happened. What? Do you think you can take a mulligan like in golf? This is real life, Bobbi. There are no free do-overs. Accident or not, you've destroyed your brother with your foolishness."

I know he wants to add "And me," but instead turns around and stalks down the hallway out of my sight.

~*~

My home isn't far from the hospital, but I take my time returning. I swing through a mini-mart to buy Robert a funny gift, hoping to give my folks time to arrive before me. My father is the last person I want to run into again tonight.

I can't stop yawning. No one has slept since the accident, except Grandpa, who falls asleep an hour after he wakes. As I pull into our driveway, lights from my parents' upstairs bedroom greet me. Grandpa's lights are off downstairs, and of course, Robert's bedroom is dark. Leaving him at the hospital was harder than anything I've ever done before. I feel as though I've been split in two.

I take off my shoes by the kitchen door. If I tiptoe, I might be able to get to my room without my mother coming in to talk to me. She's tried already too many times, making sure I'm OK. As I creep up the front stairs, voices hurl down to me.

I haven't heard my father this angry in a long time. Crouching on the third step from the landing, I listen as I did when a child, hoping I might glean an understanding about who my parents really are.

"He'll never golf again. His career is over before it started. I could have been in Florida with him next year if this hadn't happened. Now I'm stuck playing accountant to a bunch of people I couldn't care less about. I don't know how much longer I can take this life."

"Rick, calm down. Maybe he'll get better. We don't know."

"Better? Are you crazy? You heard the doctors. He'll be lucky to make anything of himself—and I know how that feels."

His anger reaches me, choking the wind from my lungs.

"You have made something of yourself. You are important to us. You're my husband and a good father. That should be enough."

I press against the wall—waiting. I will him to say what I need to hear—that we are enough. Instead, their bedroom door opens and he stomps down the hallway to Robert's room. I slide down two steps into the shadows watching. Waiting. Minutes later, I hear my mother's voice. It's filled with this pleading sound that sickens me.

"Leave them alone, please. He'll use them again."

"Not in my lifetime he won't. It's over. The dream is over."

I recognize the metallic sound. I can't help myself. I jump up and run to my brother's room where I find my father hauling Robert's clubs out of the closet. One by one, he takes each club and throws it to the hardwood floor, making both my mother and me jump.

"Stop it, Dad!" I scream. "Put them back. You're ruining them."

At the sound of my voice, he freezes midair, Robert's favorite driver gripped in his hand. His hair is in disarray and his eyes focus beyond us. I've never seen him like this. My mother grabs my arm and moves me back through the doorway. "Go to your room," she whispers. "Now."

I can't. I can't let him destroy my mother's heart because of me.

"Please," she says. She mouths the word again. The blood has left her lips.

"Listen to your mother." My father lowers the club but his face remains a mask of confusion. He stares at the floor, his head drooping on his neck.

It's then, staring down at the golf clubs, that I see the truth, how much of my father's life—our family life—was tied up in knowing that his son would achieve the thing he didn't. A chance at the pro circuit. And I know what I have to do.

"I'll check on Grandpa." I turn around, shutting the door on their grief. There is only one way I can help my father find himself again. Even if it means leaving home and doing something I never thought I would do.

I don't sleep that night. Not only because of Robert lying in a hospital bed but because I fear what lies ahead.

2

Two months later.

I twist the doorknob of my classroom for Golf Psychology. I can't believe I'm this late. Twenty pairs of eyes turn in my direction, making me want to run back to Pennsylvania. Why did I ever think my decision to come to Orlando made sense? I'll certainly be the worst golfer here.

Breathe. I cross the threshold at the same time I hear my name being called. Or should I say the name I've grown accustomed to hearing mispronounced for most of my life?

"Robert Lacy? Are you here?" The instructor stands only a few feet from me.

"It's Roberta, actually. I go by Bobbi. With an *I*." I pray my burning cheeks won't betray my discomfort, but I'm certain they will. All I want is to become invisible. And go home. It's the memory of my brother lying in bed that propels my feet deeper into my nightmare.

I sweep my gaze across the classroom. A few men in their mid-forties cluster toward the front of the room eating ham and egg sandwiches for a late breakfast. To my right, a group of recent high school graduates whisper to each other about some dumb thing they did the night before. And women...I search the classroom again. The admission rep told me women attend this

golf college. Maybe they do, but I don't see any in this class, and that knowledge sinks to the bottom of my stomach.

I spot a vacant seat at the end of the third row and rush to it. Once seated, I readjust the collar of my pea-green jacket made for much broader shoulders than mine. Could it possibly look any worse on me than it did this morning? *A requirement*, the brochure said. Requirement or not, the ridiculous coat makes me so hot I want to throw up. I'm in Florida, for goodness sake, not Alaska.

Stuffing my backpack beneath my seat, I shrink into the hard-backed chair. Why hadn't I risen earlier? Tomorrow I won't be the last one. I look up and offer my best smile to the instructor who has finished reading his register. He stands with his hands on his hips, and he's wearing an expression that says he'd prefer be anyplace in the world than teaching at Orlando Golf College. I empathize with him. With only a few hours' sleep behind me, it takes all my effort to listen to his instructions.

"We take attendance at eight. I expect everyone to be on time tomorrow or you can assume the door will be locked." He shoots me a pointed glare and turns toward his desk, giving me adequate time to finish my assessment of him. OK, he is good looking in that slightly-older man genre. Mr. Drew Hastings. Drew. His name rolls over my tongue, and then I catch myself before I whisper it aloud. It sounds like a character from one of my mother's soap operas.

My gaze travels from his sun-bleached hair to his tan oxford shoes, the exact brand my brother bought last year. They still sit on the floor of his closet in the original box, since walking is not in his immediate

future. Drew's red polo shirt stretches across his ample chest.

A jock, of course.

I won't ever fit in here. Not even with all the praying I'd done after I'd sent in my application. This situation reminds me of when I'd tried out for cheerleading in the tenth grade. A double flip? Right. I'd walked around hunched over for a week and signed up for the yearbook staff instead. Is earning my degree in Golf Management God's plan for my life? Why would I think it is? My mother wants me to come home. Robert points to Scripture about God's will for my life. Only Grandpa supports my decision to come here. But he isn't in his right mind half the time.

A sudden jolt to the back of my chair causes me to pull up straight. I peer over my shoulder. A guy a few years younger than me is bent over his desk intently listening to a game on his cell phone. His maddening tapping increases.

I take a deep breath. If I'm going to survive here, I can't be a wuss. I slap his desk and point to his foot; his size ten leaves my chair and finds a home on the floor in front of him.

"After class you can sign up in the hallway to play golf. First come, first served." Drew Hastings picks up a whiteboard marker and outlines the homework assignment for the next week. Golf Psychology. More like golf torture by the way the attention span of those nearest me wane. I scribble down the required page numbers and study Drew's face when he turns back toward the room. His eyes remind me of the sky over our back field on a June morning. I blink back tears when I think of home.

When class ends, I sling my backpack over my

shoulder and follow my classmates into the narrow hallway where everyone congregates around the bulletin board. I hadn't planned to play golf today, but I need the practice. Inching my way through the crowd proves useless, and I curse my height. Why aren't I as tall as my brother?

A wayward elbow nudges me in the side.

I rub the area and bite my lower lip. That's it. I drop my backpack to the floor and push forward, digging my fists into the backs of anyone in front of me. My actions cause only one jock to move aside and the others act like I'm a gnat on their necks.

"You need to use a little force or they'll walk all over you."

I turn to my left and look up. Drew (or should I call him Mr. Hastings?) stands next to me wearing a lopsided grin. A hint of cinnamon comes from his direction.

"I thought that's what I was doing." I shrug. "I wasn't planning on golfing today, anyway. I probably should take a lesson first."

"My lesson sign-up sheet is over there." He points toward the water fountain. Two or three blank sheets of copy paper hang in a neat line. "If you're fast, you might get in." Again, that smile. Is he flirting with me? I move as casually as I can and glance at the now almost-filled golf sheet.

"Are you any good?" I give him my best sizing-you-up look.

"PGA."

If he'd said he'd dabbled a little in high school it would have been enough. At least he has offered to teach me, and I haven't met any of the other instructors yet. Besides, I could fall into his eyes.

"You're on." I pull out my pen (one of the twenty my mother packed for me) and walk to the board. I scribble my name into the one o'clock slot. There. It's done. I have officially started my golf career.

The thought makes me want to bawl.

~*~

Drew comes over the slight incline and walks steadily toward me, the afternoon sun sending shots of golden hues through his hair. He twists the cap off a bottle of water and takes a long slug. "Are you ready?" His lips sink into a straight line.

I wipe the sweat dripping from my chin. He'd said we'd practice for a half hour. But his grim look says it will be less.

"Do you want me to hit a few?" I rest my driver at my feet and wait in the unflinching heat.

"Sure. Show me what you've got."

I adjust my wrists on the club and swing the driver the way I'd been taught. When my hips twist and I feel that sweet snap in my body, I watch with satisfaction as the ball races over two hundred yards.

Drew whistles behind me. "Not bad. How long have you been playing?"

"Does it show?"

"What kind of lessons have you taken?"

I study the turf beneath my feet as though it is growing right before my eyes. I look back at him, deciding I should be honest if I'm ever going to make it here. "I haven't taken any. I've only played with my brother. My dad, too."

His eyes widen. "Your brother, is he a pro?"

"He was going to be. My dad was."

“And?”

I can't tell him that my brother almost died saving my stupid paintings. So I don't. I look away.

“I take it you want to be as good as they are. You'll need to sign up for more lessons.”

He makes his pronouncement as though he's a dentist telling me I'll need braces because of my crooked teeth.

“I know I will. The question is, can you teach me? I need to be better than good.” I stretch my back to lengthen my five-foot-four frame.

Drew meets me with a stance of his own. “I'll see you tomorrow at the same time. Better practice on that downswing this afternoon.” He packs his clubs and hoists the bag onto his shoulder still wearing that reserved look.

“You won't be sorry,” I call to him as he turns away. I pump my fist in the air.

“I don't expect to be.” Drew turns back, catching my gesture of glee. It's then I see what I've been looking for since he arrived at the range—a flash of a smile in his eyes.

3

Finding my way back to my mobile home court in Winter Garden is as confusing as the time my mother tried to teach me to knit. My stomach growls and my eyelids barely stay open as I make a right turn and discover a grocery store in a plaza ahead. My new place is empty of food except for the snacks my mother sent with me.

I park and head to the entrance. After a few minutes of wandering, I stop in the bakery section and taste drool as freshly baked bread scent wafts toward me. We don't have stores like this back home. The selection overwhelms me, but finally I select a loaf of whole wheat marked half off, and then find the cereal aisle where I pick up some shredded wheat. The soup aisle is next, and soon my arms are full of tomato soup, crackers, and a half gallon of milk.

At checkout, I discover I'm short of cash. My credit card is lying back on my dresser with a stash of tissues I took out of my purse that morning. A groan escapes me as I catch the dubious look on the cashier's face. "I'm sorry." I dig deeper into my purse—hoping. An older gentleman behind me offers a few dollars but I shake my head fighting back tired tears. "Please take off the crackers and bread," I tell the clerk, my face heating with embarrassment.

It takes me a while to find my car since the late afternoon sun nearly blinds me. I pull back onto

Highway 50 toward home, Golden Acres, a community for the over-fifty crowd. How I find my way back, I'm not sure, but I park under the awning of the compact silver trailer in relief. I found the mobile home development online.

Actually my mother did. She'd pointed out the pictures of the swimming pool and lighted tennis courts as though I'd have all this free time to enjoy them. What would she think now if she saw their real condition? I will not be lying around any pool in the near future. Especially since this one hasn't been filled since the eighties. Nor will I be playing tennis in the weed-infested courts or walking the non-existent trails in the back.

My home-sweet-home unit sits next to a larger trailer covered with enough purple and red birdfeeders and wind chimes to decorate the entire state. It won't surprise me to find out the owner is a Red Hat Society member. The chimes thankfully lulled me to sleep last night when two acetaminophen pills didn't work.

But my rent is cheap and my student loan won't cover much more. I drop my head on my steering wheel, close my eyes, and let myself dream of the home where I spent my childhood—a two-story colonial with a wraparound porch that rests on a hundred acres. Lush wooded acres surround it. A stocked pond waits out back while the Susquehanna River meanders down the hill across the hard road from the wagon house.

When I turned sixteen my mother papered my upstairs bedroom in a federal blue floral pattern I chose. She updated the frilly curtains (she sewed herself) and bought a new matching throw for my bed. The best part of the room was the closet Dad fitted

with cabinets where I'd stored all my art supplies until he built the studio out back for me. In an impromptu party, we hauled all my easels and brushes and paper out there when he completed it. I loved my art studio, as simple as it was for as long as I had it. It served as my oasis, my hideaway, my place to dream.

Until the fire.

I reach for a tissue from the stash I keep in the glove box. Looks like I'd need to refill it already. Did I cry that much on the trip down? I still can't believe I caused my brother to get hurt. If only I hadn't screamed to him to save my work. I could have repainted everything.

I check my face in the mirror. A quick scan of the neighborhood assures me that no one will see my red eyes. Not even the older gentleman who rode his golf cart past my car three times last night. I carry in my purchases while leaving my clubs in the backseat for tomorrow. All I want to do is eat and take a hot shower to wash off this sticky sweat.

An hour later, I dig into my purse for my cell phone, noting at the same time that I need to look for a cheaper plan. This one is taking a huge chunk out of my budget, like everything else in my life. A bowl of sesame pretzels waits next to my elbow. My mother sent three bags and enough chips to bump me up another pants size. But then the soup didn't fill me like I'd hoped it would. I forgot how hungry I get when I golf. I place the call after chewing down another handful.

"Hello?"

Grandpa's greeting sends warmth shooting through me. The gruffness in his voice brings a smile to my face. At the ripe old age of eighty-five, he is our

family hero, the man with the golf legacy and the man I have looked up to since I was old enough to understand what a great feat it is to play the Masters. Even though I wasn't as enamored with golf as Robert was growing up, I loved to sit next to Grandpa and page through his photo albums, oohing with him about his trophies.

I raise my voice a notch to be sure he can hear me. "Grandpa? How are you doing?" Snapshots fill my head of him leaning back in his recliner next to the telephone stand with a glass of cold soda nearby. He refused to let that chair go when he moved to our home last year despite my mother's best tantrums. A proud man, proud of his accomplishments and how he lived life the way he chose, he never asked for any help. He seemed to shrink a little the day we came to pack up his belongings to bring him to the farm he'd given my parents when my mother married my father.

But life caught up with Grandpa, and though in his mind he thinks he needs no one, he does. Black and blue shapes tattoo his legs from frequent falls because he refuses to use a walker or a cane. He'd rather die than resort to those "old-man appliances."

"Is this Bobbi-girl? When will you be home, darlin'?"

"Not for a while, Grandpa. Maybe at the end of August in time for some sweet corn. Will you smoke it for me?" His memory is failing by threads each time I talk with him. Though my mother denies what is slowly happening to her father, I can't. I want to tell her that Grandpa is slipping and he'll always be her hero.

But life changes us. If I speak my heart, will it destroy what little strength is left in hers? My mother

depends on her father more than a woman her age should, but what choice does she have? I'm not blind to my father's ways. He's not always been here for our family. But when Robert began to golf with him, I saw a glimpse of the man my mother said she fell in love with.

I clear my throat. "You know how much I love your corn."

"Oh yes, my corn. And how about that golf game yesterday?"

"I didn't get to see it, Grandpa. I was driving."

Will he lose all memory before I have the opportunity to make him proud? Will I have enough time to go on tour while he still remembers my name?

"What a shame you missed it. Here's your mother." I picture my mother dressed in her stretch-waist polyester pants, baggy sweatshirt embroidered with red kittens, her tight perm (leftover from the 80s) and her makeup free face. She comes on the line sounding out of breath.

"We miss you, honey. How is it there? Did your first day go all right? Bobbi, I wish you'd change your mind and pack up and come home. You aren't to blame. Don't give up your own dreams."

I grip the phone tighter and lift my bare feet onto the only other piece of furniture in the living room—a stuffed chair that looks like the dogs have taken a liking to it. I trace the muddy stain on the bottom cushion with my big toe. At least I haven't found bugs like I did in the kitchen sink and cupboards. Tomorrow I'll buy insect spray and air freshener for the horrible musty odor that struck me in the face when I came inside.

I ignore my mother's plea—one I've heard over

and over since my decision.

"I took a lesson today. Have another tomorrow and I stopped at a grocery store for food for supper. You'd love the bakery section. All kinds of bread. I miss all of you. How's Robert?" I swallow hard. It's expected I include him in my conversations though talking with him makes me cry every time.

A long sigh trails into my ear. "He misses you."

"Tell him I miss him, too."

"Why don't you tell him? Wait, I'll take the phone to him."

My heart thuds louder.

I'm sure she rushes toward the front of the house—once the good room—now having been transformed via a hospital bed and a three-point commode. He'll be lying with his open laptop next to him and a stack of golf books piled on his nightstand. Of course, his Bible will be there, too, marked up in his color-coded fashion.

How can I end this call in a hurry?

"Hey, sis, how's it going down there?" His voice is deep and familiar. He sounds pleased I've taken the time to include him in my call.

"I'm good. Really good, but a little tired. I had my first classes today."

Silence.

"Are you there, Robert?"

"I was thinking about what you said before you left. How you plan to be the best female golfer ever. Are you sorry yet you're doing this?"

My brother has this way with words. Direct. To the point. Not always what I want to hear and certainly not tonight when I'm bone-tired and trying to survive on rocky emotions. I love him with all my heart, but he