

REUNION *at* CRANE LAKE

AN ACCIDENT STOLE HER FIANCÉ'S MEMORY.
HER SISTER STOLE THEIR FUTURE.
NOW IT'S HER TURN TO
FORGET...AND FORGIVE.

ROBIN BAYNE

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Dedication

This story is dedicated to my wonderful husband Nelson, who first took me to the lovely inn I used as inspiration for this book's setting. "The Lamb and Lion Inn," in Barnstable, MA, is a tourist's dream.

What People are Saying

Cole and Tia were terrific characters who never tiptoed into melodrama. While not a suspense, there is enough mystery hinted at throughout to keep readers turning the pages. 4 Stars ~ RT Book Reviews

Ms. Bayne draws the reader subtly into the lives and emotions of her interesting and sympathetic characters and makes us open our hearts to their problems. She pulls us in and doesn't let go until we've read the last page. Good job, Ms. Bayne! ~ Edna Curry for In the Library

...an engrossing story about love between two people and how hard it is to overcome betrayal. Tia is trying to forget the betrayal of Colt and her sister in order to make the inn what she wants. Colt has feelings of guilt because of his betrayal of Tia with her sister. They both have to come to terms with the past and then let it go. This is a well-written plot and will easily hold the interest of the reader. ~ Hattie Boyd, Scribesworld Reviews

1

Colton Reece propped his weathered boot on the gray boulder marking the driveway. This was the place. He shut his eyes, feeling the warm breeze flick the ends of his hair, and drew a breath deep enough to drag in the smell of the flowers growing around the rock, whatever they were called. It was just as his grandmother had told him. He'd been here before.

He looked around, lowering his gaze to the uncut lawn surrounding the inn. An uneven carpet, the bald, earthy patches emphasized why he was here. This grass could be brought back with a little care. This was land he needed to own, land that needed him.

It felt like home.

It *had* been home.

And thanks to God's grace, now he could remember.

Eyeing the auction sign swaying with the wind, Colt straightened, stretching. Getting this place back in shape wouldn't be easy, but the lack of prospective bidders standing on the lawn was a good sign so far. Turning them away wouldn't be pleasant, but there was no need for an auction now that he was back.

To think he'd nearly missed today, nearly let the place slip from him, to go to the highest bidder with a cold cash deposit. Colt rubbed his jaw, his fingers pushing his taut cheeks in circles, striving to ease the tension. He needed to walk.

Circling the property, he took note of the

outbuildings that needed repair. He could manage most of it himself. The house looked sturdy, although the white wooden planks covering the wings of the sprawling rancher badly needed paint. Lining the back and sides of the house was a wooden deck in need of bracing and refinishing.

He couldn't see the pool, but knew it was in the center of the wings, surrounded by the house itself, and Colt didn't have a key. Too bad. Being in possession of the keys might have helped him call the auction to a halt.

Hidden behind the house sat the lake, and Colt stiffened at the sight of the calm, glassy water. Not that he'd forgotten about it. He never would. The lake still gave him a creepy feeling, despite the eighty-degree temperature of the June morning.

Without boats, rafts, or swimmers taking advantage of its cold depths, the lake looked like nothing more than a pond. Even the pier seemed rickety, splintered, and uncared for as it jutted from the shore. It wouldn't support the weight of a small child in that condition or keep a small boat steady.

But that wasn't Colt's fault.

Shaking off the icy hand that pinched the corner of his mind, he put the lake behind him and circled around the inn.

By the road and circular driveway, Colt examined the elaborate, sculpted sign that announced the inn's unique name: The Crane and Cardinal Inn. An artist's rendition graced the top of the post, a large crane that had originally cradled a now missing red bird created from something like brass and pink marble.

He waited by the sign, leaning, nodding to the auctioneer arriving in a dark sedan. Colt had met him a

few days prior, asking the man a multitude of questions about the auction process, about what would happen should he decide to claim his heritage as Gran had wanted. He'd asked about canceling the auction, making sure the real estate guru understood he'd be paid either way. John Berger had frowned and asked for proof that Colt had regained his faculties.

As if he'd lost his mind instead of his memory.

The short man emerged from the car and the agent slam the door so hard his one strand of slicked hair slid across his huge forehead. He clutched papers in one hand.

"Mr. Berger," Colt said, approaching the driveway. "I need to speak with you."

Two more cars entered the drive, slowing to a stop behind the sedan. Colt swiped a hand across his mouth, tasting metal and dirty wood he must have picked up from the inn's flaking sign. More cars meant more bidders to turn away. Once he owned the place, he'd put up a new, tasteful sign. Maybe it would say "Reece's Retreat." He smiled at the corny idea.

"You look happy, Mr. Reece," John Berger said. "Can I assume you've decided to keep the place, as your grandmother requested?" Two car doors closed, and several people in suits descended on the property.

Colt watched from the corner of his eye as two older men and a redhead in a short skirt approached. They looked solemn. Oh, great. Just perfect. "Yes, I'm keeping it."

Mr. Berger looked skeptical, and tilted his head. "You realize, of course, you'll need to come up with the back taxes, the transfer taxes, the principal, interest, and late fees on the missed mortgage payments, and—"

"And the inheritance taxes, yes, I am aware." Colt

sighed, rubbing his jaw again. Stress always lurked in his facial muscles. Gran always said he'd get wrinkles early on. He was sure Gran hadn't been aware of how much she owed. She probably never dreamed how much money it would take for her grandson to keep the inn. But he could probably get a loan. *Maybe.*

"Well, in that case, I'll inform the others that the sale has been postponed." Berger shoved a stack of papers into his briefcase, his face reddening in agitation.

Colt straightened his shoulders, wanting to intimidate the man with his size. "Postponed? Don't you mean canceled?"

Berger looked up, met Colt's gaze, and sighed. "Only after the finances have been settled on your end. Sorry, Colton. I know this will be tough."

"Selling your childhood home must be very difficult," a female voice added from behind him. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "A lot of things in life are hard to accept."

The skin on his neck prickled, and not from his untrimmed hair. He knew that voice. At least, he knew it now. Turning, he eyed the woman, taking in her stylish black suit with the slim skirt and sensible flats. Her long, reddish-brown hair was pulled into a ponytail, hooked into one of those clamp things women used. She returned her attention to Berger.

Snorting softly under his breath, Colt moved back and leaned against the sign, grasping the pole for support this time, feeling it give slightly with his weight. Under his palm, splintered flecks of paint scuffed his skin, yet his gaze never wandered from the woman. How could she be here now? Why? Was it some sort of sick revenge? Had he sinned so much?

Must have been the sun getting stronger, for Colt felt himself start to sweat when Berger and the woman moved closer to him, still talking steadily in whispers.

The other men had already piled back into their car and were pulling out onto the narrow, country road.

"I think we have a solution, here, Mr. Reece, if you're willing to listen with an open mind." Berger took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and swiped his mile-wide forehead.

Open mind? Colt's gut clenched, but he waited, listening to whatever she had to say. Whatever they had to say.

"Miss Francis has an interesting proposal for you."

He met her gaze then, staring into her intense, ebony eyes. They looked almost Asian to him, narrow at the edges. He used to love those eyes, kissed the eyelids all the time. And he remembered doing it. But that was an awfully long time ago.

When no one spoke, Colt crossed his arms. "Well?"

Berger cleared his throat. "Miss Francis, would you like to explain your offer?"

Watching her, Colt couldn't help but remember another time, when she'd stood by him, offering her home for his rehab time. She'd wanted to stand by him when he had no idea who she was. She'd looked like this then, her dark eyes focused on his, one hand pushing her hair away from her face as she told the discharge nurse she'd see him home.

"Well?" he asked, when no words came.

"Well," she said, loosely crossing her arms and rubbing them with her hands, "I'd like to put up the money you need to take ownership of the inn, and then

I'd like to be your partner."

Partner? Colt felt an invisible fist in his gut, but he shrugged, pretending she wasn't standing there, watching him. He turned to Berger. "Why would she do that?"

"Because I want to be half-owner." She spoke again, as if he'd not addressed the question to someone else. "I also have the money to help with the renovations, along with some willing elbow power." With that she slipped out of her jacket, revealing a prim and proper sleeveless white blouse and well-toned arms.

Colt watched her watching him. He could remember when her gaze had been filled with warmth for him. She seemed to be breathing a little more rapidly now that her agenda was on the table.

"My mother was just as much a part of this place as your father and grandmother," she went on, talking too quickly. "And I have the money your family paid her to buy out the partnership."

He felt queasy. "And now you want back in." How awkward would this setup be? Colt turned to Berger and tilted his head at the woman. "Does she know how much money we're talking...and does she have it?"

Berger nodded once, firmly. "I'll leave you two to discuss things. Call me." Halfway to his car, he turned to Colt. "If you can get past the, um, personal issues, I'm sure you'll see that this is the best solution all around." He slid into his real-estate-agent car and left.

Colt was left standing face-to-face with the woman he'd once forgotten.

~*~

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. His voice sounded gruff.

Tia Francis had waited to hear his voice, waited for words from Colt for many years-but not these particular words. She straightened so her head came level with his shoulders--the ones with the big chip on them.

“Doing what? Saving your butt?” She regretted her choice of words immediately. If Colt had retained any of his old personality, she’d need to fight to maintain control of the situation. Right now, the only control she held came from having money.

His eyes narrowed, and he moved his hands to his pockets. He swore softly. “Tia, can we try this again?” Shifting his weight, he relaxed his stance. “It’s nice to see you. You look great.”

“So do you. And I didn’t really expect you to be glad to see me.”

“Maybe I’m just stunned to find out you want to get involved again.”

She raised an eyebrow, or tried to, at his comment.

“With this place, I mean. You know anything else is impossible,” he added.

He seemed slightly unnerved, and Tia smiled at the thought. She knew she could do this without falling under his spell again. Eight years had passed and she’d changed. A lot.

But when he returned the smile and little crinkles she’d never seen before lined his mouth and eyes, her heart began pattering, echoing all the way to her toes. She couldn’t believe how good he looked with longer hair. Did he remember his own preference to have his

dark locks cut short? Tia sighed. Maybe he did need someone. If she'd stuck a metal spatula in a socket she couldn't have felt a stronger jolt.

"I told you why I'm back," she went on, rumpling her jacket in her hands. "I want to rebuild my family's side of the business. For starters, I want to revise the menus for guests and for banquets. Eventually, I'd like to hold receptions here and large parties. To get started, I have a great new recipe for Filet Fiorentina." That had always been his favorite meal.

"You can cook?" His eyes, a deeper gray than she remembered, widened.

She sighed again, louder. "Why do you think I went to the Culinary Institute? Don't you remember-?" She broke off, snapping her lips shut, but it was too late.

Pain blurred his features, but only for a second before he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"Sorry," Tia said, the word harsher than she intended. To escape his scrutiny she looked toward the house. "Shall we go in and see what kind of mess awaits us?"

His head moved slightly, which she took as agreement.

A few paces from the arched front entrance, Colt grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. "Are you sure you want this? You would be working with me on a daily basis. It might not be so great for you." His jaw tensed as he waited for her answer.

Tia swallowed, noticing not only his face but the width of his shoulders, the sculpting of muscles under the faded blue shirt. She'd forgotten how big he was. When she managed to drag her gaze up to meet his, she shook his hand from her arm. So what if her pulse

had gone from zero to sixty in about two seconds when he'd touched her? She was here for the inn, and for herself. Not for Colton Reece. Tilting her chin up, she smiled, willing her voice to be steady. "If we do this, it will definitely be on a daily basis. I'm moving in."

He stared at her for several seconds before breaking into a grin.

Tia didn't know what to make of that. She unlocked the wide, green painted wood door.

They moved from room to room, checking the condition of the guest rooms and innkeeper's quarters. Tia was relieved that the only problems appeared to be mouse droppings and a coating of dust, and the inn's style had been preserved through the years she'd been away. Each room was unique, actually a mini-suite with its own floor plan and decor. Touching a grimy light switch, Tia smiled, recalled playing with it as a child, flipping it up and down at whim.

She wondered what memories Colt had.

Of course, she told herself, she really didn't care. She was here for a lot of reasons, but he wasn't one of them. He was just another piece of ancient furniture she'd have to work around like the old velvet settee in the parlor. Never mind that the settee appealed to her in a garish, art-deco sort of way. Some things were better left alone.

"This doesn't look as bad as I'd imagined," she said as they ended their tour in the main kitchen. The room smelled of must and something resembling sawdust.

"It's only been nine months since Gran's death," Colt said, turning the hot and cold faucets on. Letting the tap run, he passed his large fingers under the stream. A groan filtered from the old pipes, but the

water ran clean. “The buildings out back are in the worst shape. Since Dad left, no one has cared for them.”

Tia knew Mr. Reece had been gone for several years, ever since her mother had married another man and left the inn. Running her hand across the ceramic tile counter, she pictured herself as a child, with her sister, being lifted up to watch their mother working on a huge meal for the guests. She could almost taste the biscuits they had always made from scratch, could almost see the flecks of flour sprinkled across her little sister’s nose. Her chest tightened at the memory. She missed her mother, and her sister.

“So, how does this place stack up against the fancy ones I presume you’re used to?” Colt’s voice suddenly turned cold.

Looking up from where she crouched by a cabinet door, Tia addressed only the question, ignoring the temperature change. “It will be perfect. I just need to give it a good cleaning. A really good one.” She stood and looked out at the rectangular center of the inn, an in-ground pool surrounded by cement covered with round picnic tables and the leaning skeletons of sun umbrellas. A stone barbecue pit hugged one corner, another spot to provoke Tia’s memories. Her father had made the worst hotdogs—

“Tia?”

Grinning, she turned to Colt. “Sorry, I was daydreaming. This place just...” She bit back the words. *Brings back memories.* “Just drips with possibilities! You know? We can make this inn a great place to stay, get it listed on vacation websites.” She tapped the windowsill with her nails. “We’ll need our own site.”

He barked out a laugh. “Great. You think big. I’m

heading back to town for supplies." He shut off the faucets. "I guess we'll need to meet with the bank tomorrow to settle the finances? That is, if you don't change your mind overnight."

Tia watched him from the corner of her eye as she searched the remaining cupboards. No way could she afford to change her mind.

Colt had found a loose floorboard and was determined to stomp it into place with his boot. Viciously. It was almost as if he wanted to scare her off. He might try to run her out with his attitude, but she was the wronged party here. Not him. He should make the effort to get along with her, all things considered.

"I won't change my mind." She had strength now that she hadn't before.

Colt straightened, giving her one of those full-body all-over, up-and-down looks.

She waited, letting him look, feeling a trail of warmth wherever his gaze lingered. Even while her brain screamed at her to turn away, ignore him and this intimidation tactic, her body tensed, all the while waiting for a caustic remark. Who knew what he might say? And who cared if he liked what he saw? His preference in women had been decided years ago.

Nothing came. Just a grunt he made to punctuate the end of his perusal, followed by an empty feeling in Tia's heart when he stalked toward the door. The same stained glass, embedded high in the dark wood door, gleamed with the evening sunlight.

Colt paused and his brow furrowed as he seemed to fixate on it.

Tia wondered what deep memories it evoked.

Finally he turned to her, one hand on the doorknob. "You want pizza when I come back?"

She nodded, and he left her there, obviously surprised at the question.

~*~

Colt threw his truck into gear and backed out onto the road, anxious to put some distance between him and Tia Francis. He was not a wimp; he could control most situations, and here he was flip-flopping like a beached fish. He'd never tried to contact her once he'd remembered. For her sake. He knew he couldn't live and work with Tia. Not after all that had happened.

He gripped the wheel, knuckles whitening, and the truck slid around a curve in the road. The inn needed work—and Colt needed Tia's money to do it right. That would have to be the sole reason for their partnership. It would be a business relationship, nothing more. Nothing he couldn't handle. Colt slowed to a stop at the warning light ahead.

He could keep his distance from Tia. He had to, despite the fact that when his memory had returned, so had his feelings for her.

A car honking snagged his attention, and Colt saw the light was green.

~*~

Tia situated herself and her laptop in her favorite guest room. It was the cleanest, and she'd always loved the little foyer right inside the hall door, which led into the large room with sofa, fireplace, and four-poster bed. The decor was charmingly old-fashioned, with antique artwork and needlepoint touches. The room also had a glass-topped table with cafe chairs, and

there she set up her computer and hooked into the phone line. Luckily, Mr. Berger had made sure the utilities were on.

After sending e-mail messages to her suppliers, she outlined her next few weeks of work in her calendar program. Most of it involved cleaning the guest rooms, followed by shopping or online ordering of fresh touches, including guest towels, shapely bottles of massage oils, and a variety of candles. She wanted her guests to feel pampered. Years ago, Colt's father had offered a special package to writers who wanted to spend a week or more "away from it all," and she hoped to do the same.

She didn't hear Colt return, but smelled the pepperoni from her room. The aroma, tinged with garlic, was one of her favorites, and she closed her computer lid and followed her nose. She found Colt in the kitchen, rifling through drawers.

"Smells great," she said, moving to stand next to him. "What are you looking for?"

"Knife. Or pizza cutter, whatever."

Tia produced a steak knife from a drawer she'd checked out earlier, and they re-cut the pie into manageable slices. The gooey mozzarella dripped over her fingers as she carried her plate, by its edge, to the main dining table.

"Thank you for bringing food," she said between bites. Colt watched her from the opposite end of the table.

"I got wine, too," he said, and left the room. Moments later he returned with a bottle of Merlot, a brand Tia recognized, and two glasses still wet from rinsing.

"I'm impressed. Nice wine, but I don't drink

anymore.”

He shrugged, working a corkscrew into the bottle’s neck. “I’ve learned a bit about it.”

From Cami, she thought, knowing without him saying it. His girlfriend had taught him about wine, because when Tia knew Colt, his beverage of choice had been beer. Her face warmed at the thought, while her mind knew she shouldn’t be jealous. That relationship was clearly over now. She was the one here with Colt, sharing a meal, staying in the same house, making plans for the future.

She sat straighter, reminding herself that this was clearly a business relationship. She had to remember that, despite the way her nerves jangled every time she was near him. He had chosen someone else to care for him after the accident, someone else to care for, regardless of the fact he was no longer with that person. She remembered this as he opened the wine and poured himself a glass, the fluid splashing into one of the crystal goblets he’d found. He got her water.

They ate in silence after he said a quick prayer.

Outside an owl hooted occasionally, and Tia began running her finger around the rim of her water glass, creating a hum, just to break the feeling of isolation. “Too bad we don’t have a CD player. I’ll bring one from home.”

Colt nodded, reaching for another slice of pizza. “Good idea.” And the silence resumed. He didn’t ask when she’d head home or when she planned to return.

Licking the last speck of bitter oregano from her fingers, Tia felt bold, either from the setting or from the need to know. She wasn’t sure which. If they would be working together, there were things she had to know. “When did you start to remember?”

His hand froze en route to his mouth, but then Colt set aside his pizza. He stared at her across the table, and Tia felt his hesitation and saw his forehead wrinkle. He wiped his hands on a paper towel.

She waited. Would he answer?

"I guess it was January or so. Right after Gran died." He rubbed the paper towel across his face. "I felt this stab of pain in my gut, and suddenly I remembered that I'd loved her all my life and that she'd helped raise me. And then I walked through this place, dazed, and everywhere I looked was another memory suddenly shooting off like a firecracker. A slew of them that day, some the next, some later. Even now I still glean an old memory here and there."

Tia watched his face as the little vein she remembered emerged from his temple. His face was leaner now, the cheekbones more pronounced than she remembered. Maybe the longer hair just gave that appearance, or maybe the stress caused it.

"My head pounded that first day. I mean, it pounded. It took months for my brain to sort it all out. The worst came after Cami left. It was tough then." He took a breath and rubbed his eyes. "Really tough. I wasn't sure what was real anymore. What was a memory. What to call the memories I had from when I didn't have a memory."

Tia clutched her glass, feeling the smile wobbling on her face. She knew his last comment had to hurt, considering those memories were of another woman. What could she say to that? She tapped her nails on the crystal. "I can't believe I got you to say all that."

"You always did bring out the long-winded part of me."

"Really?" Tia lifted her glass to him. "Then, cheers