

Leaving her is his worst regret. Returning to her is his only hope.

DEBORAH PIERSON DILL

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- BRENDA, THE ROMANCE STUDIO
ON PERFECT SHELTER

Return to Me

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Deborah Pierson Dill

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Return to Me

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Books by Deborah Pierson Dill

Perfect Shelter

Return to Me

Moving On (Coming Soon)

Dedication

To the Lord, who placed the heart's desire within me.
And to the family who consistently encouraged me to
pursue it.

1

The buzzards circling overhead should have been her first clue.

Actually, her stupid car's air conditioner—busted again on this, the eleventh day in a row of triple digit heat index—should have been her *first* clue. But the buzzards circling overhead, waiting for something to drop dead from heat stroke, should have been the clearest clue that this day would soon go completely down in flames.

Audrey Rhodes clutched her purse, raising it to her chest like a shield, and stood blinking, frozen despite the heat in the middle of the Prickly Pear Café, face to face with the boy who had thoroughly broken her heart ten years ago. Since that time she had referred to him only as, “what's-his-name.” But not because she couldn't remember his real name. Try as she might, she would never forget him.

The years hadn't changed him, except to add a definitive manliness to his looks and generally improve on what Audrey already considered perfection. He had the same head full of wavy, dark blond hair; the same green eyes that hinted how he could show a girl the time of her life; the same dimpled, easy smile; the same lean, muscular build.

Now he stood three feet away, directing that smile at her, like he just knew he could still make her toes

curl if she'd let him. Her heart began to skip and palpitate, and her stomach went all twisty inside like it hadn't done since she'd been a girl. But even as every nerve screamed for her to cross the distance between them and slap him, she felt a slow smile emerge.

Then he opened his mouth to speak.

"Hi, Audrey. Remember me? Brent Thomason?"

That did it!

Every shred of sentimentality vanished. Audrey turned and slapped a twenty-dollar bill down, the sound of her palm hitting the counter underscoring the hush that had fallen all around. The whispering voices of former classmates bringing lunch companions up to speed on the back-story may have been real or imagined. But either way, in the span of about twenty seconds, he managed to make her a public spectacle yet again.

Audrey snatched her change from the confused looking teenaged girl behind the counter and grabbed the sack full of burgers she'd come for. Then she turned around to face him again.

How dare he! How could she have, even for one second, forgotten the insensitivity, the callousness of this...this...boy? The audacity of him, reintroducing himself like that! As if what had gone on between them had been so inconsequential that she might not even remember him.

"Brent." She ground out his name and pushed past him coldly.

"Audrey, wait."

She gritted her teeth and turned back to see him throw his check and a few bills on the counter, then thrust his hand out impatiently for his change while the poor cashier rang him up as fast as she could. She

knew the value of a dollar as well as anyone, but that bit of action only served to irritate her further. Let him chase her if he wanted to talk.

“Audrey, wait!”

She’d made it halfway across the sizzling asphalt parking lot before she heard him call. She yanked the car door open and tossed her purse and the burgers across to the passenger seat as he caught up.

“Audrey...” He sounded incredulous. Like he couldn’t believe she wouldn’t weep for joy and throw herself into his arms at this chance encounter. “That’s it?”

Audrey stopped and turned to face him. Was that actually confusion registered on his face? “Well, Brent, let’s see. I could say how good it is to see you. But, you know, it’s really not. I guess I could ask how you’ve been. Except that I don’t care. What else is there?”

“Well, there’s ‘hello,’ for one. Or, ‘what brings you back to town?’ And I get the distinct impression that maybe you *do* care a little.”

What right did he have to be so contentious? After the way he’d treated her...

Audrey narrowed her eyes and glared at him for a brief moment, then got into the car and slammed the door, remembering too late that the action wouldn’t put an end to their conversation because she’d left the windows down.

“Come on, Audrey—”

“OK, how about this? You never called.”

He gave his head a perplexed shake. “What?”

“I believe your exact words were, ‘I’ll call you tomorrow. *I promise.*’”

Brent blinked at her. Clearly, this wasn’t the line of conversation he’d hoped for.

“Audrey, I’m sorry...I just didn’t--”

“You know what? Never mind. I really don’t want to hear your pretend apology. It’s about ten years too late, anyway.”

Brent placed both his hands on the car door, preventing her from putting up the window. But she didn’t even try. Earlier she’d nearly branded herself with the seatbelt buckle. The car door had to burn like the handle of a hot iron skillet. A silent minute ticked by as she waited for him to move.

“Sure is hot out today,” he said at last, as a little bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

Audrey froze, her hand poised to turn the key in the ignition and steer the car away, not bothering to care if she ran over his foot in the process. Then she felt it; the smile that emerged slowly, without her consent. She tried to subdue it. It started somewhere inside, in response to what, she couldn’t even say. Anger boiled right up to the surface when she looked at him. Still, there he stood with that unpretentious, irresistible smile, thoroughly honest about and unapologetic for the kind of guy he was. In her wildest dreams she never thought she could feel glad to see him again. But some part of her did.

She sighed. “Yes, it is.” Then she turned the key, started the car, and put it in gear.

“Maybe I’ll see you around?” He sounded hopeful.

Audrey shook her head. “Not if I can help it.”

Brent stood in the middle of the parking lot watching Audrey’s retreating car as the heat radiating

from the asphalt all but singed the hair off his arms. She was mad at him. Livid might more adequately describe it. All because he hadn't called?

He couldn't deny his guilt. Ten years ago he *had* promised to call. In fact, he very clearly remembered promising her much more than that. If she was only mad because he hadn't called...well his guilt extended far beyond that, and he knew better than to think her anger only extended to that particular injury.

Brent pushed a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. The way he'd treated her shamed him. He had used her, then cast her off like...what? He couldn't think of anything for which he would show so little regard now. And the heat made it nearly impossible to think straight about anything. And those buzzards circling overhead couldn't possibly be a good sign.

The air conditioning in his new pickup provided little relief this afternoon, but he adjusted the vents anyway, trying to direct as much cool air as possible his way. He could remember some hot summers here. But he didn't remember a time when so many fields had lain dead and ruined from heat and drought. Hundreds of acres had suffered the ravages of wildfires, leaving entire pastures and long stretches of right of way along the highway charred black. He couldn't remember the summers taking such a toll on the environment. But he had a different perspective now.

On the drive back here from College Station, he passed a few farms with irrigation systems running. But even so, their crops were withering. Livestock herds in fields along the way looked smaller than they should, and what cattle and goats did graze appeared

too lean as they foraged for whatever sustenance they could gather from dying land. And that wasn't the only problem, or even the biggest. Every stock tank he noticed had been nearly dry if not completely so. This could be a devastating summer.

Brent adjusted the air vents again in a vain attempt to direct more cold air his way, and slowed to a stop for the first of two major intersections in town. He glanced around at the strangely foreign, yet familiar surroundings. A new convenience store stood proudly on one corner, just across from an old one that sagged, abandoned like so many other buildings that, to his knowledge, hadn't been occupied in decades. No, not much had changed. Except his perspective.

Blithe Settlement was a hot, central Texas town—not quite far enough south to be considered part of the hill country, not far enough east to completely escape the West Texas dust. Right in the middle, it sat, where two or three terrains blended on their way to becoming something else. Three hours or more away from every major city in the state. The middle of nowhere.

Still, it felt good to be home.

He turned off the highway and into the parking lot of an unassuming brown brick building. It was flanked by a caliche parking lot and an array of animal pens and stalls which filled the space between the building and a good sized pole barn. The Rhodes Veterinary Clinic.

His one o'clock appointment with Lyndon Rhodes awaited him.

Audrey was pretty mad now. Brent could only pity the poor soul chosen to give her the news that he'd come home to stay, and would most likely be working for her father.

Audrey dropped her purse and the sack of burgers on her desk, then turned the dial of the oscillating fan on top of the filing cabinet as high as it would go. She sank into the chair and eyed the sack of burgers, not really hungry anymore. Then she twisted her hair and tried to hold it up off her neck for a moment.

She opened the top desk drawer and shuffled through it looking for a hair clip. There had to be one somewhere. An irritated grumble slipped from her throat as she pushed the contents of the drawer around. Last time she'd opened this drawer there had been two clips right there. But now they were gone. It figured.

What's the point? She let her thick hair fall back down.

Cooling off wouldn't make her feel any better now. It was a shame, too, because Audrey had just recently begun to feel the pieces of her life falling back into place again, like things had finally taken a turn for the better.

Unfortunately, it only took the sight of Brent Thomason to drag her right back down again. The memory of how stupid and weak she was, and probably always would be, nearly crushed the notion that she would ever have a reasonable amount of control over anything.

She couldn't blame Brent, really. She'd known what kind of boy he was all those years ago. Being mad at him for how he treated her was like getting mad at your cat after it caught and killed your pet hamster when you'd been the one who left the cage open.

Truthfully, she was angrier for succumbing to the stupid teenage fantasy that *she* would somehow be different to him—that her love could change him. Brent had only done what he always did. Unfortunately, her tragic taste in men had begun with him and continued on, just as tragically, once he'd gone. Audrey sighed and laid her head on the cool veneer surface of her desk.

"What happened to you?"

Audrey turned her head without raising it, getting a sideways view of Carlene Fletcher, who leaned against her office doorjamb, arms folded across her chest. Carlene came to dig around in the bag on Audrey's desk, looking for her hamburger.

"I ran into Brent Thomason at the Prickly Pear just now," Audrey said.

"Old what's-his-name? What's he doin' back in town?"

"I don't know."

Carlene stopped digging and looked up at Audrey, a slow smile spreading across her face. Then she pulled a burger out of the sack, opened it, and began picking at it.

"Brent Thomason..." Carlene's tone changed when she said his name. Suddenly she sounded all dreamy and contemplative.

Audrey finally raised her head.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Carlene made it back to the present. She perched on the corner of Audrey's desk, one leg crossed over the other with a black, strappy sling back dangling from her toes. "Where's he been? What's he been up to? How's he doing?"

Audrey shrugged and reached for her own burger.

“Did you talk to him at all?”

“Not any more than I had to.”

Carlene just looked at her as if she'd gone completely stupid. Then realization lit her face. “Oh, that's right,” she drawled. “You were the last in the Brent Thomason Trail of Tears. I guess *that* explains the condition of this burger.”

Should she smile at the melodrama or cringe at the tactless exaggeration? Audrey didn't know. Finally she nodded. She had been the very last. Brent had left town the next day. Of course, with Brent one could never tell, there could have been two or three more that night. That's the way he worked. But she'd probably been the very last girl between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one in the town of Blithe Settlement to give in to his charm.

Carlene had given in a lot sooner and more than once if the rumors were true. Audrey had been so jealous. And maybe it was jealousy that made her so certain that Carlene was not the kind of girl she should extend friendship to.

Audrey bit her bottom lip, shame stinging at the memory of her youthful arrogance. They hadn't been friends in high school. Most of their senior year they'd been competitors for the affection of one what's-his-name, even though she and her Sunday school morality didn't stand a chance when pitted against a girl like Carlene Fletcher. And Carlene probably had no idea about Audrey's feelings for Brent.

Carlene had always tried to be too sophisticated for a little town like this. Who knew where her inspiration came from? It probably had something to do with the stack of *Cosmopolitan* magazines she kept piled in one corner of her office. Although she did a

better job of it now than she had ten years ago, she still never quite managed to pull it off.

Audrey stifled a snort and looked down at her burger. *Or maybe she does. How would I know?*

She cast a glance where Carlene sat in a skirt that was a little too short and a little too tight; with her dark hair piled up on top of her head just a few tendrils falling down for effect; with her eyebrows tweezed pencil thin, smoky eye makeup, and red lipstick. Audrey's gaze traveled down Carlene's leg to the sparkly, red pedicured toes which toyed precariously with her dangling shoe. Suddenly she could remember with absolute clarity why they had never been friendly in school.

But then they'd graduated, old points of contention fading as they became fully immersed in the world of jobs, bills, and independence. Eventually both had ended up working at the real estate office; Carlene as an agent, Audrey typing, filing, making coffee, sweeping crickets off the front porch in the mornings, and other duties as assigned. Despite their former opposition, they had gotten to know each other and had become friends.

*Still...*Audrey sighed. A bit of the old animosity reared up at the thought that what's-his-name was back in town.

"So what *did* you say to him?" Carlene's voice brought Audrey back to the present.

"I pointed out the fact that he never called."

Silence.

"What?" Carlene asked, incredulously. Then she laughed. "And what did he say to that?"

"I think he started to apologize. Then I told him I didn't really care, and I got in my car and drove off."

Carlene stared at her.

“I thought about running over his foot.”

Carlene laughed again. “His foot? If I was mad enough to run over some part of Brent Thomason, it wouldn’t be his foot.”

“Dadgummit, Gertie!” Audrey blew out a frustrated growl.

As if this day hadn’t been irritating enough already. Now she had to contend with this. And there wasn’t even anyone she could call to complain to. No one actually claimed Gertie, but everybody knew her name. She wore a collar and a bell, was generally indifferent to humans, and on any given day, could be found relaxing on the hood of Audrey’s car. It made no difference where she parked—shade, sun, rain, hail.

It wouldn’t have been so bad had Gertie been a cat. A dog would have been a bit more troublesome, but still acceptable under the circumstances. No such luck. Gertie was a solid black Pygmy goat with one bright white patch right between her horns. And there she sat this blistering Friday afternoon, atop the car hood, front hooves tucked neatly underneath her, chewing cud.

Audrey grabbed for one of the goat’s horns, a maneuver which was usually sure to bring her to her feet. But today, she was met with a warning tap from the goat’s horns and a half-hearted bleat. A second tactic, pushing the animal from behind, worked. Gertie finally budged and lumbered down, leaving one or two new dents and scratches in her cloven-hoofed wake.

The car felt like an oven when Audrey slid inside. She turned the key in the ignition and tested the temperature of the steering wheel with the tips of her fingers, wanting nothing more than to go home, turn her meager window units as high and cool as they would go, and lay on her couch watching television and eating ice cream until she fell asleep. But she'd promised her parents she'd come for dinner tonight. And as much as she wanted to, she couldn't back out.

Her relationship with her folks had been turbulent the past several years. Since she'd broken up with Bobby, things had evened out some. But not enough that she felt like she could cancel dinner plans without them bringing their "tough love" to her house to find out what the problem was now; to make sure she wasn't falling back into the same trap that had ensnared her before. So she turned the car in the direction of their house, smiling a little at the ultimate sense of comfort and belonging that eased frustration as it came into view.

Home.

A horse's whinny drifted on the breeze from the clinic as she stepped out of the car, the sound reminding her of the childhood spent here, safe, secure, happy. So many times she should have run back to this security. Her parents had begged her to when they realized the violent turn her life with Bobby had taken. How much sooner might she have sorted out the whole mess if she'd just come back when she'd had the chance?

"Hey, Mom." Audrey called a greeting from the utility room entrance before pausing briefly in the guest powder room to rinse her face and wash her hands. Then she joined her mother in the kitchen.

“Hi, baby. Would you mind setting the table?”

“You’ll never guess who I ran into today.” Audrey picked up a stack of her mother’s best china—*her best china*. It gave her a little pause, but she took it to the dining room table without a word. Four place settings. Someone else was coming to dinner. Some kind of weird bad feeling sunk itself into her gut.

“Oh? Who?” Paula Rhodes was busy with a pot on the stove.

Audrey’s heart sank and she hung her head. Her mom sounded way too nonchalant. “Brent Thomason. Remember him?”

“Mm-hm.”

Audrey finished setting the plates and returned to the kitchen. “OK, what do you know about it?” But the pieces had already fallen together.

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind she vaguely recalled that Brent had left to pursue a career in veterinary medicine at Texas A&M. When Audrey combined that bit of circumstantial evidence with the fact that her father was looking to hire a new vet, the situation began to look very grim.

“Audrey.” Her mom tapped a spoon on the side of a pot and then replaced the lid. “I don’t recall what exactly happened between the two of you. I know you were heart broken when he left. But that was years ago. You were a girl. Surely it wasn’t that bad. And you two were such good friends when you were children.”

Audrey hardly heard a word her mother said. Her mind latched greedily onto the idea that Brent had never been much of a student. It was quite possible—probable, in fact—that he’d never finished school, and his appearance in town today was nothing more than a bizarre coincidence.