

MULBERRY

Hollow

A RIVERBEND ROMANCE



THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798
DENISE HUNTER



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Mulberry Hollow

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hunter, Denise, 1968- author.

Title: *Mulberry Hollow* / Denise Hunter.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2022] | Series: A Riverbend romance ; [2] | Summary: "From the bestselling author of *The Convenient Groom* (now a beloved Hallmark Original movie) comes the second romance in her latest series!"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021051562 (print) | LCCN 2021051563 (ebook) | ISBN 9780785240532 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780785240549 (epub) | ISBN 9780785240556 (downloadable audio)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3608.U5925 M85 2022 (print) | LCC PS3608.U5925 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20211021


LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021051562>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021051563>

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

One



Two glaring realizations flashed through Wes Garrett's mind as he blinked against the morning sunlight: he was alone in the camping shelter, and he was soaked to the skin. A few other insights struck—his head throbbed, his muscles ached, and despite the July heat, chills racked his body.

He groaned and rolled over, pushing off the sleeping bag. He labored to draw a full breath. He should just go back to sleep. Why was this happening now, with only a couple of weeks of his two-month hike remaining?

He thought of Lillian, awaiting him in Albany, New York. Thought of his best friend Landon and their plan to complete the Appalachian Trail after their return to the US. Thought of Landon's last moments before he died in the Colombian dirt—in Wes's place.

So could he lie here in the shelter and give in to the oblivion of sleep? No. He would push through for his friend. He'd overcome much worse than this.

Resolved, he sat up, the floorboards of the raised shelter creaking beneath him. His head spun from the motion, and he blinked against the salty sting of sweat in his eyes, recalling the coughing man he'd slept next to a few nights ago. *Thanks a lot, buddy.*

The sunlight glinted through the trees in the clearing. Had to be going on ten at least. He hadn't once slept past six on the trail. The three hikers he'd shared the shelter with were long gone, the only evidence of their existence a ghostly curl of smoke rising from the firepit.

He was on his own.

He swallowed against a dry, sore throat and reached for his water. He had to get moving. He'd feel better once he had some food and coffee in his system. He'd make it at least as far as the next town, then reassess. Thoughts of a shower, a real mattress, and a home-cooked meal pushed him to his feet.

But twenty minutes later all his optimism faded and grim reality settled in. Getting dressed and fed had bled him of his energy, and Riverbend Gap was still fourteen rigorous miles away.

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Avery Robinson had spent her entire adulthood dreading her thirtieth birthday—and it had finally arrived. She winced as her family, gathered around the picnic table, belted out the “Happy Birthday” song. Terrific family, stellar people, but singers they were not.

Avery's stepmom, Lisa, blonde hair pulled back from her pretty face, set the cake (really, a brownie) in front of Avery.

Thirty candles flickered in the July breeze, lighting up the night like a bonfire.

Her oldest stepbrother, Gavin, hit a note well out of his range, making her snort. Her other stepbrother, Cooper, gave him an aggrieved look. Cooper was the only reason the song was half recognizable. His fiancée, Katie—also Avery’s best friend since college—leaned forward, her long, honey-colored hair swinging over her shoulder as the song (thank God) came to a close.

“Gosh, guys,” Avery grimaced. “Thanks a lot.”

Dad’s eyes crinkled in that Kiefer Sutherland way. “Make a wish, sweetheart.”

“She’ll probably waste it on a doctor for the clinic,” Cooper said.

“Wish for a man,” Katie blurted. “But be specific. Good sense of humor. Good looks, gainfully employed . . .”

“Willing to put up with a workaholic,” Cooper added.

“Who has a mountain of books on her nightstand.”

Lisa gave her sons a mock scowl. “All right, boys, be nice. It’s her birthday.”

“The only man I want is one who holds a medical degree and who’s willing to live in a tiny mountain town. And accepts carriage-house accommodations as partial salary,” Avery added offhandedly.

“Have you seen your carriage house?” Cooper raised an eyebrow.

“Have you seen this town?” Gavin added.

“Hey . . .,” the rest of the family chorused.

“Anyone would be lucky to live here, doctor or no,” Lisa said.

Gavin pushed his black hair off his forehead, exposing

bright-blue eyes. “Which is why she’s had so many responses to her ads.”

“Hmm, let’s see . . .” Cooper squinted his brown eyes. “Six-figure salary and fancy penthouse or shoebox with faulty plumbing.”

“The plumbing works just fine, thank you very much.”

“Honey,” Dad said, “if having another doc will reduce your hours, you go ahead and wish for one.”

“Absolutely.” Lisa rubbed her shoulder. “You’re wearing yourself out, and you really don’t need that.”

It was as close as anyone had come to mentioning the significance of her thirtieth birthday. Avery stared at her blazing brownie-cake, giving her wish further consideration while the family weighed in on Avery’s workload. She didn’t really believe in wishes, but as Gavin had so kindly reminded them, her ads—and numerous prayers—didn’t seem to be working.

She’d planned to wait until next year to hire another doctor for her clinic, until she’d had time and money to renovate the carriage house. But the long hours were getting to her—and then there was that fateful night back in April.

Her gaze drifted to her dad, sitting catty-corner to her and fully engaged in the conversation. His color was good tonight, and he seemed in high spirits. They’d come so close to losing him—and it was all her fault. That helpless panic she’d experienced as a child had rushed back, making her chest hollow and achy. Only this time she was an adult, a doctor. She should’ve been here for him.

“All right, everybody, the candles are melting.” Lisa’s words jolted Avery from the terrible memory. “Make a wish, sweetheart.”

Avery dredged up a smile as she eyed the candles. It was her

birthday wish, and daggonit, she did need another doctor. Her family was correct about one thing: she couldn't continue at her current pace. She drew in a lungful of oxygen and blew out all thirty candles in one long breath.

Gravel popped under the Jeep tires as Avery backed from her parents' long drive. The smile she'd forced all evening had melted away the second she slipped from the house. Her dad had wilted as the evening wore on. He tried to hide it, but there was no fooling Avery.

The two stents had seemed to do the trick, and his cardiologist was optimistic the problem had been resolved (she'd all but harassed the man for details on several occasions). But hearts and their arteries could be tricky.

She drew in a deep breath and released it, counting to ten. He would be fine. She would never again leave him—or the rest of the community—vulnerable by leaving town. Not until she had another doctor in place. Maybe she'd win one of those grants she was applying for so she could actually offer a living wage.

Minutes later she drove through town, deserted since they rolled up the sidewalk by eight o'clock. She passed the church and headed toward the campground, which Gavin managed, and finally entered the heavily wooded side of town known as Mulberry Hollow. The road curved and twisted alongside the river, and the full moon cast a ghostly glow over the treetops. On the other side of the river, the Appalachian Mountains rose to rounded peaks, silhouetted against the evening sky.

To some, this town was a place from which to escape.

Goodness knew most of her schoolmates had felt that way. But to Avery, Riverbend, nestled in its guardian mountains, was a safe haven from the rest of the world. She'd known she wanted to grow old here even before she'd realized she wanted to be a doctor. The people were friendly and quick to lend a hand. And the Robinson roots were deep here—five generations deep. She came from farmers and entrepreneurs, all devoted to this small mountain town. She was proud to carry on the family legacy.

She drove past the old Craftsman-style homes set close to the road and, in recent years, converted into businesses that mostly served hikers and nature lovers. A bait-and-tackle store, an outfitters shop, a rafting company.

Her clinic was just past the last of these. The sign by the street, lit from both directions, swung in the breeze. *Riverbend Medical Clinic*. The hours and phone numbers were listed, including an emergency number. Those calls had her desperate for another doctor. Sure, she had help: Katie, her nurse, and Sharise, her nurse practitioner. But Sharise was a single mother of two, so the responsibility of off-hour care fell on Avery.

She slowed and pulled in to the gravel parking lot, formerly the house's front yard. Her apartment upstairs was as dark as the porch. When she left the light on, someone inevitably showed up at midnight with a hangnail, thinking it was an all-night clinic despite the posted hours.

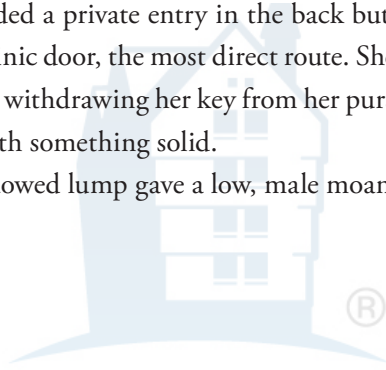
Her headlights swept across the clinic. It was one of the larger homes on the street, but the mountain beyond it dwarfed the brick structure. She shut off the Jeep's engine, then grabbed the gifts and leftover brownies, which Lisa had condensed down to one Over-the-Hill gift bag (compliments of Cooper). Avery looked forward to indulging in another brownie—it was her

birthday, after all. She'd enjoy it as she resumed her Jane Austen literary marathon—she was currently halfway through *Emma*.

As she stepped from the vehicle, her gaze flickered up to her darkened apartment where her cat, Boots, was almost certainly nesting in the living room window, awaiting her return. The night smelled of wood fires and gardenias. Avery took in the flowers Lisa and Katie had planted in the spring, but it was too dark to appreciate their beauty.


She'd added a private entry in the back but headed instead toward the clinic door, the most direct route. She took the porch steps and was withdrawing her key from her purse when her foot connected with something solid.

The shadowed lump gave a low, male moan.



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Two



“Hello?” Avery leaned over the man and gave him a gentle shake. “Sir?”

When he didn’t respond, she stepped over him, unlocked the door, and turned on the porch light. She was back at his side in seconds. Was he drunk?

He lay curled on his side, head propped on a backpack. He wore hiking shorts and a gray tee. Dark-blond hair fell in waves over his face, most of which was covered by an overgrown beard and mustache. All of the above—plus the earthy smell emanating from him—pegged him as a thru-hiker. She estimated him to be in his upper thirties, though the facial hair made it hard to ascertain his age.

No obvious injuries. His face was flushed but he wasn’t sweating. She touched his forehead. Midgrade fever.

The man stirred. His eyes squinted open, glazed but fixed

on her, a startling pop of cornflower blue against his bronzed skin.

“Sir, do you have an injury?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Sick.”

“All right. Well, let’s get you inside where I can examine you. Do you think you can stand?”

With what appeared to be Herculean effort, he pushed to a sitting position.

“That’s it.” Avery grabbed his upper arm—and what an arm it was. Sculpted and hard beneath her palm. It took three tugs to get him to his feet and then she saw why; he topped her by at least six inches. At five feet seven she wasn’t exactly petite.

He wavered on his feet.

“Steady there.” She gave him a moment to get his bearings, then opened the door. “Are you all right to walk? I’m Dr. Robinson, by the way, and I’ll be seeing to your care tonight.”

“My pack . . .” His voice held a ragged edge.

“It’ll be fine here on the porch for now. Let’s get you settled in a room.” She led him on a slow walk toward exam room one.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Fever. Fatigue. Sore throat.”

“Any tick or mosquito bites?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Rash?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Have you been around anyone who’s sick?”

“Few days ago at a shelter. Guy was coughing a lot.”

Maybe a nasty virus, but she’d save the diagnosis until she’d properly examined him. “When did all this come on?”

“This morning.”

They were almost halfway to the room. She got the feeling he wasn’t used to requiring help and didn’t like feeling needy, so she changed the subject. “Where are you staying while you’re in town?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Because he was confused? Or because he hadn’t made plans yet? She assisted him through the exam room doorway. “You don’t know?”

“Just got here.”

“Where did you spend last night?”

“Laurel Knob.”

She slid him a sidelong look. “That’s almost fifteen miles away, and I didn’t see a car in the lot.”

He said nothing as he dropped onto the bed, sagged down, and closed his eyes. His breaths were labored, and he shook with chills.

Avery took his blood pressure. Laurel Knob was north of town, which meant he’d climbed over two thousand feet of rugged terrain before descending into the valley on a humid day that reached into the midnineties. Challenging even for a healthy adult.

His blood pressure was on the low side, and his heart rate was high, from dehydration, exertion, or both. She clipped the oximeter on his finger and waited for a reading. Normal.

She finished the exam, asking questions when they arose. By the time she checked his lungs, he was hardly responding to her questions.

“Mr.—sir, can you wake up for me?”

His lashes fluttered open and his sleepy gaze fixed on her.

"You never told me your name."

He wet his lips. "Wes Garrett."

"Okay, Wes. Well, you might have a pretty good upper-respiratory infection going on. But the more worrisome issue is that you're dehydrated. I'm going to call over to Mission Hospital and have them send an ambulance. You'll need an—"

"No."

"I understand your reluctance, but your medical needs are beyond the scope of the clinic. You need an IV, perhaps some diagnostic tests, and overnight care."

That wasn't going to happen. Wes shook his head, the motion making it pound. "Can't."

Probably just a little virus. Granted it had literally knocked him to his knees today—more than once if he was honest. And he couldn't begin to explain the relief he'd felt upon reaching the clinic. After the hot trek over the mountain, the rest felt divine, and the cool concrete porch was as welcoming as a luxury mattress.

"You're severely dehydrated, Wes. You need IV fluids."

His gaze locked on the doctor's face. Ivory skin, smattering of freckles across her nose. Delicate brows arched over green eyes that would've stolen the show if not for that mane of brown hair.

She didn't look much like a doctor in her white sleeveless top. Didn't smell like one either; he drew in a fragrance that hinted of sunshine and coconuts. Then he realized she must be smelling him too.

Time to go. He pushed up to a sit, the movement taking ridiculous effort. He blinked against his throbbing headache and pushed off the table.

The doctor placed her hands on his shoulders, holding him in place. “Whoa, whoa, where are you going? Did you hear what I said? You’re dehydrated—and you need an X-ray of those lungs and possibly other diagnostic tests to rule out something more serious.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll drink some water and rest a couple days.” As he got to his feet the room spun. His vision went dark around the edges, coming down to ragged pinpoints of light.

Come on, Garrett. Fight it back.

She put both hands on his arms and easily pushed him back down to the table. “What’s your problem with the hospital?”

He waited for the spinning to stop, then locked his eyes on hers. “No insurance.”

“They’ll treat you there anyway. It’s a terrific hospital. They’ll take good care of you.”

But they’d still bill him, and he had no way of paying for it. He didn’t take on debt if he could help it; it was a matter of honor. He licked his lips. So thirsty. “Don’t think so. Can you recommend a place nearby with a shower and bed?”

“Mr. . . . Wes. I highly recommend you rethink your plans. You really do need fluids and—”

He pushed to a stand, the wave of dizziness not taking him by surprise this time. “I appreciate the diagnosis, Doc. We can settle up and I’ll be out of your hair.”

He started toward the door, his legs wobbling as if he were on stilts. His head spun and his heart thrashed against his rib cage. He powered through, exiting the room. He had exactly

\$127 in his bag. Probably shouldn't have bothered with the clinic because that would likely cost everything he had, and he still had to pay for a—

"Wait. Wait." The doctor stepped in front of him. "Do you have friends or family in town?"

"No." He braced a hand against the wall.

She pursed her lips. "Fine. You can stay here. I'll set up an IV. I don't usually do that, but I'll make an exception this time."

"Not necessary. I'll be fine."

She narrowed her eyes on him, her full lips going tight at the corners. "Actually, you won't be. You're feverish but not sweating. You have a rapid pulse and you're light-headed. And then there's that headache you haven't mentioned. All signs your body's in desperate need of fluids, Wes, and you need them now. If you try walking to the nearest motel—which, by the way, is over a mile away—you'll pass out on the side of the road, and when someone finds you in the morning, they'll be calling that ambulance for you."

"I don't have—"

"Insurance, I know. We'll work something out." She grabbed his elbow. "This way. I have a hospital bed in room four where you'll be comfortable."

He was too weak to fight. And he hated to admit it, but she was probably right about passing out. Even now the room was spinning, and putting one foot in front of the other was a challenge. He followed her down the hall, his hiking boots feeling as if they were weighted with sand.

An overnight stay in a medical clinic that obviously wasn't staffed for nighttime emergencies—this would cost a fortune

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he wouldn't be able to pay back anytime soon. Visions of his childhood swam in his head. The creditor messages, the eviction notices, the middle-of-the-night departures his dad tried to sell as a grand adventure.

He pushed away the memories and focused on walking. He entered the room and spotted the bed. Almost there. Just a few more steps and he could finally sink into oblivion.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Three



Avery had been dozing on and off, but concern for her patient once again had her sitting up. She blinked against the glow of the hall light. Her Fitbit read 3:17 a.m., about seven minutes past the last time she'd checked. As she stood the air conditioner kicked on, and she folded her arms against the cold blast of air.

For the third time that night she padded from the office, down the hall, and pushed open the door to room four. Her patient didn't even stir as light flooded the room. She neared the bed and noted the slow rise and fall of his chest. The beads of sweat on his forehead verified the IV was doing its job. In the morning she would send him on his way.

The thought brought a little pang. Even though her sleep had been restless, it was kind of nice having someone here. The building

and her apartment were so quiet at night. She was alone a lot—which was not the same thing as lonely. She was not lonely. She had her work and her family and friends.

Well, *friend*. Katie was really the only person outside her family to whom she was close. But she had many acquaintances and neighbors, people who cared, and that was the same thing, wasn't it?

She checked the IV site and lowered the rate of infusion.

Wes gave a low moan. The blanket she'd covered him with was pushed to the side and hanging over the rail. He wore the hospital gown he'd insisted on donning himself last night. But he hadn't secured the neckline, and it had slipped down, exposing well-defined shoulders.

She hoped he had the good sense to rest up until the illness passed, but these thru-hikers were a driven lot. He wouldn't be the first to push through illness or injury for some arbitrary deadline and end up worse for the wear.

She placed the back of her hand on his forehead. Hot to the touch. He was shivering a bit so she adjusted the blankets over him.

"Time is it?" he croaked.

"After three. How are you feeling?"

"Better."

She took that with a grain of salt since he seemed intent on downplaying his symptoms, and his fever was still high enough to cause myriad unpleasant symptoms.

"You didn't have to stay." His eyes fluttered shut, calling attention to long lashes she would've traded her best brownie recipe for.

She'd explained this last night but did so again. "My apart-

ment's upstairs so I crashed in my office. Just give a holler if you need anything."

"I'm fine . . ." The sentence trailed off and his breaths lengthened once again.

He was weak as a baby and clearly in the throes of this virus. Maybe he wouldn't be moving on so quickly. Today was Sunday and the clinic was closed. There was no reason to rush him out the door. Besides, it was Fourth of July weekend, and finding an available bed would take a miracle.

Avery awoke to a loud crash. She bolted upright in bed and blinked against the daylight. Not bed. Sofa. She'd finally fallen into a sound sleep, and now it was . . . seven thirty.

Another sound came from down the hall, and she remembered her patient. She pushed back the blanket, sprang to her feet, and rushed down the hall, following the sounds of muttering.

Wes was sitting up in bed, the IV out, the pole tipped over onto the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"Sorry 'bout that."

"Lie back down and let me get your vitals."

"I'm fine. I've taken up enough of your time."

She gave him her best doctorly expression. "It will only take a minute. Lie down please."

He held her gaze for five full seconds before his jaw ticked, his thick beard twitching. With seemingly great effort he swung his legs back into the bed and sank down, his eyes falling shut. The minimal movements had left him winded, and fever still flushed his cheeks.

Avery took his vitals. His blood pressure and oxygen levels were in the normal ranges, but his heart rate was rapid, though that was probably from exertion. She withdrew the thermometer from his mouth. “You’re properly hydrated and your vitals look good with the exception of your temperature: 101.8. You must be feeling pretty crummy.”

“If you could just recommend a place nearby with a bed and a shower, I’d be much obliged.”

“Tell you what. You take it easy for a minute, and I’ll go make a few calls.”

“Don’t have to do that.” But Wes was already drifting off again. Just as well. The man needed rest.

Wes’s eyes snapped open and fell on the doctor as she swept into the room. He must’ve been asleep awhile—sunlight now flooded the room. Plus the doctor’s hair was done up in a ponytail, and she’d changed into a collared shirt and white lab coat.

With great effort he pushed himself to a sitting position. His head throbbed and every muscle in his body screamed. But his skin felt clammy, like maybe his fever had broken.

“Seems like you had a nice nap.”

He rubbed a hand over his face, getting a palm full of bristly hair. “Time is it?”

“A little after ten. I’m afraid I have some bad news—I wasn’t able to find accommodations for you. Tomorrow is the Fourth of July so this weekend is a busy one around here.”

“You mentioned a campground before . . .”

“The cabins are full but there was a cancellation for a

campsite. However, the hard ground is no place to recover from an illness.”

“I’ll be fine. I have a tent.”

The doctor regarded him with an enigmatic expression. “It’s up to you, of course. But you’re welcome to hang around here awhile. We’re closed Sundays so it’ll be quiet.”

He was already shaking his head. He’d already be paying for this medical detour for months—and just when he’d almost cleared his dad’s debt. “Thanks for the offer but as I said before, I don’t have insurance. And I don’t want to be a bother.” This was probably the doctor’s only day off.

“I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Is that code for me making payments for the rest of my wage-earning days?”

One side of her lips lifted. “No, it’s code for we’ll work something out. Financing in a small town can get a little creative. Let’s just say I have a year’s supply of freshly grown vegetables at my disposal. The door to my apartment? Trade. And how do you think I came by my adorable kitty?”

“Gee, I’m fresh out of veggies, doors, and kitties.”

“You *are* feeling better. Like I said, we can work something out.”

“How much am I in for so far? Ballpark estimate.”

She cocked her head, holding eye contact for a beat before she quoted a rate that made his body break out in a sweat again.

“But I’ll cut you a deal for today since you’re off the IV and will require minimal medical care.” The rate she named was equivalent to a stay in a hotel—the kind Doc might stay at.

He had marketable skills, but he didn’t exactly have a job waiting for him in Albany. And there was Lillian to consider.

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He didn't like the idea of starting their lives together digging out of debt.

But if he was honest he wasn't sure he could make it all the way to the campground, and he couldn't in good conscience thumb a ride when he was contagious.

"So what do you say?" The doctor stared at him, those green eyes holding something he couldn't quite decipher. "Stick around for another night?"

The fatigue made every movement feel as if he were swimming in molasses. He regarded her for a moment. "Any chance you have a shower around here?"

"We do. And I can grab some food from the deli if you feel up to eating. You must be starving."

His stomach gave a hard, empty twist. He couldn't remember the last thing he'd eaten. "All right. One more night."



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