

Grounds for Return
A Yadkin Valley Novel

Melissa Collins Harrell

“But why had he always felt so strongly the magnetic pull of home, why had he thought so much about it and remembered it with such blazing accuracy, if it did not matter, and if this little town, and the immortal hills around it, was not the only home he had on earth? He did not know. All that he knew was that the years flow by like water, and that one day men come home again.”

—Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all military, first responders, and their families. We honor with heartfelt thanks the gifts of freedom, safety, and compassion that you so willingly bestow on others. Your service is the invisible backbone of our communities, and the necessity of these critical services would only be truly recognized if suddenly they ceased to exist.

Dear Reader,

As I began to work on this novel, I came to realize that winemaking is a beautiful analogy for life. Much like the harvested grapes, our lives go through a variety of seasons along with multiple cycles of clarifications and refinements that mold and shape us. Some seasons we have a great harvest with triumph and joy, while other years, disasters threaten to take our entire crop. At times, the pressing can be unbearable, but if we hold tight, the end product, while often much different than expected, may be more than we ever anticipated. In the end, life gives us two choices: we can harbor sour grapes over loss and disappointments, or we can take the grapes we're given and create our own unique signature blend. So grab your favorite wine or sparkling grape juice and get ready to go on a journey to Chatham!

Cheers to many hours of happy reading!

Melissa

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Prologue

May 1965

The nurse wraps the pink, wrinkly newborn in a blanket and places the baby in the exhausted mother's arms. The indescribable pain and temporary feelings of violation are still fresh, and from the sound of things, she's not alone. The baby lets out a high-pitched scream to announce the displeasure of the recent eviction from the safe cocoon into a strange world of chaos.

Her eyes are heavy, but the weary mom knows she has very little time. Her lips kiss the smooth head as the baby's fuzzy hair tickles her nose. Her finger traces each line on the warm face as she attempts to memorize every tiny detail of her baby. Her finger stops short as the child grabs her pinky, almost as if to say, "Hello, Mommy, I am here." Her eyes lock with her child, and she feels a rush of joy that she has never known.

A knock at the door abruptly interrupts this silent conversation. Ms. Dodds, the hospital social worker, enters the room. Glancing back at her baby, a sense of panic sets in, and she knows that she needs to undo this situation. The young mother opens her mouth to speak, but no sound comes. She wants to say, "*You can go. I'm keeping my baby.*" Resigning herself to the fact that she has no choice, she reaches down and her lips find that warm, soft space for one final kiss. Her silent tears flow like a steady rain that washes over her babe with a baptism of love. Reluctantly she transfers the tiny infant to Ms. Dodds and watches her baby exit not only the room, but her life.

The distraught mother looks through tears that have now shifted from love to anger at her own mother. She knows that for the rest of her life, a piece of her heart will be lost. A piece that even now, at the tender age of 16, she knows can never be replaced by a husband, career, or more children. She fears that she is permanently damaged. How can she not be when a piece of her heart will always be away from her? Exhaustion takes over, and as her body surrenders to sleep, she soothes herself with a promise. Whatever it takes, one day she will find her child and they will be together again, even for just a moment.

The Harvest

September, 2009

Chapter One: Michelle

Images of green, rolling hills whiz by Michelle Richardson like flickers on a movie screen. If she could project her thoughts through her Bluetooth, it would say: DETECTING ERROR, WRONG WAY, MAKE A U TURN IF POSSIBLE. Her brain GPS was correct. This was most definitely not the route she intended. Instead of these winding country roads speckled with cows and pastoral scenery leading her to a new life in Germany, she was rewinding her way back in time to her hometown of Chatham, North Carolina. She shook her head in disbelief. *I can't believe I'm actually doing this.*

When she boarded her first flight from Germany, she just pretended she was on another work assignment. Yes, just a few short months back in North Carolina and then on to the next chapters in her life. However, this mind game didn't work for long. As her plane landed in Raleigh, reality set in, and she was hit with a barrage of emotions. Sure, she'd been home to visit over the last 20 years, but actually living here day in and day out left her with a mixture of fear and dread. Yet every mile west she drove, like a magnet, she felt the pull of home. This pull led to a shift from dread to anticipation of seeing those she loved. What kept her from Chatham was most definitely not the people here. She was blessed with a wonderful family and had more than a pocket full of happy childhood memories. Crossing the county line, she notices a new and rather large sign that proudly boasts: "Welcome to Chatham." There's no turning back now.

The quirky yet charming town of Chatham is nestled in the foothills of western North Carolina. These foothills serve as the gateway to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Every fall, the Blue Ridge Parkway, which runs well over 400 miles through 29 Virginia and North Carolina counties, hosts millions in search of nature's latest masterpiece. These wide-eyed leaf gazers drive about with their heads hung out windows like hound dogs as they "oooh" and "ahhh" at the vibrant display of colors that can only be produced in nature. Today these infinite winding roads lead to vast stretches of mostly family-owned farmland turned into vineyards. The Yadkin Valley is home to some of North Carolina's most beautiful vineyards and skilled winemakers.

Chatham is the place where every crop you can think of has its own festival and queen. The bright fall leaves bring the Pumpkin Festival, and as the spring blossoms emerge on the

dogwood trees, you know the Strawberry Festival is near. It doesn't matter that each festival hosts the same itinerary: the church-lady crafts booths, costumed characters making balloon animals, funnel cakes, and more items dipped in chocolate than can ever be imagined. These festivals, while traditions for locals, help create much of the allure that now draws so many tourists.

Like many other small Southern towns, this town is steeped in sweet tea and strong faith roots. While religion continues to be an integral part of the community, as a child, church wove its way into every part of the fabric of life. Here you will find a denomination for everyone and a church on every corner. Michelle recalls when, as a child, summers brought extra opportunities for worship by way of tent revivals. Large tents popped up in random fields, and hours of singing and preaching were meant to bring the lost sheep back into the fold. Ironically, these seemed to be held on sweltering July nights, possibly a strategic move to remind people that hell would indeed be hot. Many preachers were astounded at the moving of the Holy Spirit as one by one sinners ran to the altar to be baptized—likely not so much to “be saved” by Jesus for fear of burning in hell, but everyone knew that the quicker you repented, the faster the preacher would let you go home.

As twilight set in, the sweet voices of children could be heard counting backwards from ten and then the scurrying of feet as hours of hide and seek began. Each kid raced with confidence to the one spot they believed no one would ever think to look for them. They would peer out from their victorious hiding spot, breathing as quietly as possible and hoping the iridescent glow from lightning bugs wouldn't give up their secret location.

Back in those less hectic days, porches weren't for curbside appeal but for sitting and sharing the latest family and community news. Front porches were where you learned who was getting married, who was sick, how someone was your distant cousin, and where everyone pondered whatever in the world ever happened to Old Man Pete. To this day, no one knows, but many theories were speculated on the front porch about Old Man Pete. While chatting about these events and the weather, parents would take turns hand-cranking homemade ice cream while drinking glasses of fresh-squeezed lemonade. Although this is the wine country now, alcohol was frowned on and most areas around were dry counties. However, Michelle still wonders if there was a bit of adult liquid added to that lemonade. No judgment here. Who can blame them? This adulting is hard for sure, and she didn't even have the stress of raising children yet.

Even with all its quirks and at times backwoods ways, Michelle loved this place, and up until the summer of 1989, she never dreamed she would live anywhere else. She tried to recall how she felt at 18 before her entire world fell apart. She was sure that she once felt excitement and anticipation for what adventure lay ahead. Like many of her friends, as she prepared to graduate from high school, she had dreams of starting a career and then building a life in Chatham. Her imaginary vision board had always included raising kids near family and, of course, Allie, her best friend. She and Allie were more like sisters than friends. Their moms used to joke that they shared joint custody of each girl because they were always together. Their houses were within walking distance, and they attended the same school and church. One would think that this much closeness would eventually lead to disagreements, but she couldn't think of one harsh word that had ever been shared between the two. They passed their summer days playing outside until the last light of day. On holidays, they somehow managed to rope all the neighborhood kids into their parades and front-porch shows. Legend holds that there was some bribery involved; thankfully their moms kept the freezer stocked with popsicles and rarely took inventory. Michelle started dating Benjamin first, and then it wasn't long before Allie met Dave. The two couples became inseparable, lulling them into a belief that their late-night preteen chats of raising families together could really become a reality.

In a modern-day world of online dating and global abilities, some people may find it hard to believe that you can find and know such deep love so young. But even at 38, Michelle has never experienced those feelings since her days here—a secret she keeps tightly tucked in her heart, especially from her current love. Now here she is, twenty years later, coming back to the place she had loved so dearly and never dreamed she would leave.

From her years in the US Air Force, watching people come and go, she noted that there seemed to be two things that drew people back home after moving away. For some, it was a deep desire to return to their roots, while others returned because of circumstances beyond their control. Today, Michelle fell into the second group. Her sister, Katie, would never want to inconvenience anyone, even her annoying little sister. Rounds of chemo and radiation had ravaged her sister's body, leaving her with aplastic anemia. She was now transfusion-dependent and had reached a point where a stem cell transplant was her only hope. Since siblings are the most likely match, Michelle had been tested in Germany, but sadly she was not a match.

On their last video chat, Michelle's heart had been pierced by Katie's sudden decline in health. From behind her exhausted eyes and pale face, Katie's heart seemed to whisper the words that she would never say to her sister: "I need you." In addition to raising three kids, Katie and her mom were partners in running The Dogwood Inn and Bakery. With the expansion of tourism in Chatham and the popularity of Airbnb apps, their business had exploded over the last five years. As summer ended, the tourism wave would head from the beaches of Eastern North Carolina westward. From late September through December, the inn would be booked up and the bakery running full blast. The aroma of batches of apple and pumpkin pies would permeate in fall, followed by an array of holiday cookies and cakes that would rival the North Pole.

Michelle is an expert in tasting these delicious family recipes, but she's absolutely clueless about this business. Nevertheless, she has a feeling that she's about to trade in her rifle and combat boots for an apron and a spatula. Yes, this is definitely going to be interesting, since her idea of homemade is serving the takeout order on the fine china. Baking? Please, she left that to the professionals in Europe.

Yet none of that matters because in a crisis, especially in the South, families rally around each other. Grudges go on hold and temporary truces are declared, and that includes your entire community of neighbors. This was one of the things that she had missed so much about Chatham and the small-town life. While big cities offered her fine dining and entertainment, she often longed for the deep connections she had growing up. It was one of the parts that made her feel so much guilt for leaving. She knew she would have the support of so many to heal if she remained here. In the end, she just couldn't stay. Cities had offered her an escape and refuge and allowed her to spend the last twenty years avoiding this place. Michelle knew that for her family, moving back home was the right thing to do, even though it meant putting the next phase of her life on hold. At this juncture, her desires had to take a back seat to the needs of her family.

Hopefully soon a donor match would be found. It seemed that everyone in town was getting tested. And thanks to Barbie Jo Settle, the local queen of social media, there was surely no one across the globe who didn't know that Katie Mercer needed a bone marrow transplant. Once she got the inn and bakery through the seasonal rush and Katie was stronger, she could move on to the next chapter of her life in Germany with Alex.

Germany had captured her heart on her first deployment there years ago. When the chance to return had surfaced, she jumped at it. The history and beauty drew her back, as did the

proximity to so many other European towns. She could travel to France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy on a whim. She had met Alexander while on her second tour in Germany. He worked as a contractor in IT, and with her work in meteorology, their paths often crossed. She'd been a bit hesitant at first, given that he was recently divorced and came with a 15-year-old son. His persistence paid off, and they had now been dating for a little over three years. It had taken her years of therapy to build up the nerve to even imagine building a life forever again with one person, and she was not going to screw up this chance to plant some roots and finally have a family. At 38, her biological clock was far from ticking, but it was blinking down the last ten seconds to destruction.

Leo is now 18 and off taking a gap year backpacking Europe before starting his art studies at the university. He's quite the opposite of his father and takes after his mother. Michelle secretly blames Leo for her growing desire for children. Moving in, she had feared the dreaded teenage "monster," as they're described, but that wasn't what she found at all. Leo had such a kind and gentle spirit, and in addition to some spirited Mario Kart matches, they shared some deep intellectual conversations. She and Alex talked often about getting married, and lately she has a feeling that he might pop the question any day.

Oh crap, she thinks, I totally spaced and forgot to call Alex when I landed. She glances at her phone and sees six unread messages. *Great, this long-distance thing is off to a stellar start!* She picks up the phone to call, but the glowing orange light on the dash grabs her attention and takes priority. He'll just have to wait, as she needs to scoot in for gas or she'll be walking the rest of the way.

She misses her Honda; this new, fancy rental car is definitely not for her. She likes her cars well broken in and without all the bells and whistles. It's late August and hot enough to scorch a lizard, as her mama would say. She spent the first half of her trip with the windows rolled down, since it had taken her over 100 miles to figure out how to work the new-fangled air conditioner. While it might be hot here, these westerners don't experience heat like eastern NC. During her time stationed at Seymour Johnson AFB in Goldsboro, NC, she was pretty sure that those training grounds were literally built on top of the gates of hell.

Some days she felt they might as well be in the desert. Of course, without fail she often had to hear her first sergeant say, "Richardson, you know it's not the heat down here that makes it so hot."

“Yes sir, I know, it’s the humidity.”

“That’s right, we need an assignment to Vegas so we can get us some of that dry heat.”

She didn’t care if it was the heat or the humidity—it was brutal, especially in full basic duty uniform.

She slows down and makes her way to the gas pump. Great, now to spend ten minutes looking for the hidden gas lever.

Even though her trips home had been few, every time she half expected it to be just as she’d left it in 1989. It was so chaotic after the accident. Everything happened so fast, she just felt that time should have frozen, like hitting pause on a movie, and when she returned, she could just pick up where she’d left off. Sadly, that’s not how life works. Buildings and the people she loved had aged, including herself. She would have never admitted it then, but at 18 when she left Chatham, she was still very much a young girl. She looks in the mirror while adjusting her ponytail and acknowledging her crow’s feet, noting that a hair color appointment will be one of her first calls.

One thing is right where she left it—the old Hendrick’s store. Still in the same place, right next to the old Benham School, but she could certainly say it was no longer stuck in the 1980s. By the looks of it, it had been bought out by a large convenience store chain. They had updated the country store appearance by replacing the rustic wood with industrial siding. Honestly, it looks like a bad facelift. Some things should just be left to age gracefully. She fears that as the world attempts to modernize the hillbillies, much of what made Chatham will be lost forever.

She never considered herself a hillbilly until she was branded that nickname in basic training. While in basic training, a southern accent combined with growing up in the hills of NC earns you that term of endearment. Still, it’s better than some names awarded to her other comrades. Since WWII, it’s been common practice to give pilots a call sign, but that tradition became common practice for many branches. A career in the military—yet another thing Michelle could have never predicted in her life. She had skillfully avoided eye contact with every local recruiter during career day and evaded every follow up phone call. She wished she could erase the event that sent her to the air force, but since it couldn’t be undone, it had turned out to offer her some incredible opportunities. A fresh start, discipline, and drive had been just what she needed to awaken her inner strength and confidence that she’d feared would never return.

After basic training, she'd headed to Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi to train as a weather tech. In her eight months there, she learned the basics of weather forecasting and meteorology. Following her time there, she was assigned to the 4th operations weather squadron as a weather apprentice. She spent two years there working with her fellow airmen to ensure that pilots, command, and support crew had the most precise forecasts. After a brief return to Keesler AFB for the weather observer course, she had been assigned to the 21st Operational Weather Squadron at Kapaun Air Station in Germany. Yes, this career had been a much different path than she'd envisioned, but it had exposed her to many new experiences. She was grateful for all her experiences and that it had led her to Alex and Germany—a place that she had grown to love as much as home.

Her eyes register the sliding glass doors as they gently glide open, but her ears still hear the hinges of a creaky country door opening. The memory of that sound sets off a memory sequence like a chain of dominoes. Anytime her dad grabbed his keys to head to the store, Katie and Michelle would be like two bird dogs off for the hunt. When he'd arrive at his truck, he'd be met by two precocious daughters begging with their best little puppy faces to take them with him to the store. It would always start the same: "Not today; maybe next time." But eventually it would end with "All right, hop in the truck." Once they had successfully secured their spots, Katie and Michelle would smile at each other with intense sister satisfaction. War could resume later, but the temporary truce was worth the sweet promise of ice cream or a candy bar.

One of the gifts of childhood was completely living in the moment and believing that life would always be happy and good. Nana Lucy used to warn her of this growing up. "Michelle, don't wish your life away. Just you wait, time speeds up every year you live. One day you wake up and see an old lady staring back at you, and you wonder where your life went." But when you're young, time seems to be something to speed up to get to the good stuff. It felt that time was this villain making you slowly wait for all the good things in life. She wished that she had taken Nana Lucy's advice to heart, to truly savor each moment, because she had no idea that those days were days she would long for as an adult.

As she approaches the counter to pay, she's temporarily blinded by the "LOTTERY TICKETS SOLD HERE" sign flashing behind the clerk's head. She pauses and chuckles to herself. Oh, the prayers that must be lifted up by the Ladies World Prayer group for the sinful gamblers who buy these tickets. She could only imagine what Cathy Hedge had to say about this.

Cathy Hedge had taught third grade at the local elementary school for what seemed like 100 years. Either the water in Chatham is from the fountain of youth or she's preserved by the gallons of Rose Milk lotion. Whatever the case, she never seemed to age. In addition to being a dedicated teacher, she was and still is a cornerstone of Calvary Baptist Church. She had made it her personal charge to shepherd every single child in Chatham to their salvation—that is, with the exception of Declan Carlyle, who could never sit still long enough to get through the sinner's prayer of confession. Today he would likely be diagnosed with ADHD, but back then his only diagnosis was a severe case of ants in his pants, which many parents felt could be remedied with a good swatting of his behind with a fly flapper. Of course, only to kill the ants.

Michelle can just imagine all the ladies circling around and holding hands in Cathy Hedge's parlor: "Lord, we just pray for those who struggle with gambling. Release them from their bondage and bring them back to the fold." She also speculates that after prayer, there are more "prayerful conversations" about who had seen who buying tickets the day before, and how next time they will pray specifically for them by name. She silently snickers as she wonders how many in that parlor have snuck across county lines to secretly buy a few tickets of their own. Without a doubt, if they're ever caught, they'll profess that the winnings will be used to do the Lord's work.

As her car slowly rolls towards the railroad tracks, Michelle, out of instinct, reaches down to turn the radio off and cracks her window. Her dad, Steve Richardson, had been with the fire department and responded to almost every crash here since way before she was born. She had been drilled in safety habits from a young age and can still hear her dad now: "Young lady, watch your speed. An accident is just around every corner. Half of accidents occur just a few miles from your own home. You see all those crosses along the road? They are a trail to follow to the local church all right ... straight to the cemetery!" He sure doesn't need to know that she coasted into town on fumes and had broken the never-go-below-a-quarter-of-a-tank rule. She feels an involuntary smile spread on her face. No matter how old she gets or the miles that separate them, she's a Daddy's girl and is ready to see him.

She had missed her friends and other family, but leaving him had been one of the toughest. She had always known that any man in her life would have to measure up to him. His calming presence helped soothe her on many occasions. Between her and Katie, the Richardson girls had their fair share of stitches and casts in their day, but her dad always seemed to make it

all okay. She knows that underneath that calm exterior, her dad carries tough memories from some of the more difficult calls he responded to. She also knows that even though he will never admit it, he carries a huge scar from that summer of 1989. Truth be told, so does the whole town.

