

Making Amends

Melinda Clayton



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The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it?

Jeremiah 17:9

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: Tabby](#)

Chapter 1: Tabby

VON'S HIBISCUS PLANT was dying. I had told her it would, but she's got a stubborn streak a mile wide and she never has liked taking advice from me, especially not when it comes to her plants. For an instant, I couldn't decide whether to tell her about it or let her see it on her own. I have to admit there's something funny about Von when she's angry, the way she pokes her bottom lip out and scrunches up her forehead, looking for all the world like a female version of Elmer Fudd. In the end, though, I decided to tell her. She might *look* funny when she's angry, but being around her when she's angry is no fun at all. If the plant died before she could work her magic on it, I knew I'd come to regret it.

"Von!" I yelled, stepping up into the mobile home that served as the office for Von's Plants and Such. We had argued over that name, I remembered. "Plants and such? What the hell's that even supposed to mean, Von? What's the *such* part of it?" I had asked, bending over to pick up a stack of seed catalogs that had slipped off the even bigger stack teetering on her kitchen table.

"It's quaint," she'd responded, not even bothering to look up from *Fruiting Plants of Florida*, a book from which she could quote entire paragraphs, and often did. "It's catchy. People will remember it. Just wait and see." She licked her finger and turned the page, letting me know she was finished with the conversation.

As it turned out, she'd been right. Thirty years later, Von's Plants and Such covered nearly three acres and was known for carrying the most healthy, productive plants in central Florida, if not the whole dang state. Von even had an advice column in the *Volusia Sentry*, where she answered everything from, "What're these little shell-looking things all over my Mexican petunias?" (scale bugs) to "Why do my roses keep getting black spot no matter what I do?" (Because you live in Florida, honey.)

For a woman who knew just about everything there was to know about plants in our zone, it was particularly frustrating to her that she couldn't figure out why her hibiscus plants kept dying.

"Von," I repeated, using the doorframe to heft myself up, "we've got to get a step for this door. My knees aren't what they used to be, and one of these days I'm going to get stuck halfway up with no obvious solution but to fall back down, and then I'll have to sue your ass. Anyhow," I paused to catch my breath, "you're not going to want to hear this, but—"

She shushed me, holding up one calloused hand while with the other she pointed to the little thirteen-inch television perched on the back corner of her desk amid ledgers, receipts, and those endless catalogs. “Tabby,” she said, and I knew by the way she said my name something was wrong. Von is not a soft person. When Von goes soft, I go on high alert.

“What?” I moved around the desk so I could see whatever it was she was staring at on the screen. She reached up and pulled me down to sit on an upside-down orange crate, not letting go of my arm once I’d settled.

It was the audio that got my attention before the picture did. “Thirty-year-old Robert Clark,” the newscaster was saying, “who was kidnapped by his father at the age of five, was arrested in Tampa, Florida today and charged with the murder of his father, fifty-three-year-old Vernon Clark. According to....”

I couldn’t hear any more due to the buzzing in my ears. My eyes wide, I looked at Von, who took my chin in her hand and turned my face back to the screen. There he was, my precious baby, my little boy, the half of my heart that piece-of-shit ex-husband of mine had stolen from me twenty-five years before. Video showed him escorted to a police car, hands behind his back, the officers flanking him, guiding him into the backseat of the cruiser with a hand on top of his head.

Funny, I thought, my last clear thought for a while, they couldn’t find him when he disappeared, but let him kill the bastard who stole him and they sure as hell knew how to find him.

Chapter 2: Ricky

“MAN, YOU’VE GOT a twin.” The slap on the back from Gerry, my coworker, coupled with what he’d said, nearly caused me to drop my coffee. I did have a twin, or at least I *had* a twin, but he had no way of knowing that. I hadn’t spoken to anyone about my brother in years, certainly not since accepting a position at *News from the Swamplands*, an independent paper that was unfortunately as cheesy as the name implied.

Setting my Styrofoam cup down before the coffee-sludge spilled down my tie—I only had three, after all, and happened to be wearing my favorite—I scrambled to come up with a response. How could he possibly know about Robert? And what did he know? I hadn’t seen my twin brother since my father snatched him off the street a quarter century ago, leaving nothing behind but one of Robert’s blue sneakers. Oh, and me. He left me behind, too.

Lucky for me, Gerry is a talker. Before I’d had a chance to come up with any sort of response, he plunged ahead. “Guy arrested for murdering his dad. Did you see the news this morning? Dude looked *exactly* like you, man. He’s in Florida, too. Andy’s already on his way to Tampa to cover the story. You sure you aren’t adopted? Maybe you guys were separated at birth or something.”

Not at birth, but not too long after. We were five years old, Robert and I, that beautiful September afternoon. Our mother met us at the bus stop at the end of the street and walked us home, as she always did. My mother had her share of detractors in those days, people who thought she was an unfit mother, but Robert—Bobby—and I worshipped her.

We didn’t care that she was dressed in the same stained t-shirt and baggy sweatpants she’d worn that morning as she’d waved goodbye, following along beside our window until the bus turned the corner. We didn’t care that her breath held the permanent odor of spiced rum, the underlying whiff of coffee as she kissed us goodbye having morphed into an intermingled tinge of cola by the end of the day. If our house was unclean—hell, if *we* were unclean—we never noticed; if she slept odd hours it mattered not to us. My mother was a good mother, maybe not by conventional standards, but she was, nonetheless. She still is, because she loves us. There isn’t much better than that, is there?

An indescribable feeling started in the pit of my stomach as Gerry rambled on, something like disbelief mixed with hope, both sprinkled with a dose of fear. Gerry paused for breath and I

jumped in before he could continue. “What was his name? Did you catch it?” He nodded emphatically before I’d even finished the questions.

“That’s the really weird part, bro,” he said. “He has the same last name as you. Clark. Crazy, right? Andy’s all over it; he wants you to call him as soon as you get to your desk.”

I bet he does. If my boss was on his way to Tampa, it wasn’t to cover the story of this man’s arrest. We were a news organization by the most liberal use of the term, but we didn’t focus on stories you could see on CBS, NBC, or ABC. No, we focused on the story *under* the story, as Andy liked to say. Although print circulation of our little rag was miniscule, the online edition had a good-sized following, not just locally but nationally, even, occasionally, internationally.

No one could dig up dirt like *News from the Swamplands*. Andy had a nose for scandal, and he’d learned over the years that society has an insatiable appetite for delving into the dark depths of someone else’s despair. The stories didn’t have to be about someone famous; I think this is what made Andy’s paper so successful. He realized they could be about anyone, so long as the details and secrets were sufficiently horrifying. We’d never be able to compete with publications covering celebrity scandals, but I feel confident saying Andy’s take was well into the six-figure range. “Everyone has dirt,” he used to say. “It’s our job to dig it up.”

It was shameful, really, the way we operated. Our local news might report on a hit-and-run accident, but *Swamplands* went deeper than that. Our job was to dig up whatever we could, not only on the perpetrator, but also on the victim. We didn’t report on what happened at the scene, we reported on what happened earlier that day, that year, that lifetime.

An example: Twelve-year-old William Jacobs was struck and killed by a sport utility vehicle while crossing the street on his way to school. The driver of the SUV, forty-four-year-old Todd Matthews, a construction worker from the east side of town, just plain didn’t see him. It was early morning, still dark, and William, who was wearing a black hoodie, wasn’t in a crosswalk when he was hit. A tragic accident, and that’s the way most organizations reported it. But not us.

Further investigation revealed that Matthews, the driver, hadn’t been on his way to work as previously assumed. No, he’d been on his way to his girlfriend’s house for a little pre-work tête-a-tête. His wife hadn’t known that initially, but she certainly did after our front-page report. It wasn’t relevant to the story but it sold papers and clicks, and the online comment section went

wild. Comments ranged from, “He’s not only a cheat, he’s a murderer,” to, “He deserves nothing short of the death penalty.”

Another example: a series of murders in and around Tampa, committed by an unknown intruder dubbed the Silk Stocking Rapist. There were four known victims, all violently sexually assaulted before the intruder strangled three of them to death with a single silk stocking. *Swamplands* mentioned those incidents in passing, but the fourth, the lone survivor of the last brutal attack, caught Andy’s attention and kept it.

No one had known for certain how the man gained entry to his victims’ homes. There was no sign of forced entry in any of the four cases. But when fifty-eight-year-old Thelma Suzette Parker’s adult daughter dropped by for an unexpected visit and discovered Ms. Parker unconscious on her bedroom floor with a stocking around her neck, a neighbor stepped forward to say she’d seen a white van outside Ms. Parker’s home several hours prior, a white van such as might be used by a pest control service. Ms. Parker, transported by ambulance to a local hospital where she remained in intensive care for several weeks, corroborated that information upon awakening from a medically induced coma.

While local news organizations are generally careful about releasing the names of victims of sexual assault, Ms. Parker and her family voluntarily came forward with information in an effort to aid in capturing the assailant. It didn’t take much digging for Andy to discover Ms. Parker’s history of erotic dancing. Speculation was rampant after that fact became public knowledge. Had a former customer been the attacker? Was it due to a drug deal gone bad? Could it have been a pimp? Were the other victims involved in something seedy, as well?

It hardly mattered that none of the victims had known each other, or that Ms. Parker hadn’t danced in nearly twenty years. Nor was there any indication whatsoever she, or any of the victims, had ever dealt in either drugs or prostitution. The click rate skyrocketed, and the comment section exploded. “Lie down with dogs, get up with fleas,” was the general theme, once again highlighting the ugly underbelly of online commentary. The assailant vanished without a trace, and a part of me wondered if *Swamplands* was somehow responsible, if we shed so much light in the wrong direction people stopped looking in the right one.

This formula for selling subscriptions wasn’t something of which I was proud. I considered my current position as a less-than-savory stepping stone to something better. Paying my dues, was the way I described it to anyone who asked. The fact that I’d been there seven years, three

months, thirteen days, and four minutes didn't change my long-term goal, even if it did signify it was harder to reach than I'd previously imagined.

It would only be a matter of time, I knew, before Andy found the current story under the story, and since it happened to be the story of my life, I wasn't looking forward to that moment.

"Guess I'd better get to my desk and make that call," I told Gerry, but it wasn't Andy I needed to call. It was my mother.