

**Healing Divides**  
*Smokey Mountain Series: Book 2*

By

**Stella Moore**

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# Chapter 1

Summer in Tennessee wasn't leaving without a fight. During the day, August drowned the Smokey Mountains with humidity and baked them with its searing sun. Nights were only marginally better, and as Dr. Melissa French knew all too well, the unrelenting heat sometimes made people a little crazy.

Not that the seasoned psychiatrist would ever use a term like 'crazy' when dealing with her patients. At least, not when anyone could hear her. She was tempted, however, to use some less than professional language with the couple currently bickering in her office.

"That's enough for today." The words were spoken with a quiet authority that she had found to be more effective than raising her voice. The couple immediately quit arguing and looked over at her.

"But Dr. French, we haven't gotten anywhere," the woman whined. The high pitched, nasally voice grated on every nerve the good doctor possessed. Inside, she wanted to wring the woman's neck. But she forced her lips up into her bland, professional smile and responded to the woman's complaint in a calm, measured voice.

"I know it seems that way, Mara. But we are making some progress." They weren't, at least not as much as Melissa had hoped, but she wasn't ready to give up on the couple just yet. "I'll see you both next week, at the same time."

"This is ridiculous. What are we even paying you for?" Mara demanded sulkily.

Refusing to be baited, Melissa looked over at the man who was studying his wife with a thoughtful frown. Hope sparked through the fatigue that was dragging at her and she decided to give them a few extra minutes. They were her last appointment, after all, so she wouldn't be intruding on anyone else's time.

"William, is there something you'd like to address?" Melissa asked.

William Hanson, still stunningly handsome at nearly fifty-three, never took his eyes off his younger, curvaceous wife. They really did make a stunning pair, just on looks alone. But Melissa had also seen something between them the first time they'd come to her that had caused her to dig in her heels. Where most people just saw a young gold digger and a wealthy man going through a bit of a mid-life crisis, she saw genuine affection and a love she hoped would deepen with time.

"Apologize to Dr. French," William said after an extended pause. His tone sent a shiver down Melissa's spine that she ruthlessly suppressed.

Mara, however, had none of the good doctor's training or willpower. She turned and gaped at her husband. "Why?" she asked, crossing her arms across her chest in a defiant gesture that had Melissa inwardly cringing.

"Because you were rude. She's been nothing but kind and helpful. Now apologize. I won't repeat myself again."

Mara's expression turned mutinous, but Melissa could see the gleam of lust in the gorgeous woman's eyes. "And if I don't apologize?" The taunting tone nearly brought a smile to Melissa's face, but she kept her features carefully passive.

"Dr. French, might we have a bit of privacy?" William asked, his eyes still trained on his wife's now shocked face.

“Of course. I’ll be just outside.” Melissa stood and smoothed her skirt before walking to the door that led to the reception area. “Oh, and William,” at the door she turned, and offered a bright smile, “just so you know, this room has been thoroughly soundproofed.” She shut the door on William’s deep laughter and Mara’s startled gasp.

Melissa kept herself busy making notes and checking her appointments for the following week, grateful as always for the almost militant organization of her receptionist. Several minutes later, the couple emerged from her office. Mara’s eyes were lined with red, and the same color rode high on her cheeks. Gone was the antagonistic, whiny brat Melissa had gotten to know over the past several weeks, and in her place was a contrite, yet glowing woman.

“Dr. French, I’m very sorry for my rudeness. Will you forgive me?” Sympathy stirred in Melissa’s heart at the tears filling the woman’s eyes.

“Of course,” she assured Mara with the first genuine smile of her day. “Same time next week?” she asked, hopeful they would keep their weekly appointments for the time being. The obviously healthy discipline session in her office was a good start, but it wasn’t going to magically fix the underlying issues in their relationship.

William inclined his head as he slipped a supportive arm around his wife’s waist. A surprising surge of jealousy rose up in her as Melissa watched Mara lean into his embrace. The couple said their goodbyes and Melissa locked up behind them. She returned to her office, but it wasn’t long before she realized she was too restless to concentrate on her notes.

Restless was a good description of how she’d felt in general lately. Her practice kept her busy and fulfilled. She loved her career. Helping people sort through the mess in their heads so that they could pursue healthy relationships was one of the main reasons she’d become a psychiatrist.

The fact that she was gaining quite the reputation in certain circles for her understanding and skill with relationships containing a dominant and submissive dynamic only added another layer of satisfaction.

But lately, she found herself wishing for more. Being the authority figure in her tiny office was natural and necessary, but she longed for a space where she could hand over that authority and let someone else be in control. She craved it like some women craved chocolate.

Unfortunately for her, she would be going home to her empty house, and there would only be more responsibilities waiting for her there. Bills to be paid, chores to be done.

The idea of going home alone was suddenly unbearable. Before she could talk herself out of it, she shut down her laptop, packed up everything she would need to work on that weekend and bolted from the office.