

OUT OF MIRROR LAKE

A Novel of Decisions and Consequences

Betty Parsons Cunningham

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First Edition

New Author Publishing
Brockville, ON., Canada
www.newauthorpublishing.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Betty Parsons Cunningham, 1930
Out of Mirror Lake: A Novel of Decisions and Consequences /
By Betty Parsons Cunningham

ISBN 978-1-928045-17-5

In memory of my dear friend, the late Anne “Bunty” Loucks, whose
enthusiasm and encouragement will never be forgotten

To my entire family for their love, patience and understanding

Acknowledgements

My thanks to my daughters, Andrea and Martha, who read the first few chapters and encouraged me to continue; to Sharon Dempsey for reading and clarifying certain passages in the almost completed manuscript; to Dwight Fidler for his help in the beginning; and to the wonderful members of Writers' Ink, a Brockville writing group, who encouraged me throughout. Also to my wonderfully patient and understanding editor and friend, Chris Stesky, I give my everlasting thanks; and to her equally patient husband, Bob, my thanks for help at the computer end. And of course, thank you to Gary Wolfe, of New Author Publishing, for agreeing to publish my story. Lastly, to all my friends and relatives who have been wondering if my story is probably sitting in a bottom drawer somewhere, my thanks for not quite giving up on me.

CHAPTER 1

Mirror Lake, 1961

“Maggie, where in blazes are you?”

Seth Poole’s bellow from the sagging back porch of the four-room farmhouse echoed over the dusty weeds and dead plants in the once flourishing Blake Market Garden and died somewhere over nearby Mirror Lake. A few crows, nesting in a large oak tree beside the house, flew off cawing in indignation, but the target of his bellow, Maggie Blake, ignored the shout, or tried to.

At the far end of the garden, out of his sight but well within reach of his yell, his red-haired, freckle-faced stepdaughter continued her self-appointed task of picking wild raspberries. Why bother to answer? She’d hear his latest complaint soon enough. What would it be this time, she wondered, idly. A broken shoelace? Lumps in his porridge? Had he run out of beer and cigarettes? Maybe his ancient Cadillac had broken down again. Whatever it was, as usual, he’d claim it was because of something she had or hadn’t done.

Almost from the day he and her mother had gotten married four long years ago, he had begun finding fault with her at every opportunity, and done his best to make her life miserable. And he had succeeded, beginning with making it clear she was to be at his beck and call at all times. Barely a teenager at the time, she had had little choice but to live with his never-ending demands and complaints, but she had never gotten used to the shouting that accompanied them. Soon he was blaming her for all the real or imagined misfortunes and mistakes he couldn’t pin on anyone else. Over the years, most of his accusations had nothing whatsoever to do with her, but it never seemed to matter; he’d blame

her, anyway. And, sadly, her mother had never interfered, even when his accusations were ridiculous. Within weeks of their marriage, the miserable crook had succeeded in changing her once self-assured and assertive mother into his mindless slave, agreeing with everything he said and did. How and why her mother had allowed herself to become Seth Poole's puppet was beyond Maggie's understanding.

At least it wouldn't happen to her, she thought, as she finished filling a berry basket. In just two months and eight days, she'd be eighteen years old, and free to walk away from the big bully. Surely she could put up with his mean temper until then.

"Damn it, Maggie Blake, answer me. I know you can hear me."

For a moment, she stood utterly still with her fingers poised over a cluster of ripe red berries. Then, with his second (or was it third) bellow ringing in her ears, Maggie Blake experienced an epiphany. What was wrong with her, she wondered suddenly? She was a reasonably intelligent person nearly eighteen years of age. What was her excuse for putting up with Seth Poole's miserable disposition all these years? Concern for her mother? Fear of the bully's retaliation? Perhaps a bit of both, but not anymore. She had had enough.

She dropped the basket of berries and muttered, "To hell with two months and eight days." In a burst of fury, she kicked the half-filled basket of raspberries onto the path beside the ones she had already filled, and stamped them all into bits of wicker and crushed raspberries. Eyeing the slippery red mess with satisfaction, she kicked one smashed basket out of the way and drop-kicked another over the fence into the bushes. Turning toward the farmhouse, she shouted, "I quit!"

Lightning didn't strike, the heavens didn't open, and the raspberry bushes didn't go up in smoke, but her willingness to tolerate the detested dictator vanished, as if drowned in the bright red pool of berry juice. She was bathed in perspiration, and the noonday sun was crisping her skin, but all she felt was an urge to cheer.

Flushed with determination, she sloshed through the raspberry juice and raced up the garden path, looking forward to a showdown with the hated back-porch bellower. She skidded to a stop at a curve in the path, and slipped unseen behind an overgrown honeysuckle bush, to catch her breath and cool her temper. Peering through its leaves, she stared at Seth in disgust. He was slouched against a post on the rickety porch, his hands

cupped around his mouth, no doubt preparing to shout again. Her lip curled. Obviously, shaving hadn't been on his to-do list this morning. A fringe of black hair surrounded his bald spot, and oily strands of it coiled over his neck and upper back like skinny black worms. He was naked to the waist, his rumpled jeans held up by one suspender strap, its mate dangling alongside his leg. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. God, he was repulsive! A far cry from the fancy-dressed gentleman who had sashayed into Mirror Lake and proceeded to bamboozle her lonely widowed mother.

* * *

She had been thirteen, going on fourteen, when the creep slithered into the village, oozing charm like a leaky old rubber boot and telling everyone he was a land surveyor. Maggie had thought he looked more like a thug than any kind of a surveyor with his black hair, skinny moustache and phony smile, and she wondered out loud if he might be an imposter. Her mother just laughed. Who listens to teenagers?

Often, as Maggie got older, she had wondered why no one had thought to ask the newcomer what land he planned to survey in the tiny hamlet of Mirror Lake. But then, why would they? Here was a charming middle-aged gentleman in a seersucker suit and wingtip shoes, driving a big white Cadillac, and anxious to make friends. Who would have believed he was anything other than who he claimed to be? Certainly, not her mother.

Just days after his arrival in the village, he had started hovering around her mother, showering her with big bouquets of daisies and boxes of chocolates. To Maggie's disgust and loud disapproval, her mother, who was probably lonely and flattered, had drunk up his attentions like a thirsty camel at a desert oasis. Little did either of them know — and possibly her mother wouldn't even have cared — that all the creep really wanted was her property. Within six weeks, her mother had fallen so completely under the crook's spell, she had agreed to marry him. Even worse, so thrilled was she by his promise to restore the market garden, she had given him the deed to it as a wedding gift. Maggie's disgust had quickly accelerated into disbelief. Convinced he was as dishonest as he looked, she made no secret of her feelings, but her mother simply smiled indulgently. The marriage took place as scheduled.

Soon after the wedding, Seth's deceit was revealed. Somewhere the con artist had heard rumours about waterfront property in Mirror Lake being in great demand. He had immediately high-tailed it to the area, planning to acquire a lakefront property, by fair means or foul, before the owner heard the rumours. Once he became the new owner, he would sell its waterfront section to a developer, and he, Seth Poole, would quietly sit back and get rich. Upon meeting her mother, a young attractive widow and the owner of a lakefront property to boot, he probably felt he had hit the jackpot. Six weeks later, he had accomplished his goal — he had acquired her mother's property with little more than sweet talk, promises, some bunches of daisies and a few boxes of Laura Secord chocolates.

His con fell through when he tried to have the land subdivided, and learned that a number of years ago, due to severe flooding, all land within two kilometers of the lake had been designated a flood zone and building on it was highly discouraged. Furthermore, to his chagrin, Slippery Seth discovered that the deed to the market garden property he now owned, didn't even include the waterfront area, and never had. Apparently, in his rush to get the deed transferred, the deceitful bridegroom had neglected to examine it thoroughly. When his rage subsided, and he found himself broke, with an unwanted wife and teenage stepdaughter to support, he turned into a miserable, lazy, beer-drinking, gambling slob with no more interest in a market garden than in a kindergarten. Unbelievably, even after it all came out, her mother's devotion to her cheating husband didn't change a bit. Worse still, she had gradually become more and more like him.

* * *

Now, as Maggie stepped away from the honeysuckle bush and into the sunlight, Seth caught sight of her and let his hands drop.

"Well, there you are, finally. Why the hell didn't you answer when I called?"

"Oh, was it you bellowing, Seth? Goodness, I didn't think you'd be up this early. I was busy picking raspberries."

"Forget the damned raspberries." He gave the railing a vicious kick. "You are supposed to be filling the vegetable kiosk at the end of the driveway."

“I have filled it already, and the condition of the vegetables is so pathetic, I was ashamed and embarrassed — which is why I am out here picking raspberries. It occurred to me that perhaps a few baskets of them placed alongside the limp and dying produce in the kiosk, might tempt a few customers to stop, but I doubt it. You can damn the raspberries until the sun sets in the east, Seth Poole,” she said, “but thanks to your neglect, the berries growing wild along the fence are the only edible items in the garden. Unless your luck changes at the poker table, or a miracle takes place in the garden, we may soon be selling wild raspberries from door to door to keep from starving to death.”

Seth’s face darkened. “Watch your tongue, Miss Bigmouth.”

Maggie wasn’t finished. “If that happens, Seth, let’s hope the Mirror Lake people will be generous. Perhaps they will even forget how they called you ‘Cess’ Poole when they learned how you cheated my mother four years ago, but I doubt that, also. Your scheme may have back-fired, but it was still a swindle, and Mirror Lake people have long memories.”

Ignoring his angry scowl, she climbed the porch steps to face him. “A minute ago, it suddenly struck me I must be crazy. On top of being overworked and unpaid for taking care of everything inside and outside the house, including the garden, I’ve had to listen to your constant bellowing. Well, I quit! You can find yourself another slave.”

“Oh, you’re crazy, all right,” he said, sneering. “I hope you don’t expect to find anyone else who would put up with a sassy brat like you because of your mother.” He turned toward the kitchen door. “I’ve heard enough of your whining and complaining, so shut up!”

But Maggie was still on an adrenalin high and eager to let loose her anger and frustration.

“I don’t give two hoots what people in Mirror Lake call you, but I call you a liar,” she said, scornfully. “You got what you wanted — the deed to the property — by promising my mother you would restore the garden to what it was before my father died. Look around you — some restoration. God knows what my father would call you — bone lazy comes to mind. And the way you have neglected his once successful market garden and let the buildings fall into disrepair, he would call scandalous, shameful and disgraceful.”

“God dammit, I told you to shut up!” Seth grabbed a torn cushion from a porch chair and slammed his fist into it, before finally flinging it

over the porch railing. "You're lucky the cushion was handy, Missy, or it might have been you at the end of my fist," he shouted. Kicking the chair with even more violence, he pointed a threatening finger at her. "You'd better not forget it's my house you're living in."

Ignoring him and the bits of cushion stuffing flying about, Maggie started toward the kitchen door. He held out his arm, barring the way.

"I think you should know, Miss Bigmouth, your snide remarks about repairs on this dump mean squat to me. I'm not interested in your dead father's comments. I'll make repairs when I'm damn good and ready. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly." She shrugged. "By then the buildings will probably have fallen down, anyway. What a pathetic ending to the well-maintained business you stole from my mother."

Whack! The blow struck the side of her head. She stumbled backward, clutching her head with one hand and, with the other, grabbing the arm of a wobbly porch chair to keep from falling. The arm broke off in her hand and she stared at Seth, wide-eyed with disbelief. He had actually hit her! Then fury took over. Breathing heavily, she stepped closer, waved the broken chair arm over her head and shrieked, "You lay a hand on me again, you miserable worm, and I'll bash your brains in."

"Yeah, yeah, sure." He turned away, laughing.

The blood rushed into Maggie's face. Kicking the wobbly chair out of the way, and bracing herself against the doorframe, she drew her arm back, preparing to make good her threat, if he took a step toward her.

"No, Maggie! No!"

She whirled. Her mother was standing inside the door. In the sudden silence, Maggie's eyes fell on the broken chair arm in her hand, and her heart jumped into her throat. A rusty nail was half-embedded in the wood. She dropped it in horror. In a daze, she heard Seth shouting at her mother.

"Okay, I've had it! I want your smart-mouthed brat out of my house, do you hear me? She's been nothing but a lippy bellyacher from the beginning. I'm not giving free room and board to a teenaged troublemaker even if she is your daughter."

Maggie's head cleared, instantly.

"Give? Free?" she shouted. "Did I hear you say free? Who has been cooking your meals, and washing your clothes, and cleaning the house,

and trying to keep the place going while you're hanging out with your pals in the village, or lying on the sofa watching TV and swilling beer and demanding attention?"

"Shut up! If you're not out of this house by the time I get back, I'll throw you out bodily." He leaped from the porch and headed for the lean-to shed that housed his battered Cadillac.

"Don't worry," Maggie yelled at his retreating back. "I've wanted to get away from here since the day you slithered into Mirror Lake, you lying swindler."

"Maggie, Maggie," her mother admonished, as the car roared down the road toward the village of Mirror Lake. "Why can't you be civil? All he wants is some respect." She sighed. "I've told you a million times to curb your tongue. Seth didn't mean what he said. When he comes back, tell him you are sorry, and he'll forget about your silly spat."

Maggie's mouth fell open.

"Silly spat! He hit me, Mom, and I might have driven a rusty nail into his no-good brain if you hadn't screamed. He meant what he said, believe me."

Her mother turned to go back into the house, saying over her shoulder, "Well, you shouldn't have provoked him with your sarcasm."

"What sarcasm? He is a lazy, beer-drinking gambler, and you know it." She followed her mother into the house, slamming the door. "And you don't have to worry about me provoking him anymore. I'll be out of here long before he comes reeling home."

She stamped across the main room of the house to her bedroom. Before she even reached the door, her mother had turned on the television and settled onto the sofa. A lot she cares, thought Maggie, flinging herself face down on the bed in her room. At long last, she had to accept that her mother had abandoned her. She blinked back hot tears. Her heart was still racing, and her stomach heaving. She took deep breaths, unsure if the nausea was caused by the shock of being struck by Seth, or by having the showdown with him. A minute later, the sound of a car motor made her jump off the bed in a panic. The car drove by, but the possibility was enough to jolt her into action. She sat down on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. What action?

Forget throwing up, Maggie Blake, she said to herself. Just get the hell out of here before he comes back. She looked around the room. Like

the house itself, it was small, barely big enough for her bed and small chest of drawers, but it had been her refuge after Seth's arrival. She strode to the curtained-off corner that served as her closet and rummaged until she found an old khaki backpack once belonging to her father. It was scratched and faded, but it would do. More importantly, it had never belonged to Seth.

How could she have been so stupid, she thought, staring blankly out the small window with the backpack clutched to her chest. For months, even years, she had been looking forward to being eighteen, legally of age, and free to get away from the farm and its slave-driving tyrant, but even though her birthday was only a couple of months away, she had made no plans. What had she been thinking? That all of a sudden, the day she turned eighteen, a job and a place to live would appear like magic? Now, unexpectedly, the day she had been longing for had arrived even earlier than she had anticipated, and she hadn't a clue what to do. "What an idiot," she said aloud, turning from the window. What kind of work could she get, anyway, she wondered? She hadn't even finished high school, thanks to good old Seth. The thought of him stiffened her spine. Forget Seth Poole, she said to herself. You haven't been sitting around twiddling your fingers all this time. Surely you can get a job somewhere, doing something. Lord knows, you can't afford to be fussy.

Giving her shoulders a determined lift, she started stuffing her meager belongings into the knapsack.

"What on earth are you doing with your father's old backpack?"

Maggie looked up. Her mother was scowling at her from the bedroom door.

"I am packing my things and I'm leaving. Surely you don't expect me to hang around here, working like a slave, while the master of the house does zip and uses me for a punching bag."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Maggie, stop acting like a tragedy queen. What happened today was nothing more than a family squabble. You know as well as I do you're not going anywhere."

"Oh, I'm going, Mom. I'm sorry to leave you to cope with everything, but I can't stay here after what he did today." She flinched, as she touched her still reddened cheek. "Maybe when the lazy lump discovers he's lost the best and cheapest labourer he'll ever have, he'll smarten up."

Her mother shook her head. “Give it a rest, Maggie,” she said, sighing. “You have no money, and no way of earning any. How do you propose to survive on your own?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I’ll find a way.”

“You are being ridiculous, Maggie. Put down the backpack and come to your senses. I told you before: Seth didn’t mean it. He simply lost his temper.”

Maggie’s eyes flashed. “You can call it temper, if you want. I call it his naturally rotten disposition, and his pathetic need for control. Look at what he’s done to you — cheated you out of your property, let the successful business you inherited from my father fall into ruin, and turned you into his personal slave with no mind of your own. You don’t seem to care, but I do. He has been trying to dominate me, but I won’t let him. Not anymore.”

She picked up the backpack and started for the door. Her mother stood in her way. “How can you say such things to me, Maggie? You are my daughter, and I love you.”

Maggie brushed past her, blinking back tears. “Not enough to stand up for me.” Stopping at the doorway, she looked back. “It isn’t too late, Mom,” she said, softly, “Come with me. Leave the scumbag.”

“Oh, Maggie, don’t be silly ...”

Maggie turned away. “Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll find work, somewhere.” Slung the backpack over her shoulder, she left the house where she’d been born nearly eighteen years before. As the door closed behind her, tears she had been holding back spilled over, and she wept.

CHAPTER 2

The driveway wavered under the sweltering heat of the midday sun. Her tears blurred her eyes. She tied her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail to get it off her neck, and pulled a kerchief from the backpack to wipe away both the perspiration and the tears running into her eyes. At least she had had the sense to change into a long-sleeved shirt, and wear a sun hat.

Not far from the Blake Market Garden driveway, she came to an opening in the trees beside the road and remembered an old cross-country trail through the woods that ended at the top of a hill on the Greenwood road about five miles from the town. The trail hadn't been used for years and was probably overgrown in spots, but she decided to take it. At least the trees would provide some shade, and the trail would cut some of the distance to the Greenwood road.

It wasn't far, but by the time she reached the end of the trail, she was already homesick. From where she stood on a grassy bank beside the road to Greenwood, she could see the countryside for miles — its rolling hills checkered with fields, its hidden valleys surrounding little lakes and streams, the clusters of white, gray and green clapboard houses and red barns that made up its tiny villages. Wherever she went, she thought, blinking back tears, this little area of southern Quebec, and particularly Mirror Lake, would never be far from her thoughts.

She looked south toward the Vermont border, only a few miles away, checking for oncoming cars. There were no vehicles of any kind in sight. With a sigh, she turned her gaze away from the Green Mountain peaks and looked north toward the town of Greenwood, where she would, with any luck, find a job.

Sitting down on the bank, she slipped the backpack from her shoulders, wishing she could as easily slip off her guilt at leaving her mother. She never should have abandoned her, she thought, no matter

what Seth had done. Her eyes filled with more tears. Maybe she should go back. Greenwood was still five miles away at least, and she probably wouldn't get a ride, anyway. She peered at her watch through her tears. She would wait three minutes, she decided, and if no one came along and offered her a lift, she would go back and apologize to Seth, even though she would rather stick needles in her eyes.

Leaning back against a rock but keeping a careful eye on the road, she let her thoughts drift back, as they so often did, to the happy times she and her mother had enjoyed before Seth Poole slithered into Mirror Lake and spoiled everything.

She and Seth had disliked each other from the beginning and their relationship had deteriorated during his seduction of her mother. Once the marriage occurred, though, Maggie had tried to get along with him, hoping her mother would appreciate her efforts and, eventually, if they all got along well, she and her mother might regain the closeness they once had.

What a fool she had been! She should have realized her mother was too obsessed with her new husband to have eyes or ears for anyone else, not even her daughter. Maggie's good intentions had lasted until she heard the story of how Seth had conned her mother to gain possession of the market garden property. Furious, she had called him a scheming, belly-crawling, snake-in-the-grass. It hadn't taken him long to get even. A few days before her fourteenth birthday that fall, he had met her at the farmhouse door when she arrived home from school.

"Your mother and I have decided you have had enough schooling for a farm girl," he had said. "The day you turn fourteen will be your last day of school." She could even remember the sneer on his face at the time.

She couldn't believe it. It was the cruelest thing he could have done to her, and he knew it. She had been within two years of receiving her high school leaving diploma, something she had been studying so hard to achieve. Weeping and wailing, she had begged her mother to interfere, but it was useless. Her besotted mother was more intent on kowtowing to Seth than caring about her daughter's welfare.

It was then Maggie realized she was nothing more than a servant in Seth's eyes. She was also forced to accept that her mother's love was lost to her until (or unless) her mother suddenly developed a backbone and

threw out her lazy, mean-tempered slob of a husband.

She shook her head. It wasn't going to happen. She'd never understand how her mother could care for the deceitful crook, particularly after what he had done to her. Never!

She looked at her watch. The three minutes were nearly up. Reluctantly getting to her feet, she put her arms through the straps of her backpack. She would have to apologize to Seth. Well, she sighed, at least I stood up to him for a few minutes. Before leaving the grassy bank, she took a last look down the road from Vermont. In the distance was a northbound vehicle. She gave a whoop of joy. All thoughts of returning home evaporated like mist in a morning sun. Waving both arms enthusiastically, she stood on the bank and watched it approach. It was a green pickup truck with "Ryan's Chicken Farm" in white lettering on the door, and it went by without slowing down. Tears of disappointment started to fill her eyes, only to be brushed away a few seconds later when the truck stopped and backed up onto the right-hand shoulder of the road, beside the grassy bank.

"Howdy, miss." The driver was an elderly man with a white beard and a thick mane of silvery hair. Leaning sideways from his seat, he looked over at her through the passenger side window. Then he peered at her more closely and his voice became gentle. "You all right, miss?"

Oh, Lordy, she thought, he noticed I've been crying. She climbed down from the bank, straightened her shoulders and kept her face averted. "I'm fine, thank you," she answered with dignity.

"Well, good," he said. "It sure is a hot day, though." He pulled a red and white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. "I'm on my way to Greenwood. If you're heading there and would like a lift, I'd be pleased to take you. The name is Ryan, Will Ryan," he said, opening the passenger door and offering her his hand.

She shook it, mumbling, "Uh, Maggie Blake, and I'd really like a lift."

"Good. Well, then, hop in."

He didn't have to tell her twice.

"Blake, you say?" said Mr. Ryan, pulling the pickup onto the road. "I used to know a chap named Blake, Hank Blake. Lived up Martinville way. Don't suppose he'd be any relation?"

"No, I don't think so." She kept her eyes on the window, hoping to

discourage conversation.

“Visiting folks in Greenwood, are you?”

“Uh, no, not really. I’m — I’m looking for a job.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You don’t say.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to find one,” she answered, wishing he would shut up.

“You got some place to stay?”

She gritted her teeth. “No, but I have enough money to pay for a place for — for quite a while.”

“Good ... Not to be nosy or nothing, but you look a mite young to be going off on your own, especially with no prospects.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said firmly, this time looking him straight in the eye.

“Yes, miss, of course you will,” said Will Ryan, and to Maggie’s relief, he lapsed into silence.

On the edge of Greenwood, he stopped the pickup in front of a large, two-storey brick building. A white painted sign on the front gate read, in large black letters: “Mrs. Brock’s Boarding House.” Underneath, in smaller print, was written, “Gentlemen Only.”

Maggie looked at Will Ryan and raised her eyebrows. “Is this as far as you’re going?”

“No, miss, but I’ve been thinking. I’m told this Mrs. Brock is looking for some help,” he said. “Might be a good place to start anyway. I hear the pay is good, but if it’s not the kind of job you’re lookin’ for, I’m sure she’ll do her best to find you one someplace else. She’s a big lady with a heart to match. I’ll be coming back this way in about half an hour; I’ll keep an eye out for you in case you don’t like what she’s offerin’.”

Maggie wasn’t prepared to have a job interview quite this soon, but, not knowing what to say, she thanked him for the lift and for the job tip and climbed down from the pickup. She heard the truck drive away as she walked through the wooden gate in the low stone wall fronting the property and started up the path toward the wide, white-painted front door.

----- End of sample -----

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