

ENTANGLED THORNS

Cedar Hollow Series, Book 3



by

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Dedication

To my husband, Donny, and my children, Caleb and Isaac.

In the words of Kay Langley, “Some people, like me, are blessed with a good family all the way around.”

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*For entangled like thorns, and drunken as with their drink, they are consumed utterly
like dry stubble.*

~ Nahum 1:10

Chapter 1

Beth Pritchett Sloan

The sun fades away in the west, and I pour myself a second glass of chardonnay, a pricier selection than my typical fare. We generally save the good stuff for company, but it's been a particularly trying day. The decanter is slick with sweat, the chill long since faded. This does not bother me. As quickly as I'll be emptying the bottle, it's hardly worth rousing to trek to the refrigerator between glasses, and I long ago gave up the pretension of an ice bucket. I'll drink it warm.

Given long enough, I might even omit the goblet. I've not previously sunk to that level of intemperance, but the swift road to my decline has left me uncertain as to what my final destination might be. The image of me imbibing straight from the source no longer seems beyond the realm of possibility, though I'm not quite there yet.

Replacing the bottle on the marbled windowsill with a satisfying *thunk*, I settle back into my overstuffed chair. It isn't a comfortable seat, chosen more for looks than functionality, the upholstery scratchy and unyielding, bought in a moment of presumption. But it's the only one that affords me the view I want. I have to crane my neck to the left and peer between the sprawling houses across the street, but if I angle my head just so, I can get a glimpse of the western sky.

Vaguely, I wonder when the sunsets became so subdued. Dull pink, dirty yellow, in the distance the colors are smeared across the dingy Memphis sky like a vapid stain, and I have a fleeting memory of tattered clothing hanging from a line, blowing in the wind. The air is wet and heavy, dripping with the stifling humidity that rolls across town from the muddy waters of the Mississippi River. The window fogs in front of me, the droplets creating rivulets on the steamy glass. In my current state of mind, the whole world appears to be weeping.

The flaming sunsets of my childhood had stretched across the West Virginia mountaintops as if painted by God himself, the hellfire and brimstone God I heard Brother Thomas Hudson, Jr. preach about down at the Cedar Hollow Baptist Church on the rare occasions my family occupied a pew. As a child, I took it literally when Brother Hudson spoke about his personal relationship with God. Observing the preacher's deep creases and lines, I had assumed he and God were roughly the same age, though in retrospect the poor man was probably no older than I am now.

As I tilt my head, savoring the taste of expensive wine as it slides down my throat, I'm amused at the memory of my childish interpretations. I haven't thought of Brother Hudson in years, and for a fleeting instant I wonder if he's still there, perched behind

the pulpit, fist waving in indignation at the sinful nature of his parishioners. Of course he's not; he'd be long dead by now. I swallow, leaning my head back against the rough upholstery, too disappointed in the faded sunset to risk the crick in my neck I'm sure to receive by seeking it out.

There are a few things I miss from my childhood, and the sunsets are one of them. My family, however, is not. The letter in my lap lays like a weight across my thighs, pinning me down and holding me prisoner, wiping out any comfort I might have found from the wine. With the exception of my sister, I haven't seen my family of origin in nearly twenty-seven years, not since Luke died. And now this.

The house is quiet, and my thoughts seem to echo not only through my own mind, but through the darkened rooms. I am alone here, literally as well as figuratively. Mark is still at work, or wherever he is when he isn't home, possibly with a patient or answering an emergency call, or—the nagging thought won't leave me alone—maybe having an affair with his voluptuous new receptionist. I'm too old and tired to entertain the thought of competing with her salacious seduction. I would like to believe our years together, our children, and the home we've created would outweigh whatever attraction Mark might feel for her, but I don't know, and at this point it hardly matters. It's too late.

My older child, Matthew, recently moved into the dorms of the University of Tennessee. I smile at the thought of my quiet, serious son. Matthew wants to follow in his father's footsteps, entering into the university's pre-med program with a full course load. He's an earnest young man, very much like his father was when we met. I only hope Matthew won't learn to wield that earnestness like a sword the way his father does. But I'm not being fair; it isn't Mark's fault I can't live up to his expectations.

Unlike Matthew, Marissa is anything but serious. Irreverent, raucous, Marissa has been a challenge since the day she was born. I congratulate myself on getting her through her first seventeen years of life relatively intact. I only hope I can get her through her last year of high school before she completely rebels against my authority.

Marissa stormed out hours ago, after another of our battles, texting me later to let me know she was with friends at the mall. That text gives me hope. Marissa is a good daughter, a sweet girl in spite of our skirmishes, but I can feel her slipping away. Always headstrong, her sudden temper flares have become more frequent and longer lasting. I'm not sure the cause, and I don't know how to fix it, but her temperament is all too familiar. This tortures me. I love my daughter. I don't want to lose her, too.

I swish the drink around in my glass again, watching as the liquid sparkles in the light from the lamp by my side. More often than not, I spend my evenings sitting alone in the lamplight. I ignore the phone calls confirming church bake sales and band booster events; I disregard the doorbell, turning away impromptu invitations to share gossip and drinks on someone's back deck.

When the children were younger, evening was my favorite time of day, regardless of the season. I loved the softening around the edges, the muted light, the gentle breeze that always seemed to pick up just as the sun slipped toward the horizon. I was comforted by the sight of cars turning into carports up and down the street as families reunited.

In warmer weather, we gathered outside as soon as the dinner dishes were cleared, as if summoned by some sort of unspoken communication. The parents and the children, at first in our own yards and driveways, eventually drawn together, sometimes content to stand on sidewalks, other times settling on lounge chairs and deck swings, the location unimportant, the company everything. Neckties were loosened, high heels were kicked off, and drinks were poured as the children played around us, two on bikes, another three on a swing set, a passel playing hide and seek through the adjoining yards.

I still hear the sounds, the deep rumble of a man's laugh, the higher melody of women's voices, shrieks of children at play. They resonate, muffled through my window, but I no longer join in. Instead, I sit alone with my thoughts. On clear evenings I watch the sunset before pulling the shades, complete in my isolation. Sometimes I ruminate on those early days, when things were different. I remember children running through the house, laughter bouncing off the walls, wrestling sleeping bags down from the linen closet for another slumber party.

I remember standing over the stove, timing the meatloaf just right so that after an exhausting day of building up his medical practice, Mark would enter into a home warm with family and food, the table set, the platters steaming. I remember that for a little while, a moment in time so brief I can barely grasp it before it dissipates like a fine mist, I was the perfect wife and mother, our home the epitome of domestic bliss. As pathetic as it may seem, these solitary evenings with my memories are now the highlight of my life.

I have enough insight to realize I've created the circumstances that sadden me, but not enough to know how it could have turned out any differently. My family of origin was not an easy one. My grandfather, Lucas Pritchett, Sr.—known as Old Man Pritchett to the good folks of Cedar Hollow, West Virginia, and as Papaw Pritchett to us—was a smalltime moonshiner and bootlegger, making 'shine in the stills behind the rundown shack he called home, and running it through Mingo County back when no stranger in his right mind would dare to drive through Williamson after sunset.

Mingo County was pieced together out of parts of Logan County back in 1895, in an attempt to get a better handle on the moonshine activity in the area. Williamson, the county seat, is a pretty little town today, rich with West Virginia history. But in Papaw Pritchett's day many claimed, and I believe them, that Mingo County was built by, run by, and governed by bootleggers, some in overalls like my grandfather, and some, they said, wearing the uniform of the law.

I suppose my grandfather's claim to fame, if there is one, was that he helped build Mingo. To this day his body is no doubt buried somewhere within the county lines; it was never found, but it was on the night of one such run that Papaw Pritchett failed to make it home. It wasn't entirely unexpected; bootlegging was an ugly business back then. I imagine it still is, whether it's whiskey or meth, the modern day equivalent. At any rate, Papaw Pritchett wasn't missed. Outside of making and running hooch, which most of my family knew how to do, he'd been a regular bastard.

The educated people with whom I'm acquainted laugh when I mention my family history. To them, it's quaint, a small slice of Americana that no longer exists. But it does still exist; I know this because many of my family members still live it. Oh, they don't run 'shine across county lines anymore, but I'd be willing to bet my cellar full of fine

wines they continue to make it for themselves, and no doubt bootleg it to any tightlipped locals who crave the taste.

Papaw Pritchett's son, my father, was known simply as Junior. I suppose we must have called him dad, but I don't remember calling him anything at all. I don't remember ever addressing him, except in answer to his orders. I knew him primarily as, "Yes, sir."

When Papaw didn't come home, my father took over the running of the stills. He was, after all, the oldest of the ten children, and therefore the most experienced with the process. If Papaw Pritchett's whiskey running business was smalltime, my father's was miniscule, not because he couldn't make decent rotgut—his was known as some of the best around due to the amount of cane sugar mixed into the mash, a recipe he proudly referred to as *pure 'shine*—but because in the absence of Papaw Pritchett's iron will, my family always had a tendency to drink more than they sold.

My job, along with my younger siblings and cousins, was as taster. I don't remember when they first began using me in this manner, but I do remember when they began using Naomi. She had just celebrated her first birthday. I was three at that time, old enough to have learned there was no use fighting it. Naomi, however, fought with every muscle in her tiny little body, screaming until she was blue in the face that first time and many times after.

Naomi was always the stronger of the two of us in spite of my advantage in age. As I think about it, I realize Marissa is very much like Naomi, a fact made more interesting because they've never met. This realization brings with it a pang of regret. As far as I know, Naomi doesn't even know I have children. Although we ran away together, we haven't spoken since before my children were born.

As Naomi would eventually learn, screaming worked against us when we were on the job. The more extreme our reaction to the squeezing forced into our mouths, the better the quality of the 'shine was believed to be. This was apparently a huge source of amusement for the numerous relatives that seemed always to be camped in lean-tos and tents behind our shack. Not surprisingly, it's also the source of the many fillings and crowns that now adorn my teeth. I suppose I should be grateful they never called us in to taste until after the flame test had been conducted. Tasting ruined our teeth, but at least we weren't dead from lead poisoning.

The sun sets and I sit staring out at the darkness watching the street lights switch on, illuminating the Germantown neighborhood that has been my home for the past eighteen years. In Germantown, we like to pretend we're safe from the poverty and crime that exists in our sister city to the west. We trim our hedges and water our lawns and have weekend barbeques and neighborhood watches and pretend not to know what's out there, although just last week three murders occurred within ten miles of my upper-crust neighborhood. Our safe cocoon is just an illusion, and it strikes me as sadly amusing that I've come so far to go nowhere. But how could I have done otherwise? The person I seek to escape is myself.

I lift the bottle, struggling with the cork. As I pour my third glass I promise it will be my last for the night, but I know I'm a liar even as I make the promise. *You need to come home*, the letter says, but there's no point in going home. The past is done; it can't be changed no matter how much we might wish otherwise.

In the early days the wine brought me temporary peace, but that hasn't been the case for a long time. I need to let it go, this habit. The only thing that keeps me from stopping is the fear that I can't. God, I've made a mess of things.