

Threads of Regret

Regina Russell

"Books you can trust with your heart."



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Chapter 1

1979

Dahlonega, Georgia—A Sunday morning...

Her heart was pounding as if she were the one getting ready to walk into the small establishment with a gun tucked underneath her belt. She brushed her hair out of her eyes so she could see into the store more clearly.

She hadn't had a hit in two days and there was nothing she wanted more. But they were close now. She could feel it.

She watched as Charlie sauntered toward the door and then stopped to lean against the building. He attempted a casual pose while keeping his head down. She sighed. To her, he looked as awkward as one of the skinny-legged cranes she saw frequently picking their way along the shallows at the lake. She was still watching a moment later, when a customer came out carrying a newspaper and a gallon of milk and walked right by him. She saw Charlie slip inside the store without even touching the door before it closed all the way.

She took a deep breath and started to count to thirty the way he instructed her earlier. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi...."

When she reached thirty Mississippi, she smiled anxiously to herself, started the car and put it into reverse as she began to back out.

The blast of a horn blowing startled her causing her to stomp on the brakes. The momentum jerked her

forward in her seat. She looked to her left. The man she saw carrying the milk out of the store had brought his car to a quick stop also just a few feet away from her bumper and he was glaring at her. She put the car back in drive and shot her hand out of the window giving the man an obscene gesture while she pulled the car back up to let him by.

She looked around her and took a deep breath. Charlie was still in the store. She tried backing up again. This time she navigated the car out of the parking spot successfully and then began her slow drive toward the front of the store as she watched for Charlie to come back out.

What was taking him so long? Suddenly, she saw him bolting across the parking lot towards her. Instead of driving up to meet him, she stepped on the brakes again.

"Go! Go!" he shouted as he jerked the passenger door open and this time she did step on the gas and the car lurched forward.

Charlie barely made it into the seat.

"Did you get the money?" she asked him, the urgency in her voice matching the wild look on his face.

"Yes, I got it!" Charlie screamed. "Get the ____ out of here. I just shot a man!"

Franklin County

Patricia heard the front door open and she took a deep breath before placing her feet into her slippers and heading for the stairs. He better have a good explanation for staying out all night, she thought but in her heart she knew he wouldn't.

Drew had gone into the kitchen and she walked towards the noise he was making—the solid, sure sounds of doors closing—first it was cabinet doors, then it was the door of the refrigerator. She rounded the corner and saw him standing there—wrinkled shirt-tail hanging out over his blue jeans and still wearing his old, work boots—looking cowboy to the core.

Patricia was fuming. She had told him a hundred times he was not allowed to come further than the foyer of the house with his work boots on. He was pouring a glass of tomato juice as he stood near the gray and white marble bar she had coaxed him into buying. The bar was terribly expensive and took five men to handle but it helped turn the kitchen she had so lovingly redecorated after they married into a showpiece.

He glanced at her before throwing one long leg over the leather bar stool the way he would throw his leg over Samson, his favorite horse. "You know..." he started drunkenly with a lop-sided grin in her direction, "...I'm glad I bought this contraption now. I feel right at home."

Patricia's anger boiled over and she felt the compunction to do something to wipe the smirk from his lips. She stepped towards him and reached for the glass of tomato juice with the intention of flinging the bright liquid into his face. But Drew, even a drunken

Drew, was too fast for her. The disgust in her eyes had telegraphed her intentions to him as surely as if she had spoken them and he lifted the glass out of her reach and laughed.

"Now, just what did you think you were going to do, Mrs. Amos?"

Patricia drew her hand back to slap him and he caught it in mid-air. After a few long seconds of being held in check by his iron grip, she let her arm go limp. Aware of the ridiculous spectacle they must make, even though there was no one there but them, she stepped back, chest heaving and he released his hold on her.

"How dare you come in here and act as though nothing has happened!"

"Tell me," Drew inquired lazily as he slurred his words. "What has happened?"

The innocent look on Drew's handsome face only sharpened her anger. She knew there were a lot of women in town who would be glad to go to bed with her husband at his request and she feared the worst.

"You're the one who didn't come home all night!" she accused as hot tears began to roll down her face. "You're the one who..."

"Who what?" he asked before taking a long drink of his tomato juice as though leisurely waiting for her answer.

She had been about to say, "Who has already caused enough trouble by sleeping around," but caught herself and answered instead: "Who has left your wife at home alone to worry all night about you."

He set the glass down carefully—too carefully. The smile was gone from his face as he considered the

angry countenance on the beautiful woman he had married.

"What about *me* being left alone, Patty?" he asked harshly. "Where is all your worry for how I will be left alone in California with no wife to accompany me—no wife because she is too busy with her store to even spend time with her husband when he asks her to? Where is your worry about that?"

"You don't have to go," she shot back.

"Should I change my plans then?" he shouted as he stood up and stepped closer to her. She could see the anger in his eyes now and prickles of fear ran through her. She was not used to seeing him in this condition.

"I asked you," he repeated. "Should I change my life for your store?" He grabbed her arm just above her elbow. She knew there would be a bruise there the next day.

"Tell me, Patty, does everything have to be about making you happy—doing what you want? Is that the only way this marriage can succeed?" He sneered as he drew her closer to him. There was nothing she could do. His hand was like a vice and any strength her anger had spurred up in her earlier seemed to have melted into her shoes.

Suddenly, she was being pulled towards him and his lips were on hers. She could taste the liquor on his mouth and feel the hardness of his chest as he mashed her body against his. His kiss was long and insulting to her and when he released her she almost fell down in her attempt to get away from him.

"Don't you ever grab me like that again!" she told him as she rubbed her arm with her hand. "I'm not one of your...,"

"My what?" he dared.

Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head. "Oh, what do I care? Just leave me alone, you drunken jerk!" she cried.

"Go to California and buy your cattle but go without me. I don't want to go with you! Take care of your business and I'll take care of mine!"

There was nothing for her to do next but climb the stairs back up to their bedroom and slam the door and there was nothing left for him to do but head towards the guest room and fall into bed.

There were no more tears for Patricia that morning though. After she washed her face and became calmer, she realized she was left in the rare position of not knowing what she wanted to do with the rest of the day.

Her store was closed because it was Sunday and she had left the books there for once, tired of spending her only day off examining them. Business was starting to get better little by little and Patricia finally felt as though the store was experiencing an upturn.

When she had finished a leisurely bath, she wrapped herself in her favorite robe and wandered out into the hall. She noticed the closed door of the room they referred to as the "guest bedroom" and knew Drew was probably inside because the door was usually left open. She placed her palm on the door and for a long moment considered going inside to her husband.

She thought about putting her arms around him and telling him she was sorry and that she wanted to go to California with him after all.

But pride held her back. He was the one who had wronged her and when someone wronged you, you had

to teach them a lesson. She thought of her sister and her father and felt her heart harden. No.

She would let Drew Amos lie there in his drunken stupor and she would not let him touch her again until he got back from his trip. That would teach him, she decided and with her mind made up, she determined to go to church instead.

She glanced at the clock. The service would begin in about an hour so she needed to get ready. Content with her agenda, she returned to her bedroom.

Patricia found pleasure in picking out the clothes to wear for her outing. It wouldn't hurt either for the people in town to see her attending a service, she thought as she let her fingers slide down the sleeve of an expensive, silk blouse. She considered wearing it but remembered the bright print dress, never worn since buying it over a month ago. She knew it was too sophisticated for work, with its revealing neck-line and sheer, long sleeves but with a simple green scarf to cover what would otherwise be an immodest décolletage, it would be wonderful for church, she decided.

She smiled at the prospect of wearing it as she laid the dress carefully across her bed. Let Drew sleep it off while she saw a few old friends, she thought. They would work things out between them later. They always did.

Dahlonega, Georgia

After the Chevy II shot out of the store's parking lot, Charlie ordered her to drive them to one of his friend's houses, a man everybody called Diamond. Shakily, she obeyed and a few minutes later she was pulling his car up the gravel driveway of an old, ramshackle house located on the edge of town.

Soon they were seated cross-legged on the floor in front of a scratched up coffee table with a line of coke in front of each of them. Both leaned forward over the table sniffing in every tiny, white particle they could coax up their noses. The next thing she knew, Charlie was telling his friend about the robbery.

She was stunned! They had agreed to tell no one and Charlie had already leaked it to the first person he talked to. He saw the look on her face and tried to placate her. "He's cool. You know that."

She punched him in the arm and went outside and got in the car. Charlie had shot a man and he was dumb enough to brag about it! She couldn't believe it.

Soon, they were heading back downtown to where she had been staying. Charlie lived with his brother and his family but she lived wherever she could. She could not go home to Kentucky especially since the old man had caught her sneaking back in the house. She had some money now though and thought if she gave her friend's mother twenty dollars, she might let her stay there another week. She knew the woman was a pot-head and didn't really care about her but if she could get a bag of weed out of it, she would probably let her stay. Maybe by the time the week was up she would have somewhere else to go.

She pulled up in front of the house and put the car in park. Charlie leaned over and kissed her. "Stay cool and don't use all that blow at once. I'll see you tomorrow." He scooted over to take her place behind the wheel as she got out of the car. She bent over to plant another kiss on his lips.

"I hope Diamond keeps his mouth shut," she said with a worried expression as she stood back up, "...or they'll put us under the jail."

"Don't worry, Babe," he urged. His tone was easy as though her show of concern was just an anxious over-reaction. "He's not telling anyone."

She thought to herself that drug dealers did not tend to be the most trust-worthy people but there was no use debating that now. She walked toward the entrance of the small house where her friend lived without looking back. She still couldn't believe Charlie had told.

Franklin County, Kentucky

Patricia's decision to go to church while Drew slept off his drunken state helped to ease the tension in her mind. The admiring glances she received from several of the men and not a few of the women were like a healing balm to her. The gorgeous red-head did not know much about how to respond to a man who was not at her beck and call but she did know how to acclimate herself to an admiring group of people who were glad to have her among them.

It had been several weeks since Patricia had gone anywhere that wasn't business related besides her own home and she found herself appreciating the company of others, the hymns and warm atmosphere, even the sermon.

She sat near the middle of the church next to a woman and her family who frequented her store. After the service was over, she accepted greetings from several people around her. She enjoyed the feel of their warm grasps in her daintily gloved hands as she lingered to chat.

Though she glimpsed her lawyer and friend, Stephen Porterhouse talking to someone, he never made eye contact with her. She was surprised to see him there and wondered how long he had been going to church. Then she realized Stephen's presence was probably due to the woman beside him. As Patricia was walking out of the church's double doors, she saw Stephen and his companion already getting into his car as though they were in a hurry. Her eyes narrowed in deliberation.

It was almost incredible to Patricia that someone she shared such a close business relationship with could

be so distant to her in public. Hadn't he seen her sitting there? Why hadn't he come up to her after the service ended?

She watched as he drove away and frowned. He was probably heading towards marriage from the looks of it. She hoped his attachment would not affect their business relationship. There was no one else she trusted the way she trusted Stephen and as Drew's best friend, there was no one else who understood the things she had gone through with Drew. She should have considered that before she set them up, she reflected.

Still, she was glad she had come to church and as she settled behind the wheel of her pale, yellow Lincoln Continental, she wished someone had invited her out to lunch that day. Suddenly, she was engulfed with a feeling of loneliness.

Patricia thought of her store and the children's clothes hanging there in neat rows. She thought of the new orders and the inventory she needed to work on and decided she would get something to eat and take it to her workplace. It wouldn't hurt to get a jump on Monday, she thought as she pulled out of the church parking lot.

Dahlonaga, Georgia

She was swinging her leg and talking animatedly with Georgina as she sat on the edge of her bed. The after effects of the cocaine in her system made it hard for her to sit still. She was smiling and laughing as she plotted with Georgina about the best way to get her mother to let her stay there another week.

Finally, they heard her car pull up outside and Georgina looked out the window. "That's her," she said.

She got the money out of her pocket and headed towards the living room. Georgina followed. Her friend's mother's eyes brightened considerably as she noted the twenty dollar bill she held out to her. Directly following her friend's mother's agreement to let her stay there another week, there was a loud knock on the door. The woman almost grabbed the money out of her hand before going to answer it.

It was a wide-eyed Charlie.

Without wasting time on any of the simplest of greetings, he entered the living room and took her by the hand. "We've got to get out of here," he told her while leading her toward the door in an urgent manner.

Georgina and her mother stood by and watched in surprise as Charlie almost drug her towards his car.

"My brother said one of his friends told him the police have got a search out for a light brown, 1964 Chevy II two door," he announced. "He called me when he heard because he knew it sounded like my car."

Her countenance grew angry. "That old _____," she cursed as she opened the passenger door and got in.

Charlie glanced at her as he put the car in drive. "My brother?" he questioned.

"No. The dude who was carrying the milk right before you ran back out of the store. He almost hit me when I was backing the car out to come and get you."

Charlie cursed. "I told you to be careful; not to get noticed and you almost had a wreck in the parking lot?" He shook his head as he stepped on the gas. "I can't believe you!"

"Hey, nobody told you to shoot anybody either!" she yelled back. "That was *real* smart. That just took everything to a whole 'nuther level."

Charlie looked both ways before turning down the street that led to a back-road he knew. His long hair swayed in motion around him as he turned to shout at her. "You knew me using that gun was a possibility. That ___ ___ looked like he was reaching under the counter for something! What was I supposed to do—stand there and get shot?"

She twisted around in her seat nervously to look through the rear window as they sped down the street. "No, but you sure wasn't supposed to go right to Diamond and spill your guts either!"

"All that doesn't matter now!" he shouted. "We've got to get out of here!"

"Maybe *you've* got to get out of here," she shot back.

Charlie's face was a mask of hurt and anger as he stepped on the brakes and came to a full stop at the next corner. He turned to look at her. "You want out? I'll let you out right here, baby!"

She considered opening the passenger door, jumping out of the car and just running back to

Georgina's house. Maybe that would be the best thing to do. But she thought of Charlie speeding away without her and her stomach drew up in knots.

"No. Keep driving," she replied. "We're in this together."

Her words would come back to haunt her many times over the years.

Franklin County, Kentucky

Patricia scanned the shelves in the layaway department as she checked for the numbers that corresponded with the ones on the ticket she was holding. So far, every order lined up. Cracking the whip over Leah's head had helped, she thought as she considered the heated one-sided conversation she had with her employee a couple of weeks ago. She still regretted not keeping her friend, Cynthia on in her place. However, at the time she made the decision, she thought she was doing the right thing. Leah had seniority over Cynthia. Patricia, in fairness to the employee who had been there the longest had let Cynthia go and kept Leah. As a young boss and owner, Patricia knew she could not let herself be weakened by fraternization with her employees. That was something she determined early on but Cynthia never forgave her and their friendship was ruined.

However, with the passing of time, Leah had proven to be a little lazy and Patricia would not tolerate an employee who was not willing to give more attention to detail. There was too much at stake. One customer's complaint about the disheveled state her layaway was in when she received it was enough to

send Patricia to Leah's department with fire in her eyes. She didn't believe Leah would let it happen again and Patricia was there that afternoon to make sure it wouldn't.

Almost a week had passed since Drew stayed out all night. Patricia had seen him rarely since. They passed one another in their home several times and barely acknowledged the other's presence.

To her surprise, he continued to stay in the guest room and neither of them tried to do anything to repair the rift between them. Patricia thought a lot about it. She missed Drew in their bed.

She decided she would be at the airport when he left to say goodbye. She imagined the surprise on his face when he saw she was there to see him off. That's the image she wanted him to take to California with him—her standing there, dressed and coifed immaculately with tears in her eyes as she told him she would miss him. In the movie of her mind, it would make for a great homecoming for them. And they needed one of those just to get back on track.

She never wanted to let things get out of hand. She had seen it happen with other people who did not pay attention to the condition of their marriage. Arguments would lead to more arguments. People forgot why they loved each other. Time passed and eventually they claimed not to love one another anymore and divorce would follow. That would never happen with her and Drew, she determined. Patricia believed Drew was the love of her life—the only man she would ever love.

Her mind drifted as she recalled the time she tried to forget Drew. She had even gone so far as to become engaged to someone else. Patricia remembered the look

in her fiancé's eyes when she told him she could not marry him. He was crushed and though he married a few years later, any chance meeting they had was still awkward for them.

As Patricia slipped deeper into reverie, her fingers loosened on the pen she was holding and it dropped to the floor. She bent down quickly to pick it up. Get hold of yourself, Patricia, she thought. There's work to do.

She began matching the numbers again as she checked out the condition of each box of goods. There were scores of boxes of children's clothing as women "laid away" their dreams for another day. Christmas was coming up and her layaway department had been flocked with a lot of business.

Her eyes grew moist as she thought of the children who would have gifts under Christmas trees soon—gifts their mothers purchased from her store. Yet there would be no gift for a child under her and Drew's tree. She thought of the doctor visits and the heartbreaking news that came to them finally after several tests.

She was not able to conceive.

Patricia knew Drew tried not to show his extreme disappointment that they were destined to be childless but she believed she saw the evidence of it in his eyes sometimes. Then she thought of the deception she helped to stage against him and sighed. There were just some things people were better off not knowing.

She checked her watch again. She would have to leave soon to accomplish her plan. Drew's plane was to take off in less than three hours and she intended to dress for the occasion. She smiled as she pictured his face when he saw her waiting there for him. Surely, that

would patch things up between them before he left. It had to.

Some where in Illinois near the Michigan state line

Looking back on it later, she was surprised they had been able to escape the hands of the law as long as they did.

Charlie drove at night and they slept during the day. They lived in the car, ate bologna sandwiches and took sink baths in gas station restrooms.

The money from the store robbery was almost gone and so was the coke they snorted but they still had a dime bag of pot left. Charlie had thrown the gun over the bridge going into Cincinnati as they travelled north. In a weird set of circumstances, the gun landed on a man's fishing boat in a tub of catfish and was turned into the police the next day.

However, the gun was not connected to the shooting until after Charlie was pulled over near the Michigan state line. A policeman had recognized the license plate from the all-points bulletin he received that afternoon at the beginning of his shift. The eager rookie called dispatch, confirmed the plates matched those of a tan 1964 Chevy II and within moments he had back-up joining him.

"I think that car might be following us," Charlie told her. Still, he took a long draw from the joint she passed to him. He tried to hold the smoke from the hit in his lungs as he spoke, drawing his eyebrows together and straining. "I think it's a cop car."

She reached for the joint and took a small hit from it. "It's no time to get paranoid," she said knowing from experience that smoking marijuana could cause one to

have deep feelings of paranoia. "We're hundreds of miles away from Georgia and they've got enough of their own trouble up here without worrying about us."

Though she was hoping to encourage him, she knew he might be right. They could have police in every state looking for them and not even know it, especially if the man Charlie shot died.

What if the guy in the store did die? She shrugged her shoulders. There was nothing she could do about that now. Then she thought of the man who was carrying the gallon of milk out of the store and recalled how he blew his horn at her when she backed Charlie's car out in front of him a moment later. She wished she hadn't shot him the finger when he blew his horn at her. Later, as she and Charlie discussed how the police might have gotten a description of his car, she confessed everything that happened. Charlie had shook his head and murmured that she probably couldn't have done more to make his car memorable to the man.

Just then, the moment they dreaded came. Red and blue lights began to flash behind them. "Oh ____!" Charlie cried as he put the joint out in the ashtray and began to roll his window down to let out the pungent aroma of the marijuana.

"Maybe they're just pulling you over cause of that broken tail light or something," she yelled. "We can't freak out!" She thought of the bag of pot lying between them and threw it into the glove box.

"You idiot!" Charlie screamed as he began to slow down. "That's the first place they'll look! Roll your window down and throw the rest of that joint out. We gotta' get the smell out of here too."

She did as he said and then took the small rolled up baggie of pot and began to stuff it frantically into the crevice of the seat behind her. "Don't call me an idiot! You're the one who got us into all this trouble!"

"Yeah, I knew that's what it would all come down to," he threw out bitterly. "I knew if anything happened all the blame would fall on me."

"I didn't tell you to take a loaded gun into that store!"

"You didn't care if everybody in there got shot as long as you got what you wanted!" he raged.

"Let's stop this!" she cried finally. "We have to get ourselves calmed down!"

"You know we're going to jail," he answered as he turned the old Chevy into the empty parking lot.

She looked back up at him and pleaded. "Just ask what the problem is. It might not have anything to do with the store."

He looked in the rearview mirror again as the colorful flashing lights followed them into the parking lot. "It's like we're being chased by a Christmas tree!" he commented and despite her fear, his words caused her to burst into nervous laughter.

But by the time Charlie got the car slowed to a stop, her laughter had ceased and her heart was beating like a wild deer's. She looked in the rear view mirror and saw two more police cars with lights flashing and sirens blasting pulling in behind the first one.

That's when she knew for sure they were not being pulled over for a broken tail light and fear spread through her veins like ice water.

Franklin County

It seemed to Patricia that everything was working against her getting to the airport to see Drew off. She tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel in an impatient staccato.

The immensely needed shipment that was supposed to refurbish the racks and shelves of her store before the shopping season was over had arrived two hours late. By the time she was able to leave, Patricia knew there would be no going home to change her clothes. She would be doing good just to get to the airport on time to see Drew.

She pulled down the mirror in her visor and checked her makeup. When would that traffic start moving? She had taken the main road out of town that headed towards the Louisville airport but there were signs of construction up ahead and traffic was only inching along. If she had to wait much longer, she might as well turn around and go home. She would not make it to the airport in time.

After waiting a few more minutes, Patricia gave up and turned her car around to head back towards home. She was exhausted and the thought of traveling so far and possibly arriving too late caused her to rethink her plan. She would call Drew that evening at his hotel, she decided. She would tell him about the late shipment and the traffic and he would know she had good intentions. He would know she tried.

Drew's trip to the airport allowed his mind to be free to think about what had happened between him and Patricia. He didn't expect her to be at home every evening with his supper waiting for him but he figured once a week would be nice. He thought of other women in his life who were important to him and wondered what it would have been like if he had married someone else, particularly May. May and her two boys would have meant an instant family.

However, Drew was convinced in his heart that as long as he was able to draw a breath, he would long for Patricia and if he had married someone else, Patricia would still be in his heart. With that thought uppermost in his mind, he almost backed out of the trip to California to go back home to his wife. The distance between them at that moment seemed too great for him to physically add to it and being a man of instincts, he regretted going ahead with his plans for the trip. But the thought that settled it for him, causing him to keep steering his car towards the airport, was that Patricia would probably still be at the store if he turned around and went home anyway.

Another hour later, Drew was parking his truck on the third tier of the airport's parking garage in Louisville, Kentucky. Not a fan of long car trips, he was glad to finally feel his boots on the ground.

But he frowned as he lifted his suitcase out of the back of the pickup and began the long walk to the terminal. He hated flying.

A few moments later, he entered the terminal and headed towards the check in. Drew was not a man to feel out of place just because he was a farmer. He was the type of self-assured, educated man who acclimated

easily. With a self-confident stride, he made his way through the airport.

But something he did not expect stopped him in his tracks. Someone called his name.

"Drew! Drew!" he heard the familiar female voice calling. His surprise was evident as he saw the woman who used to be his wife's best friend coming towards him quickly, the clicking noise of her heels as they smacked the floor mirroring her hurried state.

"Cynthia?" he questioned as he noted the fact she was pulling a large suitcase by a long handle. "What are you doing here?" But as soon as he said the words, he thought he knew. She was here because of him.

In a few steps she was beside him. "Remember the other night after we left the bar and we sat in your truck and talked?"

He nodded.

"I thought a lot about that night and I'm here because you said you didn't want to go alone. Now, you don't have to," she said simply.

His eyes scanned her quickly. Her pretty face and shoulder length brown hair flipping up at the ends was enough to turn the heads of most men but it was her figure that really caused the second glances. Cynthia was not a woman who scorned showing off her bountiful cleavage. She wore a low v-necked, yellow blouse and a pair of tight fitting bell-bottom jeans that caused a desire in him he did not bother to fight. He knew he had flirted with her a few nights ago as they commiserated and drank too much together.

She gave him a knowing smile as she looked up at him. "I didn't think you needed to go to California by yourself," she stated, her eyes daring him to disagree.

"You're not the kind of man who needs to be left alone to your own devices in a strange place."

At that moment, Drew knew he was glad to let Cynthia accompany him to California. His mind made up, he smiled in return as their eyes met for a long second.

"You're right. I don't want to go alone."

Her eyes were warm and understanding. "I've been waiting for you. I was sitting back there and if you weren't alone, I would have left but I saw you were."

They began to walk together towards the check-in line.

"Have you got a ticket?" he asked.

She nodded. "After we talked the other night, I decided to call the airlines. There was only one flight leaving for California at the time you told me so I made a reservation."

He grinned and couldn't help asking: "You were that sure I wanted you to come?"

"No," she replied boldly. "I was that sure *I* wanted to."

She turned to face the ticket counter as they stood in line together leaving him to mull over her words. He let his eyes roam over Cynthia's shoulders and back and then down to her buttocks. He closed his eyes for a brief second and tried to think of Patricia but all he could see was her face contorted with anger as she told him to go about his own business while she went about hers.

He knew what they were doing was wrong. He did not doubt that he would pay for it either. But at that moment, he knew he wanted Cynthia Moreland with

him in his hotel room that night more than he had wanted anything in a very long time.

Chapter 2 — Five Years Later 1984

Arrendale State Prison Alton, Georgia

She wasn't the only one in their group who never received letters from the outside but that didn't make it any easier for her. Once again she sat silent as the women around her discussed their children, their husbands and showed pictures of their families while they talked about how they couldn't wait to get out and see them again.

It had been three years since she had gotten the letter from Charlie telling her he was getting married to some woman on the outside he had been corresponding with. It still made her mad to think about it. If it wasn't for him and his stupid idea to carry a loaded gun in that store, she'd be on the outside with her own life to live, yet here she was alone and somehow he had managed to procure a wife. Anger pulsed through her veins.

She headed to the workout room but kept her eye out for the guard they called *Big Red* and an inmate named Helen Brannigan. Helen still had it in for her because she spit in her face once. The unfortunate incident happened when she had just arrived at the prison. Scared and feeling more alone than she had ever felt before, she thought she had to show everyone, right from the start, that she was not someone to be messed with.

Helen blamed her for their subsequent fight. She claimed it kept her from receiving a good behavior

recommendation that year and believed it cost her the parole she was hoping for.

Well, she thought, I was young and scared to death. Helen shouldn't have cursed at me and made that vulgar remark on my first day. I thought I had to show everyone I was tough.

Now, she realized that putting on the tough bravado attitude on first entering prison so people would fear you only worked in the movies. Looking back on the whole thing, it was a wonder to her she wasn't killed. She knew if they hadn't put her in solitary confinement and let her calm down, she might have been.

Even her free time in here wasn't free, she decided as she got closer to her destination. She frowned as she acknowledged to herself she had to watch out for her life every minute. She passed by the Juniper room and sneered. Those Christians in there better stay away from her, she thought as she remembered the church-going man who gave her a beating.

Nothing about her life turned out right, she told herself as she entered the prison's work out area. Two women were on the mats doing leg stretches. She wished there was a punching bag in the small gym. She needed to punch something.

Franklin, Kentucky

Almost everyone who was invited to one of Patricia and Drew's parties did their best to come and Patricia hoped this evening would be no exception. The Grand Opening of her children's clothing store in Lexington was successful and the new store, her second, was showing signs of doing even better business than her first one. Tonight was the celebration.

The couple was progressing at such a pace financially they had become minor celebrities in their region. Though Drew's decision to invest in Charolais stock from California was hugely profitable, Patricia hated the cattle. They were just a constant reminder to her of his fateful trip to California when he had forsaken his marriage vows to sleep with Cynthia.

Sometimes, when Patricia looked out of her bedroom window towards the west field on foggy mornings, the white cattle seemed as if they were ghost-like apparitions sent to haunt her.

She opened the doors of the antique wardrobe Drew bought her for their fifth anniversary and surveyed the beautiful gowns hanging there. Suddenly, her eye caught the flash of emerald green, her favorite color and she pushed the other dresses aside to gaze at the ball gown she had only worn once. Oh, what a night it had been, she thought out loud but then a daring idea darted into her mind. What if I wore this dress tonight? Would Drew remember? Would he care? The last question decided the matter for her and Patricia began to strip off her clothes. Let him see her in this dress and remember what it had been like to think he was losing her forever. It would keep him on his toes.

Of course, she knew it would still fit.

A few moments later, Patricia, fresh out of the shower, powdered and perfumed, tried on the dress that she thought was so beautiful it had caused her heart to beat faster the first time she saw it. She surveyed herself in the mirror, turning this way and that and smiled as the memories from the first and only time she had ever worn it tumbled into her mind.

She even remembered the diamond and ruby necklace she wore with the dress on that fateful occasion so long ago. She walked over to her closet and pushed aside some blouses hanging there to reveal a wall safe. She mouthed the numbers to herself as she turned the combination lock. Fifty-six to the left, six to the right and another full turn to the left until she came back around to the number two and the door swung open.

Inside the safe there were two trays and two envelopes. Drew didn't even know what one of the envelopes contained. The larger envelope contained her birth certificate and some documents that had been her mother's. The smaller envelope held the copy of a hospital record and a sheet of paper with an address on it of a couple she had never met.

Her mood grew somber as she perused the jewelry in the tray. She picked up the necklace laden with jewels and held it in her left palm as she remembered some of the life-changing events that took place since she wore it last—events for her heart alone.

So tonight, she determined in sentimental reverie, she would wear the necklace in honor of the secrets she kept. The diamonds would represent a covenant broken and the new one formed. The rubies would represent

the hearts that had been broken and blood—blood not shed but borne away.

She closed the safe and went to stand before the ornate full-length mirror again as she fastened the diamond and ruby necklace around her neck. There, she thought. The look is complete. Her blue eyes gazed back at her as she took in the emerald dress with the sweetheart cut, her slender arms and the figure-fitting long skirt that seemed to swirl invitingly around her legs.

She dared Drew to look at any other woman tonight!

Arrendale State Prison, Alton Georgia

"You've got mail!" she heard and then an envelope came flying into her cell and landed on the floor in front of where she was sitting. Her heart pounded as she reached down to pick it up. It was not the regular time for mail but she saw the letter came from the warden's office.

"We are sorry to inform you that the review board does not feel you are yet ready to fill the position of seamstress for the prison work shop. You are welcome to apply again when there is another opening."

She crumpled up the note and envelope and hurled it across the room—the only mail she ever got and it was a letter of denial. "I hate this place!" she yelled suddenly as she kicked at her bed and then the wall. "I hate this place!"

There were a few mocking curses hurled back at her and she knew if she could get hold of one of the women making fun of her, she would make them shut up. She felt like screaming. Nothing ever went her way.

"Hey!" the girl in the cell across from her reasoned, "Don't start anything. Cool down. You know who's on duty tonight."

She knew the woman was right. Even in her anger, she didn't want to cross the guard known as Red Bull.

Rumor had it Red Bull could have you put away to where you would never be seen again. She didn't know if that meant the guard could have you killed or have you transferred to a harder prison but she didn't want to find out. Arrendale was hard enough time. She sat

down on the side of her cot and refused to let the tears come that were threatening to gather in her eyes.

They would never make her cry again, she determined. Never!

Saturday night

Franklin, Kentucky

Drew was waiting for her when she came stepping down the long, spiral staircase. She took her time. Patricia was in her mid thirties and arguably the loveliest she had ever been. There was no girlishness left in her beautiful face. Instead, the supreme confident beauty of a well-heeled woman who dared to meet one's eye with a faint knowing smile even the Mona Lisa would have envied, met his gaze.

One arched brow told her he recognized the dress and the slow smile that came across his face showed his approval. He approached her as she neared the landing.

"Well, Mrs. Amos, tonight I will not have to gaze at you from afar while you're in the arms of another man."

"You remembered," she said softly as she looked into his eyes.

"Remembered?" Drew asked with a sardonic smile. "The image of you in that dress was burned into my memory that night."

"How dramatic," she said.

"Jealousy can be," he replied.

She gave him a wicked smile. Perfect.

"Our guests will begin arriving soon," she stated.

Drew nodded. "I just looked in on Maurice and he seemed to have everything under control."

Patricia laughed. "I'll see about that," she told him as she turned in direction of the kitchen.

"I thought you would," Drew replied. He reached to take hold of her hand. "But first, come here." He

knew his statement was said as if her were giving an order but he also knew by the expression on her face as she turned around that she liked it.

It was the redhead's turn to lift a quizzical brow but her eyes sparkled as Drew pulled her close and took her in his arms.

"Have I told you I am obsessed with you?" he asked as his lips traveled from her cheek to her mouth, then to her neck.

Patricia drew in her breath sharply. "Darling, only last night..."

"Sh-h-h..." he whispered in her ear as his warm breath sent tingles and goose bumps running down her arms.

"I need to say it again."

Patricia closed her eyes and smiled as she listened to Drew's proclamations of love.

After he finished kissing her, she laid her head back lazily and looked up into his eyes. "I knew it was a good night for the dress."

Liberty, Kentucky

May twirled the ice in her glass with her spoon as she listened to the man across from her. He bored her so completely she found herself having to make the conscious decision not to yawn in front of him.

"...So in five years..." he was saying as May attempted to look interested. "...I hope to be looking at a partnership in the business. Tupper's son isn't interested in it. He'll probably have drunk himself to death by then anyway."

Daniel Overbey smiled at her as though he just revealed a great secret but May found his words pompous and uncaring.

She couldn't help but notice, to her consternation, that the man at the next table, though seated with what was obviously his wife and their child, threw several admiring glances her way. It increased her irritation and her only thoughts now were about how quickly she could get the miserable date over with.

Finally, she let the yawn she had been holding back come and she covered her mouth and blinked her eyes afterwards. "I'm sorry..." she said with as much regret as she could muster. "...But I'm so tired, Daniel. Would you mind taking me home? It's been such a long day."

Patricia knew by the lift of his eyebrows her request surprised him. She could also tell he never considered the fact his constant bragging might be something she found unattractive.

"I was going to take you to a movie," he stated a little sternly and May was reminded of a petulant child.

"Oh, that's sweet of you to suggest but I really don't feel like it tonight." She smiled at him and offered nothing else. Surely, he would get the message.

He did.

Finally, after a brief moment of consternation, he shrugged and nodded. The cold look in his eyes brought back a bad memory for May—a memory of a man now dead who had hurt her once and she shivered.

"Let me take care of the check," Daniel said as he stood up. She rose gratefully. His eyes avoided hers as he stepped aside for her to walk by him.

The wandering-eyed married man seated at the nearby table could not keep from glancing at May's backside as she passed. His wife shot him a threatening look and he defended himself.

"I think I know her," he explained as she glared back in unbelief.

"I think she was the cook when I worked for Drew Amos."

His wife turned her attention towards May's retreating figure. She didn't voice her opinion but if the lovely woman who just exited the restaurant was the cook for Drew Amos, she was glad her husband wasn't working for him anymore.

May heaved a sigh of relief when she closed the door of her townhouse apartment behind her. Never again, she thought as she heard Daniel's car speed away. She took off her coat and hung it in the nearby closet and kicked off her shoes.

She sighed again as she sat down in the big, overstuffed recliner and picked up the television remote. I'm so tired of the Daniel's of the world, she

thought sadly. "If that's all there is left out there...", she muttered to herself (even though she knew she was looking at life through pessimistic eyes following a bad date) "...I would rather be by myself."

After switching to a news channel, she picked up the mail she had laid on the table next to her and pulled the folded up *Franklin County Messenger* from the stack. The headlines on the front page jumped out at her: *Local Business Woman Branches Out*.

Directly below the headline was a color picture of a group of people with their glasses raised towards a strikingly handsome couple standing before them. The caption read: Drew and Patricia Amos, the Toast of the Town. May frowned as she brought the paper closer to examine it.

Then something else of significance registered in her mind—the dress Patricia had on. Though she couldn't help but notice the newspaper's ink did not do the color of the gown justice, she still recognized it. Patricia was wearing it the first time they met—the night she had thought Patricia was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

Several conflicting emotions ran through May. She remembered her innocence then—when the world seemed to be opening up for her again—when everything seemed possible. She took a deep breath. How did it all slip through her fingers?

Suddenly, it occurred to her to look for him among the guests in the photo. May scanned the picture to see if he was there, lifting his wine glass in a celebratory salute with the others.

Then she saw him and her heart seemed to lurch within her as though it were an engine suddenly forced

to change gears. She saw him and he was not alone. There was an attractive looking blonde standing next to him. The woman was looking up at him and smiling seemingly oblivious to the couple she and everyone else was raising their glasses toward. May drew in a sharp breath and let the paper fall into her lap.

She had the sinking realization she had been a fool. It didn't matter who left who, she considered. She was still without him. It didn't matter who was right or wrong; she had given him up.

Sadly, May considered the fact that on the outside, she might look put together but underneath she was a mess. Her life now was like a tapestry woven with threads of regret. Too late, she found out that pride and fear are not conquered by running away. Too late, she admitted to herself, trust might have saved her.

She closed her eyes against the pain in her heart. Why hadn't she prayed back then, she wondered? It seemed, when she looked back on it, as though her life the last few years was one example after another of shallowness and the inability to trust God or man.

She stood up and walked over to the window that gave her a panoramic view of the town and as she surveyed the lit up homes beneath her she realized she would trade her townhouse and everything she worked so hard for to not be what she was now: alone.

Chapter 3

Berea, Kentucky—Sunday morning...

Bethany was thankful for the many changes in her life. Only a few months earlier, she had been a lonely freshman in college while Bill was in his last semester before graduating. The two met in a geography class and their romance had developed more quickly than any relationship of her life. Soon, she was going to church near the campus with him.

Before meeting Bill, Bethany thought of church as a place where people met who believed in God and liked to sing hymns and have Bible school together—like a little club. She didn't believe there was anything wrong with that; she just didn't see the necessity of it.

But during a young couple's meeting at the church, one of the girls she recognized from her philosophy class stood up and talked about Jesus as though He were her friend.

That stuck with Bethany and she began to wonder about it. One day, while she was doing her laundry, she decided to talk to Jesus—maybe He really was around somewhere listening.

There was something going on inside of her too. She noticed it the second time she went to church with Bill. It was almost like her heart had been listening for something all her life and had finally heard it. She realized she suspected the Bible might really be the written Word of God. What if Jesus did die on a cross and rise from the dead the third day?

For a week afterward, she walked around perplexed. Church wasn't as she thought at all. This

wasn't about people going into a building to meet; it was about something much more significant. This Jesus was calling *her*. She knew He was and she knew she had a decision to make.

She decided to read the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. She wanted to see for herself what the people who spent time with Jesus had to say about Him.

It wasn't long before she knew she believed but more than that, she wanted to walk down the aisle and commit her life to Him. She didn't want to commit because of Bill or because she wanted to be in a club of any kind but because she realized she needed forgiveness and Jesus was the One who could do it. For the first time in her young life, her sin was weighing on her and she knew without a doubt she was a sinner.

It was a scary thing to walk down the aisle of the church in front of everyone but confessing her repentance and belief before others was important. Bill taught her that and she wanted to. In fact, it felt as if her heart would burst if she didn't.

So Bethany, knees trembling as her legs carried her forward, confessed her sins and asked Jesus to be her Savior. There was no doubt in her heart that Jesus saved her from the debt of her sin that day. She felt cleansed and happy and the burden that seemed to be weighing heavier and heavier upon her all the time was finally relieved.

That night, she was baptized in the church's baptistery before the congregation. After church, Bill and some of the church members hugged her and told her how proud they were of her. Her heart was full.

The next time she walked down the aisle a few weeks later, it was as Bill's bride.

Bethany's mother, Miriam, acted embarrassed though. She seemed speechless about the fact Bethany was marrying a man who claimed he was called by God to preach and she shied away from his mother and father.

Bethany suspected her mother's attitude had something to do with her financial situation because she couldn't help with the wedding. She tried to console Miriam by telling her it was a very low cost event from the second hand dress to the reception hall held at Bill's church but Miriam was not placated.

Though she was happy for her daughter in a bewildered sense and attended the wedding, she left soon after the ceremony, only staying at the reception long enough to watch them cut the cake. Bethany was so happy she didn't let her mother's unenthusiastic presence dampen the fact it was her wedding day—for once deciding she was not going to let her mother's problems be her focal point.

Bill's parents had accepted her with open arms and at their urging the young couple had set up house-keeping in Richmond, Kentucky where Bill began working as a substitute teacher while applying for pastorate positions. She quit college to go back to his home town not knowing if she'd ever want to return to the world of academia. Bill was her world now.

However, she did ask herself later why Bill's parents were so accepting of their marriage when they barely knew her. Their reaction seemed as odd to her as her mother's—as though her mother and Bill's parents were at opposite ends of the spectrum of normal

behavior. But who was she to judge normal behavior, she asked herself when she recalled the way she was raised.

Sometimes, the unsettling memory of the woman named Patricia handing her mother an envelope full of money while threatening her dropped into her mind and the recollection could still send little darts of fear through her again.

The unpleasant memory was only one of many and there were those nighttime reenactments of the past, when Bethany laid wide-eyed and unable to sleep while Bill snored next to her. During those times, she would remember the death of her father and what it was like to live in Mr. Draker's house as she watched her sister become more and more unhinged.

It was only two months after Bethany and Bill were married when Bill received the phone call that would change their lives. A church a few miles away in Berea Kentucky, where he applied for the position of pastor, had responded and wanted him to come in for an interview. After the interview, he was invited to preach before the congregation. To the young couple's joy, the vote was unanimous. Reverend William Hawn was to become the pastor of Grace Church in Berea, Kentucky.

The next few weeks were spent moving into the parsonage just down the street from the church. Every night after they were settled, Bethany obediently and with the focused concentration of someone trying to do their best listened as Bill schooled her in everything from being a minister's wife to learning the books of the Bible by heart.

Finally, Bill's first day as pastor came. The handsome couple held hands as they walked towards

the church. When Bill was quiet, Bethany knew to stay silent. She could feel his intensity in the grip of his hand and his pace had quickened. She tried her best to match the pattern of his footsteps. They were almost to the church and she was thankful when he slowed down some.

Bill glanced at her and smiled. Bethany looked beautiful. The curled ends of her long, dark hair were bouncing gently as she walked and the look in her eyes told him she was proud of him.

His mind was whirring with excitement as he considered the day before him. This was his church now. The board had approved him and the congregation had voted him in. There was so much to do here—so much he wanted to accomplish!

While Bill preached, Bethany's expression was one of love and admiration. How quickly he had the congregation's attention like he was holding them lovingly in the palm of his hand, she thought. His first sermon as pastor was engaging and she was glad to stand in the vestibule with him later near the front door while the line of people took turns greeting them as they were leaving. She was proud of the appreciation they voiced for her husband.

"That was a wonderful sermon."

"We're so glad to have you!"

Only a few weeks later, Bethany looked back on that day and remembered her naïveté with regret. She had been walking on clouds then, she realized, for she was beginning to suspect her husband's commitment to the church overshadowed his commitment to her. She was also beginning to see a side of him she had never witnessed.

An incident that shattered her perspective and brought her down to earth began innocently enough. Bethany received a phone call from one of the women in the congregation everyone referred to as "Aunt Rho." (Her name was Rhoda Stratton.)

"Bethany we'd like to start a woman's devotional," Aunt Rho informed her. "Would you help us?"

Bethany was flattered to be included. With a tendency toward shyness, Bethany knew she was not cut out to be the kind of minister's wife she had heard so much about from Bill—the kind of woman who led charities and spoke at women's meetings. But Aunt Rho only asked for her help, not for her leadership skills, so Bethany was immediately interested.

"What kind of help do you need?" she asked.

"Well, we thought we'd have the date and time for the women's meeting put in the bulletin and maybe have the first one at your house, if that's alright with you and the pastor. It would encourage some of the other women to come," the older woman suggested. "Then, we could take turns having it in each other's homes. Some of us have talked about it and we think taking turns leading the devotion too is a good idea. We could discuss some community projects worth sinking our teeth into also. What do you think?"

"Well, I'm not much of a speaker..." Bethany volunteered, "...but I think a women's group is a wonderful idea."

She remembered Bill telling her she needed to be more involved. Maybe this would be a good way for her to start. "Of course, we could open our home to it too."

When she told Bill about the phone call that evening during supper he laid down his fork and looked at her as though the words she said were incredulous to his mind.

"You agreed to start a women's group and have it meet in our home without consulting me? Have you forgotten that I am the pastor?"

Bethany was startled by his reaction. Bill was looking at her as though she was a traitor of the worst sort and he seemed to be almost seething.

"I'm not starting anything," she retaliated as she bravely took a stand. "Some of the women had an idea about a devotional group. They want to take turns having it at different houses, not just ours. I didn't think you would mind. You've been telling me to get more involved. Well, I am."

Bill stood up and slammed his fist against the table causing Bethany to jump. "And I *am* your husband and the pastor of the church. Doesn't that old biddy realize this matter needs to be approved by me first? Also, why did you think your approval mattered? I'm the one the church elected. Not you. Do you understand that?"

Bethany was taken aback by his tone, his red face, bulging eyes and clenched fists. "Bill, why are you so angry? I thought you *wanted* me to get involved."

"Get involved," he shouted as his face grew even redder. "But do it *after* consulting me!"

He walked away from the table while Bethany stared after him in shock. Her heart was pounding and her hands were trembling but she was determined to get to the bottom of the matter as she rose from the table and followed after him.

"Bill, what is wrong with you?" she called.

"Don't come in here, Bethany!" he demanded while slamming the door of his office behind him.

Bethany stopped in her tracks. Maybe it would be wisdom to let him cool down, she reasoned. Maybe something happened today she knew nothing about. She stood there for several seconds as she went over the whole confusing incident. Finally, she shook her head and started back toward the kitchen. She began the task of cleaning up. She frowned as she worked. She hadn't even got to tell him the good news.

"Bill?" A couple of hours had passed since Bill's unexpected outburst of anger. Bethany had taken the time to think about what happened as she washed the dishes and cleaned the counters in the kitchen. She decided stress had been building up in her husband the past few weeks as he tried to handle the move, the new parish, the meetings with the men on the board and finally, actually pastoring the church. It was a lot for a man not even thirty years old to take on.

She began gathering the ingredients for oatmeal cookies, Bill's favorite, as she thought about his explosion. A few minutes later, the aroma of the cookies in the oven wafted through the kitchen and on into the rest of the house. She hoped Bill would walk into the kitchen with a smile on his face and an apology on his lips. In fact, she half expected it but it didn't happen. Finally, she placed the last cookie sheet of gooey, lumpy rounds in the oven to bake before going to him.

"Bill?" she called again as she approached his study. The door he had slammed remained closed and

she opened it carefully before stepping into the room he sometimes spent several hours a day in.

He was stretched out on the old, black, leather couch his parents gave them that was nestled next to the far wall. Lying on his side with his arm crooked over his brow, Bill's arm hid his eyes and the top part of his face from her and she couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep.

Bethany approached him warily and sat down gently beside him, facing him as she perched on the edge of the couch. "Bill...", she coaxed. "...I've made some oatmeal cookies."

He brought his arm down and wrapped his hand around her waist as he pulled her to him. "Beth, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"No. No, it's not," he announced as he brought her closer to him.

She bent over and kissed him on the lips. It was a full kiss, not a peck. She kissed him with love and forgiveness and he returned her kiss gently at first but hungrily a few seconds later. Finally, she rose up with a little smile on her face.

"I had a head-ache," he explained. "It was like the ones I used to have after..." he stalled.

"After what, darling?" Bethany's eyes showed her concern.

"After the accident," he replied in a tone that reminded Bethany he didn't like talking about it.

"Oh," Bethany said as she recalled the story he had told her of the head and neck injury he received in a car wreck when he was in his freshman year of college.

It had been a rainy day and Bill was going too fast when he came to a sharp curve in the road. He was trying to make it to class on time after over sleeping and his car had slid off of the wet road and overturned in a field. He was knocked unconscious and when he woke up, he was in the back of an ambulance with his neck in a brace. The next day, the headaches had begun and no doctor since was able to make them stop.

"Do you need some aspirin?"

"I took some," he replied and at the same time she noticed the bottle of pills on his desk.

"How much did you take?"

"Three or four extra-strength ones. It takes a lot to knock one of those headaches but I fell asleep after a while and I just feel a dull thud now," he said as he massaged his left temple. "I haven't had a headache that bad in a few months."

"Maybe the stress of the move and new job brought it on."

"Maybe," he answered.

Able to contain her news no longer, Bethany blurted it out. "Bill, I think I'm pregnant."

His eyes widened in surprise and she kept waiting for him to smile but he didn't.

"How do you know?" he asked finally.

His reaction made her nervous. Wasn't he glad? "Well, I'm late for my period and I'm never late and this morning I noticed that my breasts were sore."

Bill was staring past her. Finally, he spoke. "I knew we would have a family some day but I didn't think it would happen so soon."

She squeezed his hand. "Aren't you glad?"

He looked into Bethany's eyes and saw the apprehension in them so he attempted an enthusiastic reply. "Of course!" he answered as he pushed himself up to sit beside her. "I'm just surprised. That's all."

He ran his hand through his dark hair and turned to smile at her.

"Of course, I'm glad. Be fruitful and multiply—that's what God said to do and we're doing it." He laughed. "Maybe I will have a son."

"Maybe," she answered but in her heart she already knew she wanted a little girl. She could imagine long afternoons with her, watching her play with her dolls and tea sets and reading stories to her. This house wouldn't be so lonely then, she decided. Even if he was shut up in his study or at his meetings with the board or church members, she would still have somebody to love.

"The cookies!" she cried suddenly and leapt up from the couch.

Bill watched as she sprinted out of his office toward the kitchen. He hoped the cookies weren't burnt.

Bethany paced the floor. Her long, dark hair hung prettily down the length of her back. She was dressed in a blue dress that clung to her curves. The smart little jacket that came to her waist gave the dress a more modest but fashionable appearance and was one of Bill's favorites. He was supposed to take her out to eat that night. She checked the clock on the wall again. He should have been home an hour ago.

He said he was going to take her out to celebrate the doctor's confirmation. She was six weeks pregnant and they had only been married for six months. She

frowned as she looked out of the window in the living room again—still no sign of him. Why were those board meetings always more important than her, she questioned again.

He knew this day was something special to her and he was late. She frowned as she placed her hand over her belly. She knew the baby inside was still too small to change her silhouette. Maybe, when the physical reality of the child she was expecting showed in a more obvious way, the baby would become more real to Bill and he would spend more time at home with her, she hoped.

The phone rang and Bethany rushed to answer it. She figured it was Bill calling from his office at the church to tell her he would be home in a minute but the voice on the line was a stranger's.

"I need to speak to a Mrs. Bethany Hawn," the caller said.

"I'm Bethany Hawn," she answered with growing trepidation. Phone calls from strangers always unnerved her a little bit.

"Your mother requested I call you. I'm an EMT for Franklin County and she has been in an auto accident."

Bethany froze. "Is she okay?"

"She is but I'm afraid they're going to be taking her to jail, Mrs. Hawn. She gave me the number of a friend of hers and your number too and asked if I would try to get hold of one of you. The other lady didn't answer so I'm calling you. Your mother needs somebody to come and get her out of jail."

"So, she wasn't hurt but she's going to jail?" Bethany was mystified.

"Well, she wasn't hurt much, Ma'am. She had a few little shards of glass that had to be picked out of her face and chest from the broken windshield but the police are leaving the hospital with her right now and they've got her in handcuffs."

Just then, Bethany heard her mother's voice shouting angrily in the background. She couldn't tell what she was saying but she could hear the tone. Knowing her mother, Bethany did not envy the policeman who had to cuff her.

"Why are they taking her to jail?"

"Well, Mrs. Hawn, from what I can tell, they said she pulled out in front of a car belonging to a city constable and caused a wreck. I'm not supposed to be giving out this kind of information but since you're her daughter...well...it looks like she's had a lot to drink."

"Oh."

The caller could tell she was not surprised. "I'm sorry."

"Was the constable hurt?"

"He was banged up pretty bad but nothing major, I don't think. They're keeping him in the hospital overnight for observation."

Bethany exhaled and sat down in the chair next to the phone stand. "Thank you so much for calling me. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Ma'am."

Bethany hung up the phone dejectedly after she heard the click on the other end. Her mother was going to jail. She thought of telling Bill and closed her eyes. Oh mother, she thought. Isn't it ever going to stop?

Ten minutes later, Bill opened the door and entered their home. His eyes were dancing with excitement and

without taking the time to gauge his wife's mood, he took her by the hand and pulled her to him.

"The addition to the church for a new fellowship hall is a go!" he announced as he looked down at her. Finally, he noticed her unhappy expression. "Hey, what's wrong, darling? Is this because I'm late?" he asked as he traced a finger gently down the side of her face.

Just then, a tear escaped the corner of her eye. She did not want to tell him.

He led her to sit beside him on the couch. "You look like you've just lost your best friend. Is it morning sickness again?"

She shook her head but knew she couldn't put off telling him any longer. "Mother is in jail."

Bill's handsome countenance changed to one of surprise. "Your mother is in jail?"

Bethany told him about the phone call and to her relief, Bill responded by calling the police in Franklin County to find out what needed to be done. It took a while before he got to talk to someone who would give them the information they needed, but finally, he was able to ascertain there was nothing they could do to get her mother out of the jail that evening. They would have to wait until the next day.

"Mother's never been in jail before," Bethany sighed. "I can't imagine what she's going through. If I thought it would do any good, I'd call her friend, Sue. Maybe she could help."

"Why don't you do that?" Bill encouraged. He hoped this Sue would be able to handle the matter for them and they wouldn't have to make the long drive to Franklin County.

Bethany called the operator and wrote down the number for her mother's friend. She dialed the number and waited. She counted eight rings before hanging up.

"She's out," she announced to her husband. "As far as I know, she's the only friend mother's got and I can't even get hold of her."

Bill shook his head sorrowfully. "Let's say a prayer for Miriam. God will take care of her and we'll go tomorrow and get her out."

"What if her bail is too high?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Bill replied wearily. Then he took her hands in his and bowed his head and prayed but even while he was talking to God, he couldn't help but wonder what the board would say if they found out his mother-in-law was incarcerated in a county jail.

It was the first time he ever doubted if he should have married Bethany.

After more thought on the situation, Bill decided Bethany could take care of getting her mother out of jail deciding he would spend the day in his office at the church. Bethany thought it was just as well. She didn't want him burdened down by the untoward incident.

However, the next day did not go well for Bethany and her mother. She tried to understand her mother's anger but Miriam blamed everyone but herself for what happened. She didn't even seem especially grateful to Bethany for coming to post bail for her either.

"You should have called Sue," her mother blasted as soon as they got in the car together. "You wouldn't have had to drive all this way."

"I tried, Mom. She didn't answer."

Miriam grew quiet for a moment as her venomous eyes smoldered. Then her lips twisted with the ugliness of her sarcasm. "You should have called Mrs. Patricia Amos then."

"Mom, please. Don't." Bethany tried to think of something to stop her mother from continuing in the direction she always seemed to with her hate. "Are you hungry? We could get something to eat?"

But Miriam was not deterred. "Did you know she opened up another store?"

Bethany kept her eyes on the road. "Yes," she answered dejectedly.

"She could buy the jail if she wanted to and probably has." Miriam said with a sneer. "Did you see the picture in the paper?"

"The Franklin Messenger?" Bethany asked.

"And the Lexington Signal," Miriam told her. "She's a regular high-society woman now."

Bethany didn't say anything. She almost had her mother to her home in the low-income housing district.

"You don't have to come in," Miriam informed her when they finally pulled up to the parking space in front of her apartment. "I just want to go in and take a shower and go to bed."

"I'll come in," Bethany told her even though she didn't really want to. "I haven't got to see you in a long time, Mom."

Miriam stopped in front of her door to search in her purse for her house-key. She was a tall, shapely woman with long, wavy brown hair. She opened the door and turned to look at her daughter with sadness in her eyes instead of anger.

"I'm sorry, Beth," she told her. "You're a good girl and now you've had to come and get your mother out of jail."

"It's okay, Mom," Bethany replied with a sad smile.

Miriam motioned for Bethany to go on in ahead of her. "I wish things were okay," she said.

Miriam walked into the living room and shut the door behind them.

"Nothing's been okay since Jesse died." She plopped down on her couch with abandon. "And I'm beginning to think nothing ever will be again."

By the time Bethany got back to their home that evening, Bill still hadn't come in. She crawled into their bed not caring if she made supper or not—and not caring if Bill might get angry as he had been so quick to do lately.

Seeing her mother, especially in the worn out, dilapidated state her drunkenness and night in jail had left her in, was hard on Bethany.

She felt as if she had stepped into the past again as she heard her mother talk about Patricia Amos. It was like all of her old nightmares had been set on rewind.

Since her sister Geneva's death, her mother had grown worse too. Bethany thought of her sister, Geneva, drowning in the lake all those years ago and she wept profusely. Was her mother killing herself with alcohol just as surely as her drugged and drunken sister had when she walked into the lake?

She thought of her father's death too and grew more despondent. How she wished Bill would come home soon. Though she had life inside of her, she felt like death was all around her.

Franklin County

Patricia waited impatiently for Drew to quit talking to the man who had approached their table and started up a conversation. She considered it rude for the man to engage her husband for so long. Drew had brought her there so they could have dinner and they hadn't even got to order yet. She took a quick look around the restaurant admiring its tear-drop chandeliers and the exquisite reproductions of famous art lining its walls.

Finally, the man left and Drew gave her one of his slow smiles. "Sorry about that, doll but that man just offered to sell me something I'd love to have."

Patricia gave him a sideways grin as she summed up the excitement she saw in his eyes. He would have whatever it was then, she knew. "Why don't you trade off those ugly Charolais for it?" she threw out but immediately regretted the comment. She had never confessed how much she hated the cattle to Drew.

His face grew quizzical. "Get rid of my Charolais? Why in the world would I do that?"

Patricia made herself laugh as though her words were only nonsense. "It was just an idea, darling."

Drew considered her statement for a moment with narrowed eyes but decided to leave it alone.

"He's got that old tractor of Dad's and says it still runs."

"Really?" she replied as if she were interested though she thought it was sentimental foolishness but she would never tell Drew. She knew the high regard he had for his father and the way he farmed in the "old days."

"It would be a treasure to you, wouldn't it?" she asked with understanding.

"Oh, yes," he said. He flashed a charismatic smile that still had the power to raise her pulse rate.

"Then let me buy it for you," she offered.

Something about the fact Patricia could buy him almost anything he wanted bothered Drew but he refused to let her know that.

"I appreciate the offer...", he told her, "...but I can buy my own toys."

Patricia shrugged daintily and then tossed her luxurious, vibrant-colored hair. "Let's order, darling. I'm famished."

Drew turned his head to look for their waiter. The young man appeared at his side immediately.

"Yes, sir. Are you ready to order?" Drew nodded and held his hand out to gesture for his wife to go first. The waiter turned to look into the eyes of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Drew watched as the young man stared and smiled while Patricia explained in minute detail what she wanted and how she wanted it.

Finally, the young man realized he was supposed to be taking her order instead of only watching her give it and he opened his leather-bound notebook and took out his pen. "I..I'm sorry, I...", he stuttered. "Would you care to repeat that?"

Drew chuckled. "Don't worry, son," he told him as he leaned back in his chair and stretched his long legs out until his shoe touched hers underneath the table. "She does that to men all the time."

"Drew!" Patricia said as though embarrassed while she nudged him back with her shoe.

The admiring waiter finally got Patricia's order taken correctly and soon she was enjoying her tomato brochettes and Drew his seafood portabella appetizers.

Berea, Kentucky...Bethany

Bethany stroked Sam's head lightly, letting her fingertips caress his hair as she passed by the couch where he had fallen asleep. How much she loved him, she thought. She knew she could have loved no child of her own more, even though Sam had only lived with them for a year now.

Still, a tear crept down her cheek and she wiped it away as she sat down in the easy chair and picked up the television remote. The memory of the still-born baby she had given birth to two years before still haunted her.

It had been determined that her baby (a girl) died in the birth canal. Then, after the heartbreaking birth of her lifeless baby, Bethany had kept bleeding and couldn't deliver the placenta. The doctor was forced to do a hysterectomy.

She let her gaze settle on the young boy's peaceful face as he slept. She had fought for him as she had never fought for anything in her life.

She remembered when she had the idea they become foster parents after reading an article in the newspaper about the need for them. Bill was against it at first but finally acquiesced and took the classes with her.

Sam was eight years old when he came to them. Now, Bethany was sure Bill was going to agree they could adopt him. He had to do this for her—for them,

she had told her husband, allowing him to hear the unmistakable threat in her voice.

The word *divorce* was not spoken between them but Bethany knew Bill's ministry at their church would probably come to an end if she took such a drastic measure. She found herself using everything she had to bargain with to get him to agree—even the threat of leaving him.

The way Bethany looked at it, since God would not allow her to have a child of her own, she had to adopt one. Even if Bill would have been satisfied having no children, Bethany refused to live in a childless marriage with him.

She knew there was an unspoken agreement between them now: She would stay and be the good church wife, putting up with his headaches and foul moods—being there for him as he sought to lead the congregation into a relationship with God she was not even sure he possessed himself anymore. But she would have this one thing: Sam. He would be her child—one she would never lose again.

Franklin County...Patricia

It was a beautiful dining experience for Patricia and Drew—one she thought back to many times over the years. She wondered if they had known it would be their last dinner together, if they would have stayed longer and lingered over every word. Would they have laughed and enjoyed each other's company more if they knew?

But that was the mercy of God, she decided. If they had known what was to come, they probably could not

have enjoyed the evening at all and the memory was still so precious to her.

Several lonely years had passed since that evening and Patricia could still see Drew's smile as he sat across from her and teased their waiter. Her eyes grew moist but an intense pain caused her to forget her memories for a moment and she closed her eyes until it ebbed away.

Then she gazed down at the paper before her and picked up the pen that had been a gift from Drew and began to write: *The Last Will and Testament of Patricia Amos.*

There, she thought. She would call Stephen in the morning and ask him to come over. She knew she could do it if she had his help. However, she also knew there was the possibility he would refuse to work with her after she told him the truth. She hoped he would forgive her but she couldn't blame him if he did not.

There were so many regrets and so much to make up for. She bowed her head for a moment and said a simple but heartfelt prayer as her tears made wet paths down her cheeks.

"Father, can you please help me right the wrongs I've done?"

A short while later she was back at work making plans and writing. She considered stopping once to take something for the discomfort but she wanted to keep a clear mind as long as possible. There were people to reach out to who had become lost to one another—people who deserved to know the truth. She owed them something.

Patricia gritted her teeth when a fresh wave of pain rolled over her but determination had always been one of her strong points. She continued to write.

There was so much to do and so little time...

~

Threads of Regret is the prequel to the epic novel, *Lovely Strings*, where the fascinating lives of these characters and the people they are connected to continues when they are summoned to a cabin in the woods for the reading of a will.

Lovely Strings is available in ebook form through Smashwords, Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

Four Stars!!!!

Review for *Lovely Strings*

"*Lovely Strings* was a beautiful, powerful, and soul - stirring book. The writer effortlessly weaves together the lives of seven women, creating a powerful web of deceit, lies, and misdeeds. But, also included is the stunning power of love and redemption. This is a very complex, multi-layered story, but the individual stories come together beautifully." *WRB on Amazon*