

Threads of Regret

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"Books you can trust with your heart."



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Chapter 1

1979

Dahlonge, 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

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