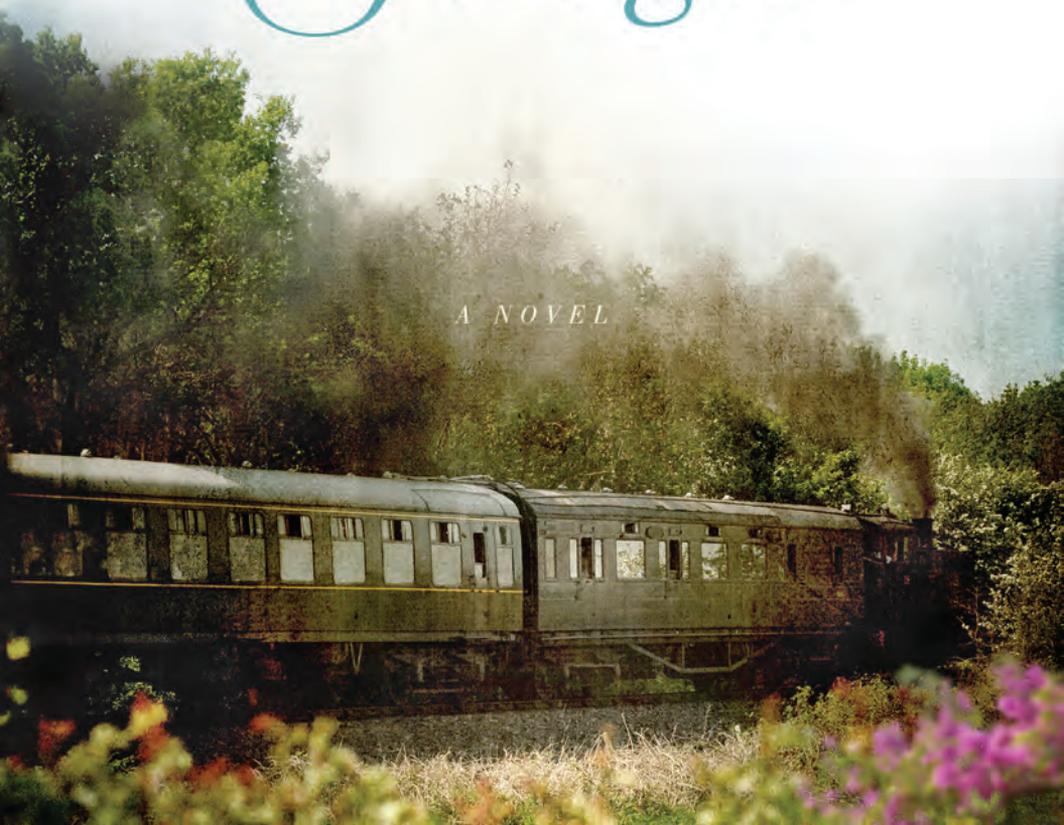


sarah loudin thomas

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Sings

A NOVEL



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For Dave Long

With thanks for being the sort of editor
who pushes me to dig deeper.

You have heard of the California gold rush
Way back in forty-nine,
But Thurmond, on New River,
Will beat it every time.
There's people here from everywhere,
The colored and the white,
Some mother's son bites the dust
Almost every night.

Captain H. W. Doolittle, conductor
for C&O Railroad

chapter *one*

Thurmond, West Virginia
March 1930

Colman walked along the last car of the coal train, tapping each wheel with his long-handled hammer, listening intently to the *clang clang clang*. He cocked his head to the left and closed his right eye so he could hear better. The tone was just about perfect. Good—no cracks.

He moved on to the final wheel, pushing his free hand deep in his coat pocket. Signs of spring were all around, but here in the shade of the train it was plenty cold yet. He hoped he wouldn't hear the flat ping of a cracked wheel on this his last task before calling it a day. He'd been told not everyone could detect the often slight difference in tone between a solid and a damaged wheel, but he'd been gifted with the ability. Although there were days when he wasn't sure his keen hearing was such a gift.

He tap-tap-tapped the last wheel, held the back of his cold hand to the axle box to check for overheating. Satisfied, Colman straightened to roll his shoulders and stretch his spine.

That was when he saw Sam, one of the chief clerks, hurrying toward him, head down and steps tight like he might break into a run. Colman tensed. Sam wouldn't rush unless it was important. In a yard as large as this one, it never paid to be in a hurry among the rails.

"Caleb's been shot." Sam raised his head and cast Colman a worried look. "Word's spreading through town fast. I know you and him grew up together. Thought I'd best come tell you, so you can prepare yourself." He jerked a thumb toward a string of businesses located farther up the track. "There's a mess of your kinfolk at the Lafayette Hotel, and they're talking revenge. Thought you might be able to talk 'em down."

"Is Caleb alright? How bad's he hurt?"

Colman forgot about his plans to go home and work on his latest sermon. His cousin Caleb had been like a brother when they were boys growing up among all the Harpe young'uns in Thurmond. It was once they were old enough to take an interest in the Harpe-McLean feud that they'd drifted apart. Colman's mother insisted her family have nothing to do with feuding, which put Colman on the outs with most of his kin. Then, after she died, he'd gotten a steady job with the railroad as wheel tapper and took up preaching whenever someone would let him. Nobody expected a preacher to go around feuding. Caleb, on the other hand, preferred to work odd jobs for ready money and then devote himself to gambling and drinking—maybe other things, too.

"All I heard is, he was shot while playing cards over at the Bearskin Inn last night."

Colman stiffened. "Who shot him?"

Sam blew out a heavy breath. "Jake McLean."

Colman ripped his cap off and flung it as hard as he could. If he weren't trying to be a preacher, he'd cuss sure enough. "I shoulda known it would be one of those sorry, no-account . . ." He caught himself and grimaced. "Sorry. Old habits die hard."

"I thought you didn't much buy into that old feud." Sam trotted along as Colman strode toward the station, hammer swinging in his hand.

"I don't. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to get mad when a McLean shoots a Harpe."

Sam pulled ahead so he could look Colman in the eyes. "I heard it all started when that Holy Spirit preacher come and stirred up the town back in 1832."

Colman shot him a sharp glance. "That's the story, but I don't pay it any mind."

"Is it true the Harpes have—" he paused and lowered his voice—"a special way about 'em? Like you with your hearing?" He flapped a hand beside his ear.

Colman stopped short and glared at his friend. "You been listening to the old women talk? I thought you knew better than that."

Sam shrugged. "Can't help what I overhear. Some say the Spirit got ahold of the Harpe clan that day and their people have been touched ever since. Some say the McLeans refused to believe and their lack of faith has cursed their line right on down to the current batch."

"Touched. Cursed." Colman snorted. "I've been hearing those stories all my life. Probably the feud started over a horse or a parcel of land. Who knows? If what you say is true, then how come Serepta McLean owns half the land and most of the coal around here? Does that sound like she's cursed?" Colman started moving again.

Sam hurried to keep up. “You can be rich and still be cursed,” he replied. “Besides, she married in.”

Colman stowed his hammer and headed along the tracks. Sam was right. Curses and blessings didn’t always look the way you might think. And while some called his own ability to hear things no one else could a gift, he knew it all depended on what it was you heard and what you were expected to do about it. Sometimes a gift turned out to be a weighty thing to carry around.

Several men Colman recognized were tromping up the stairs to the lobby of the hotel located mere yards from the railroad tracks. It didn’t take any special gift to feel the roiling energy spilling out of the room and onto the tracks. He drew closer, his nerves singing like wires in a storm. A deep foreboding swept over him, and he had to stop and catch his breath against the vibration that started in his gut and made his head swirl. Like a cracked wheel that could derail a train, Colman had the feeling something was about to knock him off track.



Colman eased into the room like he thought he might step on a snake. Just about everyone present was either a Harpe or married to one. And they were all mad. He stepped over beside his cousin Don. He’d married into the family five years earlier and didn’t hesitate to take up the family’s prejudice toward anyone associated with the McLeans. Being a newcomer, he was also more accepting of Colman.

Don gripped his elbow hard. “You heard?”

Colman nodded. “Jake shot Caleb. He at the hospital? How’s he doing?”

Don squeezed harder. “Caleb’s not just shot, Colman.

He's dead. Died this morning. That coyote Jake shot him in the back and left him for dead, but he was still alive when Irene went hunting him and found him barely hanging on outside the Bearskin Inn over in Glen Jean." He spoke the curse that was in Colman's heart. "Caleb must've suffered something awful. Made Irene promise she'd see him avenged and then he died right there in her arms."

Colman wished for something to hold on to. He'd felt called to preach for a while now and wanted to be a peaceful man who turned the other cheek, but this was too much. Surely God wouldn't let those blasted McLeans get away with something like this. And while he knew vengeance was God's, he also knew God could use men to carry out His plans. He closed his eyes and forced a prayer for guidance into his head, if not his heart.

"Colman, we're getting up a bunch to go after Jake. About time you pitched in, ain't it?" A distant cousin loomed in front of him.

Colman swallowed hard. Some of his own kin called him a coward or worse, but he'd stuck by his mother's wish that he steer clear of feuding. If he could just get a church, maybe they'd leave him alone. He had his eye on that new Thurmond Union Church perched on the side of the mountain with a view of the river and valley. Don cocked an eyebrow at him, and he heard the unspoken challenge.

"Romans twelve, nineteen," he said. "For it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

"You said it, brother." Don slapped him on the back and sneered. "And this right here"—he waved his hand to encompass the room throbbing with men—"is the hand of God."



As the evening wore on, darkness and thoughts of the area's rough terrain persuaded the men to wait to hunt Jake down. Plus, word got around that Jake had hightailed it out of the county, if not the state.

"Coward done run off, and a good thing too. Eye for an eye." Caleb's father, Colman's Uncle Webb, looked him up and down. "That's in your Bible, too. We'll get Jake next time he comes around. My boy will be avenged."

Colman thought to say something about New Testament grace, though he doubted anyone would listen, and sad and angry as he was, he didn't much feel like suggesting a low-down murderer like Jake McLean deserved any kind of grace. He was still hoping God might go ahead and do some smiting of His own and save them all the trouble.

He dragged on home tired, hungry, and sad. While Caleb might have gone astray here and there, he didn't deserve to be shot down over a game of cards. And his sometimes girl, Irene, sure didn't deserve to find his bloody body only to watch the last of his life ebb from it. Colman wanted nothing more than to fall into bed and sleep, but he knew he'd be expected at the wake that night if he didn't want to be a total outcast. Goodness knew Dad wouldn't go. He rarely left his house clinging to the side of the mountain. Colman washed his face, put on a clean shirt, and made his way to Uncle Webb's place.

The women had washed and dressed Caleb in his best suit. Colman arrived just in time to see his cousin Miriam remove a towel soaked in soda water from the dead man's face. He flinched to see the pale skin and eyes weighted with coins. As many times as he'd sat up with a dead body, he never got used to it. Caleb didn't look like himself anymore—some part of him was long gone.

They'd taken down a door to use as the cooling board, which was balanced across two chairs. Family members drank coffee and ate molasses cake, talking in low voices. Caleb's mother sat in the kitchen, crying softly. Sometimes at a wake there'd be whiskey and folks would get to telling stories, but this night the air was somber and heavy. Colman got some coffee and settled in to keep watch.



The funeral was late the following day. Colman debated staying away but knew failing to appear would be seen as breaking faith with the Harpe clan, and too many already shunned him. He'd have to lose a leg or worse if he wanted to miss this event.

It was every bit as bad as Colman expected. He was just grateful no one asked him to deliver the service. The preacher from the church the Harpe family founded when they broke with the McLeans knew his audience well. He sang Caleb's praises while presenting Jake as a demon doing the devil's bidding. Though Colman didn't disagree, he wasn't sure it was the right tone to strike on such a sad day.

The coffin stood open in front of the pulpit, Caleb looking foreign with his hair combed neatly and his hands folded over a Bible on his chest. Colman doubted he'd held a Bible since he was a boy. Folks had slipped a few things into the coffin with him—a hunting knife, a rock gleaming with mica, and the ace of spades. The playing card peeked out of Caleb's left coat sleeve. Colman thought it was disrespectful but decided to let well enough alone.

As the service wrapped up, Uncle Webb made his way to the pulpit. He leaned there heavily, bracing his hands on either side, head hung low. About the time the silence began

to feel uncomfortable he turned red-rimmed, bleary eyes on those gathered before him.

“Word has reached my ears that Serepta McLean has sent a message.”

Colman stiffened. Serepta was the matriarch of the McLean clan and Jake’s mother. When her husband died, everyone quickly learned that she had long been the power behind that throne. In a place where women were expected to keep house and raise children, she’d managed to carve out a veritable kingdom. And anyone who expected her to be a pliant female quickly learned otherwise.

“Serepta has this to say . . .” There was an uneasy pause as Webb’s weighty gaze rested on first one and then another of those gathered in the room. “She says the world’s a better place with one less Harpe in it.”

Even though Colman knew the sound came from human throats, the roar seemed to emanate from the very walls, floors, and ceiling. It surrounded him and echoed in his chest until his heart started beating rough and ragged. He breathed slow and steady, as though he could calm the room and his own racing pulse at the same time. That message was just the sort of thing Serepta would say. Cold and hard as the woman herself.

Webb raised one hand, lifting it high until all the voices stilled. “I vow that Jake McLean will die by my hand. God and each one of you are my witnesses. This abomination will not go unpunished.”

This time the roar was one of approval. Colman, sitting in a pew near the back of the church, slipped outside. They had more men to carry the coffin than they needed. He’d wait for them to come out and lay Caleb to rest in the cemetery, where even now he could see purple-and-white

crocuses pushing up through the soil. Death. Life. And then death again.

He tried to see Jake from God's perspective but failed. All he could see was a bad man who had taken the life of a . . . well, not a good man exactly. Maybe the life of a man with the potential to be good. Jake, on the other hand, murder just might be crossing a line too far to ever find your way back to good.

He joined the stream of people following the coffin from the church. He saw his father leaning against a fence post, watching the procession. He nodded, and Dad nodded back. Irene leaned into some other women, sobbing and wailing. Webb preceded the coffin to the grave Colman had helped dig that morning. It had taken them more than half the day, working with shovels in the heavy clay-thick soil. Colman got there first and cut the greening sod carefully, setting it to the side so it could be laid on top again. He knew he'd take more care than anyone else, and it seemed important to him to be able to cover over the dark scar in the earth. As if it were possible to heal this wound—to forget it, even if none of them were ever able to forgive it.

Because, God forgive him, he wanted revenge, too.

Colman stood to the side as they lowered Caleb's coffin into the cold earth. The grave was close to a cedar tree that had been growing in the cemetery for decades. When they dug the two-and-a-half by eight-foot grave six feet down, they'd had to cut off roots sticking out from the sides. The sharp scent of cedar filled the small space. Colman closed his eyes and remembered his grandmother's cedar chest where she stored quilts, fine linens, and sentimental bits and pieces. Cedar preserved things—kept the moths away. Colman felt anger tighten his belly. Nothing would preserve

Caleb now. He told himself that vengeance wouldn't ease this pain, but the need to do something—to take action—was strong. It was going to require long hours on his knees to let this anger go. That is, if he decided he really wanted to release it.