

A woman stands on a stone path, wearing a light green dress with a small dark pattern and a long, fringed orange shawl. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is a brick building and greenery. The title 'THESE TANGLED THREADS' is overlaid in large white letters. The author's name 'SARAH LOUDIN THOMAS' is at the bottom in yellow letters. The text 'A NOVEL of BILTMORE' is in the middle in white letters. There are decorative dotted lines in the background.

THESE  
TANGLED  
THREADS

A NOVEL *of* BILTMORE

SARAH LOUDIN  
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*For Becka, Mariah, Megan, Scott, Sean,*  
and for all the kids like them who are trying  
to make the best of an impossible situation  
and often succeeding.

The gem cannot be polished without friction,  
nor man perfected without trials.

—*Dutch proverb inscribed  
on a fireplace stone, Grove Park Inn*

## *Prologue*

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# ARTHUR

**ELKINS, WEST VIRGINIA  
1897**

Arthur stilled his hands the moment the slim, mustached man stepped into the sunlit room and asked to see Reverend Swope. He felt his breathing slow as the man's dark eyes swept the simple space. Arthur had the sense their visitor planned to describe what he saw in detail later. When that warm, interested gaze landed on him, Arthur quivered like a rabbit in the shadows. He tucked his newly braced foot further under his chair.

The man moved closer, his steps unhurried. He picked up the deer Arthur had finished carving the day before and held it to the light. Arthur clutched the block in his hand more tightly. It would soon be a fawn to pair with its mother.

The man turned the small figure over and over before looking at Arthur once again. "This is fine work. Are you the artist?" Arthur cleared his throat but only nodded, gripping the penknife so tightly his fingers felt numb. "How old are you?"

Arthur wet his lips. "I'll be nine soon enough, sir."

The man's eyes crinkled. "Impressive."

A door opened, and Reverend Swope stepped into the room. "Mr. Vanderbilt. What a pleasure to have you visit us today."

The man—Mr. Vanderbilt—turned to greet Arthur's guardian. "Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice. As I mentioned in my letter, I have an exciting opportunity I'd like to discuss with you."

Reverend Swope, always cheerful, grinned even wider. "Indeed, indeed. Only too happy!" He looked over Mr. Vanderbilt's shoulder and winked at Arthur. "No time like the present."

As the door closed softly behind the two men, Arthur realized Mr. Vanderbilt had not returned his carving.



# LORNA

**GROVE PARK INN  
ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA  
SEPTEMBER 1923**

“It must be—” Ellen Harshaw closed her eyes and kissed her fingertips, her shoulders dropping as she exhaled and flung her hand wide—“*exquisite*. Yes, that’s the only word for it. Edith has carried your homespun fabrics to the height of fashion, and this gift for Cornelia . . .” She trailed off, shaking her head. “I trust you can create something exceptional. Perhaps like you did for her twenty-first birthday party?”

Lorna tucked her hands behind her back and forced a smile. “Absolutely. I’ll begin sketching out the design immediately.”

Mrs. Harshaw gave Lorna a sidelong look. “And don’t tell anyone. I’m sure the engagement won’t be announced for *ages*. But I have it on excellent authority that there will be a wedding within the year. Even as early as next spring.” She simpered. “I’d name the groom, but that would be telling, wouldn’t it?” She stood and tugged her gloves into place. “I

absolutely must take advantage of what I've been hearing to have the most unique gift for the newlyweds. And for heaven's sake, not a *plaid*." She wrinkled her nose. "Plaids are so common."

Lorna nodded. Of course, plaids weren't the least bit common if you really understood what the patterns meant or how challenging they were to weave. But Lorna supposed Mrs. Harshaw wanted something showier that would make her gift stand out among what was sure to be an ostentatious display of silver, crystal, and even jewels at the society wedding of the year if not the decade.

Lorna had met Cornelia, Biltmore Estate's heiress, on several occasions. When they were both youngsters, Tarheel Nell, as the locals called her, was often a visitor to Biltmore Estate Industries, where Lorna had first learned to weave. She'd even spoken to her on her birthday two years earlier when Lorna had mistakenly counted herself lucky to supply those blasted curtains that were coming back to haunt her now.

Of course, Lorna didn't really know Cornelia, who was three years her junior and a thousand miles her social superior. No matter that she had laughed and played with the village children once upon a time. Now Mrs. Harshaw seemed confident that she was about to become engaged at the age of twenty-three. Her father wouldn't be there to walk her down the aisle, which was a sadness Lorna understood. Keenly.

"Can you give me a hint?" Mrs. Harshaw cooed, interrupting Lorna's thoughts.

"A hint?" Lorna blinked. "Oh. As to the design?" She shook off her reverie and gave her customer a wide-eyed look. "I might let you have a peek once I'm further along. But for now, you'll just have to trust that I will create a design unlike any you've seen before."

"Wonderful!" Mrs. Harshaw stood and tucked her bag

under her arm. “And remember, the cost is of no consequence.” She tossed her head and laughed. “Use gold thread if you like! Just be certain the end result is utterly unique.” She leaned close and lowered her voice. “It should be fit for *royalty*.”

Lorna walked the older woman out to her waiting driver and waved her off with a confident smile. She watched the car disappear down the mountain. When she returned to her desk, Mr. Tompkins, her supervisor, stood there, tapping his toe. “Can you deliver on that promise you just made?”

Lorna swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “Of course I can,” she said lightly.

He pinched his lips. “Really? Because it’s been quite some time since you produced anything even close to what that woman will be expecting.” He narrowed his eyes and stabbed the desk with his finger. “And if you fail, I feel confident your time here will be at an end. I know some people go so far as to credit your early designs with helping to save the company, but it’s been nearly two years since your last release.”

Lorna hoped he didn’t see her flinch. Mr. Tompkins had been hinting for months that the administrative work she handled could be done by someone younger and less skilled just as well for less money. She suspected the only reason she was still employed was because Mr. Seely had a soft spot for her. And because she was always willing to step in and help with weaving and training to keep production on schedule. There were rumors that the business was, once again, flagging as it had been when Mrs. Vanderbilt sold it in 1917.

She lifted her chin and looked down her nose at Mr. Tompkins. “Prepare to be astonished,” she said. He harrumphed and left the room.

Lorna slumped into her chair and resisted the urge to bury her face in her hands. She had just promised the impossible.

She hadn't had an original idea for a fabric design in years. Once upon a time—when she was first starting out—she'd had a few ideas that shone. When she first learned about open work, she'd pulled off a handful of patterns that were applauded. But they'd ultimately been deemed too complicated and phased out of production. As the years rolled by and her focus turned to training others, she'd rarely even tried to come up with something original. There was just so much to do . . .

Now the fabulous designs she'd “borrowed” from Gentry were long gone. Technical skill wouldn't be enough this time around. How would she ever deliver on this impossible task? She suspected that more than her own employment depended on her coming through. Mrs. Harshaw could spur sales among other ladies in her set and boost their business overall. If Biltmore Industries failed, it would affect nearly one hundred workers.

For a moment, Lorna felt nostalgic for the “old days” when the business had been supported by the Vanderbilts and the focus had been on training unschooled Appalachian youth in viable trades. Once, eight looms had seemed like an overabundance. Now the weaving house was lined with dozens of looms, many of them operated by men. Lorna sometimes wondered if she should give up and move on. But no. She could still contribute. She could still be part of ensuring that Biltmore Industries was around for a long time to come.

For the first time in years, she thought about Gentry and wondered where the girl with the wild imagination and natural instinct for design might be.



Lorna strolled through the dappled shade at the weekly market on the lawn of the Cathedral of All Souls in Biltmore

Village. She wasn't paying much attention to the wares for sale. She'd just needed to get away from her office, away from the weaving room. If only she could get out of her own head as easily.

"Miss Blankenship!" Lorna turned and slowed her pace. A young woman caught up to her. "Miss Blankenship, I thought that was you." The girl tried to calm her breathing and laid a hand on Lorna's arm. "I hope this isn't too much of an imposition, but I wanted to show you something."

"Not at all," Lorna said, slipping her mask of professionalism back into place. The girl looked familiar, but she couldn't place her. "I'd be delighted to see your wares."

"Oh, it's not mine," the girl said with a blush as she steered Lorna toward a table tucked against the wall of the church. "It's just that I know you're the best weaver in all of Asheville, maybe in all of North Carolina"—Lorna allowed a faint smile at the praise—"and I knew you'd be interested." The girl faltered. "Well, I thought you would be. Of course, my eye isn't as good as yours, but this cloth . . ." She finally let her words spin out.

"What's your name?" Lorna asked.

"I'm Bernice Collins. I've been working in the weaving room for about six months." She ducked her head. "I haven't worked with you directly but I know who you are."

"I'm glad you're taking your training seriously enough to examine the work of others," Lorna said, patting her hand. "Now, show me what you've found." She tried to mask her weariness. The last thing she wanted to do was examine some inferior homespun produced in who knew what backwoods holler. While the traditional fabric had certainly started on small homesteads, where women did everything from shearing the sheep to spinning the thread to weaving the rough cloth, what they made at Biltmore Industries was finer and of a much higher quality. She'd make short work of this and

then slip inside the church where she might find a moment's privacy and stillness.

"See?" Bernice lifted a shawl from a table that mostly offered squash, eggs, and some coarse knitted items. She held the garment out as if it were an offering. Lorna blinked. Then she stretched out her own hand to take the fabric. It was soft—luxurious even—and the pattern was perfect. The finely rendered plaid in the colors of autumn showed crisp definition while still blending and flowing together in a way that gave it a softness and subtlety she'd rarely seen before. For just a moment, despite the heat and humidity of the August day, she felt the bite of an autumn morning and smelled the earthy, tobacco scent of fallen leaves.

If Mrs. Harshaw could see this, she just might change her mind about plaid.

Lorna turned to the woman standing behind the table. "Did you make this?"

"Why do ye need to know?" she said with a scowl. "If ye like it well enough, buy it."

Lorna pulled out her purse, and the woman stuck out a gnarled hand. Fishing out some coins, Lorna eyed the woman. "What if I wanted more like this? Do you have others?"

"Could be. But I ain't got 'em today."

Lorna extended her hand but didn't release the coins. "Perhaps I could visit the weaver to buy other cloth directly."

"Oh, aye, and leave me out of it." The woman snatched Lorna's money. "I'm not the one makin' the cloth, but if you want more, you'll have to talk to me."

Lorna felt frustration bubble. If the weaver, clearly highly skilled, had other designs, perhaps she—or he for that matter—could be persuaded to share a unique design with Lorna. Otherwise, she was going to be hard-pressed to satisfy Mrs. Harshaw. She thought quickly. "Tell the weaver I'd like