



Prayers and Lies

Sherri Wood Emmons

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When seven-year-old Bethany meets her six-year-old cousin Reana Mae, it's the beginning of a kinship of misfits that saves both from a bone-deep loneliness. Every summer, Bethany and her family leave Indianapolis for West Virginia's Coal River Valley. For Bethany's mother, the trips are a reminder of the coalmines and grinding poverty of her childhood, of a place she'd hoped to escape. But her loving relatives, and Bethany's friendship with Reana Mae, keep them coming back.

But as Bethany grows older, she realizes that life in this small, close-knit community is not as simple as she once thought. . .that the riverside cabins that hold so much of her family's history also teem with scandalous whispers. . .and that those closest to her harbor unimaginable secrets. Amid the dense woods and quiet beauty of the valley, these secrets are coming to light at last, with a force devastating enough to shatter lives, faith, and the bond that Bethany once thought would last forever.

Spanning four decades, Sherri Wood Emmons' debut is a haunting, captivating novel about the unexpected, sometimes shocking events that thrust us into adulthood--and the connections that keep us tethered, always, to our pasts.

Advance praise for Sherri Wood Emmons and Prayers and Lies

"From the first sentence, the voice of the narrator, Bethany, rings true and never falters. By the end of the book, I cared for every aunt and cousin, mother and sister, even the most troubled and dangerous. *Prayers and Lies* is the story of a family that knows how to love and forgive and get on with life." --Drusilla Campbell, author of *The Good Sister*

"Through the careful rendering of this dysfunctional family, Emmons makes us fall in love with Bethany Wylie, the young girl at the heart of this story, as well as her wayward cousin, Reana Mae. The evolution of their friendship--the way they grow together and grow apart--is heart-breaking." --T. Greenwood, author of *Two Rivers*

"Prepare to stay up all night reading! Sherri Wood Emmons perfectly captures the devastating impact of family secrets in her beautifully written--and ultimately hopeful--debut novel. With its evocative setting and realistically crafted characters, *Prayers and Lies* is a must read for fans of rich family drama." --Diane Chamberlain, author of *The Lies We Told*

"A sweet, revealing tale of family, friendship, long-held secrets and includes the all-important ingredients of forgiveness and love." --Kris Radish, author of *The Shortest Distance Between Two Women*

"I loved it." --Cathy Lamb, author of *Such A Pretty Face*

The Kiss

We always knew when Bobby Lee came home. Folks up and down the Coal River Valley heard the roar of his motorcycle on the gravel road long before he tore around the final bend, turning so sharp he lay nearly sideways on the ground. Sometimes he'd be gone weeks at a time, sometimes just a few days. But his homecoming never changed.

He rode into the valley like a conquering hero. And Jolene, his wife, would come flying out of their shabby cabin, long red hair streaming behind her, just as Bobby Lee pulled into their little dirt yard. He'd be off the huge bike in a flash as she ran down the two broken and patched steps and into his arms. And then there would be the kiss--scandalous for that rural West Virginia community in the 1960s. We children would stand on our own porches or in the road, gaping at the two of them, our mouths and eyes wide.

Usually, Reana Mae was waiting on the porch, too, but Bobby Lee didn't notice her right off. His wife was such a whirlwind of red curls and short skirts and hunger that their daughter--thin, freckled, and silent--went unnoticed. After the kiss would come gifts, if his haul had been a long one. Sometimes, Bobby Lee drove his rig all the way from Charleston to California, and he brought Jolene and Reana presents from places like Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Usually a toy or coloring book for Reana. For Jolene, he brought clothes--shocking clothes. Like the halter top and hot pants he brought from San Francisco. Or the lime green minidress from Chicago. Jolene strutted around like a peacock in them, while the rest of the valley folk shook their heads and whispered to one another over their fences and laundry lines. Jolene was the first woman in the valley to go braless, her round, full breasts barely contained beneath the tight T-shirts and sweaters she wore.

After the gifts and the hellos and the "What's happenin' in the world?" talk, Jolene would send Reana Mae off to her greatgrandma's, then disappear into the house with her husband for the

rest of the afternoon. Sometimes, Reana spent the night at her Grandma Loreen's before Jolene remembered to come for her. Loreen would make up Jolene's old room, and she'd fry pork chops and boil potatoes with green beans and bacon fat like Reana wanted, and she'd sing her the lullaby she used to sing to her own babies. And so, on those days, Reana Mae got cherished a little bit.

Jolene wasn't from the valley, though her people were. She'd spent most of her childhood up north in Huntington with her mama, EmmaJane Darling. Her father, whoever he might have been, was long gone before Jolene made her appearance at Our Lady of Mercy Charity Hospital in Huntington. Jolene came to live with her grandparents, Ray and Loreen, after EmmaJane died, and she was a handful.

But Bobby Lee fell for Jolene the first time he laid his eyes on her, the day she came to the Coal River. She was just twelve years old then, but she looked sixteen in her tight black skirt, low-cut blouse, and bright-red lipstick. And Bobby Lee told his little brother, "I'm gonna marry that girl." Five years later, he did. And don't you suppose Ray and Loreen were relieved to have Jolene married off? They fairly beamed at the wedding, didn't even bat an eye when Jolene wore a short blue dress to be married in instead of the nice, long white gown with lace that Loreen had offered to make for her.

"At least," my Aunt Belle had whispered, "it ain't red."

They were scandalous, those two, even in a valley that tolerated a good bit of questionable goings-on. Times were hard, after all, and people had to take their happiness when and where they found it. Folks in the valley were philosophical about such things. But Bobby Lee and Jolene Colvin, they pushed it too far by half.

They didn't go to church, for one thing. Everyone else in the valley spent long Sunday mornings at Christ the King Baptist Church, praying for redemption, hearing the true gospel, and assuring their eternal salvation. But not Bobby Lee and Jolene.

They sent Reana Mae to church, though, every Sunday morning, scrubbed clean and wearing her one Sunday dress, her spindly legs bare in summer and winter alike. Folks sometimes said Jolene sent her daughter to church just so she could lie abed with Bobby Lee, desecrating the Lord's Day. And the church folk were sugary sweet to Reana on account of it. But she never even smiled at them; she just stared with her unblinking, green cat-eyes and all those brown freckles. Not a pretty child, folks whispered. Small, knobby, wild-haired, and so quiet you'd hardly notice her, till you felt her eyes staring through you. You couldn't hardly tell she was Jolene's daughter, except for those eyes--just like Jolene's.

Reana Mae sometimes sat with my sisters and me at church, and she never wrote notes on the bulletin or whispered or wriggled or pinched. She just sat with her hands folded in her lap and stared up at Brother Harley preaching. Sometimes her lips moved like she was praying, but she never said a word. She didn't even sing when Miss Lucetta started up a hymn on the piano.

Christ the King Baptist Church was the glue that held that community together. The weathered white house of God had married and buried valley folk for longer than anyone could remember. Brother Harley, the pastor, was a heavy-jowled, sweaty, balding man who liked a good joke and a cold beer. When he didn't wear his black robe, he donned plaid shirts with a breast pocket, where he tucked the white handkerchiefs he used to wipe the sweat from his forehead and neck. His daddy had been the first pastor of Christ the King Baptist Church, and he was hoping his grandson, Harley Boy, would take the pulpit when he retired.

Brother Harley was great friends with my Great-Aunt Belle. Often on quiet summer nights, you could hear his belly laugh echo

all through the valley when he sat on Belle's porch, drinking beer and sharing gossip. His tiny, sharp-eyed wife, Ida Louise, didn't join him at Belle's. Folks sometimes wondered, quietly over their laundry lines, just why Brother Harley spent so much time with a rich widow and so little time at home. "But"--Loreen would sigh to my mother, her head bobbing earnestly--"knowing Ida's temper, maybe it ain't such a wonder as all that."

Aunt Belle--Arabella was her Christian name--was born and bred in the Coal River Valley, the eldest of the three Lee sisters. My grandmother, Araminta, was the youngest. Arathena, Bobby Lee's grandmother, was the middle child.

When she was nineteen, Belle caught the eye of a much older and very wealthy man. Mason Martin owned a chain of drugstores in East Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. He'd come to the valley to look into property, before deciding the community was too small to support a drugstore. He left without a store but with a beautiful young wife. The couple settled into a fine house in Charleston, and for eleven years lived happily together.

At thirty, Belle came back to the valley, widowed and childless. Mason had dropped dead in his rose garden at the age of sixty-two, leaving Belle the sole heir to his drugstore wealth. They'd had just one child, a scrawny son who died of whooping cough before his first birthday.

When Mason died, Aunt Belle had her big house built and proceeded to buy from the Coal River Excavation Company as many of the small riverfront cabins as she could talk them out of. These she sold to the families who had long lived in them, for monthly payments of about half what their previous rents had been. It was Belle who waged war with the electric company to get the valley wired in 1956, and Belle who hired the contractors to install plumbing and septic tanks for her little houses a few years later.

Aunt Belle always sat right up front at Christ the King Baptist Church, marching in solemnly, winking sidelong at friends, just as the first hymn began. When we first started coming to the river, she and my mother had battled fiercely over whether we would sit with her.

"Pride of place," my mother said softly, in that velvety firm voice that brooked no argument, "does not belong in the house of the Lord."

"You all are my family," Belle had hollered. "You ought to be up front with me. What do folks think, you all sitting way at the back of the church, like you're ashamed before the Lord?"

But my mother would not be moved. Aunt Belle had all the resources of her drugstore empire and the indebtedness of an entire valley, but they were nothing in the face of my mother's rock-solid belief in the rightness of her faith.

That was always the difference between valley faith and my mother's. Valley folk took their religion tempered with a hard dose of pragmatism. If Brother Harley spent more time than was absolutely seemly with Arabella Lee . . . well, look at his wife, after all. If the mining men drank too much beer or even whiskey on a Saturday night . . . well, didn't they earn that privilege, working underground six days a week? If Reana Mae had been born only six months after Bobby Lee and Jolene got married . . . well, at least they made it legal in time.

My mother's fiery faith allowed for no such dalliances with the Lord and His ways. There was no liquor in our house, no card playing, no gossip. And there was definitely not pride of place; no, ma'am, we would not sit up in the front pew with my Aunt Belle, no matter how loudly she argued. We sat quietly in the back, with

Reana Mae.

Most of the valley kids teased Reana Mae, but my sister Tracy was the worst. Tracy seemed to really hate Reana. I wasn't sure why, but then I didn't understand a lot about Tracy in those days. She was purely mean most of the time, and poor Reana Mae bore the brunt of it when we came south. I wonder sometimes that Reana didn't fight back earlier. Later, much later, she learned to hurt Tracy more than Tracy ever hurt her. But in those hot and sticky days of the 1960s, she only took whatever Tracy gave and came back for more.

"Why doesn't your mother get you some clothes that fit?"

Reana Mae looked down at the faded yellow swimsuit that hung from her shoulders, her cheeks reddening. She shrugged and lowered her head. We were building mud and sand castles at the strip of cleared land that passed for a beach.

"I guess she doesn't want to waste her money," Tracy continued, shoveling dirt into a pink bucket and smashing it down with both hands. "Why, it'd be like dressing up a scarecrow. Like putting Barbie dresses on a stick doll. Ain't that so, Bethany?" She paused, looking up at me expectantly. I didn't make a sound, so Tracy went on. "I guess she wants to keep all Bobby Lee's money for herself so she can buy those trashy dresses she wears, the ones that show her butt."

Reana Mae just stared at the ground, her small frame slumped and still.

"My daddy says people down here breed like rabbits," Tracy continued, "but your mama and daddy just have you. How come?"

Reana shrugged her shoulders again, still silent. She shoved her dirty-blond hair back from her freckled face with a muddy hand.

"I guess when they saw how ugly you turned out, they didn't want any more babies." Tracy smirked.

Still, Reana Mae said nothing, and neither did I. At least Tracy wasn't focused on me.

"What's white and ugly and disgusting to look at?" Tracy continued.

Neither of us said anything.

"A pile of maggots . . . and Reana Mae's face."

Tracy's laughter rang shrill up and down the river. Reana Mae looked up at me, to see if I would laugh, too. She looked like a dog waiting to be kicked.

"Shut up, Tracy," I heard myself say out loud.

Tracy's eyes widened in surprise, then she snickered. "Well, I guess you finally found your real sister, Bethany-beanpole-bonybutt-baby. You and Hillbilly Lilly must have come from the same garbage can. That's where we found Bethany, you know." She turned to Reana Mae now that I was the target. "She was crying in a garbage can and Mother felt sorry for her and brought her home. She's not our real sister. Mother has to pay people just to be her friends." She laughed again, her brilliant hazel eyes sparkling mean.

Reana Mae stared directly into Tracy's beautiful, hateful face and finally whispered, "I think you're the meanest girl that ever was."

Tracy stopped laughing abruptly and hurled the contents of her bucket at the two of us, drenching us both with wet sand and mud.

"You two are just alike," she hissed as she rose. "You're the trash-can twins."

With that, she picked up her bucket and ran up the road.

We sat there silently for a moment, dripping and muddy and miserable. Then Reana said to me, smiling shyly, "Well, I guess I always wanted a twin anyhow."

I smiled back at her. All my life I'd had three sisters--three strangers I lived with but never really knew. Sitting in the mud on that muggy day, I found my real sister. I was seven, Reana Mae was six, and I had no way of knowing just how intertwined our lives would become. But from that day forward, Reana and I were connected in a way I've never been with anyone else. Her story and

mine got so tangled up together, sometimes it felt like I was just watching from the outside, like she was the one living. Sometimes, I hated her for that. But mostly, I loved her.

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