

A Stillness of Chimes

A Novel

MEG MOSELEY

AUTHOR OF *Gone South*

Praise for
A Stillness of Chimes

“Meg Moseley has composed a haunting, melodic tale that, like any great ballad, lingers long after the last note. Full of romance, intrigue, and whispers from the past, *A Stillness of Chimes* will stir readers’ hearts and awaken their own unanswered what-if’s...and bring hope that maybe some dreams don’t have to die.”

—BETSY ST. AMANT, author of *The Rancher Next Door* and
Addison Blakely: Confessions of a PK

“If you’re looking for sweet tea with a twist, you’ll find it in Meg Moseley’s irresistible *A Stillness of Chimes*. With sacred themes of family and the beauty of second chances, this novel sweeps you south and touches your soul in ways you won’t soon forget.”

—LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award finalist and author of
Love’s Reckoning

“A small mountain town in Georgia, with its wry humor and full complement of kudzu, is the background for this story of three closely related families. However, less than congenial relationships lurk beneath the poetic prose of this talented writer. Clue upon clue builds—to at last reveal the startling end, hinted in the story’s beginning. The finish may catch you by surprise, but its rich meaning will leave you with wonderful food for thought.”

—RUTH TRIPPY, author of *The Soul of the Rose*

“Assured writing, fully realized characters, and family secrets revealed are deftly woven to create a story as compelling as its title. When the chimes still, healing, faith, and light weave through the silence left behind. Readers will find themselves caught up in Sean and Laura’s journey to wholeness and love.”

—LISA WINGATE, national best-selling author of *The Prayer Box*
and *Wildwood Creek*

“I loved *A Stillness of Chimes*. It’s a classic southern story with childhood friends, memories, a mystery, and a lake. Moseley tells the tale in her unique fashion and lyrical storytelling voice. I highly recommend.”

—RACHEL HAUCK, best-selling, award-winning author of
Princess Ever After and *The Wedding Dress*

“There’s something magical in the sound of chimes. Something ethereal in the tinkling of notes gracing the air. Ms. Moseley has written an ethereal story of love and of loving family. Don’t miss *A Stillness of Chimes*, lovely in the prose, magical as it unfolds.”

—ANGELA BREIDENBACH, author of *A Healing Heart* and president
of the Christian Authors Network

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AUTHOR OF *When Sparrows Fall*



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A STILLNESS OF CHIMES

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Scripture quotations and paraphrases are taken from the King James Version.

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To our wounded warriors and their loved ones.
You have my unending respect and gratitude.

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Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 116

One



Eighteen years ago

Laura Gantt didn't believe in ghosts, but sometimes she wondered if living across from a graveyard had warped her. Part Irish, all southern, descended from moonshiners and holy rollers, she'd always believed in things she couldn't see. Her dad said it was just the old whisperings in their blood.

All morning, she'd heard soft, sure warnings. Some kind of trouble was on its way. The whisperings hinted it would come for Sean.

She and her friends, plus one tagalong kid sister, had been picking blackberries for an hour in the brambles that lined the railroad tracks. Trees choked with kudzu vines loomed above them like green monsters.

A few feet away, Cassie Bright and her little sister worked side by side, their blond hair damp with sweat. Sean Halloran was bent over the brambles farther down the tracks. He looked lost in a T-shirt his brother had outgrown.

Sean straightened and squared his skinny shoulders. "No slacking off, Gantt," he hollered. "Lazy bum."

Laura swatted a mosquito on her arm and tried to think of a smart

comeback. She gave up and shrugged. Sean went back to work, laughing, but he couldn't fool her. She knew what he lived with.

Sweat trickled down her neck. She was sick of the heat, the scratches, the bug bites. There were snakes too. She tried not to think about the snakes.

Cassie stopped working to examine her fingers, stained purple with juice. "Ugh. I hate blackberries."

"I hate snakes worse," Laura said, thinking of Sean's father. The Hal-loran boys called him by his first name—Dale—to show their disrespect. Never to his face, though. They wouldn't dare.

Cassie moved closer between long-reaching canes that bristled with wicked little thorns. "Guess what?" she said quietly. "The Cheevers heard the Peeping Tom last night. He was pitching pebbles at their windows."

"Why do you act like it's good news? It's creepy."

"Yeah, but this town could use a little excitement. My dad says it's Slattery."

Laura shivered in spite of the heat. A sloppy, skinny man, Slattery lived in a run-down duplex just down the road. Nobody knew his first name.

"How would your dad know who it is?" she asked.

"He has a friend who's a deputy, remember? He tells us all kinds of stuff."

Laura dropped a handful of ripe berries into her bucket. "Your dad's friend should spend less time talking and more time catching bad guys."

"You're scared. Scared of a silly prowler."

"No, I'm not. My daddy has his guns."

"Bet you won't be so brave when the Peeping Tom's at your window. He—oh!" Cassie shrieked and giggled. "Mr. Gantt, you spooked me. Sneaking up like that."

Laura hadn't noticed her father either, but there he was. A curlicue of wood shavings clung to his shirt, and the humidity made his sandy-blond hair frizz where it escaped from under his baseball cap. He didn't seem to be in one of his moods, but she wasn't sure until he tipped his cap, his eyes twinkling.

"My apologies, Miss Cassie," he said. "I didn't aim to scare anybody. Looks like you've got that department covered, though." He wrapped his arm around Laura's shoulders. "Hey, sweetheart. Are you managing to comport yourself like a lady?"

"Always." Laura leaned into his sun-warmed shirt and that familiar smell of sawdust. "You don't have to keep checking on us. We're not babies."

"Even when you're a grown woman, you'll be my baby girl. No matter what."

Out of nowhere, a heavy sadness settled on her. Whether it was about his troubles or Sean's, it made her feel like a grown woman already. A grown woman who didn't mind being called her father's baby girl.

"And you'll always be my dad," she said. "No matter what."

He smiled and gave her ponytail a gentle tug. Then he nodded toward Cassie's sister. "Tigger's still a baby even if she doesn't think so," he said quietly. "Y'all keeping an eye on her?"

Laura and Cassie glanced at each other and swiveled their eyes back to him. "Yes sir," they said in unison.

He turned toward Sean. "Young Mr. Halloran. It's good to see you, son."

"It's good to see you too, sir." Sean spoke with so much respect that she half expected him to salute his hero. Her father, Elliott Gantt.

"I understand your brother enlisted," her dad said.

“Yes sir.” Sean came closer to his idol but not too close. “He’s in boot camp.”

“You must be proud.”

“Yes sir, I am.”

“I hope he’ll never have to go to war. If he does, though, he’ll make you prouder still.”

“Yes sir. I know he will.”

Laura’s dad stole a few berries from her pail. “Y’all behave, now.” He studied Tigger, his expression softening. “You too, Tig. Be good for your big sister.”

“I will,” she chirped.

“You’re always a good girl, aren’t you?”

Tigger nodded and gave him an angelic smile, drawing a laugh from him and a subdued grumble from Cassie.

“I’ll get back to work,” he said. “That wood won’t make itself into anything useful.”

“Bye, Dad,” Laura said. “See you at supper.”

“Yep. And we’ll have cobbler again, I hope. You and your mama make the best blackberry cobbler in Georgia.” He swiped a few more berries, their color nearly matching the neat lettering on his muscular arm—“life everlasting.” A memento of his army days, it was his only tattoo.

A bright yellow butterfly wove a wobbly path above his head as he waded through the brambles, finally disappearing in the tangle of green. He would come out on First Street, a block from his workshop in downtown Prospect.

“I wish he wouldn’t keep checking on us,” Laura said. “I mean, come on. We’re twelve.”

“Yeah, maybe he needs to loosen up a little.” As Sean approached, Cassie lowered her voice. “Just be glad he’s not like Sean’s dad. What a creep.”

Sean came closer, his pail bumping against the leg of his too-short jeans. He scowled at Cassie. “I heard that.”

She scowled back. “Sorry, but it’s true.”

“That doesn’t mean y’all have to go around yammering about it.”

“You have to tell somebody,” Laura said.

He squinted at her. “Tell somebody what?”

“Don’t play dumb.” She lifted his floppy sleeve so Cassie could see the new bruise on his sun-browned shoulder.

He yanked the sleeve down, moving so quickly that berries spilled from his bucket. “Mind your own business.”

“You are my business,” Laura said. “You’re my friend.”

He walked off without answering, his head high and his shoulders stiff.

Cassie wrinkled her nose. “What’s wrong with him lately?”

“Everything’s worse since Keith enlisted.” Laura’s eyes watered. “Now Sean’s got nobody to watch his back.”

“His brother must’ve been sick of looking after him. Like I’m sick of looking after Tigger.”

“Don’t say that. You’re lucky to have a sister.”

“Yeah, I’m real lucky. I’m always stuck watching her so she won’t wander off. Sometimes I wish she would.”

“Cassie!”

“You know I don’t mean it. I’m just so tired of having her tag along. Tigger the Tagger.” Cassie stared into the distance, her eyes rimmed with smudges of the mascara she’d borrowed from her mom’s bathroom. “Some-day I’ll get out of here. Out of Georgia. All the way to Hollywood, maybe.”

She brightened. “Mom bought some new nail polish. Sunset Boulevard Red. Let’s go paint our nails.”

“My dad doesn’t want me to paint my nails until I’m older.”

“You’re older than you were yesterday, so you’re older. Come on. He won’t even notice, and your mom won’t care. She’s cool. Hey, maybe we can talk my mom into renting a movie.” Cassie popped a berry into her mouth and walked away.

Laura studied her purple fingertips. Berry stains were allowed—and so was a tattoo, at least for her dad—but nail polish wasn’t. It didn’t make sense.

She continued tugging ripe fruits from their stems, aware that Sean was slowly working his way back. At last he stopped beside her.

He reached for a cane loaded with berries that hung like black jewels in the bright green leaves. “Sorry I got mad. I just don’t like it when you tell me what to do.”

“I can’t make you do what I say, but you sure can’t keep me from saying what I think.”

He gave her a quick glance and went back to picking. “You’re all right, Gantt. Sometimes. For a girl.”

Cassie popped up from behind a bush. “Sean and Laura, sittin’ in a tree,” she chanted. “K-I-S-S—”

“Knock it off,” Sean said. “We’re just friends.”

“We’re all friends,” Laura said. “All three of us.” She looked over her shoulder. Tigger was singing softly, paying no attention to the rest of them.

Laura placed her bucket on a patch of relatively clear and level ground. “Put down your berries for a minute.”

Sean and Cassie cooperated, but they looked hot and tired and skeptical.

“What’s this about?” Sean asked. “Ordering me around again?”

“Yes. Listen up, y’all. Hands together, right now. We have a promise to make.”

Three pairs of hands layered themselves together, stained and sticky with juice, marked with dirt and scratches and bug bites. The girls’ hands were pale and small compared to Sean’s bigger, darker hands. A bruise Laura hadn’t noticed before circled his left wrist like a wide purple bracelet.

“Me too,” Tigger said, bouncing toward them on her skinny legs. Her glittery pink hair clip was about to fall out of her silky hair.

Cassie pushed her sister away. “This isn’t little-girl stuff.”

“I’m not little! I’m almost eight.”

“Let her stay.” Laura drew Tig’s hands in with the bigger ones. “We’re just going to promise we’ll always be there for each other.” A glance at Sean made her heart hurt. “We’ll look out for each other. Always.” That wasn’t half of what she wanted to say, but her throat had clogged up.

The others only stared at her.

“Say it,” she ordered in a whisper. “Promise.”

“I promise,” Sean and Cassie said, and Tigger piped up with another “Me too.”

Sean glared at each one in turn, his shaggy hair half-veiling his fierce blue eyes and hiding most of the tiny scars on his forehead. “But y’all have to promise you won’t do anything stupid either.” He looked straight at Laura. “Promise you won’t go blabbing things that shouldn’t be blabbed.”

“I promise,” Cassie said. “No blabbing.”

“No blabbing,” Tigger parroted.

Laura’s hands were roasting. She felt as trapped as the times she’d knelt

at the altar until her legs ached, but she didn't dare move in the middle of a moment that might have been sacred. This wasn't church, though. It was pure foolishness, probably.

"Laura," Sean said. "Promise."

Maybe this was part of being there for him, part of being his friend: promising to do things his way. Because, after all, she didn't know what kind of trouble she'd stir up for him if she told her folks about his bully of a father.

She let out her breath. When she inhaled, her lungs seemed to fill with a deep sadness that seeped into every cell of her body.

"I promise. No blabbing."

Sean nodded. His face relaxed a tad.

A honeybee drowsed over his shoulder, breaking the spell. Laura flexed her fingers but couldn't free herself from the sticky, sweltering pile of hands.

Tigger yanked loose, releasing the rest of them too. "Sean, lookit," she said, picking up her pail. "I got tons of berries."

"That's a lot," he said. "Good work, Tig."

She scampered away, her pale hair catching the light. The sun always seemed to find her, even in the shade.

Cassie held her juice-stained hand to her heart. "There. We made a solemn vow, signed in the blood of a thousand berries." Dropping the dramatic pose, she laughed and walked away.

Sean poured his berries into Laura's pail, filling it to the brim. "Give 'em to your mom."

"You don't want any?"

"You think I bake pies and things? Nah. I'm gonna go drown some worms behind the Bennetts' place."

"Now? The fish won't be biting."

“That’ll still be better than hanging around with a bunch of girls.”

She gave his wiry shoulder a gentle shove. “Get out of here, then.”

“Get out of my way and I will.”

“Stop by later,” she said. “I might be at Cassie’s house for a while, though.”

“Don’t start slapping on the makeup like she does. I like you the way you are.”

Laura blinked.

“And don’t bat your eyelashes at me,” he added.

“I wasn’t—”

“Sure, you were.” Sean gave her a quick grin and sauntered away.

He would follow the tracks north for a while. Then he would cut to the left on the dirt road that led to the Bennetts’ little lake. He never had qualms about fishing on private property. But he hadn’t brought a fishing line, and his house was in the other direction. He only wanted a place to hide out while his dad was home.

Sean didn’t have a mom to stick up for him. Or to bake cobbles with. He would be all right, though. He was smart and strong and good. He would run away if he had to, and then Dale Halloran wouldn’t have anybody left to kick around but the dog.

“Man, it’s hot,” Cassie said, slapping a mosquito on her neck. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah, I’m done too. Sean gave me his berries.”

“Come on, Tigger,” Cassie said. “Time to bounce along home.”

Tigger pouted. “I have to fill my bucket first.”

“Oh, all right, but come straight home. Stay away from the tracks. You hear?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Tanya Jean Bright, say ‘Yes ma’am.’” Cassie sounded just like her mother.

“Yes ma’am.” Tigger’s quick fingers went back to finding berries.

“Take some of mine,” Laura told her. “Then your mom will have plenty and you can come home with us.”

“No! I want to fill up my own bucket by my own self.”

Laura pulled Cassie aside. “We can’t leave her by herself. We just told my dad—”

“She’ll be fine,” Cassie said. “We can look out the bedroom window and see her. Shoot, she’ll be home in five minutes. Even if she stays longer, she’s smart about trains and stuff. C’mon, let’s go paint our nails. My mom has tons of new makeup samples too.”

Laura imagined herself drinking something cold and sweet inside the Brights’ cool, dark house. Cassie’s dad was at work, and her mom never interfered with girls who wanted to primp and giggle. Mrs. Bright was like an aunt to Laura. The fun kind of aunt.

She fell in behind Cassie. By the time they’d made their way up the bank to the shoulder of the road, Tigger had started singing again. Her tiny voice floated behind them, growing fainter as they walked away.

Laura and Cassie were at the house in two minutes, their berries sitting on the coolness of the kitchen counter. Mrs. Bright was in her bedroom, fussing over a sewing project, but Cassie stuck her head in long enough to tell her they were back. Then she brought her mom’s nail polish and makeup samples to the kitchen table where the lighting was good.

“Wash up and gimme your hand,” Cassie said.

After a moment’s hesitation, Laura obeyed. She wondered if the fruit in

the Garden of Eden was the same lovely, warm shade of coral-red. Sunset Boulevard Red.

Half an hour later, her nails felt weighted and conspicuous. Her skin felt coated, her pores choked with something called Sunlight Bisque Foundation. Her eyes stung from their first exposure to mascara and liner. Staring at herself in a hand mirror, she decided she'd better scrub her face before her dad got a look at her. He'd say she was too young for makeup. He'd say she was just a little girl, not much older than Tigger—

Laura lowered the mirror. "Cassie? Tig still isn't back."

"Oops. We'd better go get her." Cassie was halfway to the door already. "I'm in deep doo-doo if my mom finds out."

They stepped outside, careful not to make noise and alert her mother to their exit. Once they'd reached the shoulder of the road, they ran, their sneakers making the gravel fly.

"There she is." Cassie pointed but didn't slow down.

They closed the gap quickly as Tigger trudged toward them. Her face was filthy, and she'd either spilled most of her berries or eaten them.

"What took you so long?" Cassie asked.

Ignoring Cassie, Tigger fixed her tearful blue eyes on Laura. "Your dad scolded me and told me to go home. And he told the creepy man to go—"

"What creepy man?"

With her free hand, Tigger pushed her hair out of her eyes, leaving a purple smear on her sweaty forehead. "The weirdo."

Cassie gave her a skeptical look. "Slattery? Yeah, right. Don't tell fibs."

"I don't. Laura's daddy yelled at him and"—Tig's fingers explored higher on her head, moving faster and faster. "Where's my new hair clip? It fell out!"

“Don’t start bawling. I’ll buy you another one.” Cassie started finger-combing Tig’s hair. “You’re lucky we promised we won’t blab. We won’t tattle on you for staying by yourself at the berry patch. Right, Laura?”

Laura nodded, awed by Cassie’s slick shifting of the blame.

“As long as you don’t tell Mom, you’re not in trouble,” Cassie said, wiping Tigger’s wet cheeks. “Hey, you want to try nail polish?”

Tigger’s eyes widened. “Yeah!”

Her cheerfulness restored, she scurried toward the house. Laura and Cassie followed at a slower pace.

“Close call,” Cassie said in a low voice.

“We’re still in trouble. My dad will tell your dad.”

“Uh-oh, you’re right.” Cassie made a face. “Well, if my folks decide I’m a bad baby-sitter, maybe they’ll stop making me baby-sit.”

The three girls trooped up the steps to the back door and into the kitchen. Tigger climbed into a chair and spread out her grubby hands for her first-ever fingernail polish.

Grateful that Tig had come safely home, Laura leaned against the counter and stared out the window at the bright blue sky. A train whistle moaned in the hills. Sean must have heard it too, up at the Bennetts’ little lake where he hid out whenever he was afraid to go home.

Shivery sadness filled her again, as lonesome as the whistle of the far-off train.



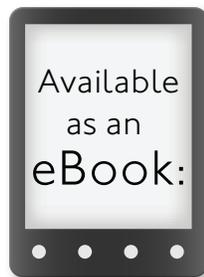
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