

Dawsonville, Georgia was the moonshine capital of the country in the 1940s. Thunder and White Lightning is a family story of moonshiners, whiskey trippers, dirt tracks, soldiers, stock cars drivers and the untamed characters-real and fiction-who make NASCAR possible and pointed it toward the future.

Thunder and White Lightning

by Grace Hawthorne


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Thunder and White Lightning

*A Novel
By Grace Hawthorne*



*A 1940's family story of moonshiners,
surprising women, dirt tracks, soldiers,
stock cars and the untamed characters
who made NASCAR possible.*

Foreword by Bill Elliott

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with some details to enhance the reader's experience.

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First Edition

In Praise of *Thunder and White Lightning*

Thunder and White Lightning is a feast of dialogue, events, characters, humor and stories so real you'll taste the moonshine, hear the roar of engines and smell the gasoline of the racing cars.

Betty Hanacek

There's nothing more fun than getting the inside story on who did what to whom. *Thunder and White Lightning* is the Downton Abbey of North Georgia in the 1940s.

S. I. Nichols

My husband grew up in the 40s and he and his friends idolized Roy Hall and the other drivers. *Thunder and White Lightning* rang true to his teenage memories.

Fontaine Draper

Grace Hawthorne's books are a piece of the tapestry of Americana, part of the strong tradition of storytellers. *Thunder and White Lightning* is no exception.

Nanette Trainor

Grace Hawthorne has written an engaging tale of two families living in the hills of north Georgia who were caught up in a world that is being remade.

Frank McComb

Another great story by Ms. Hawthorne. As always, her story line is tight and many of her characters seem to be people I know. But what I enjoy most, is that I always learn something new.

Jim Reeves

Also by Grace Hawthorne

Shorter's Way
Waterproof Justice
Crossing the Moss Line

CHAPTER ONE

“Freeze!”

Duncan McLagan stopped dead still. Other than the black locust wood crackling under the cooker and the bees buzzing in the mountain laurel, there was no other sound for miles through the quiet Georgia hills. The voice didn't have a threat in it, but the gun pointed at his chest told a different story.

Duncan glanced down at the cracked bowl on the ground between his knees. He'd been mixing up a paste to seal steam leaks because losing steam meant losing money. For a second he considered flinging the bowl in the face of his tormentor and making a run for it. But, considering the circumstances, he stood up and wiped his hands on his overalls instead.

The tall man slowly put the gun back in his holster. “You're Duncan McLagan, that right? I'm Homer Webster. I'm a federal agent.”

“I know who you are, Homer. Glad you put your gun away. Was you plannin' to shoot me?”

“Naw, the gun's mostly for show. We're just gonna bust up your still and then we're gonna take you to jail.”

That was about what Duncan expected from what he knew about Homer. However, he was relieved not to have a gun pointed at him. He walked over to wash his hands in the creek and took his time rolling a cigarette from the tin of Prince Albert tobacco he kept in his overall pocket. This gave him a little time to think. He knew he'd been caught red-handed, but

Homer sounded friendly enough, so Duncan decided to follow his lead. “Homer, if I’d known you were comin’, I wouldn’t have wasted my time patchin’ up leaks. But you know, since you’re causin’ me all this trouble, you oughta let me keep at least one jar. Lord knows, I deserve a drink.”

Homer just laughed and nodded to his men.

Duncan managed a sad smile and sat down on a nearby rock to watch as the revenuers took an ax and a sledgehammer and destroyed his still. It broke his heart to see it go. His father had helped him build the still shortly after his son Gus was born. That was 15 years ago now. Duncan had laid every slab of rock, plastered every handful of mud around the furnace, connected every pipe, sealed every joint, carried countless pounds of corn and sugar, tended the still in all kinds of weather and hauled out thousands of gallons of the best moonshine in North Georgia. He and that still were old friends. They knew each other’s weaknesses and strengths.

He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the destroying-noise all around him. As Homer’s men carried water from the creek to put out the fire, they crushed the red horsemint along the banks and its scent mingled with the smell of whiskey and smoke. Duncan remembered his pa saying, “You need to find a good place, a creek that’s got horsemint and you’ll find soft water, that’s what you need to make the best whiskey.”

And it *had* been a good place, but now it was just a pile of rocks, smoldering wood and useless pieces of copper and tin. Duncan saw one of Homer’s men throw the coil into the woods and he made a note of where it landed. No need to buy a new copper worm if he didn’t have to.

By the time it was all over, the sun was beginning to set and it always got dark on the backside of the mountain first. Homer sized up the situation and looked at Duncan. “It’s gettin’ late and there’s no sense in takin’ you to jail now. You

go on home tonight, but be at the courthouse by 9:00 sharp tomorrow. You know where the courthouse is, don't you?"

Homer couldn't resist having a little fun at Duncan's expense. Like many small southern towns, Dawsonville had grown up around a courthouse. Doc Fletcher's office was on the north side of the square between the drug store and the beauty parlor. Junky Brown's Garage and Filling Station covered most of the south side. Kelly's Grocery—which eventually became the Piggly Wiggly—was on the east side next door to the Pool Room. Key's Quality Furniture Store and Showroom took up most of the west side.

"I reckon I can find it," Duncan said.

"Good. I don't wanna have to come get you."

"I'll be there. Then what's gonna happen?"

"I'm gonna take your picture and get your fingerprints and then there'll be a hearing. After that you and the commissioner can settle on your bond. The bondsman's office is in the basement of the courthouse."

Duncan nodded. He'd been making shine more than 30 years and in all that time, he'd never been caught. However, he had a general idea of what Homer was talking about.

"Once you pay the bond, you can be released until the trial." The revenuers picked up their tools and all the men walked down the mountain together. When they got to the gravel road, the lawmen got in their Ford sedan and Duncan turned to walk home.

He was sentimental about losing his still, but he wasn't too upset about the rest of it. Almost every moonshiner he knew was sent to "build days in Atlanta" sooner or later. It was just part of doing business. Besides it was his first offense, so maybe he'd get off easy.

Before he went into his own house, Duncan stopped next door to get some advice from Sean Calhoun. The two men had

been friends all their lives. So had their wives, Mattie and Emma. Both couples married young and started having babies right away. In ten years Mattie and Duncan had five boys and Emma and Sean had five girls. The women assumed their baby-making days were over, but Old Mother Nature had a different idea. Mattie gave birth to Gus when she was 42. At the same time, Emma, who was 41, had twins, Finn and Skye.

From the time they were able to crawl, the three children were inseparable. Wherever you found one of them, you found the other two. Folks in town never bothered to distinguish between them, they just referred to them collectively as “the kids.”

The name on Emma’s new son’s birth certificate was Patrick Seamus Calhoun, but Sean insisted the boy be called Finn after Finn MacCool, the grandest of all Irish heroes. “I’m havin’ no son of mine called *Paddy* and that’s a fact!”

When it came to naming the other twin, Emma took one look at the clear blue eyes of her new daughter and named her Skye. Sean started to point out that was typically a Scottish name, but on second thought, he held his tongue. He’d had his say about Finn, better not push his luck with Emma.

Duncan drained the last of the moonshine Sean had poured for him and headed home to talk to Mattie. He knew she would be upset, but she had helped other women when their husbands “went away” so she would know what to do. Mattie always knew what to do.

Early the next morning, Duncan and Gus loaded up their wagon with a lot of hay and a dozen or so Mason jars of shine. Finn and Skye came out to help. When the shine was secure, the teenagers piled into the wagon and they all headed to Dawsonville.

While Duncan went inside the courthouse to take care of business, the kids got busy. In no time they had sold their

supply of shine. When Duncan came back outside, they gave him the money and he went back to pay the bondsman. Once that was done, they started the journey home.

Court week was always a source of entertainment and drama in Dawsonville. Mattie usually stayed home, but not this time. She shared Duncan's hope that the judge would let him off with a warning, but no matter what happened, she was going to be there.

She knew everybody would turn out for the trial because Duncan McLagan not just an ordinary moonshiner. He was a pillar of the community. Contrary to popular belief, not all Scots are tightfisted; they just know the value of a dollar. It was Duncan—along with Sean Calhoun—who gave money to add a room to the old schoolhouse and build the new Baptist church even though Mattie was a Methodist.

Duncan was well respected around town. He stood nearly a head taller than most of the men in Dawson County. He attributed that and his straight nose, high cheekbones and dark eyes to a most fortunate encounter between his great, great grandfather and a Cherokee maiden. They fell in love, married and had 12 children.

The Cherokees and the Scots found they had a lot in common. Both of the tribes were loyal, honest, hard-working, spiritual and somewhat reserved. The only serious difference was whiskey. It did not agree with the Cherokees, but it was mother's milk to the Scots.

Finally, Federal Judge Edwin Dunbar got things underway and they got around to the case the audience had been waiting for. Homer Webster presented his evidence. Then the judge called on Duncan, who unfolded his six-foot-three frame and faced the judge. "Mr. McLagan, this is the first time I've seen you here in my court. Now *I* know, that *you* know, that moonshining is illegal. You're known to be an intelligent man,

so why do you persist in this activity? It has taken us a while, but you knew eventually you'd get caught."

Duncan straightened his suit coat—which had clearly seen better days—and took a deep breath. Mattie knew that Duncan wasn't accustomed to making long speeches unless it was absolutely necessary. Like everybody else, she wondered what he was going to do.

"Well, Judge, it's like this. My family came over here from Scotland back in the 1800s. We're Lowland Scots, just like St. Patrick. He wasn't Irish you know. No Sir, he was a Scot just like me. Born at Dumbarton and lived there until the Irish Celts kidnapped him.

"Anyway, like I was sayin', folks around here know that King James the First gave the world the King James Bible, but my people remember him for stickin' his nose into Ulster business where it didn't belong. No need to go into all the details, but that started a long history of anger, mistrust and hostility toward the gov'ment."

The judge started to interrupt, but he decided to just let Duncan ramble on a bit farther to see where this history lesson was going.

"Judge, when my kin came over to these mountains, they packed up those feelings—along with their knowledge of whiskey-making—and brought them all to the New World. I have to admit we're a cantankerous lot and we don't suffer fools gladly. My early kin was known to believe that anyone associated with the gov'ment was, by definition, a fool," he smiled slightly. "Of course we don't believe that so much anymore.

"Now, as I was sayin', my people left the poverty and persecution of the Old Country and come here full of hope and the promise of land. And they found land. Lots of it right here in Georgia was free just for the hard, back-breakin' work it

took to tame it and ‘improve the property.’ When more land came up for sale, we bought it, a little at a time as soon as we were able to scrape together a few dollars.

“You’ve got to understand, Judge, that none of us will ever deal with rented land again. We learned that lesson the hard way. The landowner could raise the rent on a whim and demand payment on the spot. Landlords didn’t care if there was no food on the table or if a sick child needed care. In this country, land means freedom and it has to be protected at all costs.”

The judge tapped his gavel to get Duncan’s attention. “Mr. McLagan, I appreciate this little stroll through ancient history, but what—if anything—does this have to do with making illegal whiskey?”

“I’m about to get to that part, Judge. See the only problem with Georgia red clay is it won’t grow but two things: cotton and corn. Cotton is a good crop, but you gotta have a lot of open, flat fields and lots of hands to plant and pick it. But you can grow corn in small plots and one family can pretty much take care of it.

“Like most folks around here, my family has a garden and a patch or two of corn, some chickens, maybe a pig or two. That’s plenty to provide for us, you know, tradin’ back and forth for stuff we need. We don’t hardly ever need foldin’ money.

“*But...*” Duncan took another deep breath. Mattie was in a mild state of shock. She couldn’t remember Duncan using that many words at one time in her whole life.

“But,” Duncan continued, “when it comes to payin’ our property taxes, then the gov’ment says we gotta have *cash* money. That’s where moonshine comes in. I can grow about 50 bushels of corn per acre, but gettin’ it to a mill and then gettin’ the meal to market is most nearly impossible.

“Back when we were haulin’ everything by mule, he could carry four bushels of dry corn, but that same mule could easily carry 24 bushels of *liquid* corn. Whiskey-farming just made sense and we all lived happily ever after, tax-free until the Civil War. Don’t worry, I’m gonna skip that part.”

The judge sat forward and raised his hand as if he intended to get on with the trial, but Duncan was not done, not by a long shot. Mattie soon realized the audience was enjoying themselves. It was not often they got a chance to hear their history told publically or in such an interesting way. And they were also wondering what all that had to do with Duncan going to jail.

Duncan started up again, “It was needin’ money to pay for The War that gave the gov’ment the idea to tax whiskey and that’s when moonshine became illegal. I just want to make it clear right now, that I might be what you call a tax evader, but I am *not* a criminal. I bought the land, I bought the stuff to build the still, I bought everything I needed to make the shine and I worked long hours up in those woods. I never stole nothin’ and as far as I can see, I’m not guilty of nothin’.

“If you make me stop farming’ whiskey, I won’t have cash money to pay my property taxes and the gov’ment will take my land away and my family won’t have a place to live.

“Now, Judge, you may not know this, but I got six boys and I keep them busy moonshining’. If I can’t do that, they’ll get bored with nothin’ constructive to do and who knows what kind of devilment they might get up to. The long and the short of it is, I feel it’s my civic duty to continue to make shine for the peace and prosperity of Dawsonville and this entire county. I thank you.”

Duncan bowed and sat down. The audience laughed, rose to their feet and gave him a hardy round of applause. The judge banged his gavel, but it took some time to restore order.

Once the room got quiet again, the judge looked at Duncan and shook his head slowly. “Mr. McLagan, just what is your occupation?”

Duncan was clearly confused by the question. “Well, Sir, I would say I’m a farmer.”

“I would say we’re all lucky you didn’t decide to be a preacher or a politician. Do you always talk that much?”

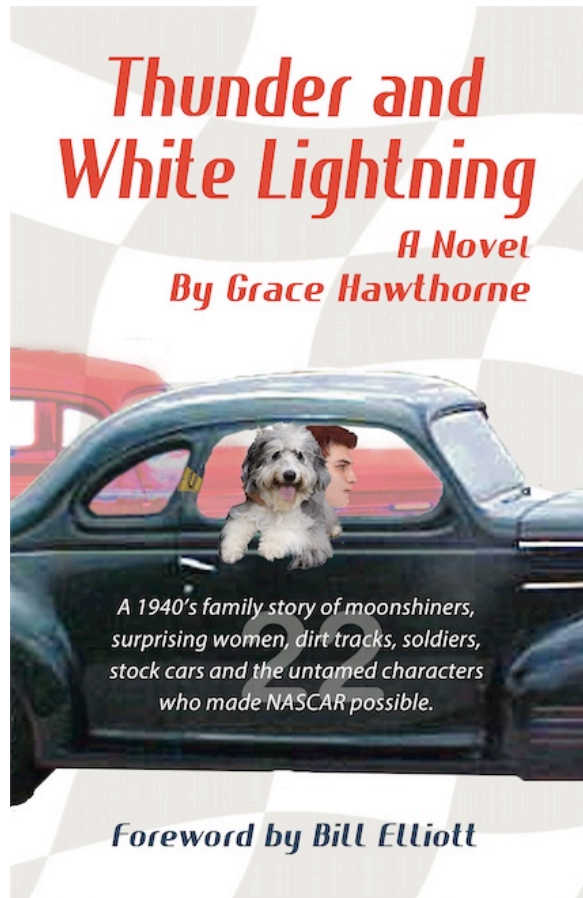
“No, Sir, only when somebody’s tryin’ to send me to jail.”

“Ah yes, that’s what we’re here for, I almost forgot. Since this is your first offense, or at least the first time you’ve been caught, I’m inclined to be lenient. If I let you off with a caution, do you think you could refrain from making illegal whiskey?”

Duncan stood and faced the judge once more. Mattie, Gus, Sean, Emma, Skye, Finn, and everybody else in the court room, waited anxiously to see if Duncan had actually talked the judge out of sending him to jail. Now that would surely be a story worth repeating.

Duncan knew what he *should* say, but the momentum of his speech and the sweet sound of the applause temporarily robbed him of all reason. In his most sincere voice he said, “Judge, I could promise to do my best, but to tell you the honest-to-God truth, I just don’t think I can manage to give up moonshining’. I’d feel too guilty.”

The courtroom broke into laughter again. And so it was, that in the Year of Our Lord 1940, Duncan McLagan was sentenced to a year and a day to be served in the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta.



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