

Needlework
A Novel
by
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Chapter 1

I could hear Mother's voice before I could see her coming down the stairs. "Your father was supposed to be here an hour ago." The bright orange high heels came into view. She was walking awkwardly, planting her feet apart. When she reached the landing, she paused, giving me a chance to admire the effect of newly orange shoes and purse with her beige sheath.

"You look beautiful." She did, of course. She always did. Skirt length that didn't vary with fashion, just at the bottom of her knee, low enough to hide the scar no one would ever notice, short enough to maximize the effect of her calves. "Most redheads can't wear orange. I can't."

She gave her exasperated sigh. "Of course you can, Jan. You have exactly my coloring."

Exactly her coloring except that when we went in the sun her skin turned to honey and mine blotched and freckled. Except that her hair was a deep auburn and mine had tinges of the carrot.

"Take this." She transferred the purse which she carried at arm's length from her finger to mine. "Don't let it touch anything. This dye was supposed to dry in an hour and it's been more than two." She sat on the sofa and, using her fingernails, pulled at the cap on the heel of each shoe until it eased off her foot. She set the shoes on the coffee table and touched one, leaving a dull spot.

She watched me look for a place to hang the purse, "I don't know why I had to try something new at the last minute. Of course, I didn't know it would be the last minute. If those things dried like they said they would, it would have been fine." She glanced at her watch. "And another thing, where is your father?"

I was used to Mother's leaps of logic, and I knew that Daddy's whereabouts was always the other thing when she was upset. "He's just a few minutes late."

She raised one eyebrow. Neither of us ever relaxed enough to believe he was just a little late.

The phone on the table beside her rang, as if it had felt her frown. She answered it with her professional "Hello," learned from her years at the hospital switchboard. I knew it was Daddy by the upswing of her "yes." She was making him talk, performing the automatic test we both did when he was an hour late, smelled a little too strongly of aftershave, stayed too long in the bathroom. He only had to speak three words for either of us to know if he was drinking. He wasn't. I could tell by her shoulders. But something was wrong. "What is it this time?" "When do you want to leave?" "That's impossible. There's this party to get through."

This party. A combination engagement-party bridal shower that Richard's family was having at the farm. She took time out from being upset at what Daddy was saying to glare at me. She never missed an opportunity to remind me I'd ruined my life.

Mother hung up the phone. "Well, your Uncle Clete's dying again." She tapped a cigarette and lit it. "Lung cancer."

"Is it serious?"

Her mouth twisted. "Actually, it may be this time. Baby called." Everyone knew Aunt Baby didn't exaggerate. Mother and Daddy had made three rush trips to Texas in the past eighteen months to see about Uncle Clete. Two of the calls had come from Granno, and Mother had never believed they were serious. "She just yo-yos your father back and forth. Can't let go of her baby boy." But the third call had come from Aunt Baby, and while Uncle Clete's life hadn't been in danger, it was more frightening. He had cut his throat and given Granno a heart attack. They were both in the hospital. That had been nine months ago. Now this.

"So Uncle Clete might really die?"

Mother's sigh this time conveyed sardonic resignation. "Frankly, Jan, I don't have much worry left for Clete Hopewell. It's your father and what this will do to him. That's what we have to concern ourselves with."

Mother had talked to me about Daddy as if he were our joint responsibility ever since he came back from their first divorce when I was six. We conspired to protect him, usually from himself, sometimes from predatory women. "There's a certain kind of woman who finds your father attractive," Mother would say, her tone letting me know that it wasn't a nice kind of woman. After she married him for the third, when she gave me that "certain kind of woman" line, I thought she had it coming. I said, "You mean women like you?" But I regretted it. Mother wasn't nearly as sure of herself as she seemed. "It's not fair," she

said once, checking her makeup. Every year your father gets more handsome and I get more wrinkles.”

She reached for the insurance company calendar she kept by the phone. “I don’t know how I’m going to get away. We’ve got auditors coming in.” She flipped up the page. “If Clete dies, we could be into the Fourth of July. I hate holiday traffic.” She replaced the calendar. “Well, I just have to do it. He wants to leave in the morning.” She picked up the phone and started the series of calls to make sure the hospital wouldn’t shut down without her.

Uncle Clete might die. The thought left me blank. There had been so many false alarms that it was hard to believe it. Anyway, I guess I didn’t really feel much for this uncle I rarely saw. Like Mother, my main worry was for Daddy.

Mother was between calls with her finger on the switch hook when the phone rang again, startling us both. It was Daddy again. “How late?” she asked. “So I have to brave this alone.”

She hung up and slumped into the couch. My mother with the perfect posture, who told me every day in junior high, “Stand up straight so everyone can see how pretty you are,” slumped. “Your father will meet us at the party,” she said. “He has things to take care of before he can leave tomorrow.” An hour, maybe two hours when we wouldn’t know where he was. She tested her shoes again, leaving another smudge. “It’d be nice if he was selling a house. Three months at Realty World and he hasn’t drawn a commission yet.” She took a deep breath and blew it out. When the air was gone, her shoulders were straight again — her strength-gathering sigh. “Still, I suppose it’s better than losing money.”

Daddy’s restaurant had been a constant drain on our finances. Mother still hadn’t gotten over nearly losing the house. In fact, it wasn’t the drinking or even the carrying on with a waitress that was the final straw. It was finding out that the money she’d given him to pay the mortgage had gone for restaurant supplies.

That’s when she divorced him in what may have been the shortest divorce in southwest Missouri history. A week after it was final, the three of us drove to Oklahoma where you can get a license the day you show up. They were married again, and I got to be bridesmaid for my own two parents for the second time. Mother said she was convinced that he was going to kill himself without her, “I’ve prayed and prayed over this, and I know now he’s my burden to bear.” I believed she believed that, but I also knew that it was driving her crazy that he was staying at another woman’s house. I also knew that she loved him

And now she had two failures to contend with. No wonder she’d expanded her repertoire of sighs.

I looked at the clock. “So, should we go together? Richard’s expecting me at six. His mother wants us there before the guests start arriving at six thirty.”

Mother sniffed. “I don’t know why I have to be at the beck and call of those Harrisons. Farm people like that. You’re too good for them and they know it.”

“Mother, we’re farm people.”

“We were. We’re not anymore. We’ve grown beyond that.”

Somehow in Mother’s mind, the fact that we’d failed at turkey farmin and then failed at a restaurant set us above the Harrisons with their dairy farm that could support two families. Maybe the house still made Mother feel superior.

When we sold the farm, we started looking at houses we could afford — prefab ranches with carports and spray-painted walls, every house on the block alike except for color and the style of window box. The real estate agent called them starter houses. Daddy tried to put a good face on it — “Something new will be clean, a big change from a thirty-year old farm house” — and Mother seemed resigned. When I was younger I had decided they’d be happier if I didn’t know we were poor, so I acted excited about the bedroom, half the size I was used to, and didn’t mention that I’d be the only high school student on the block. And I certainly didn’t comment on the appropriateness of my parents in a neighborhood of starter homes with all the twenty-year olds and their babies.

We were to the point of picking our color scheme when Daddy saw the “For sale by owner” sign. The house, which was only a block away from the town square, had been for sale for over two years. The once-large front yard had shrunk when the street was widened, and the broad side yard had been sold off long before. The neighborhood was primarily commercial now, and the large windows overlooked a dry cleaner.

But the house had leaded glass in the front door, a mahogany stairway, a fireplace with gas tulip lights on the sides. It wasn’t a mansion, but the rooms were large and comfortable. There was a sun room on the second floor, and a swing on the porch.

Once we’d seen it, we couldn’t go back to the ticky-tacky prefabs. Mother tried to be practical, “Maintenance would be less in a new house, and I can’t even guess what it’s going to cost to heat this,” but Daddy had the final say, “This house feels like a home.”

We all had dreams for the house, and I think they meshed into the one dream that we would be a family comfortable with each other, with our place in the world. People would admire my father and think he was prosperous. My mother could entertain, decorate and show off her home. I would have slumber parties with a dozen giggling girls, and after my dates I would sit in the porch swing with handsome boys.

It was a nice fantasy, but we brought all our troubles with us. I guess we turned out to be the same people after we bought the house as we were before.

Mother was still thinking about our superiority to the Harrisons. “All my plans and you’re going to end up a farm wife.”

Sometimes I thought I couldn’t live with her disappointment in me. It was a constant pressure on my chest making every breath hurt. She had always loved me, always been proud of me. And now she’d found out I wasn’t who she thought I was.

“Still, Mother, we need to go.”

“You’re not dressed for a party.” She shook her head at my Bermuda shorts.

“It’s a picnic, Mother. I’ve told you to dress for a picnic.”

“I’m not going to a party celebrating my only daughter’s betrothal dressed for a garage sale. Besides, I really don’t look good in shorts. They cut my leg off at an unattractive place.

While she got the car out of the garage, I went through the house turning out lights. I stopped by the painting above the mantle, an oil portrait done from my senior picture, almost three feet tall. When she got the painting, Mother had the gas lamps by the fireplace converted to electricity. They were never turned off. A shrine to Mother’s perfect daughter, the brilliant daughter with a future. The smiling portrait looked more like Mother than me. Mother loved the portrait. It was the daughter she thought she had.

Daddy, on the other hand, seemed, like me, to be embarrassed by it. His only comment when Mother had it delivered was, “Sure is big.” At the thought of Daddy, I said an automatic prayer, Don’t let this thing with Uncle Clete start him drinking.

Mother turned her VW Beetle into the gate marked Harrison’s Dairy, drove down the long drive, and into the gravel parking area behind the Big House. Although the front of the house had a deep porch surrounded by bridal wreath bushes, people always entered from the back — through the screen porch, into the kitchen. The lawn was a three-quarter acre square of green with trees scattered around, bordered by the Big House on the east, the parking lot on the south, the milk barn on the west, and, on the north, the Little House — the four-room cottage where Richard and I would live. He had been working on it all spring and summer, and the fifty-year old house with its fresh white paint and green window trim looked like something out of a picture book. He’d even planted sweet peas and pansies around the back porch. I imagined myself washing dishes in the pale yellow kitchen, looking out on this lawn toward the vegetable garden the whole family tended. The curtains with yellow and orange parrots that I’d put on lay-away at Ramsay’s would blow in the breeze. I could see the barn where Richard was working, watch him walk toward me when the milking was done.

It was all planned out. We would live in the Little House, the original house Richard's granddad had built when he got married, the house where Richard's parents had lived as newlyweds. When the last of Richard's five brothers and sisters left home, Richard and I and the two or three children we would have by then would move into the Big House. Richard's parents would move back into the Little House where they had started out. The whole rest of my life was there before me. From the Little House, to the Big House, then, when my own children were grown, back to the Little House.

Richard and his dad were hanging colored lanterns from the walnut trees when we drove up. A banner made of a white sheet hung between two trees — "Congratulations Richard and Jan." The screen door banged and Richard's mother and two sisters came out with food for the picnic tables. The three dogs and two of the brothers were playing near the barn.

Richard smiled and waved when he saw us, then came down from the ladder, and started toward me. He was big and strong with muscles built throwing bales of hay on the back of a truck, digging post holes, milking cows. The high school coach had visited his parents every year, saying that a boy like Richard could pay his way through college with football. Every year Richard's dad had explained that you didn't need a college degree to work the family farm. Richard could learn all he needed to know from county extension courses and farm journals. Besides, football practice interfered with chores.

Just watching Richard walk made me happy. He walked like he did everything — slowly, smoothly, with purpose.

By the time I was out of the car, I was surrounded by Harrisons, all smiling and glad to see me. This was the way I'd always believed a family should be; but our family was only Mother and Daddy and me sitting through strained quiet meals. Mother was an only child too, so there were no aunts or uncles or cousins. Daddy's family was big enough — he had two sisters and three brothers — but the Hopewells were a quiet family and the cousins were all older than me. Anyway, Mother didn't like the Hopewells so we didn't see them much.

Mrs. Harrison — she'd asked me to call her Babs or Mom, so now I couldn't call her anything — walked around the car to welcome Mother. The two women were almost the same age; but Mother could have passed for thirty, and Mrs. Harrison, short and wide-beamed in a housedress and apron, could have been fifty. I knew which one I would look like in twenty years. Mrs. Harrison told me nearly every time I saw her, "I was a tiny thing when I got married, too, but farm work takes some heft and farm food puts it on."

Richard put his arm around me and bent down and kissed me. Then he lifted me off the ground so my legs dangled and carried me across the lawn like a toy. I knew if I struggled he'd think it was a game and start to tickle me. After we were married, I would tell him I didn't like to be carried. "How's my Little Bunch?" he asked as he spun me around. After we were married I would tell him I didn't like to be called Little Bunch.

"OK," he put me down facing our house. "What have I done this week?" This was a game we both liked.

“Let’s see. The gutters look better.”

“Right. Scraped, patched, and painted. What else?”

“Something about the porch is different.”

“Smart girl! The old railing had almost rusted through in spots. I found one just like it. Anything else?”

I looked up at my kitchen window. Blue gingham curtains moved in the breeze. “Kitchen curtains?”

“Mom made them. They’re just like the ones she and dad had when they moved in.”

“But the kitchen’s yellow now. And I bought some curtains. With parrots.”

“Can you get your money back? This is kind of a family tradition. Grandma had those blue squares too and she made some for Mom when she and Dad got married.”

Mrs. Harrison walked up behind us. “Don’t curtains add the final touch? Can’t you just see yourself standing at that window washing dishes?”

I wanted traditions. I wanted stability. Above all, I wanted a family that I could please. The bright crazy-eyed parrots flew out the window. In their place hung limp blue checks. “Thanks,” I said.

After his mother walked away, Richard hugged me. “Thanks to you for being a cooperative little wife,” he whispered in my ear. When I didn’t laugh, he pulled back and looked at me. “Something’s wrong,” he said. “Something more than curtains. Is it your dad?” It still surprised me when Richard noticed how I was feeling. I’d spent my whole life trying to avoid the land mines in our home, watching Mother and Daddy for every potential explosion. No one except Richard had ever tried to read my emotions.

“Well, partly. My Uncle Clete’s dying and we don’t know where Daddy is right now. He’s getting ready to go to Texas tomorrow.”

“Clete? Isn’t he the one that’s always dying?”

“Yeah. But this time it may really happen.”

“No wonder you’re on edge.” He rubbed my neck. “Is this Clete like your dad?” It was a measure of Daddy’s charm that Richard loved him even after seeing him at his worst.

“He looks like him. Maybe not as sweet-looking as Daddy. But he’s real handsome. Real wild too.” I shrugged. “I really don’t know him very well. He has a daughter, my cousin Pauline, who was always kind of my idol.”

Pauline was four years older than me, and wild like her dad. Trouble never stuck to her. Three days after she was suspended from high school for a week, she was elected Homecoming Queen. Her first semester at college she got busted for underage drinking at a frat party. And who was the arresting officer? A good-looking guy who fell in love with her. So instead of being sent home in disgrace, she quit school with a one-carat engagement ring and a Texas Ranger in tow. My father, always silent and disapproving with me, laughed and joked with her. It was true that she was my idol. It was also true that I hated her a little bit.

“I don’t know her very well,” I said. “She lives in California now, has a couple of kids.”

“So when do I get to meet all these relatives of yours? Do you think they’ll come to the wedding.”

I thought of how tense Mother always got around the Hopewells. “I hope not,” I said.

Richard and I walked from group to group as people arrived, unloaded baskets of food and card tables from their trunks, formed clusters on the lawn, went through the picnic line, and regrouped to eat. The men talked farm prices and politics. “I don’t know if Old Lyndon is going to prove a friend to the farmer. You’d think a cattleman would have more of a feeling for our troubles.” “I’ve been looking at new combines. The man over at Harvester, he talks a good show, telling me how it’d pay for itself in ten years, but I don’t know. It’s a lot of money.” The women talked cooking and childbirth. “And after thirty-four hours when she was weak and panting like a little puppy, they finally went ahead and did a C.” “She won’t tell the secret, but I know it’s beer. She saves Walter’s stale beer for something, and I know it’s for those brownies.”

Everyone stopped talking when old black Ford pulled up. An elderly woman got out of the driver’s side, walked around the car, got a cane out of the back seat, and helped an even more elderly woman out of the passenger side. Richard took my arm. “Come on,” he said, “it’s time to meet The Dragon.”

The Dragon was Richard’s great-great aunt Thelma, sister to Richard’s father’s grandmother. “Ninety-six, sharp as a tack, and just as prickly,” was how Richard’s mother had described her. “Now remember,” Richard said as he steered me toward the two women who were settling into some chairs people had vacated for them, “her teeth were all pulled thirty years ago. She can’t bite.”

“Hello, Aunt Thelma,” he said, his volume cranked up two notches above normal. “This is Jan.”

Hello, Aunt Thelma,” I shouted.

She gave me a sideways turkey eye. "Aunt? Aunt? Do I know this girl?"

"It's the girl I'm marrying, Aunt Thelma."

"I'm pleased to meet you Mrs --" I looked at Richard in a panic. I didn't know her last name.

"Watson," he mumbled.

"Pleased to meet you Mrs. Watson."

"Richard, tell this girl I'm not deaf." She looked me over head to toe. "She's little." There was no arguing that, but it seemed a strange complaint from a woman who looked to weigh about eighty pounds. "How many babies you planning on getting out of her?"

Richard laughed. "Oh, about the family average. Six or seven."

"Think she's got the hips for it?" She stared directly at my crotch. "I don't think she's got the hips for it." She shook her head at my hips. "So," she turned back to Richard, "you sticking to the spring plan?"

"Got to stick with what works."

"Good, good." She turned her attention to a plate of food one of the little girls brought her. We were dismissed. She hadn't said a word to me.

Richard backed me up against a tree and put his arms around me. "I'm sorry. I know it was awful."

"It's OK," I said. "Every big family should have a character. I wish my family had a character. But, Richard, six or seven kids?"

He smiled. "Oh, once we have three or four we'll decide about that."

Three or four was up from the two or three we'd talked about before. I had another question. "What's the spring plan?"

"I figured you'd noticed. When are all our birthdays?"

All six Harrison children had birthdays in March or April. "Spring?"

"That's the spring plan. We have all our babies in early spring so the wives are at full strength in summer when there's more work."

"Richard, that's awful. It's like planning crops or something."

“Honey, do you believe in family planning? Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this is family planning on a farm. It just makes sense.”

“What about accidents?”

He smiled. “If we have an accident, we have an accident. It’s just that it’s not part of the plan.” He kissed me and moved to get a baseball that had rolled in out of nowhere.

Richard would learn soon enough that I had my plans too. Our first child, a boy, would be born in September so that he would be one of the biggest and oldest in his class. Our second, and probably last, child, a girl, would be born in June because I had always wanted a June birthday. Neither of our children would share a birthday with anybody.

Through everything, I kept an eye on Mother. Just like I’d told her, her dress was completely inappropriate. Her shoes were ruined. Gravel had chipped off big pieces of orange, and her left heel had sunk at least two inches in the mud. As every car pulled in her head turned, looking to see if it was Daddy. It had been almost two hours since we’d heard from him. Each time Mother explained that he was “on business” and would be here any minute her smile got wider and her voice got tighter, but no one but me would notice. Dressed all wrong and worried about a missing husband, she looked as calm and self-assured as Scarlet at Twelve Oaks. Talking to people she didn’t know, she accepted congratulations on an engagement that I knew made her want to gag.

I knew she wouldn’t really eat until Daddy got here, so I took her a cookie. She nibbled on it as the two of us sat facing the parking lot. “I appreciate you being so nice to everybody,” I said. “I know you didn’t want to come.”

She brushed a string of hair back from my face. “Have I ever let you down, Jan? Did you really think that I’d do something to embarrass you now?”

A large expensive-looking white car pulled in and parked under a pole light. Daddy got out, half smiling, taking in the scene. There was no extra looseness to his movements, no extra glint in his eye. But his smile said he knew he might be in trouble. “Oh my God,” Mother said, “what’s he done now?”

What he had done was buy a car, a two-year old Oldsmobile that cost more than the new Chevy they’d been talking about getting if he sold two houses a month for the next six months. Mother cornered him by the trees. “We can’t afford a car like this. It’s always got to be something fancy for you. No matter how hard I work you keep us poor as field mice.”

Church mice, I thought. The expression is poor as church mice.

Daddy talked to the ground. “I thought the commission on the house I sold last week would cover it.”

“That’s the first money you’ve earned in months, and it’s supposed to cover five different things now.”

She was right. Daddy was an impulse buyer, and he could justify anything he wanted. “Why am I getting up at 4:30 every morning to feed turkeys if I can’t afford five dollars a month for a radio?” he would say, forgetting that the five dollar payment had to come on top of the eight dollar washer payment and the fifteen dollar TV payment and the Sears bill that never got smaller.

And she was right, too, about how he loved to make a grand gesture. One year, he bought Mother a mink stole from Sears for Christmas. She traded it in for a new gas range.

Daddy wasn’t one to explain himself, but he tried to explain about the car. “I know when we made the new budget, we didn’t think I should get anything yet. But we didn’t know I’d have to make this trip. I really didn’t think my car would make it. And that thing of yours — nobody’s taking that on the highway.”

Mother’s chin snapped up. The topic of her car was almost bound to start a fight. Daddy believed in laws of nature, like “Only men buy automobiles.” The fact that Mother bought a car while they were separated — and not just any car, a car made by Germans, a car that looked and sounded like a toy, “the roller-skate,” he called it — still rankled.

“But we agreed on a sensible car,” Mother said.

She was going to let the insult to her VW pass.

Daddy brightened. “I know. And I was looking at the Impalas. But, you know, an Impala is kind of a half-step. A car’s important in real estate. He gave her a quick side-long look. “You can’t get from one cliff to another in two jumps.”

Mother smiled, just a little. “You read that in one of your success books?”

He smiled at the ground and nodded. “You have to look successful to be successful.”

My dad had a smile that would make you forgive him anything. I don’t mean he had some kind of movie star dazzle-toothed smile that blinded you. It was a shy smile, barely a smile at all, rarely directed right at you. His lips only moved a little bit, but his eyes crinkled up just like his cheeks had pushed them. Once you knew that he’d grown up in a house where happiness was a sin, you understood why he learned to smile without really smiling, and you understood why all his brothers and sisters had a smile just like his.

I looked at him smiling at the ground, and it hurt my heart how much I loved him. Loved him and had never been able to find a way to show him, or find a key to make him love me back.

Whatever clicked in me when I saw his smile, must have clicked in Mother too.

“Well, let’s have a look at this new automobile.”

Why did she stop being mad? Maybe because Uncle Clete was dying and she didn’t want to give Daddy more grief. Maybe because Daddy’s arguments made sense. Maybe because a new car was a lot less frightening than what she’d imagined when he didn’t show up until eight o’clock. Or maybe because when you marry a man for the third time you just accept the fact that you love him and give up on changing him.

Daddy put his arm around Mother’s waist, and as they stood next to the car, glistening white and luxurious. She slipped her hand up to his cheek, reached up and kissed him. When they touched, you could tell, everyone else in the world vanished for them. They were a young, handsome couple who looked more like new lovers than the parents of a grown daughter.

This was supposed to be my time, my summer when I was the center of attention, my time as a bride. But instead of making my parents feel awkward and old because of my passion, I was in the same old position of trying not to notice them hanging on each other. They were the lovers and Richard and I were the old fogies talking about gutters and porch railings.

I never understood the bond that kept my parents coming back together when they made each other so miserable. Whatever it was, I told myself for the thousandth time, I didn’t want it. I wanted the kind of marriage I would have with Richard, calm and steady, not the cyclone my parents lived through.

When they finally broke their clinch, Daddy asked her, “You want to go for a ride?”

“No. That would be rude.” She laughed. “Besides, I’ll get to ride in it all day tomorrow.”

Daddy polished a spot on the car. “Actually, I thought it might be better if Jan went with me.”

I stopped where I was. Mother’s hand went to her throat. Even in the pale light, I could see the color leave her face. “I don’t understand. I always go with you.”

“I know, but it’s hard for you to get away.”

“That’s all arranged. I’ve covered everything. I can go.”

Daddy looked out over the fields in the distance, sucked his top lip in, blew out. “I appreciate that, but I really want Jan with me this time. You come later. If there’s a funeral.”

I'd never heard him say those words before, "I want Jan." "I really want Jan with me."

For what seemed like minutes, we stood like that. Mother and Daddy pulled apart now, me watching them ten feet away. Daddy broke the spell finally. "I'd better be polite to these people," and he walked away.

Mother beckoned me toward her. "Your father wants you to drive to Texas with him tomorrow." That's the way our family worked. Daddy had just been there, but he didn't tell me he wanted me to go with him. He told Mother and she told me. All my life Daddy and I had spoken to each other, if we spoke at all, through her.

"I heard."

"Jan, you have to be my stand-in. You have to protect him."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"Keep him away from Clete. Clete's always led him astray."

"Uncle Clete's dying, Mother."

"I know. I know." She tapped her toe in the gravel. "It's just that Clete's always been such a bad influence on your father. Jan, there are good Hopewells and bad Hopewells. Clete is the worst of the worst."

"I'll do my best," I said again, aware that it was ridiculous to try to keep Daddy away from the brother he was making the trip to see. Our family life was never what anyone else would call normal. My dad drank and disappeared; and my mother went over the edge sometimes, got something into her head that didn't make much sense. I did what I could to look after them both. "I'll try to keep him away from Uncle Clete."

"You stay away from him too."

"OK. I will." Since I was a little girl, I'd realized that taking care of Mother meant saying what she wanted to hear, not necessarily doing the crazy things she asked. I changed the subject. "I'd better call Foodtown."

"I'll take care of that." She waved her fingers like someone refusing bread in a restaurant. "I hardly think a twenty hour a week checker will be irreplaceable."

"Mother." I wasn't sure how to ask this. "Do you think this means Daddy's not mad at me for getting married?"

She laughed, a laugh practiced for sophisticated cocktail parties she'd never been to. "Oh, Jan, this has nothing to do with you. Your father's angry at me for some reason, I just don't know what."

She never let me forget that I wasn't important to him. I was a gnat that flitted around him, annoying sometimes but never of enough consequence to even make him truly angry.

But he'd asked for me. I'd heard him.

I left Mother alone in the parking lot. I looked for Richard to tell him I was going on a trip with my father.