

# Needlework

## A Novel

by

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### *Chapter 10*

I'd never had a headache so bad it woke me up before. And I felt like I might throw up. Something was seriously wrong. The bedside clock said 7:30. Mother would be at Granno's by now. She would take care of me. She always brought me cool cloths for my head, rubbed away cramps, rocked away pain. If I could get to my mother everything would be all right. I tiptoed past Pauline when I left the room.

Aunt Lila was at the kitchen table, sitting the same way Daddy and I had found her the day before when we'd come to tell her Uncle Clete was dead. "I think I have the flu," I said.

"No, Jan, you've got yourself a hangover. Pour some coffee," she said without getting up. "Make some dry toast, and wait it out."

I sat down at the table and Aunt Lila said, more to her coffee than to me, "I don't know. It's a damned old world. I'd always been glad I didn't have a son — so many of the Hopewell boys have trouble with alcohol, I'd have worried all the time watching for signs. I guess I'm a little like your mother — I thought the girl belonged to her mother. I didn't know I had to watch her so hard."

"Pauline's under a lot of pressure right now," I said. "This might not mean anything."

"Maybe you're right." She took a deep breath and slapped the table. "No use borrowing trouble when we've got enough already." She stood and her back was straight and her head was high like always. "Let's get through this day without any more whining." She

started toward her bedroom to dress, then turned back. "Tell your daddy I'll be at the funeral. He's right. My girl needs me."

By the time I had showered and dressed, it was after eight. Visitation started at nine. I called Granno's house to see what I should do. My mother answered.

"How was the trip?" I asked.

"Long and boring. Of course riding with Hopewells was a barrel of laughs. Willie actually spoke once in Oklahoma."

"You sound tired."

"I am tired." No sympathy in that voice. "How are you?"

My uncle was dead. My cousin was in trouble. My dad was in mourning. I'd dreamed I was trapped in a cage. My head seemed to be pounding fifty-nine days, fifty-nine days. It turned out I had my first hangover and it wasn't much fun. How much of that did Mother want to hear?

"I'm fine," I said.

"That's my good girl." She lowered her voice. "Look, everybody here is set to go over for the visitation. I have to pay my respects, but I really don't want to spend two hours looking at Clete Hopewell dead. You pick me up at the funeral home at 9:15. I'll come out to the parking lot, you don't have to come in."

"What about Daddy? Won't he need us?"

"Your father isn't going to get into any trouble with his mother hanging on him."

"I meant for support."

"Oh. Well." It threw Mother for a minute that she and I were on different wave-lengths concerning Daddy. "Baby and Maureen will be there. Anyway, how can anybody think about taking care of him when he's so busy taking care of his mama and Pauline?"

It was typical of Mother to assume that if she didn't want to be at the visitation, I didn't. It was typical of me to go along with what she said without even wondering what I wanted to do.

"Be on time. Don't leave your poor old mother stranded in the Piggly Wiggly parking lot."

I pulled in at 9:10 and remembered to roll down the electric windows before I cut the engine. Almost immediately, Mother came out. She shielded her eyes against the sun with

her hand, looking over the parking lot. Even in the bright morning light with little sleep the night before she looked beautiful. On her thirty-ninth birthday, over Daddy's objections, she'd cut her long hair and changed the color to a shade slightly less red. "Remember," she told me, "nothing makes a woman look older than trying to look younger than she is." She was wearing a fitted green dress that was belted at the waist — "Always emphasize your best features." She saw me and waved. When I was a little girl I thought I would grow up beautiful like my mother. That hadn't happened. Nobody would ever notice me when she was around.

When she got into the car, she leaned across and kissed me on the cheek. She brushed the limp hair off my forehead. "Didn't I give you time to put on your makeup this morning?" she asked. She must have called a temporary truce in the Richard war. We were back to one of her usual concerns — the way I looked.

She tsk-tsked, licked her finger, and used it to smooth my eyebrows. "You know, dear, you could get away with this in high school, but you're going to be nineteen in a couple of months. The bloom is off the rose." She laughed at my expression. "Well, never mind, we'll get you fixed up.

"Drive me to your Granno's house. The only way I got out of this event was to agree to cover the house." She sighed. "You know, I've just never felt like I belonged in your Daddy's family. That old woman had it in for me from day one. I could be as pure as Caesar's ghost and she'd still look down on me."

"I know."

On the five-minute drive Mother talked about her work. It had been hard to get away with auditors there. She was only missing one real work day, though lord knows she took enough work home that she'd be three or four days behind, even if she was back on the job Monday. She was particularly angry that they sent some twenty-five year old to teach her a new accounting system. "He has absolutely no idea of how things work in the real world," she said. "I finally looked him in the eye and told him, Gary, those who can, do." She looked at me meaningfully, ready to deliver the coup de grace. "Those who can't, don't."

I looked out the window to hide my grin. I remembered what had been bothering me since last night. "Mother," I said, "Did you and Daddy get married in Odessa before he went to California?"

"Yes. You know that story."

"Then why did Aunt Lila say you got married in California?"

"Sounds like you and Aunt Lila did a lot of talking." Her fingernails clicked on her arm rest. "For your information, and your Aunt Lila's if she wants to know, your daddy and I got married in Canyon and didn't tell anyone." Canyon? Hadn't she just said Odessa?

“Then he went to California. A month later, just like we had planned, he sent me money from his first month’s pay and I joined him. Your Granny and Gramps were so upset that they hadn’t gotten to see their only daughter get married, that they drove all the way to California so that we could have another wedding with them there.”

“And your anniversary — January 5 — which wedding is that?”

“January 5 is the anniversary of our second marriage. I mean the second time we got married for real. When you were six. After the divorce. Now, is the Spanish exposition over?”

I had been embarrassed when I was in grade school that my parents had been married twice. Now I found out they were married three times by then, four times altogether now. No wonder she couldn’t keep it straight.

“I don’t know what you’re smiling at, Jaynice Ray. This is a sad day.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

In front of Granno’s house, Mother put her hand on the door handle then slumped dramatically. “I can’t face it. I just can’t go in there right now. That place has so many bad memories for me. Jan, you go in and answer the phone and take care of people. I’m just going to drive around for a while, maybe go to the Dairy Bar and have a Coke. I can watch the funeral home from there and get back here before the others. Move the seat back for me, so I can scoot over.”

I started the engine and pushed the button for the seat. It moved an inch and then stopped with a kind of crack. We both felt under the seat. “There’s something here,” I said. “Some kind of glass. It’s kind of wedged in.” I moved the seat forward. When it was loose, I pulled up a pint whiskey bottle, empty.

Mother’s eyes narrowed when she saw it. “That man can’t be trusted any farther than you can throw him.” She leaned her head against the back of the seat and covered her eyes with her hand. “You said you’d take care of him. You know your father, you can’t let him out of your sight when he wants a drink.” She turned toward me again. Her words were sharp and fast. “You were keeping this a secret weren’t you? You and your father weren’t going to tell me. You and Lila sat up all night talking about my personal business — that’s public knowledge — but you weren’t going to tell me about this.”

There was too much in her accusation to answer. I settled for the main point. “I don’t think it’s Daddy’s bottle.”

“Don’t tell me it’s yours. I won’t believe that.”

“Pauline had the car most of the day yesterday.”

The information stopped her cold. “Pauline?” She smiled. “Miss High and Mighty? Well, I have to say I’m not surprised. I knew I was always right to keep her away from you. She’s not a good influence.” Her fear and anger about Daddy had disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

Maybe the hangover made me less cautious than usual. I didn’t filter what I was going to say. I just asked her. “How can you stay married to a man you don’t trust? Why do you keep divorcing him and marrying him again?”

She laughed, “You make it sound like dozens of times.” She saw I was serious. “Oh, honey, what can I tell you? There’s a fire there.”

“Mother!” It was one thing to hear Pauline and Aunt Lila’s bawdy talk, completely another to hear such talk about my parents. “I don’t want to hear about your sex life.”

“Well, you asked.” She looked exasperated. “I divorced him twice because I didn’t think I could live with him. But, when we were apart, I couldn’t find another man — and I’m not an unattractive woman, I could find plenty of men — but I couldn’t find another man that made me feel like your father does. I even went so far as to get engaged to another man when we were divorced the first time.”

“What happened?”

“What do you think? Your father came back. I was all set to marry this man — he owns five radio stations now — and your father showed up broke and skinny. I had my choice of this successful Amarillo businessman or your father.” She shrugged. “I went with my heart.”

She went with her heart, with the fire. Maybe that kind of thing was more important once you had it. I couldn’t imagine ever telling a daughter of mine that I married Richard because of the fire between us.

Mother was studying me, “Is something wrong? You’re a million miles away.”

“No. I guess I was just thinking that I’m glad your heart won out. I’m glad you and Daddy are together.”

“Why that’s nice, Sweetie.” Mother brightened. She smoothed her hair. “Now move the seat back like I asked you.”

When I got inside Granno’s house, I found Aunt Maureen’s daughter Quilla in the kitchen. Quilla was Pauline’s age, a quiet, girl who suffered from comparison with our beautiful

cousin while she was growing up. Now, however, her accomplishments were legend. She was named Young Mrs. Texas in 1963 when she was twenty-two years old. She had a perfect husband and two perfect children. They lived on a perfect farm next to Aunt Maureen and Uncle Henry. She could grow a perfect garden, make a perfect quilt, put up perfect pickles, and keep a perfect house. It hit me — I had grown up wanting to be wild and beautiful like Pauline and I hadn't made it. Now I was going to be a farm wife, and I had another cousin I wouldn't be able to match.

Quilla was organizing the food. "Put those two parts of pies together on one plate so we can wash the other one," she said. "I'm putting salads on the cabinet, casseroles and vegetables on the table, and desserts on the stove and the cart."

I put the two pies together, but was stumped on the first dish I tried to organize. "What's green Jell-O with marshmallows, carrots, and jalapeños? Salad or dessert?"

Quilla took it from me. "I'll do this, you take care of the door."

I brought in food while Quilla sorted.

When she was finished, we went out on the front porch. We sat on the top step, knees primly together, squinting into the sun above the houses across the street. Quilla was wearing a black skirt, the box pleats sharp and perfect, and a white peter pan blouse. I had on a green shift that hung loose from my shoulders, and as Mother had noticed, I hadn't put on any makeup that morning. We looked like a school marm and her grade school student. Next door, Mrs. Hersey was a burst of color in a flowered house dress, watering bright pink petunias along the foundation of her house. She waved to us, "Morning, girls."

I nodded back. Quilla called out, "Good morning, Mrs. Hersey. How are you this morning? Arthritis better?"

While they talked, I thought about Pauline. Maybe her problems weren't as serious as they looked. Everyone knew a death in the family created all sorts of tension. Tension that could make a husband and wife trapped in a car together break out in anger, make you drink more than you would normally. Except that Fred said it was a continuing problem. Except that she hid it. Except that the bruises on her arm made this worse than any fight I'd ever seen.

Quilla said. "Mama said Fred disappeared right after he and Pauline got here." It was eerie, the way the quiet Hopewells seemed to be able to figure out what you were thinking.

"He said he'll be back for the funeral."

"You saw him? Did he seem mad at her? Every time I've seen them together he's been mad at her. Even at their reception, something about the cake didn't suit him."

“I guess I’d say he was a little mad.”

A car pulled up and a boy got out carrying a pie plate. “My mama said she’s sorry about your loss,” he said.

Quilla took the dish and handed it to me. “Desserts,” she said. When I came back out she was talking to the people through their car window. They pulled away and she joined me. “Those were Hargreaves. They wanted to make sure Aunt Lila knew they’d been here.”

“That’s been awkward,” I said. “People don’t know who to pay respects to, and they don’t know if we’ll get messages to her.”

“It’s an awkward family,” she said. “Lots of complications.” We sat back down, but shaded our eyes with our hands now. The sun was going to force us in soon. Quilla repeated, “Lots of complications. Did you know Uncle Buddy is coming to the funeral with Aunt Baby?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“Think about it,” Quilla said. “Have you ever seen him here? Is he in the big picture they took after Granddaddy’s funeral? He swore he’d never set foot in this house and never say a word to Grandmother as long as he lived. I guess after twenty-eight years, he’s giving in.”

“What happened?”

“You mean you don’t know? He got Aunt Baby pregnant when she was a junior in high school.”

“Aunt Baby?” On a country road in a parked car. It wasn’t possible. Not now. Not ever.

“Think for a minute,” Quilla said. “She’s a year-and-a-half younger than Clete, so she’s forty-three or forty-four. Steve is four years older than me, and I’m twenty-three. Figure it out for yourself — she was sixteen or seventeen when he was born.” She looked at me. “Don’t you ever figure these things? Don’t you wonder about people?”

“Well sure if someone gets married and has a baby quick, you count months. But I never thought about looking at grown-ups, at things that happened before I was born.”

“They had sex then too, you know.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “The thing that made Uncle Buddy so mad was that Grandmother told Aunt Baby the baby would be an abomination. She said they were all three — Aunt Baby, Uncle Buddy, and the baby — going to hell. And she wouldn’t come to their wedding.

“Well, she gave it up, of course. Granddaddy was still alive then and he wouldn’t let her throw his baby girl away altogether. So after a year or so everybody acted like nothing had ever happened. Except Uncle Buddy. It’ll be interesting to see how he acts tomorrow.”

Quilla gave me a speculative look. “There’s lots of secrets in this family.”

Lots of secrets and lots of stories that changed around. “Quilla, do you any reason Uncle Clete would want to leave me something?”

Before she could answer, Mother drove around the corner. She jumped out of the car, ran up and sat beside us as if she’d been there all morning.

Other cars pulled up. The visitation was over. Granno’s old black Pontiac pulled into the driveway. Daddy was driving and Granno sat in the passenger seat staring straight ahead. Aunt Baby was next. Aunt Maureen and Pauline were with her. Then more cars with relatives and strangers.

I wanted to talk to Daddy, see how he was, but every time I tried to reach him, someone grabbed him or new people arrived. I watched across the room, trying to figure out what he might need. Sweat glistened on his forehead and patted at it with the white handkerchief from his back pocket. I got a glass of iced tea from the kitchen and handed it to him. When he took it, he said, “Thanks,” without noticing who brought it.

I went out on the back porch where I could be alone. My headache had eased for a while, but came back full force with all the people and the heat in the house

The screen door banged behind me. “Thought I’d return the favor,” Daddy said. I looked up and he handed me a glass of tea. He sat down beside me and fished a tin of aspirin out of his shirt pocket. “Lila said you might be needing this.”

He knew I’d gotten drunk. “Thanks.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll live.” He laughed. “You may not want to, but you will. I promise.”

Sympathy from Daddy for being hung over was the last thing I expected. I started to cry. Everything was backwards. Mother hadn’t even noticed I felt bad and Daddy was bringing me aspirin and iced tea. I wanted to help him, and he was taking care of me.

He put his arm around me. “Don’t cry. It’ll make it worse. Believe me. I know about these things.”

After a while he took out a cigarette. It was the last one, and he crumpled the empty Lucky Strike pack. “Would you like for me to go get you some more?” I asked. “Give me your keys and I’ll run to the store.”

He felt in his pocket, then shrugged. "I forgot. I let Pauline take my car again. Your Granno would probably let you take hers."

I hesitated, not wanting Daddy to think I was like Mother, jealous and critical of Pauline, but I believed he should know. "Maybe you shouldn't let her take the car."

"Huh?" His mind was already on something else.

"Pauline. Maybe she shouldn't be driving. She's pretty upset."

"Everyone's upset."

"She's upset and she's drinking. I think she's drinking a lot."

He shook his head, and bit his lips in. "Boy, that's bad news," he said finally.

I watched him. "Is there anything we can do to stop her?" I asked.

"What?" He was lost in his own thoughts again. "No." He patted my knee. "No, I don't know that there's anything anybody can do. At least nothing I did ever stopped Clete." He snorted. "And nothing your mother did stopped me."

Did hangovers make you braver? For the second time that day, I asked one of my parents something I had been afraid to ask before. "What did stop you, Daddy?"

"Look, Jan. I won't say I've stopped. All I'll say is I'm not going to have a drink right now. And the only reason I can say that much is that I just got tired out with it. After a while, it wore me out making everybody so unhappy."

"Maybe Pauline will get tired of it too."

"Maybe. But she's a pretty unhappy girl." He stubbed out his cigarette. "It used to seem like she had so much mischief in her, but it was fun, she made you laugh. It's just gone over the line somewhere into a kind of franticness. Maybe if Clete had been a better daddy to her she'd have found a better husband and she'd be happier. I don't know. I thought the world of Clete, but he wasn't much shakes as a father." He stared into the yard. "I guess you and Pauline both got shortchanged in that department."

I stopped an automatic denial. I wanted to think this through, and I didn't want to waste this chance to talk to him. I took three long, slow breaths and said, "Another way to look at it is that you got shortchanged in the daughter department."

"Why would you say something like that?"

"I don't know. I guess I just never was any good at the things that were important to you."

He looked puzzled. "Like what?"

"Oh. Waiting tables. Throwing a softball."

"I don't know what you're talking about. It would be nice if you could do those things, but that doesn't mean I'm disappointed in you."

My resolve to think before I spoke vanished. "Of course you were disappointed. If I'd been more like Pauline you'd have stayed around."

Daddy cleared his throat. "My leaving was something between your mother and me. It never had anything to do with you."

Through the dull pounding in my head, I realized I had never believed that he left because of Mother. No one would leave Mother. I was the one who wasn't good enough, interesting enough, pretty enough. "Well, it wasn't just her you left," I said finally.

"I know that, Jan." Daddy's voice was gruff, tight. He looked away, stood up, and still not looking at me, said, "But what do you want me to do about it now?"

It was a good question. What did I want from him now? What could make it right? "I don't know, Daddy. I guess I just want you to love me."

The pain in his eyes was as bad as when he saw Uncle Clete in the hospital. "You and your mother are my life," he said. "If you don't know that, I don't know how to show you."

I stood up and put my arms around him. He hugged me tight, resting his chin on my head. I felt safer than I had since I was three years old.

When he let me go, I said, "I'll go get your cigarettes now." It wasn't much, but it was something I could do for him.