

# Needlework

## A Novel

by

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### *Chapter 12*

I don't know how long I lay in the bedroom trying to sort out my life — what was true, what was false. One thing that felt true was what Daddy told me yesterday — “you and your mother are my life.” Had I come all this way, finally reached the point I could believe he loved me, only to have his love yanked away? How could he love me now that I knew the truth? How could I hide that I knew?

Daddy knocked on the door, then opened it. He came in and stood in the dark. “Have you seen Pauline?”

“Why?”

“My car's gone and she doesn't seem to be around.” He looked at the floor and pursed his lips. “I understand she might have something to be upset about.”

“Yeah.” I couldn't look him in the eye either. “We both do.”

“Come on. Let's find her.”

“No,” I said. I couldn't be with him now. “I'll go,” I said. “Please. I want to do this by myself.”

I got in Granno's car and headed toward the bus station. I'd take the first bus home. Richard and I didn't have to wait for September 1. We could get married like he'd always wanted to, a small ceremony in the back yard. Or I could call him, have him meet me in Oklahoma. There was no waiting period for a marriage license there. We could be married tonight or tomorrow.

But halfway to the bus station, I turned left. I'd always wanted a sister, for that matter I'd always wanted a big, messy family. It turned out I might have both. I couldn't run out on Daddy and I couldn't run out on Pauline.

I drove past Aunt Lila's, looking for Daddy's car. It wasn't there so I headed for the liquor store.

I was stopped on Main Street by barricades. The Fourth of July parade was moving up the street. I looked for a place to turn around, but there were cars backed up behind me. I pulled over to a parking meter. I'd have to wait it out. The parade moved like molasses.

Ten boys sweating in corduroy Future Farmers of America jackets walked by in rows of three, four, and three. The center boy in the first row carried the American flag. Boys in the second row carried the Texas flag and the Confederate flag. The third row carried the FFA banner. They were followed by a car pulling a flat bed trailer covered with cotton batting bearing the sign, "Wildcat Queen." Three pretty girls in formal gowns, waved, and squinted into the sun. A truck with the sign, "The Eunice High School Marching Band" drove by. The band sat on folding chairs with music stands on the back of the truck and played from sheet music whipped around by the wind.

After the band passed, I saw Daddy's car parked on the other side of the parade. The driver's door was open.

I ran past the barricades, weaving around a Brownie troop, past the barricades on the other side. The car's radio and air conditioning were turned up full blast. I reached in and cut the engine.

The "Cotton is King" float, a giant cotton snowman pulled by a convertible decorated with crepe paper and the sign, "Courtesy of Norvell's Cotton Gin," moved slowly behind the scouts. Walking beside the car, one arm on the front fender for support, her high-heeled shoes in her hand, Pauline talked to the driver and waved to the crowd. Waved and smiled as if it were 1958 and she were still the Homecoming Queen.

She saw me at the moment I recognized the driver. "Cousin Jan," she said, "you know our sort-of cousin David Baxter. Come on over and help me give him a kiss. We're all kissing cousins in this family or kissing brothers and sisters. We're just one big lovin' family." She giggled. "Oops. I've made Jan blush. I forget that she's from the pure side of the family." She leaned over and mock-whispered in David's ear. "Her mama wouldn't like me talking about family kissing."

David drove four miles an hour, as we walked beside him.

“Come on, Pauline,” I said. “Let me take you to Aunt Lila.”

She pulled her arm away from me and fell against the car. David stopped and looked at me. “The parade goes three more blocks. I’ll meet you at her mother’s house.” He reached across and opened the passenger door. “Hop in, Pauline.” The crowd cheered when she got in and sat on the seat-back, still waving.

The snare drums beat to the rhythm of the names in my head. Ba-da-dum Mildred. Ba-da-dum Clete. I thought of Pauline’s sneering whisper about my mother. The nice side of the family wasn’t so nice after all. The perfect Mildred wasn’t perfect. And Jimmy Ray, the philanderer, the drunk, he was the dupe in all of this. It was so confused, everything turned upside down. Pauline was my sister. Daddy was my uncle.

Shriners in motorized bathtubs on wheels and tiny bicycles went by. The Piggly Wiggly clown tossed suckers to the crowd. One landed at my feet. The Panhandle Palomino Association, oil men dressed in silver studded cowboy gear waved and leered at me as their beautiful blonde horses pranced and bowed.

I reached Daddy’s car just as the FFA boys started removing the barricades.

When I turned the corner to Aunt Lila’s house, I saw the cotton float in front. David was sitting on the porch. “Her mom’s putting her to bed,” he said when I walked up.

I sat down next to him and we both stared at the float. “Thanks for helping,” I said.

“Sure. What’s a sort-of cousin for?”

The silence stretched. David said, “I guess losing her dad’s been pretty rough on her.” He leaned back on his elbows. “Still, it seems like maybe more than that.”

Did he know? Did everyone in Eunice, Texas know? The man in the post office with his crack about Mother’s pretty face making Uncle Clete happy, did he know? What about Aunt Lila and her story about the first time she met Mother? All my life I’d thought my mother was nearly a saint, and I thought everyone else thought it too. Did they all always know that she was the kind of woman who slept with her husband’s brother?

“Looks like her marriage is kind of rocky,” David went on. “I never thought much of Fred from the first time I met him. Of course, it might have been jealousy.” He laughed. “I had always planned to grow up and have Pauline fall in love with me. She’d come home from college and see that the right fellow had been in front of her all along.”

I smiled. "I know that fantasy. Except it was supposed to be you noticing me."

"Is that so?" He reached out and took my chin in his hand, turned my head up and toward him, looked me over. "Well, you know, I might have done a lot worse than the smart sort-of cousin. I tried to turn my head away, but he held me, still studying me. "A whole lot worse." He ran his thumb along my jaw then let me go. "Just my luck, though, Pauline's married before I could grow up enough for her to notice me. You show up finally grown up enough for me to notice you and you're almost married. I don't suppose there's any hope left there?" He tilted his head sideways and lowered it so it was level with mine. He was smiling at me.

If I smiled back, he'd kiss me.

I ducked my head. The moment passed.

"Anyway, that's a pretty troubled woman in there," he said.

Why not tell him? I needed to talk to someone. Richard wasn't here and I sure couldn't talk to Mother about this. "We just found out some things. I guess Pauline is only a sort-of cousin to me too." I turned my head away so he couldn't see my face. "I guess she's maybe more a sort-of sister."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean my Mother and Uncle Clete."

"Oh. That."

That! "Does everybody in the world know?"

"Well, probably not everybody in the world, but some people do. It's hard to keep secrets in a family, even a family as quiet as yours." He looked at me. "Are you and Pauline just finding out about all this?"

I nodded.

"Shit. No wonder you're upset." He put his arm around me. I let myself relax into him, just a little.

"I don't even know how to sort it out. My Mother, I always thought she was perfect and I always believed everything she said, and now I think back and I wonder if everything she told me is a lie. Should I just take everything she ever said to me and believe the opposite?" He patted my arm. "And my dad and Uncle Clete. It's like they both loved me, but Mother told me they didn't, or at least told me I wasn't important to them. But

mainly, I've just been raised to think she was always in the right, and she wasn't. She wasn't at all." More patting. Even I could tell how boring this was. I pulled away. "Well, you probably need to be somewhere."

"Yeah." He motioned to the Cotton is King float taking up half the block. "I need to get my chariot off the street." Halfway down the walk he stopped. "I think Pauline will be OK. I've been watching your family for a long time, and you're stronger than you look."

Stronger than we look. Maybe that was true about Pauline, but not about me. All my strength came from other people. It always had. When I got to Winchester and didn't have Mother to tell me what to do and how to act, I fell apart. I closed my eyes and tried to feel Richard's arms around me. Smelled the fresh hay, cow, and milk smell of him coming in from the barn. Richard could help me figure all this out.

The phone rang inside. After a minute Aunt Lila stepped out. "Jan, your dad just called. He wants you to help him get all the cars home."