



Chapter 3

The ritual of the quilting party in rural communities and along the frontiers gave a woman a chance to dress up a little, to spend a day in the company of her friends and to work at something to be used more gratefully and remembered longer than most of the fruits of her dull repetitive household chores—and was a means of creating something of her own self.—The Daily News (Lebanon, Pennsylvania) April 29, 1977.

A week passed with no sign of the handsome Mr. Parker. Which was fine. After all, hadn't Delia told her sister she had no interest in a beau? She didn't need any man, not even the intriguing Clarence Parker. She didn't.

When he hadn't shown up to church this morning, her hopeful attitude vanished. To make matters worse, Sunday lunch had run long, and she'd scrambled to clean the dishes in time for the sewing bee every young woman in town was sure to attend. Then she'd had to wait ten minutes for Rabb to quit shooting cans and drive her to town.

As they boarded the wagon, Mother hurried over. "Delia, take this along to Gert's mother."

She handed up a glass jar covered with brown paper and tied with twine. "My peach preserves, straight from home."

"Ma, save them for us. I've had a hankering for preserves."

Mother batted Rabb's hand. "There are plenty. Delia, don't forget."

Delia agreed and placed them inside her sewing bag. "Let's go."

Progress along the road was slow, and Delia repeatedly asked her brother to speed up. "It would've been quicker to ride my two-wheeler."

Without sparing her a glance, Rabb shrugged. "So why didn't you?"

"I don't know my way around this town."

"Pretty simple, if you ask me."

She crossed her arms. He knew very well she had no spare time to study a map of the town, much less go exploring. The only reason she knew Gert Waldrop lived at Number Five, Banker's Row was because Sallie had told her.

"There's no missing it. It's the fanciest house in town."

When the wagon drew close to the road marked Banker's Row, she told Rabb to let her out. Surely she could walk faster than he drove.

Banker's Row turned out to be a lonely road inhabited by few homes. Good thing it was a sunny day, or she might be skittish. Not far ahead, though, a wire fence outlined a lush lawn. A copse of dense cedar trees obscured the house itself, but surely that was Gert Waldrop's home. She peered at her gold watch. The watch hands showed a quarter past three. Fifteen minutes late.

She dropped the timepiece and it swung back and forth on its long chain as she strode toward the home. The carpetbag grew heavy, and she shifted it to the other hand, wincing when

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something solid thumped her leg. The peach jam. She'd make sure to give it to Mrs. Waldrop first thing.

A few steps more brought her squarely before a manicured lawn, with formal flower gardens framing the most magnificent house she'd ever seen. Sallie's words took on new meaning. It was far fancier than any other home she'd seen in Blooming Grove.

It was as if the architect patterned it with filigree in mind. Three stories of latticed adornment. The veranda on the first floor stretched the entire width of the house and around one side of the soft yellow home, where a castle-like turret sprouted from the second floor, the kind that brought Rapunzel to mind. She counted no less than three balconies on the third story. Brick chimneys jutted from various sides of the pitched roof, and shining glass windows stared as if daring her to stride the length of the brick walkway, climb those six stone steps, and approach the imposing double doors.

She fanned her face. What was she doing here? She, who slept alongside her brothers and sister in the breezeway of an old dogtrot. The bedroom wasn't fancier, with hanging quilts dividing the space for privacy. Her large home back in Georgia had been auctioned away, along with her pride.

Or so she thought. Wasn't it that very same pride that kept her moving up the sidewalk? Dented. Wounded. Raw. But pride, nonetheless.

What did Grandmother used to say? "Where the Lord wills, He gives the way."

Saying it aloud kept her feet in motion. She climbed the grand steps and arrived on the porch, winded. She looked back along the path.

Do not retreat.

She was here to sew, not gawk at the garish house. Finally, she'd have two whole hours to work, undisturbed, on her fancy

stitches that joined one silk patch to another. She only hoped her calloused hands wouldn't snag the fine fabric.

Sewing bees were famous for gossip, and hopefully, this one would help her spread the word of her exquisite needlework. Once people knew her capability, they would trust her with their sewing needs. And maybe, with her added funds, her family would never again endure the heartbreak of a public auction.

Six months. That's all the time she had.

But first, the sewing bee, on the other side of these towering mahogany doors. Taking a deep breath, she rapped three times.

The door opened and Mrs. Waldrop, an older version of her daughter, smiled pleasantly. "Good afternoon. Delia, isn't it?" With a sweeping gesture, she indicated Delia should step over the threshold into the grand entryway.

As she entered, taking in the high walls lined with floral wallpaper and polished woodwork, the brown-paper-wrapped jar of preserves once again thumped against her leg, a painful reminder of their presence in the carpetbag. Where they would stay.

Mrs. Waldrop glided past a round table that held a tall vase brimming with colorful flowers, no doubt freshly picked from her garden. "The girls are in the morning room."

Delia followed in her footsteps, more like a little child than a young woman. All her pluck had seemed to vanish within these gilded walls.

At the doorway, feminine laughter wafted to her. Mrs. Waldrop turned to her. "How is your dear mother?"

"She is well."

Mrs. Waldrop clasped her hands together and made a tsking sound. "One more mouth to feed, with so many living in that tiny cabin." She cocked her head to the side in feigned

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sympathy, as if to provoke a rush of confession. Was that what she wanted? For Delia to spill some sort of secret?

For one heady moment, Delia thought about baiting the woman with some contrived story, just to see the reaction. Instead, she smiled. "We're very eager to welcome this baby. Mother says all babies are blessings from the Lord."

Mrs. Waldrop's eyebrows arched. "I see. Please tell your mother I plan to call on her this week to welcome her to our fair little town."

The woman turned, leaving Delia to wander into the spacious morning room alone. Young women sat in clusters and chatted while crocheting, tatting, or embroidering. Gert strode to her with a tight smile. "I see you made it."

"I'm sorry I'm late."

"Were you? I hadn't noticed. Well, go on, sit somewhere. Our maid will serve cookies and lemonade in a bit." Gert darted away, leaving Delia to scan the room for an empty space.

She settled on the brocade divan beside a girl who introduced herself as Milly Akin. With wide eyes, she leaned to speak in Delia's ear. "This is your first time here, isn't it? This is the grandest home I've ever seen. I'll bet you're just like me, dying of jealousy. Some girls have all the luck." Milly's sigh was long and wistful. Turning her gaze to Delia's carpetbag, she said, "What did you bring?"

Glad for the subject change, Delia smiled. "My crazy quilt. It's been a year and it's still far from finished. Would you like to see it?"

She reached into her bag, avoiding the preserves as she withdrew the quilt from the carpet bag. As she unfolded it, Milly squealed, attracting other admirers. Delia couldn't help beaming.

"This is gorgeous." Lucy Grant gingerly touched the bit of

white silk that bore soft green watercolor strokes. “I read about this method of painting on silk. It’s the Japanese style, isn’t it?”

“And just look at all those complicated stitches,” Milly said.

“Girls, look at the way Delia has combined the herringbone stitch with lazy daisies,” Lucy said. Echoes of appreciation brought gooseflesh to Delia’s arms.

Sallie chuckled. “Well, I don’t know anything about fancy stitches or any other kind, for that matter. I can hardly hem a skirt.”

Delia’s heart warmed to Sallie and her open humility. “I’d be glad to help you.”

“Help me too,” echoed around the room. Except for Gert, who stood across the large room, hands on her hips. Then, snapping her fingers, she approached the group.

“I have an idea. Girls, why don’t we ask our new friend, Miss Delia Truitt, if she will teach us her big-city techniques?”

“Oh, I’m not from a big city, just Pine Mountain, Georgia.”

Gert’s smile was saccharin. “I’d never have guessed.”

There was no mistaking the dripping sarcasm, especially when the girls around them exchanged glances. Delia’s face heated. The girl might as well have called her a country bumpkin.

“You don’t mind helping us, do you?” Gert arched her eyebrows. She had the upper hand and it was clear she knew it.

Delia hesitated. She needed these hours to stitch. Too many chores awaited at home to ever have a chunk of time like this. Yet she wanted to get to know these women, make friends. What better way than helping them create beautiful art with needle and thread?

Lucy shook her head. “Gert, don’t put Delia on the spot like that. She came to sew, not tutor.”

“That’s right. She works hard all week.” This from Sallie. “She deserves time for fun.”

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Gert batted her light blue eyes at Delia and raised her voice so all could hear. "I'm sorry, I was under the impression you wanted to help these sweet women. Was I mistaken?"

Delia forced a smile. "I'd be glad to help. Who'll be first?"

For the next two hours, Delia rotated around the room to help anyone who needed her. She did everything from demonstrating how to thread a needle, to sketching out an assortment of fancy stitches, to discussing the strategy of piecing a crazy quilt while making it look effortlessly random.

When two hours came to an end, Delia realized the refreshments had come and gone without her tasting any. Her empty stomach could attest to that. As she and her friends were packing their projects, she peeked at Gert's.

Unlike the others, her sizable quilt was a work of art. Delia stepped closer to examine the even stitches that connected each swatch of silk and velvet.

"It's lovely."

Gert lifted her chin. "Another blue-ribbon winner, I'm sure." She narrowed her gaze. "You're not considering entering the county fair, are you? I'd hate for you to be disappointed."

"I might, if there's time to finish my quilt. When is it?"

Lucy looked up from her seat on the divan. "It's in October. You ought to enter." She cut her eyes at Gert. "Competition is a wonderful thing."

Sallie came to stand next to her. "The grand prize winner in each category gets a cash prize." When Delia met her gaze, her friend nodded. "Fifty dollars."

"Oh." What a difference that kind of money would make to her family.

Delia glanced at her quilt, lying on the sofa where she'd abandoned it. It was far from finished. Worse, she'd just lost the only two hours where no one called her to cook or clean or milk cows. The chances of finishing by October seemed bleak. With

a sigh, she folded the quilt and opened her carpetbag to tuck it inside.

Before she could catch it, the jar of preserves tumbled out, dropping onto the wooden floor with a sickening thud. Glass and sticky peach preserves oozed onto the expensive rug. Delia clasped her hand to her mouth, horrified.

Over her shoulder, Gert cried out. "What on earth is that?"

Cheeks burning, Delia attempted to wipe up the gooey mess. A fragment of glass pricked her finger, but it didn't hurt as much as Gert's scorn. "I'm so sorry. I'll clean it."

Gert shooed her away. "Stop all that before you do more harm to my mother's imported carpet. Leave it for the maid."

Delia sat back on her heels and apologized once more.

"A lot of good that does. Don't you know better than to bring something like this to a sewing bee?"

Delia set her jaw. It would never happen again.