



## Chapter 2

*“Never has there been such intense interest in a particular quilt style as there was in the crazy quilt during the period 1876 to 1900 ... The Singer Sewing Machine Company used crazy quilts as a symbol on their trade cards; women’s magazines gave directions for making crazy quilts as table covers along with patterns for decorating them, and silk manufacturers promoted the use of their scrap waste in making crazy quilts”—The San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco, California) Sunday, September 01, 1985.*

The odor of dead animals made Delia’s stomach heave. Grasshoppers sprang up all around her, clinging to her clothing before she brushed the creatures away. She’d never seen so many spider webs. It was hard to avoid the wispy remains, and countless times, Delia shivered just thinking of the arachnids crawling up her skirts.

After working tirelessly to clean both sides of the dogtrot, Delia, Hazel, and Mother laid six pallets side by side in the covered breezeway between the two rooms of the cabin. Though Delia was weary from the endless labor, sleep eluded

her that first night. So, she sat on the steps and let her gaze wander to the wondrous, star-filled sky. One by one, her siblings joined her, crying out when a falling orb zipped across the indigo skies.

“Why haven’t we ever done this before?” Hazel voiced the wistful question, but everyone experienced the same emotion. Had they been too immersed in their own worlds to pay attention to creation’s beauty?

Though the existence was grueling, the time spent talking and laughing with her family buoyed her spirits. In Georgia, when needs and desires were easily met, she’d taken her family for granted. Here, desires were little more than fanciful wishes. This was a land where basic food, shelter, and clothing were all that mattered.

At the end of each day, she’d collapsed onto her pallet alongside her family, grateful for the air that wafted over them in the covered breezeway. Soft snores lifted within minutes.

All in all, it had been a challenging first week in their new homeland.

By the time Sunday arrived, Delia was more than ready for a Sabbath. Starting before dawn and continuing until well after dusk, all six of them had worked together to make the cabin habitable. Delia hadn’t known what hard work was until she’d swept, scrubbed wood floors and cabinets, caulked the chinking between logs, and helped lift heavy timber to brace the falling porch roof.

The prospect of church both exhilarated and overwhelmed her. She longed to meet their neighbors and future friends. Though she’d brought only one Sunday dress, it was a stylish light blue poplin with leg-of-mutton sleeves. The pastel shade brought out the coppery tones of her auburn hair.

Thanks to Uncle Robert’s provision for a wagon and two horses, the Truitts rode together to Valley Creek Church.

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Seated close in the wagon bed, Hazel turned to Delia, frowning. "I'm nervous."

Compassion melted Delia. Poor Hazel. Fourteen was an awful age full of insecurity and swirling emotions, all happening in a body shifting from child to woman. A fierce protectiveness rose within her, and she grabbed Hazel's sweaty hand within both hers.

"There's no need to worry yourself over making friends. Just be friendly, and you'll have a bevy of chums."

"Think so?"

"Why wouldn't you? You're smart, pretty ... sweet." She swallowed. Sweet wasn't exactly true of Hazel Truitt. But what would a little fib hurt? It might even encourage a milder disposition. "And fashionable. I love the way you've swept up the front of your gorgeous dark hair and left the rest to cascade in curls down your back."

Hazel rolled her eyes. "That's only because Mother won't let me pull it all up until I'm sixteen."

Delia put her finger to her lips with a pointed stare at Mother, sitting within earshot on the wagon seat beside Papa. "And you're clever to boot. Mark my words, you'll have friends galore." Hopefully.

The crease in between Hazel's perfectly shaped eyebrows disappeared. "I've been praying like crazy."

Delia tucked the damp hand under her arm with a final pat and nodded at their dozing brothers. "Those sillies are the ones you should pray for. How can anyone sleep in this wagon bed with all this jostling?"

As if on cue, Rabb snorted loud enough to wake himself and Thomas. He straightened, frowning when the girls laughed.

Mother turned and cast them a warning look as the wagon came to rest in the churchyard. "See to it you enter

quietly, as we are noticeably late.” She directed the last comment toward Papa, who ignored the jibe as he jumped to the ground.

Delia gazed up at the white church. An unidentifiable hymn poured through the open windows. Nervous pangs tightened her stomach. Would she find new friendships here? Taking Thomas’s hand, she carefully stepped to the ground and brushed bits of hay from her pale blue skirt.

Hazel blinked rapidly as she surveyed the building before them. Delia summoned a cheery tone. “Smile your brightest, dearie. Everything will be fine.”

They walked in a line up the stairs to the door, first Papa, then Mother, Delia, Hazel, and Rabb, with Thomas bringing up the rear in his easy-going, no-hurry saunter. With every step, Delia tried to school her expression to one of serenity, the very opposite of the dread that churned inside her.

The air was still and warm when they entered the church building. People crammed elbow to elbow on both sides of a center aisle, singing in lackluster fashion to an out-of-tune piano at the front. An urge to flee caused Delia’s step to falter. Maybe all the seats were taken, and they could slip out, unnoticed.

But that hope fizzled as the last discordant note ended, and the door snapped shut behind them, causing heads to swivel their way. A girl who looked to be no more than five years old stepped into the aisle to face them, shaking her chubby index finger. “You’re late!”

Laughter worked through the stifling congregation as a woman grabbed the child and cast the Truitts an apologetic look. Delia’s cheeks burned. If only these people would stop staring, and she could crawl under a rock.

A short, stout man rushed up the aisle, hand extended to Papa. “Welcome, friends. I’m Pastor Swenson.” He turned to

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the crowd with a broad smile. “Who will make room for these folks?”

Shuffling of feet and belongings broke the silence. Someone called from the front, and Pastor Swenson gestured for the Truitts to follow. “Here we go, the Browns kindly gave up their front-row seats. Plenty of room for all your family.”

Delia kept her gaze on the wooden-plank floor as they filed up the aisle to the front pew.

Standing between Rabb and Hazel, Delia shifted from one foot to the other as the congregation belted one hymn after another. Was there a rule about standing for the whole time? If so, she’d never return.

When the minister finally gestured for the congregation to sit, Delia could have cheered. Until Pastor Swenson said, “But let’s have our visitors remain standing so we might get to know you better.”

No, no, no. This was not the way she wanted to be introduced into the community. Heat crept up her neck. No doubt the tips of her ears were as red as a tomato. She stole a glance at Hazel, sure she would be on the verge of tears, bless her heart.

But her younger sister wasn’t tearful or shy. Instead, she faced the congregation with a bright smile, wagging her fingers.

Delia hissed, “Turn around this minute!”

Hazel blinked. “I’m being friendly, like you told me to.”

Chuckles fluttered through the room.

*Lord, if You care about me at all, bring forth a tornado, or a herd of squealing pigs. Even a pair of skunks. Any diversion will do.*

Pastor Swenson clasped his hands. “We are happy you’re joining our fellowship this morning. Please, tell us about yourselves.”

Papa gripped his bowler hat and directed his words to the

people sitting behind them. “I am William Truitt, just here from Georgia. This is my dear wife, Esther. My oldest son, Thomas, Rabb, Delia, who’s eighteen and unmarried, and Hazel.”

A groan caught in her throat. Papa might as well have put a sign on her back: *Eighteen and Desperate for a Man*.

She twisted her fingers together and willed the preacher to move on with the service.

Instead, he kept up the questioning. “Truitt, you say? Any relation to the Truitt’s Dry Goods?”

“Robert is my brother. He told me good things about this town.”

Pastor Swenson grinned. “Ah, yes, I thought so. Too bad they aren’t here today.”

Someone called, “Remember, they took a little trip to Dallas.”

Another voice piped up. “Don’t worry. Mary said they’d be back and have the store open Monday morning.”

Delia glanced at Rabb with a frown. Was there no end to this interrogation? She longed to ease her right foot out of its too-snug slipper.

After a few more questions, the pastor smiled. “We’re having a potluck on the lawn after services, and we’d love for your family to be our guests.”

At last, Pastor Swenson turned his attention to the sermon, and Delia sank onto the mahogany pew, tugging on Hazel’s sleeve when the girl remained standing, seemingly transfixed with the congregation’s attention. This might be the longest morning ever.

An hour later, when the service was over, Delia followed her brothers up the crowded aisle. Keeping her gaze on the shoes all around her, she ignored any comments until she crossed the threshold and gulped in the fresh air. Just one

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moment to relax, then she'd be ready to face the church members who knew far more about her than she'd like. Except the most important thing. How would she hope to offer her services as a seamstress if all they knew was her age and marital status?

Maybe Papa thought the only way she could help their financial predicament was to marry her off. She'd have to prove him wrong.

She stood beside her brothers under the shade of a pecan tree. Thomas's serious gaze on the crowd contrasted with Rabb's grin. Delia realized, with a start, how much like Thomas she was in this moment. How had she ever considered herself a social person?

Rabb nudged Thomas. "Would you look at them girls? Come on, let's talk to 'em."

Thomas shook his head.

Rabb shrugged. "Fine." He reached for Delia's arm. "Come on, Red."

"What are you doing? Let me go!"

She wrenched away, and he faced her. "We're gonna be friendly. Can't let Hazel have all the fun." He gestured to a group across the lawn, where their sister laughed and chatted as if she'd never been worried about breaking into a new group.

With a mix of pride and envy, Delia watched the confident way her sister tossed her head. Had her words given Hazel such confidence? Maybe she should heed her own advice.

"I hate to admit it, but you're right. We can't let her outshine us."

After all, the worst had already happened. Might as well venture out.



Walking beside her dashing brother was a sure way to make friends. The circle of young people chatting and laughing opened to include them. Delia forced herself to smile with every introduction.

Her gaze caught on a tall man who stepped forward and removed his hat. "I'm Clarence Parker."

She placed her hand in his. "I'm ..." She blinked, captured like a moth to the light. What an amazing color for eyes. Like looking into the grayish green of sea waves. Or was it the waft of cologne or his dapper suit that held her suspended as if she had no notion of how to daisy-chain words into a sensible message? Her gaze landed on his large hand enveloping hers.

"I'm ..." She swallowed. What was wrong with her?

His lips curved upward in a kind, patient smile. She'd never liked mustaches. Until now.

"Your name is Delia, yes?" His smile was kind.

"Yes, that's right." He released her hand, and she searched for some way to keep him in front of her. "Your eyes remind me of the ocean." She blinked. Why did she say that?

A flicker of surprise crossed his face. "I haven't seen it."

"Me too. I-I mean, I've only seen it once. It was beautiful."

Her cheeks burned. She'd just told a stranger she thought his eyes were beautiful. One minute, she couldn't speak. The next moment, she couldn't stop the babble of lunacy. What must he think?

Rabb held out his hand to the man, his expression anything but friendly. "Rabb Truitt."

"Rabb, this is Mr. Clarence Parker."

The two men shook hands. Rabb glanced at her from the corner of his eye and turned his body so that his back faced her. "So, Clarence, you gotta job?"

Of all the nerve. The one time she wanted more than anything to speak with a man, he came between them.

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“Delia?”

She looked up at a young woman with light hair, spectacles, and warm smile. “I see you’ve met my brother, Clarence. I’m Sallie.”

Deila’s lips parted in surprise. Where he was dashing and fashionable, his sister wore a simple yellow dress with a plain straw hat, and wisps of her fine, blonde hair escaped from her chignon. She held a Bible but no bag, and from behind her wire-rimmed spectacles, her blue eyes exuded sincerity. Delia liked her at once.

“I’m glad to know you. It’s a bit overwhelming, all these new acquaintances.” But this one, she’d remember.

Sallie adjusted the Bible to her left side. “I hoped you’d be at church today. I just knew we’d be friends when I saw y’all move in next door.”

Delia cocked her head. “Oh?”

Sallie shook her head with a self-deprecating chuckle. “Sorry. I should’ve said we’re the next farm over, maybe half a mile down the road.”

Before Delia could respond, Sallie grasped her hand. “Come with me. The girls are dying to meet you.”

Delia allowed herself to be dragged once again, but this time, she didn’t mind. Five or six young women dressed in pastel dresses and fashionable hats chirped enthusiastic greetings.

“We’re delighted a new family has moved in,” one girl said.

Another added, “We’ve been bored to tears with the male population in this town. Until now.” They giggled.

And Rabb thought he needed help finding a good woman?

A willowy blonde lifted her chin. “You spoke to Clarence.” Her gaze flicked over Delia.

“Is that not allowed?”

The blonde narrowed her eyes. “If I were you, I’d be careful not to flirt with men who are taken.”

“But—”

A curvaceous brunette playfully pushed between them. “All right, that’s enough, you two.” To Delia, she said, “Pay no attention to Gert. She thinks all the men are hers.”

Delia folded her arms. “I’m not here to get a man, if that’s what you think—”

The petite woman between them laughed. “Oh, we’re all after a husband, aren’t we, girls?” Her lighthearted manner diffused the tension. “Our slightly possessive friend here is Gert Waldrop, and I’m Lucy Grant. I spoke to your mother a few minutes ago. She tells me you are an expert needlewoman.”

“My *mother* said that?”

The girls around her giggled, and Delia flushed. “It’s just that she thinks my efforts should be spent on more practical things.” Directing her words to Lucy, she nodded. “I’m working on a crazy quilt.”

Lucy’s mouth formed an O. “Another crazy quilter. I’d love it if you’d teach me how to do that elaborate embroidery.”

Gert placed her gloved hands on her hips with a huff. “Well, I like that, Lucy Grant. You know I can teach you all the latest stitches.”

Lucy patted Gert’s arm and winked conspiratorially at the rest of the group. “Yes, but you get rather impatient, you know. But here’s an idea—invite Delia to our sewing bee next Sunday.”

A chorus of approval rose, and the willowy Gert managed a tight smile in Delia’s direction. “You may come.”

What a limp invitation. But Delia refused to let it dampen her spirits. “I appreciate your generous offer. I accept.”

Gert’s lips flattened. “Our simple little gathering might not impress an Expert Needlewoman.”

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Delia blinked at the jab. Was all this about one brief, though magical, conversation with Clarence Parker?

Sallie scoffed. “Gert! Don’t tease. Your sewing bees are not simple affairs.” She turned to Delia. “You won’t believe the fancy little sandwiches and cakes she has for us. And Gert’s sewing is exquisite. I can’t wait to see what she’s entering in the fair this year.”

The fair. She’d forgotten to ask Aunt Mary for details.

Heads moved in agreement, and someone said, “She’s bound to win another blue ribbon. She’s famous for her samplers, lace, and beautiful crazy quilts too.”

Someone across the churchyard called for everyone to gather for the meal. Once the blessing ended, people queued up on either side of the long wooden tables that held a bounty of food. Delia walked behind Sallie Parker and Lucy Grant, who chatted and laughed.

But Delia’s gaze tracked Gert Waldrop as she hurried to catch up to Clarence Parker. As she tucked her hand into the fold of his arm, Gert cast a sly look back at Delia.

The situation was as plain as dry toast. Gert considered her a rival. For Clarence Parker’s attentions or fancy needlework? Perhaps both. One thing was clear, though. Gert didn’t appreciate competition.

Well, too bad. Delia thrived on it.



Clarence shoveled chicken salad into his mouth and tried to tune out Gert Waldrop’s shrill voice. Clever trick, inviting him to sit with her family in front of her influential father. Her pa was the mayor of the town, as well as the banker who stood between him and the loan he needed to purchase the hardware store. He’d been trying to get in front of Waldrop for weeks,

and the man had no time for him. So of course, he'd jumped at the chance to discuss a loan with the man, even if it was at a church picnic with curious folks listening.

Only, Gert blocked all his efforts at conversation. Her father and mother had finished eating and had left to mingle with others, leaving Clarence alone to endure Gert's flirtations.

Laughter drew his attention to the blanket where his sister sat with Delia Truitt. Her movements were graceful, like she'd been through finishing school. With her thick hair piled on top of her head, she looked like that Gibson girl from the magazines. He couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Judging by the way other men were staring, he wasn't the only one interested in her. He needed to make his move, before someone else won her heart first.

Whoa. Where did that thought come from? At twenty-four, he wasn't looking for a wife. Not yet, anyway. First, he'd put all his efforts into building his business and making a profit. Then he'd build a little house. After that, he could think about a wife and children. Maybe by then, he'd have figured out how to be the kind of loving husband his father had never been. Better to live alone than in an unhappy home.

Besides, what kind of woman would want to marry a former outlaw? Not many around here knew about that part of his life, but he'd have to confess it to the woman he loved.

His gaze caught on the auburn-haired beauty.

"Clarence! Are you listening to me?"

With a start, he focused on Gert. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

She sighed. "You haven't said a word about my new dress. I wore it just for you." Gert's mouth pinched in an exaggerated pout.

"For me?" Alarm bells sounded in his brain.

"Of course I did. Don't you think it's pretty?"

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Clarence took a swig of cool tea. He hoped she didn't have designs on him. But she sure was acting like she did. "It's fine."

Gert's laugh pierced the air. "Oh, Clarence, you say the sweetest things."

What?

She smirked in the direction of the new girl. Ah. So this was a little show of possession courtesy of Gertrude Waldrop.

Well, he'd put a stop to that. He gathered the remnants of his meal and got to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, Miss Waldrop, I need to speak to my sister."

"But—"

He ignored her protests and returned his dishes before walking to Sallie and her lovely friend. "May I join you?"

"Sit down, Clarence." Sallie patted the quilt.

The most beautiful woman gazed up at him. "Please do, Mr. Parker."

His heart flipped. Aw, crumb. Two minutes in her presence and he couldn't think straight.

What kind of enchantment was this? He really shouldn't be talking to her. He had a past to redeem and a future to grab with both hands. He ought to walk away.

Instead, he folded his legs underneath him. "May I call you Delia?"