

Quilts Make a Family

A HARRIET TRUMAN/LOOSE THREADS MYSTERY



Arlene Sachitano



***When she reached her mailbox, it was,
indeed, still empty.***

She put her hand inside as if she were checking to give herself a chance to scan the cars. Smoke curled out from the window of Wes's vehicle. Lisa's engine was running with the windows all done up tight, undoubtedly to keep the air conditioner going.

She looked across to the opposite leg of the circular driveway where Paul was parked. His van windows were rolled up tight as well, which seemed a little odd given his engine wasn't running and the sun was beating down on his windshield.

He must be cooking in there.

Harriet didn't like Paul, but she also didn't want him dying from heatstroke in front of her house. She shut her mailbox and went to the driver's side door.

He sat with his head leaned back against the headrest, and she assumed he was sleeping. She almost changed her mind about talking to him, but it *was* hot. She tapped on his window.

He didn't move. She stepped closer and shaded her eyes with her hand so she could get a better look inside.

"Paul?"

It was clear the man wasn't going to answer her—or anyone. Ever. Paul had a gaping slash across his neck; his shirt was soaked with blood.

"Oh, geez...Paul."

Also By Arlene Sachitano

The Harriet Truman/Loose Threads Mysteries

Quilt As Desired
Quilter's Knot
Quilt As You Go
Quilt by Association
The Quilt Before the Storm
Make Quilts Not War
A Quilt in Time
Crazy as a Quilt
Disappearing Nine Patch
Double Wedding Death

The Harley Spring Mysteries

Chip and Die
Widowmaker



QUILTS MAKE
A
FAMILY

**A Harriet Truman/Loose Threads
Mystery**



ARLENE SACHITANO



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

QUILTS MAKE A FAMILY

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Chapter 1

Harriet Truman leaned over to her friend Lauren Sawyer, who was in her usual spot at the table in the larger classroom at Pins and Needles quilt shop in Foggy Point, Washington.

“Look at Carla, all grown up.”

Lauren glanced up as Carla Salter shuffled two pages of notes together.

“She joined the group just after I came back to town,” Harriet continued, “so that would make it—what?—a year and a half ago? Remember? Wendy was only eighteen months old, and Carla didn’t look big enough to balance a baby on one hip while she carried that giant diaper bag.” She shook her head and chuckled. “I always thought her back was going to develop a permanent S-curve.”

Lauren plucked her hand-stitching project from her bag and began attaching a green felt leaf to a black background fabric.

“Everything about her is different. I’m not exactly a fashionista, but if you ask me, she’s looking downright stylish these days.”

Harriet surveyed her own jeans and tennis shoes and smiled as she looked at Lauren’s khaki pants.

“It doesn’t take much effort to outdo our fashion statements.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m better dressed than the *average* techno-nerd. But look at Carla with her skinny black pants and oversized button-down shirt.”

“I have to confess when I saw her dark-denim jacket last week I looked up ‘jean jacket etiquette’ and discovered I’m hopelessly old-fash-

ioned with my faded version. Dark, un-faded, un-acid-washed denim is what's in this year."

Lauren arched a brow.

"And you're keeping up on twenty-something fashion, why?"

Harriet opened her eyes wide in mock protest.

"Not for myself. You know I need to stay on top of trends in case any of them impact how I stitch customer quilts."

Lauren's brow wrinkled.

"That's a stretch."

"Okay, you got me. I *have* looked at those trashy magazines in the grocery checkout line once or twice."

Lauren laughed out loud.

"Welcome to the human race."

Harriet's aunt Beth Carlson shushed them as she sat down next to her niece.

"Carla is nervous enough without you two distracting her with your chatter."

The pair sat in silence as the rest of the Loose Threads quilting group filed in and took their customary places around the table—Mavis Willis next to Connie Escorcia to the left of the trio, with Robin McLeod and DeAnn Gault to the right, and Jenny Logan at the end of the table opposite Carla.

Carla cleared her throat, set her papers down, looked around the table and picked her papers up again.

"Everyone," Connie said, "Carla has been taking an online sociology class, and she wants to talk to us about it." She smiled at Carla. "Go ahead, honey."

Carla focused on Connie's face.

"As Connie said, I've been taking an online class. Wendy is going to preschool three days a week now, so I have a little time." She paused, and her face flushed.

"That's great," Mavis told her. "Sociology, did you say? That must be fascinating."

Carla cleared her throat again.

"As part of my class, we had to interview a group of disenfranchised people in our community. I know several of my classmates are already going to the homeless camp, so I decided to talk to some of the local foster kids."

Aunt Beth set her appliqué block down on the table.

"That sounds very interesting."

"And clever," Mavis added.

Carla curled the corner of the top sheet of paper between her fingers, creating a thin roll.

“I already knew some of them from the teen mothers group I’ve been sewing baby quilts with.”

Robin took a sip from her teacup and set it down.

“What did you learn?”

“The ones I talked to are older kids—middle school and up.” She set her notes down again. “They don’t have anything,” she blurted. “When they age out of the system, they don’t have much more than the clothes on their backs. I talked to one girl at the transitional shelter, and she told me on the day of her eighteenth birthday, her foster mother picked her up after school and drove her to the shelter. She’d packed her stuff in a plastic grocery bag and handed it to her when she got out of the car. Then, the woman just drove off. She never said goodbye or anything.”

Connie dropped her stitching into her lap.

“That’s terrible. The poor girl probably didn’t know what hit her.”

Carla sighed.

“The kid thought she was staying with the family until she graduated high school. She cried when I did the interview. She’d been a straight-A student, but she had to drop out and get her GED and go to work at the coffee shop.”

Jenny shook her head.

“That’s awful.”

Robin picked a carrot stick from a plastic zipper bag she’d set on the table between herself and the cookie plate. She took a bite and chewed it thoughtfully.

“Have you thought about how you want us to help them?” she asked Carla and then smiled. “I’m guessing you’re telling us about this because you have a plan.”

Carla dropped her gaze and her face went from pink to red.

“I thought we could make each of the older kids a quilt. Maybe like the ones we made for the people at the homeless camp, with the pocket on the outside to put their stuff in.”

“You mean the quillos?” Mavis asked. “The ones that fold up and tuck into their own pocket?”

Carla nodded.

“I thought we could attach a strap on either side of the pocket that would tuck into it when the quilt is open but turns into a shoulder strap when the quilt is in the pocket. Sometimes they have to take everything they own with them during the day when they stay at a shelter.”

Connie clapped her hands.

“Oh, honey, that’s a wonderful idea.”

“How many are we talking?” Lauren asked.

Carla thought for a moment.

“I ended up spending most of my time with a group of eight kids who live with one family. I was thinking we could start with them and see if they liked them, and then go from there.”

Harriet set her stitching down and picked a chocolate chip cookie from the plate Connie had put in the middle of the table.

“Are you thinking they all get one, or just the ones aging out?”

Carla rolled the edge of her notes in her fingers.

“The law is changing, so some of them are out as soon as they turn eighteen, but some can stay in the system until they’re twenty. I thought we could give all of them a quilt now, since their circumstances can change without warning.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Beth said.

Harriet thought for a moment as she chewed on a bite of cookie.

“Have you thought of doing anything beyond giving them the quilts?”

“What are you thinking?” Lauren asked.

She set her cookie down.

“What’s that quote? ‘Give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach him to fish and you feed him for life.’?”

“Isn’t that a Chinese proverb?” DeAnn asked.

Lauren laughed. “It was actually written by Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie, who was a novelist and daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray. But close.”

Harriet shook her head and smiled.

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that, but back to the point. Maybe we should see if they’d like to participate with us while we make their quilts. They could pick out their own material, and we could teach them a little about fabric and basic stitching, like hemming and sewing on buttons. That sort of thing.”

Robin picked up her teacup.

“That’s not a bad idea. If they’re being thrown out on the street at eighteen, or even at twenty, the more we can teach them, the easier it will be for them.”

“We could teach them how to shop for food and cook,” DeAnn suggested.

Mavis took a stitch into her project and tugged the needle back out.

“Before we go too far in planning this, we need to see if the kids *want* the help.”

“And we should probably talk to their social worker to see if we need to get any permissions from anyone before we make contact with the kids.”

Carla plopped down into her chair.

“That might be difficult.”

“Why is that?” Harriet asked.

Carla flicked her long dark hair over her shoulder in an unconscious move that mimicked Lauren. Lauren smiled but said nothing.

“I had to interview the social worker.” She consulted her notes. “Lisa Barron is her name. She was very hard to get an appointment with. Once she agreed to meet, she stood me up and rescheduled three times before I finally saw her in person. She was late, and then left earlier than she’d agreed to.”

Connie dropped her stitching into her lap.

“That’s just rude. How dare she treat our Carla like that.”

“It’s okay,” Carla said in a soft voice. “She’s busy.”

Robin munched another carrot, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin when she’d finished.

“I’ve heard the social workers in town carry heavy caseloads.”

Carla put her notes back in her canvas quilting tote.

“Lisa seems to spend a lot of time in court.”

Harriet looked up from her project.

“What did the kids you interviewed say about her?”

Carla was silent for a moment.

“Well, some of them didn’t know who their social worker was, so she must not have talked to them much.” She paused again. “One of the girls said Lisa is working to reunite her with her biological parents, and she’s not very thrilled about that.”

Robin picked up her cup again and looked around the table.

“How shall we proceed?”

“One of the boys has a cell phone. That’s how I got hold of them,” Carla said before anyone could answer. “I could call him and have him ask the other kids.”

“Oh, honey, that would be nice,” Mavis said.

Harriet finished her cookie and brushed the crumbs from her hands.

“Why don’t you contact the kids and see when they can meet with us. Let me know, and Lauren and I can call everyone else. We can meet at my studio, if that’s agreeable to everyone.”

Beth smiled at her.

“That’s perfect. We could all bring pieces of fabric from our stashes and lay them on your big cutting table. If the kids are with us, we can have them look at fabric and tell us generally what sorts of colors and styles they like. Then, we can buy enough similar fabric to make their quilts.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Lauren said. “Can I ask a question about our wool appliqué project from the class we took?”

Mavis looked over at the flower Lauren was creating on the black wool background.

“That’s looking good. What’s the problem?”

Lauren smoothed out her piece on the table.

“I can’t tell if I’m supposed to make the colonial knots first, or sew the beads around the edge and *then* do the knots.”

Mavis picked up the instruction sheet and studied it before offering her opinion. Robin added some hot water to her cup from the thermal carafe on the table and made eye contact with Harriet.

“Have you and James had any more thoughts about the future of your marriage?”

Harriet leaned back in her chair and let out a breath.

“We haven’t had a chance to really talk about it. I had a stack of quilts waiting for me at the studio, and even though James has a great assistant manager, there are some jobs only he can do, including payroll.”

“Are you sure there isn’t another reason?” Robin pressed. “I mean, I know you got married to avoid a sticky legal problem, but there’s no reason you have to stay that way.”

Aunt Beth stopped stitching.

“And there’s no reason she has to decide today, is there?”

Robin raised her hand, palm down, and wiggled it back and forth.

“Maybe yes, maybe no. I don’t remember you saying either of you signed a prenup before the wedding. Since you’ve only been married a few weeks, we could make a case for each of you keeping your own assets. You won’t have had time to acquire any joint assets.”

“I can’t believe either James or Harriet would use their...their...unusual wedding circumstances to take advantage of each other,” Aunt Beth stammered.

Mavis set Lauren’s pattern down.

“Will a few more weeks really make that much difference? I think what Harriet and James need is a little space to figure out what they want to do without me or you or anyone else pressuring them.”

Harriet stood up.

“What Harriet needs is for you all to stop talking about me like I’m not here. If James and I stay married, it will be intentional, not because we forgot to get a divorce. If you must know, we *have* been busy, but we’d also like to give ourselves just a little time to see how we feel about things now that the threat of jail or worse isn’t hanging over me.”

Connie smiled.

“That’s very wise of you, and we will all do our best to leave you be while you’re sorting things out.”

Harriet left the room to pick out a few cones of long-arm thread and purchase them from Marjorie, the shop’s owner.

“Could I make a suggestion?” DeAnn asked when she returned. The group quieted, and she continued. “Whenever we do one of these group projects, Harriet ends up quilting most, if not all, of them on her long-arm machine.”

“I don’t mind,” Harriet interrupted.

DeAnn smiled at her.

“I know you don’t, but long-arm quilting is your *business*. It feels like we’re taking advantage of you.”

“So, what are you suggesting?” Mavis asked.

“One possibility would be for us to pay Harriet as if we were normal customers,” DeAnn suggested.

Harriet shook her head before her friend had finished speaking.

“What if we paid a discounted price?” Robin asked.

“I agree with DeAnn,” Jenny said. “If we’re talking about eight quilts, that’s taking away a lot of time you would have spent on regular customers.”

Harriet stood, picking up the empty hot water carafe and taking it to the kitchen. She filled the electric kettle and plugged it in before returning to the classroom.

“How about this,” she said after she sat down again. “Aunt Beth, Mavis, and Jenny are pretty proficient at machine quilting on their sewing machines. So is Connie. What if you four do your own quilts on your home machines, or if you want, you can use my mid-arm quilting machine or even one of my regular machines at the studio. Robin, DeAnn, Lauren, and Carla can make their quilt tops and buy the thread for them, and I can quilt them on my big machine. I’d like to make a quilt, too, but if we have eight done by the rest of you, we won’t need mine. Still, maybe it can be a backup in case they have a deserving friend or something.”

Discussion broke out as the group discussed Harriet’s proposal. She returned to the kitchen and filled the carafe with boiling water before bringing it back to the table.

“So, what do you think?”

Robin leaned back in her chair.

“We decided if you aren’t willing to let us pay you for your time, your plan is an acceptable alternative.”

“Okay,” Harriet said and poured water over a fresh teabag in her mug. “So now we wait for Carla to set up a meeting?”

Carla clipped the pink thread from her coneflower appliqué.

“I can call the kids this afternoon when summer school lets out, and if it’s okay with everyone, we could meet at Harriet’s tomorrow.”

Harriet added another leaf to the floral piece she was appliquéeing, pinning it in place with tiny straight-pins.

“I’ll have the tea and cookies ready.”

Chapter 2

Harriet glanced to the right as she drove up the hill toward her house. There was a break in the trees ahead, and the stately Victorian that was both her place of business and her residence was briefly visible. The sight of the old girl always made her heart happy. It was the only real home she'd ever known growing up. On the occasions when she was allowed to leave boarding school, it was to this house, her aunt Beth's back then, that she came.

The smile that had begun to form on her lips froze, and her spine stiffened as she glimpsed a familiar black Bronco parked in her circular drive. She only saw it for a second between trees, but there was no mistaking who was waiting for her. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and let up on the accelerator to give herself a few more moments to collect herself.

Aiden was leaning against the closed door of his car when she finally turned into her drive and pulled up to the garage. He straightened as she got out of her car and came over to his.

He reached his arms out to pull her to him. She ducked under them and backed up.

"Aiden, don't."

"What? I can't hug you?"

She held up her left hand to show the wedding ring on her finger.

"I'm married."

"I know, I get it. But I also know it's not real. I mean, I know it's legal, but it's not real-real. Jorge told me. You had to marry that guy because of what happened in Texas, but you're back. I get that it probably will take some time to get the annulment processed."

Harriet sighed and started to speak.

“You *are* getting an annulment, right?”

She closed her mouth without saying anything.

“Right?” he repeated and stepped closer.

She backed up again, once again avoiding contact.

“It’s complicated.”

“It’s not complicated at all. You sign the papers, file them, and it’s like it never happened.”

She clenched her jaw in frustration as he stared at her.

“You aren’t getting an annulment, are you?”

Harriet heaved a sigh and gave her head a quick shake.

The color drained from his face, and his mouth opened slightly as he drew in a breath.

“I know you’re not staying married to a man you hardly know. What aren’t you telling me? Did you have to swear you consummated the marriage? Of course you did,” he said, answering his own question. “You had to swear it was a legal marriage so he couldn’t testify against you. So you have to get a *divorce*.” He began pacing. “It’ll take longer, but it’s still doable. And I guess if you want to play it straight until your divorce is final, I can wait.”

“Stop!” Harriet told him before he could go any further. “Don’t say anything else. Let’s get something straight. You go off halfway around the world for months. I get no calls, no letters, no texts or emails—”

“It’s hard to communicate from Uganda,” he interrupted.

She held her hand up.

“Just stop. We both know you called Carla on a regular basis.” He started to protest, but she went on. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t have called her, but don’t tell me you couldn’t communicate. You were there for months, and you couldn’t even let me know you were alive once in a while?” Her face was hot. “Excuse me if I don’t believe you.”

He ran a hand through his hair.

“So, what? I miss a few calls, so you marry someone else?”

“That’s not fair. The two events are not connected, and you know it.”

“I’ve had a really hard year, you know that. When my sister died, it was too much. I needed time. I still need time. You were going to wait.”

“Was I? Did you hear me say I’d wait even if you acted like I didn’t exist for months on end? Yes, we talked about having a future together, but I don’t remember agreeing that you could treat me however badly you felt like, and I’d just smile and keep taking it. That’s not how relationships work. When people are hurt or can’t figure things out, they turn *to* their partner, they don’t shut them out. They work things out *together*.”

He hung his head.

“Okay, so I screwed up. Just tell me what I have to do to fix things.”

Now she was the one who ran her hands through her short hair.

“Like I said, things are complicated.”

“No, they’re not. You may be married on paper, but here you are in your house, just like before. And he’s still at his house.”

She stepped toward him and got in his face.

“Have you been stalking us?” she demanded, loudly enough her little dog started barking in the house.

“No,” he said and began pacing again. “I mean, when I saw everyone at the airport with the wedding balloons and everyone congratulating you, I did have to wonder. Before I talked to Jorge, I drove by here, and then by *his* house, and your cars were at your own places.”

“And from that you decided James and I weren’t together?”

His face flushed.

“Okay, so it wasn’t my finest moment, but I drove by on my way to work every morning. I mean, you knew I was back. I figured you’d call, and when you didn’t, I needed to make sure you weren’t just keeping up the charade of being married. I thought maybe you thought you had to keep pretending in case anyone checked.”

“You drove by Smuggler’s Cove every morning?”

He looked at the ground.

“Like I said, it wasn’t my finest hour. Desperate times call for desperate measures. But his car was at his house every time. And you were here. So, no harm, no foul.”

“Except for the part where you’re acting crazy. Did you ever consider picking up the phone and calling me?”

The sound of howling could be heard from the house.

“I can’t do this,” she said. “I need to take the dog out, and I’ve got groceries in the car.”

“I can help.”

“I think you’ve done enough. You need to leave.”

“But we’re not done.”

She spun on her heel and headed for the door.

“Go home, Aiden,” she called over her shoulder as she went inside.

Chapter 3

James stood in the center of her kitchen. Scooter danced around her while James's dachshund Cyrano sat behind his feet and howled. Her scowl turned into a smile.

"What on earth is going on in here?"

She reached down and patted each dog in turn and then stood back up to face her husband. He pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back.

"The boys were anxious to see you."

Harriet could feel her muscles begin to relax.

"It looked pretty intense out there," he said in a carefully neutral tone.

"I wasn't ready to answer questions about us. Not from him, and not the way he asked them."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Harriet pulled away and dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. James filled the teakettle and set it on the stove, giving her time to gather her thoughts.

"Apparently, after we saw Aiden at the airport in Seattle on our way home from Texas, he talked to Jorge, who told him the emergency nature of our marriage. Aiden seems to have made a series of assumptions as a result."

"And those are?" James asked.

"Well, first, he decided our marriage isn't real—as in, it could be annulled. I let him know we didn't qualify for annulment, and he then decided it was because we'd lied about our status. Worse, he apparently thinks he and I are going to pick up where we left off before his sister was killed six months ago."

“Wow, he must think you’re really understanding.”

“By ‘understanding’ do you mean he thinks I’m a doormat?”

James smiled. “Yeah, something like that. The guy has nerve, you gotta give him that.”

“More like the guy has a gigantic ego. Does he really think he can treat me like he did and then come home months later and find me happily waiting for him? Well, he has another think coming.”

The kettle whistled, and James made two mugs of tea.

“Here, drink this,” he said and handed her one. “It’s peppermint.” He carried his to the table and sat down opposite her.

Harriet reached across and took his hand.

“I’m sorry you’re having to deal with this mess. I mean, our situation is complicated enough without adding my weird ex-boyfriend to the mix.”

He reversed their grip and rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb.

“Our situation isn’t complicated at all. We’re married. We may have done it suddenly, unexpectedly, and without the usual motivations, but here we are—married. We can let things stay the way they are, or we can choose to end our relationship; but in either case, we don’t have to do anything today or tomorrow or on anyone else’s schedule but our own. Aiden coming back to town doesn’t change that.”

“I know we said we were going to take our time...” Harriet began.

“But...”

“No buts. I just want to be sure you’re still willing to take our time with the added complication of Aiden trying to pretend you don’t exist and the last six months never happened.”

“Oh, sweetie, I don’t care about Aiden and his dramatics. The only one I care about is you. I know you two had a complicated relationship, but you’ve told me it’s in the past and I believe you. I’ll continue believing it until you tell me different.”

She smiled at him and then laughed.

“Did you know we were being spied on? He’s been driving past our houses each morning on his way to work to make sure we aren’t living together.”

“He’s going to have to get up a little earlier in the morning if he wants to catch us together,” James said with a chuckle.

“I guess he assumed a chef would have the same hours as a veterinarian. He didn’t consider that you were gone by the time he checked, or that I might let you park in the garage.” She sighed. “Oh, well, that’s his problem.” She sipped her tea. “Are you expecting a big dinner crowd tonight?”

“No more than usual. Everything that could be prepped ahead was done before I came home after lunch, though, so if you want, we can take the dogs for a walk before I have to go back.”

She smiled across the table at him.
“That sounds really nice.”

Chapter 4

I'm in the kitchen," Harriet called out when she heard the bell tied to her studio door jingle. A moment later, Connie appeared carrying a large platter of brownies.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted these in here." She set them on the kitchen peninsula and removed the plastic wrap.

Harriet stood on the other side of the bar arranging sugar cookies on a plate.

"At the risk of sounding paranoid and/or selling the kids short, I was hoping to limit their access to just my studio. At least until we meet them the first time or two."

Aunt Beth came in through the garage door.

"I'm with you. Trust but verify. I'm sure they're all lovely kids, but we know some, if not all, of them have been bouncing around from one home to another. They probably have picked up a few less than desirable coping skills."

"And we don't want to experience them firsthand," Connie added.

Mavis joined them, a pan of Rice Krispie Treats in one hand and a gallon jug of lemonade in the other.

"Are we laying the food out in the kitchen?"

"No. We were just discussing how we need to not let the kids into the rest of Harriet's house for now," Beth told her.

Mavis turned and carried her offerings back into the studio, followed by the others.

Carla tapped on the outside studio door, and Harriet crossed to let her in. The young woman was carrying a large bin of colorful fabrics.

“I brought the scrap bin from the young mothers quilting group. I hope it’s okay.” She set the bin on the floor by the cutting table.

Harriet was impressed Carla was able to make her announcement without ducking her head or blushing. Working with her young mother’s quilt group, and now with the foster kids—both groups facing similar hardships to her own—seemed to be helping her confidence more than all the time the Loose Threads quilting group had spent trying to encourage her to come out of her shell.

“Let’s spread the fabric out on my big cutting table. I put the card table over there.” Harriet pointed to a spot near her desk. “I figured we could put the food on it.”

Mavis joined them at the cutting table and started pulling fabric scraps from Carla’s bin, arranging them in color groupings.

“How many kids are we expecting?”

Carla helped Mavis pull fabric from the bin.

“There are eight altogether, but only six are coming today. Also, if it’s okay with everyone, I’d like to make a quilt for the biological grandson of the foster parents.” She looked up at Harriet. “I know that means more work for you, but I could quilt it on my sewing machine.”

Harriet smiled at her.

“I wanted to make a quilt anyway, remember? So, I can do that, but you can quilt it. Why don’t you come over when it’s ready and try out my mid-arm machine?”

Carla blushed.

“Is the mid-arm hard to learn?”

Harriet laughed.

“Not at all. It’s a lot like your normal sewing machine; it just has a bigger throat space, so your rolled-up quilt fits better when you’re sewing on it.”

Carla’s eye’s widened.

“It sounds scary, but I guess I can try.”

“Oh, honey, you’ll do fine,” Mavis assured her.



Harriet had just poured herself a second cup of tea when she heard a soft tap on the studio door. She opened it to find a ragtag group of kids standing on the small landing.

Carla came up behind her.

“Hi, guys, come on in,” she said.

The kids filed in and stood in a semicircle. Connie got up from the wheeled chair she’d been sitting in.

“Would anyone like some lemonade and snacks?”

The kids nodded and murmured their agreement. Connie handed out cups of lemonade, and Mavis distributed napkins while Aunt Beth gave them each a Rice Krispie bar and a brownie.

Robin had arrived before the kids and was now standing in a semicircular arrangement of chairs she and Harriet had set up.

“When you have your snack, come over here and find a chair,” she told them.

Harriet noticed that the others waited for an athletic-looking boy with dirty-blond hair to sit down first. Clearly, he played a leadership role in the group.

“My name is Harriet, and this is my house.”

The boy set his drink on the floor and stood up, stretching his right hand toward her.

“I’m Luke Harris. Thank you for the snack.”

Harriet shook his hand. He wore khaki cargo shorts and a faded blue tee under a soft plaid shirt. His outfit was probably from the thrift store, but he looked like he’d just stepped out of the pages of a catalog.

“Nice to meet you, Luke.”

“Carla told us you guys want to make quilts for us. Is that for real?”

Harriet smiled at the boy.

“Yes, it’s for real. We like to make quilts, and when Carla told us some of you were graduating and would be leaving home to live on your own, we thought you might like to have a quilt for your new bed.”

He gave a sarcastic laugh.

“That’s a nice way to put our situation. Two of us are turning eighteen in the next few months. If we don’t qualify for extended foster care, we’re out on the street whether we’ve graduated high school or not.”

“That’s harsh,” Lauren said from behind Harriet.

“Where’d you come from?” Harriet asked.

“Sorry I’m late. I was on the phone with a client.” She looked at the boy. “What do you have to do to qualify for the extended-stay plan?”

Luke ticked items off with his fingers.

“You have to be in college, or in an employment program, or you have to be employed eighty hours a month, which is hard if you go to school full time, or if you have some medical condition.”

“How are you supposed to be in college if you haven’t graduated high school?” Lauren asked.

He sighed. “You begin to see the problem.”

The rest of the kids had come into the seating area and were standing around Luke.

“Everyone sit down, please,” Connie said and waited while they complied. “Let’s start by introducing yourselves. I’m Connie. I’m a quilter and a retired grade school teacher.” She turned to the boy sitting next to her. He was small with dark hair and bad skin and wore dark-rimmed glasses held together by tape on one side. The faint shadow of a mustache decorated his upper lip.

“I’m Nigel,” he said.

When no more information was forthcoming, the pretty blond-haired girl sitting on his other side spoke for him.

“He’s Nigel Sloan. He’s autistic.”

Connie spoke to the boy.

“It’s nice to meet you, Nigel.”

He looked up at her but didn’t say anything.

“My name is Sincere Mack,” the blonde said. “I’m seventeen, like Luke.” Her long hair looked clean, well-brushed, and was pulled back in simple ponytail.

“We’re happy to meet you,” Robin said.

“I’m Mickey Alston,” an overweight boy said. “I’m fifteen. I’m not getting paroled anytime soon, but if you want to make me a blanket, I’m good with it.”

Harriet fought to keep a smile from forming. He sounded a little world-weary, but she thought she detected a sharp sense of humor somewhere in there.

“They’re quilts,” Sincere corrected him.

He made a face at her but didn’t correct himself.

“Drew Kemp, twelve,” a small boy next to Mickey said. His facial expression and attitude made him seem older than his years. Clearly, he’d seen more than any twelve-year-old should.

“Welcome,” Aunt Beth said.

The last boy held his hand up in a mock salute.

“Ian Conley, fourteen.” He looked at Drew when he spoke. He may have been older, but clearly Drew was the leader of the pair.

Carla stood up, and the kids settled in their seats.

“You all know me already, and these are my friends Mavis, Harriet, Harriet’s aunt Beth, Robin, Connie, and Lauren. We have a few other members who couldn’t come today, but will be making quilts for you, too.”

The quilters nodded or waved as Carla mentioned their names.

“We don’t expect you to memorize our names this first visit, but I hope you’ll get to know whoever is making your quilt as our project goes on.”

Sincere held her hand up.

“Yes,” Carla said.

The girl twirled a strand of her ponytail around her fingers as she spoke.

“Do you think we could help make our quilts? I mean, I don’t know how to sew, but like, maybe I could learn...a little.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Connie said. “Would anyone beside Sincere like to help with their quilt?”

Luke held up the open edge of his flannel shirt.

“I don’t know about sewing the quilt, but I’d like to know how to sew on a button.”

Connie looked at the hole where his button had torn out.

“I think we’ll need to teach you a few more mending skills to go along with button sewing.”

“How many would like to learn mending?” Carla asked. All six raised their hands.

“Okay,” Connie said. “We’ll plan a class for you, and Carla can figure out when we all can get together.”

Mavis got up and went to the cutting table, which was now covered by fabric pieces, neatly arranged by color.

“When you finish your snack, come over to this table and look at the fabrics. Each of you can choose four pieces in the colors you like. In most cases, these won’t be the fabrics we use in your quilt—this is to help us get an idea of what colors you like.”

Harriet held up a piece of card stock and a stapler.

“When you’re sure of your choices, staple them to a piece of card stock and write your name on it.”

Sincere went to the fabric table and started picking up pieces while the boys all got a second brownie.

“Is it too much of a cliché if I like pink and purple?”

“Oh, honey,” Connie said and smiled, “you can like any colors you want. And I’m sure Harriet has a color wheel we can use to find some accent colors.”

Sincere stood up straighter.

“That sounds cool.”

Harriet, overhearing their discussion, handed her a wheel. The boys drifted over with the rest of the Loose Threads and began selecting their colors.



“Does anyone need a ride home?” Harriet asked when everyone had chosen their colors and eaten another cookie.

“We can walk,” Luke said.

“I’d take a ride,” Mickey said without making eye contact.

“It’s too far to walk if you’re going home,” Carla told Luke. “It’s hot out there.”

Luke sighed. “We don’t want to be a problem.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mickey said and glared at him.

“We’ll drive you. It’s no trouble,” Harriet said, ending the discussion. “I’ll get my car and meet you outside.”

“We’ll be right there,” Lauren said. “As soon as Drew empties his pockets.”

Drew stood with his hands in his jeans pockets, squeezing his arms close to his body.

“Geez, Drew,” Luke said and came to stand in front of the younger boy. “Do what she says.” He looked over the smaller boy’s head and spoke to Harriet. “I’m really sorry about this.”

Drew reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of small scissors, setting them on the table.

“Keep going,” Lauren said sternly.

The boy pulled a calculator and Harriet’s iPod from his pocket.

Luke looked away, his face red.

“You aren’t going to get a quilt if you keep this up.”

“Wow,” Ian said, the awe clear in his voice. “Drew’s really good. How did you know?”

“I’m not telling you that,” Lauren said, “In case he’s foolish enough to try something like that again.”

“Okay, let’s get going,” Harriet said and left to get her car.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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