

Sins and Needles

Needlecraft Mysteries by Monica Ferris

CREWEL WORLD

FRAMED IN LACE

A STITCH IN TIME

UNRAVELED SLEEVE

A MURDEROUS YARN

HANGING BY A THREAD

CUTWORK

CREWEL YULE

EMBROIDERED TRUTHS

SINS AND NEEDLES

Anthologies

PATTERNS OF MURDER

Sins and Needles

Monica Ferris



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Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-one](#)

[Twenty-two](#)

[Twenty-three](#)

—

[Twenty-four](#)

[Twenty-five](#)

[Flag of the United States of America](#)

Acknowledgments

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IT was mid-June, and the sun was at its northernmost position in the sky. Its beams filled the big front window of Betsy Devonshire's needlework shop, Crewel World, drowning the careful effects of the lighting inside, especially near the front.

Betsy was sitting behind the checkout desk, shielding her eyes from the glare with one hand while going down a list of customers signed up for a knitting class. Most were beginners who had knitted all the simple scarves in exotic yarns they could possibly use and wanted something more challenging.

So Betsy had hired Rosemary Kosel to teach her famous beginner sweater class, and her store manager, Godwin, to teach the fine art of knitting socks. Rosemary's class, already full, was to begin the last Thursday of next month, but Godwin's was starting in a few days, and he needed another student to make the class pay for itself. Instructors were worthy of their hire, but Betsy could not afford to pay for instructors out of shop profits. Godwin was charging forty-five dollars for three ninety-minute sessions. In that time, quick students would have one sock finished and everyone else would know how to finish it.

Betsy checked the mail to see if there was another registration. There was, but it was for Rosemary's class. She sighed and went over the list of both classes to see that she had the mailing address, phone number, and e-mail address of each student. Well, Mrs. Shipman had no e-mail address; she wouldn't even have a computer in her house. Betsy was about to put the stack into her desk drawer when the door chimed. She looked up to see who was coming in.

With the strong sun behind her, the woman was barely more than a silhouette, but Betsy recognized her sturdy outline and the blond tumble of curls around her shoulders. "Well, good morning, Jan! That twenty-eight count Laguna fabric came in. Do you still want a piece?"

The woman entered the shop, speaking in a Texas drawl. "I'm not Jan. I'm Lucille Jones. Remember me, from Trinity Church on Sunday?"

Betsy's eyes widened. "Why, of course, Mrs. Jones! I'm so sorry! But you wore your hair up on Sunday—even so, funny I didn't see how remarkable the resemblance is."

Now she remembered Lucille Jones and her husband—what was his name? Robert, that's it. The first words out of his mouth over coffee after the service, spoken in an even more pronounced drawl than his wife's, had been, "Call me Bobby Lee. Everyone who knows me does." He was tall, deeply tanned, good looking, and he'd worn to church what every good ol' country Texan does: stiff new

...dressed, good looking, and he'd worn to church what every good ol' country Texan does. Still, how rude of Betsy to be so surprised to learn he was a surgical nurse at a prestigious hospital in Houston.

His uncommon costume and disarming manners drew her attention, which was another reason she hadn't paid close attention to his wife.

Lucille was standing at her checkout desk right now, waiting for her to stop woolgathering. When Betsy's eyes came back into focus, Lucille smiled. "I take it this Jan is a regular customer?"

"Oh, yes, she's in here a lot."

"But you still thought I was her." Lucille had a twinkle in her blue eyes. "I must look a *whole lot* like her."

"Well, I can tell the difference now that you're not outlined by the sun coming in the window, but you do look alike." Both were in their forties, had sturdy builds, curly blond hair, and DMC floss colored 996 blue eyes.

"They say everyone has a twin somewhere in this world, so maybe she's mine." Lucille looked around without moving. "This is pretty nice. You told me about your shop, and I came to see what you have in knitting yarn. I'm looking for something fancy, maybe that kind that looks like fur? I want to knit one of those twirly scarves for my goddaughter, who's going into high school this fall."

As she led Lucille toward the yarns, Betsy said, "Well, I don't have as large a selection as Three Kittens or Needlework Unlimited, but I do lean toward the exotic. What color are you after?"

"Something mixed, you know, three or four shades of a color. Sydney likes green or turquoise. Oh, this one is pretty!" She took a fat skein of yarn from Betsy's hand, a dense plush in shades of medium and light green. Then her eye was caught by a group of skeins in a basket. "Say, you've got eyelash yarn. I just love it. Do you think it would look nice knit together with this?" She held up the plush skein.

"Yes, I do," said Betsy.

A few minutes later, Betsy was ringing up a sale that included two skeins of the plush, two eyelash, two of a beautiful merino wool, a book of patterns, three pairs of bamboo needles in the larger sizes, and a fabric knitting bag to carry it all. Lucille handed Betsy a credit card and said, "This Jan you said I look like—what's she like? Is she nice?"

"Well, like you, she's a knitter. But she goes to the other end of the scale from you. She likes size zero or even double-and triple-zero needles. She knits teeny little beaded bags and lace. She also does counted cross-stitch. Her latest project is a Persian rug stitched on silk gauze, sixty count."

"I like counted cross-stitch, too, but give me a nice eighteen-count linen. What eyes she must have!"

Betsy laughed as she handed over the receipt for Lucille's signature. "She has excellent vision, but she also has a Dazor light." The Dazor featured a big magnifying glass surrounded by a full-

spectrum light; looking through it was like sitting in a window full of sunlight with Superman eyes. Used by advanced cross-stitchers working on high-count fabric, it was also a godsend to stitchers over forty.

“And she looks like me?”

The insistent question made Betsy frown just a little, but she obediently considered Lucille’s face and acknowledged, “You could be sisters.”

“What’s her last name? Where does she live?”

Starting to feel really uncomfortable, Betsy said, “I’m sorry, I don’t give out customers’ addresses.”

Lucille seemed instantly abashed. “No, no, it’s all right,” she said hastily. “It’s me who should be sorry. But let me explain. My mama died a year ago February—Daddy died about five years before that. I was their only child, and as I was going through their papers, *I found adoption documents!* Well, I was sure floored! I had no idea! But after I picked myself up, I thought about it and finally decided to search for my biological roots. I found out I was left at an orphanage in Minneapolis, but it was like hitting a brick wall trying to get further than that. I finally told Bobby Lee—he’s my husband; he was with me on Sunday—”

Betsy nodded.

“I told him we were spending our vacation in Minnesota.” She smiled in a way that showed she had had to overcome some objections on his part. “But you know something?”

“What?” asked Betsy.

“I *like* it up here. It’s really different from Houston, but it feels...I don’t know...right. It’s like I’ve come home, even though I’ve never been here before. Do you think that means my biological parents really are from here?”

Betsy didn’t believe in genetic memory, but she said politely, “I suppose it could mean that. How did you end up in Texas? Were your parents originally from here, too?”

Lucille laughed. “Oh, my, no! My mother was a proud Daughter of the Confederacy, and my father’s great-great-uncle died at the Alamo.” She leaned closer to confide in an amused undertone, “Though there’s a rumor that his wife’s brother fought with Santa Anna.”

Betsy laughed.

Lucille opened her wallet to put her credit card away. “I know my birth date, so I’ve been checking at hospitals, but so far I haven’t found any record of an unmarried woman giving birth on that day.”

Betsy’s eyebrows lifted. “Maybe—” She hesitated.

But Lucille broke in, her tone inviting. “What? Tell me. One of the ladies at church said you’re

like a female Sherlock Holmes, so detect for me.”

Betsy, wondering vaguely which of her friends had spilled those beans, said, “Well, this isn’t detection, it’s more like deduction. Maybe your mother was married but died in childbirth. Sometimes a father feels overwhelmed and can’t deal with a newborn.”

Lucille stared at her as if Betsy had said something ridiculous. “No,” she said firmly. “My biological mother is *not* dead.”

Betsy did not, of course, want to start an argument, but Lucille must have read something in her eyes, because she said, touching the center of her breast, “I can *feel* it, right here. She is alive, she’s around here somewhere, and I’m going to find her.”

BETSY said she was not angry, and she wasn't. But she *was* aggravated.

"It's your own fault," said Godwin. "If you had told me about her, I wouldn't've told her about the class. But I needed one more person, and she's a knitter, and I didn't know.

"Anyhow, what harm can it do?" he continued, his stronger tone indicating a frailer argument. "She's interested in meeting her twin. I'd be, too, if someone told me there was this person who looked just like me." He drew himself up and turned sideways. "As if!" he added, sure there was not handsomer profile anywhere.

As usual, Betsy was amused at his vanity, which got her past her annoyance. "Oh, you're probably right. And it wasn't as if she seemed angry or confrontational. She's just curious. Anyway, she's only here on vacation, so even if she turns out to be a nuisance, pretty soon she'll go home, and it'll all be over."

But her own rationalizations didn't entirely ease Betsy's mind, so she decided to sit in on the first class to see how Lucille behaved toward Jan Henderson—and how Jan took it.

The class was scheduled to begin at six thirty. Godwin stood in the back, tugging at his light blue polo shirt, clearing his throat, smoothing his hair, buffing his shoes on the back of his khaki Dockers, preparing to make an entrance.

It was Betsy's role to unlock the front door—the shop had closed at five—and let the students in.

First to arrive, at six fifteen, was Doris Valentine. She had the least distance to travel, as she lived in an apartment on the second floor of the building that housed the shop.

But she was followed in short order by Katie Frazier, a redhead with hazel green eyes in a sleeveless maternity blouse, and then by Jan, Katie's aunt. After Jan came Phil Galvin, a senior citizen in jeans and a chambray shirt, the pocket of which held his four double-pointed bamboo knitting needles. In one gnarled hand he held a big ball of green lightweight yarn. "Good evening!" he said, in a loud, hoarse voice.

Last came Lucille, entering shyly, unsure of her welcome. Her bright hair was pulled back with scrunchie. She wore a dark blue T-shirt with a loon painted on it, and she carried a lavender Crewel World plastic bag. Her blue eyes flashed to the table, then fastened on Jan.

Jan was talking to Doris, so it was Phil who first noticed her. His eyes opened wide. He looked across at Jan, then back at Lucille. He leaned a little sideways and poked Doris on the arm and said in what he probably thought was a murmur, “Lookit over there!”

Doris looked at Lucille and, with eyebrows raised, smiled in pleased surprise. “Now that is *amazing!*” she said to Phil.

Jan also looked at Lucille. “Hello,” she said, frowning a little at her.

Lucille stood captured in shyness, her fair complexion pinkening under the stares of the others. Betsy took pity on her and said warmly, “Lucille, welcome! Come on over, there’s plenty of room!”

Lucille smiled gratefully at Betsy and came to the table. She took a seat across from Jan, next to Kate.

Phil said, “Say, Lucille—is that your name?”

“Yes, sir,” said Lucille in her western drawl, pulling out a chair. “Lucille Jones.”

“Jones—does that mean you aren’t related to Jan here?”

“I don’t think so.” Lucille studied Jan for a few moments. “But we do look alike, don’t we?”

“You sure do!” said Doris.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Jan.

“Suppose so?” said Katie. “Aunt Jan, what’s the matter with you? Can’t you see it’s like you’re twins?”

“Do you really think so?” Jan, like most people, couldn’t see the resemblance between herself and this other person.

“Oh, not twins,” said Lucille quickly. “But—well, sisters, maybe?”

Jan smiled. “A secret sister—there’s a concept you don’t hear much about.”

Lucille chuckled. “Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it. Unless you’re adopted, too?”

“Nope. I’m my own mother’s daughter, and I think she would’ve told me if she gave one of her other children away. I mean, what a great threat: ‘I gave your sister away, and if you don’t straighten up, I’ll give you away, too!’”

“Almost as good as, ‘I brought you into the world and I can take you out of it.’ Ah, for the happy days of having little ones in the house,” Lucille said.

Kate was scandalized by Lucille’s comment. “You never in your life said that to a child of yours!” she said.

“No. But I came close a couple of times.”

“Me, too,” said Jan. “I still might use it. My younger one is only sixteen.”

Phil, who’d been listening to all of this, spoke up. “You’re not from around here, are you?” he asked Lucille. “The way you talk and all.”

“No, I’m from Texas. But you know something?” She looked around the table. “Actually, I think I look more like people up here than back home. I mean, I never saw so many natural blondes in my life before!”

A chorus of soft laughter swept the table. Kate was a natural redhead, but Jan’s streaky blond hair, without the aid of her hairdresser, was mostly gray. Doris’s elaborate blond hairdo was probably a wig. Phil’s hair was silver, but his dark eyes suggested that he had been a brunet when he was young. Betsy went to the same hairdresser Jan did.

Godwin chose that moment to make his entrance.

The renewed grins and chuckles that greeted his entrance surprised him—he, too, was a chemically enhanced blond. But he took his place at the head of the table as if he had no idea what they were so amused by. “Good evening, good evening,” he said. “It looks like we’re all here. Has everyone got at least one skein of lightweight yarn and a set of number three double-pointed knitting needles?”

Everyone had.

“Good. Now, before we begin, how about we go around the table and introduce ourselves? I’m Godwin DuLac, your instructor. I’m also Vice President in Charge of Operations of Crewel World, Incorporated, and Editor in Chief of *Hasta la Stitches*, its newsletter. Your turn, Phil.”

“I’m Phil Galvin, retired railroad engineer. I do counted cross-stitch, but I had to wait until I retired to admit it in public. Then last year my mother died, and as I was closing her house, I came across a knit scarf. It was wrapped around a letter my dad had written from a hospital in England. He’d been shot in the leg and both shoulders during the Battle of the Bulge, and the nurses had set him to knitting as...whaddayeh call it?...physical therapy. He’d knit that scarf as a present to my mother, and she’d kept it all those years. I was gonna try a scarf, but then I heard about this sock class and thought I’d rather have a pair of socks.”

“Gosh!” said Godwin, impressed. “Okay, next!”

The young pregnant woman said, “I’m Katie—well, Mary Katherine O’Neil Frazier, really, and Jan is my aunt, and she persuaded me to take this class. I already knit a little, and I do counted cross-stitch and needle lace, and now I’m hoping to knit socks, too.” She smiled at Jan, who smiled back.

“I’m Doris Valentine,” said Doris in her deep, breathy voice. “I’m new to needlework, but I really like it. I especially love counted cross-stitch, and I wish I could afford some of those wonderful needlepoint canvases. All kinds of needlework are domestic, but knitting a sock is like the most domestic thing you can do, next to baking bread. I did factory work all my life, and I never married, but now I’m retired and have the time to do some traditional women’s work, and I’m really grateful.” She blushed at being so open about her feelings and hurriedly began to pry open the clear plastic

she blushed at being so open about her feelings and happily began to pry open the clear plastic envelope of her double-ended needles with her bright red fingernails.

“That’s really nice. I’m glad for you,” said Lucille, smiling. “I’m Lucille Jones, visiting from Texas, but you already know that. I’m here because Mr. DuLac said someone who looked a lot like me signed up for it, and I was curious about her. I can knit and purl, but I’ve never made anything before except scarves and booties.”

Godwin said, “Does everyone know how to cast on? Good. Cast on sixty-four stitches—except you, Phil. With your big feet, you cast on seventy-two. Then divide them onto four of your five needles, sixteen—Phil, eighteen—apiece.

Doris started the slow, beginner’s way of casting on until Godwin said, “Here, let me show you a faster way.” It involved taking a length of yarn and pulling it into a V between her left thumb and forefinger, then lifting first one side then the other into a simple knot on the needle. “Now, pull it tight and do another—no, not that tight.”

Phil said, “You didn’t say what you do back home, Lucille.”

“I’m a lab tech. How about you, Jan?”

“I’m a registered nurse.”

“Why, my husband’s an RN, too,” said Lucille, surprised and pleased. “He’s a surgical nurse at Methodist Hospital in Houston. They do a lot of heart surgery there, and the doctors just love him. They ask for him when it’s going to be tricky in the OR.”

“I thought about being a surgical nurse, but it’s very stressful work.”

“Yes, it gets to Bobby Lee sometimes, too, but he says he loves it too much to try something else.” Lucille knit a few more stitches then turned in her chair to smile at Betsy. “Aren’t you going to introduce yourself?”

Betsy said, obediently, “My name is Betsy Devonshire. I own Crewel World, and I already know how to knit a sock.”

Godwin said, “After you’ve cast on, start doing knit one, purl one, using the fifth needle. This will make the cuff. Begin at the place that will join the ends together.”

Lucille had already cast on. She began dividing the knitting evenly onto the four needles, struggling a bit with so many needles all apparently wanting to help. That done, she started to knit.

“This is harder than I thought it would be,” she grumbled after a few minutes of knit and purl, winding her yarn carefully through the forest of needles. “I don’t see how you do it so slick,” she added, watching Godwin’s nimble fingers build his cuff with amazing speed.

“Experience,” said Godwin. “It’s hard for beginners, but once you get even just half an inch done things settle down. You’ll find you can concentrate on just the two needles you’re using, and the other needles won’t get in your way so much.”

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