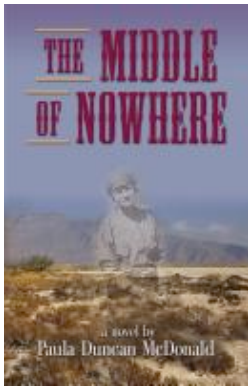


THE MIDDLE
OF NOWHERE



a novel by
Paula Duncan McDonald



Unflinching story of a pioneer family in a desolate part of Texas west of the Pecos, particularly the story of Skitchy, bold passionate daughter of the family's second generation. Hers is a story of life and love, identity and survival, during the desperate years when the Great Depression, severe drought and relentless dust storms wracked the land. At the same time it is the inspiring larger story of the shared experience of the human spirit.

THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

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The Middle of Nowhere

Paula Duncan McDonald

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ISBN 978-1-62141-695-1

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2012

First Edition

For Jim

1921

There are places on earth where life has to work harder to survive, and only the hardy, the most adaptable and resilient, thrive. The northern edge of the Chihuahuan Desert west of the Pecos River was such a place. For countless seasons the land had a crust and in some places, tall grass grew. Crust and grass kept the peace between prolific winds and scarce water. Hardy plants and animals lived their lives and the Mescalero Apaches, whose footprint was light, did not damage the crust or the grass.

A time came when people who didn't know about the crust, and who thought the grass perpetual, said the Apaches must leave. By 1886, the United States government had cleared the land of all but a few renegades and free land was offered to other people who would settle there. Ephraim and Kate Chapman married that year and took the offer. They

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began their lives together making a ranch in Reeves County, Texas.

It sometimes happens that a land of dangers and hardships wrests the hearts of the people who lay claim to the land. The people who live there think they own the land but victory over privation and hardship binds them to that which they have conquered. So it was for Ephraim and Kate. They met the arid land of heat and cold and great high sky on its own terms. The land allowed them to stay. They had seven children there and four still lived. Their daughter Skitchy was the youngest.

....

Skitchy was not quite pretty but not plain either. Her tall graceful figure, wide warm smile, easy charm, and the way she looked at people straight in the eye were usually the first things people noticed about her. Her face was triangular, somewhat squared off at the chin, with a straight nose and sparkling hazel eyes. Her sister Belle told her wearing her straight brown hair cut short gave her a slightly tomboyish look, but Skitchy had no patience for fiddling with her hair. Uncomfortable in clothes she considered fancy, she dressed plainly. Even so, at fifteen she was beginning to attract the attention of young men.

Quite aware of that, Kate Chapman didn't want to let her daughter go to barn dances until Skitchy was at least sixteen. However, she knew she was going to lose the argument over that issue when Buddy taught his young sister to dance.

Buddy, a handsome man in his early twenties, tall like his father, strong, smart and inquisitive, full of life and laughter, was popular with most everyone, not least with the young

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ladies of Reeves County. Skitchy had adored him for as long as she could remember. Thrilled when he paid special attention to her, she could hardly contain her delight when he taught her to dance.

Ephraim Chapman had ordered a Victrola and records from a catalog when Minnie and Belle, his oldest daughters, were girls. Both girls had gone away to school before there was a high school in the county. They learned to dance there and taught Buddy, who even as a boy had been an enthusiastic dance partner. Ephraim danced with his daughters as well. Sometimes even a reluctant Kate, more inclined to work first, then play if she had time, took off her apron and joined in.

Ephraim especially loved watching Skitchy and Buddy dance together, tapping his foot to the music with a well-worn boot. “Can’t have too much fun,” he told their mother when she thought they should be about their chores. “Chores will always be there. Can’t always count on the fun. Best take it when it’s there.”

“Skitch,” Buddy said, laughing, “no man’s going to ask you to dance more than once if you step on his toes.” As she struggled to learn the steps and move with the music, he encouraged her. “Mark my words,” he told his young sister, “being a good dancer will take you a long way. Men like it when you make them look good on the dance floor. Not to mention that you’re more fun to be with.” When he had said, “Honey, you’re dancing mighty well. Lots of fun to dance with you,” she had beamed and redoubled her efforts.

....

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Buddy took Skitchy to her first barn dance. She wore a dress Mama had made for her in her favorite shade of green. Her sister Belle had fixed her hair for the occasion, waving it with her fingers as much as Skitchy would allow.

Skitchy felt jittery and self-conscious at first when she walked into the Daniels' barn with Buddy. But when he grinned at her with such warmth and guided her with such firm ease, the jitters fell away. He danced the first dance with her, making sure they covered the whole sawdust floor so that everyone could see her dancing.

"Smile at me once in a while when I'm your partner," he whispered to her. "And at anyone else you want to say hello to or might want to dance with." When she stumbled on a tricky step she felt his hand firm on her back, guiding her back to the music. "Don't pay that any mind," he said softly. "Everybody does that once in a while. Best way to handle it is laugh it off," and he laughed lightly and spun her around gaily.

"Buddy," she said when the dance was over, "thank you with all my heart. I'm surely the luckiest girl I know to have you for a brother."

He had grinned broadly at her. "Just doing the best I can for my little sister. What else is a brother for?"

....

It was at that dance in the Daniels' barn that Belle Chapman met Pinkney Campbell.

Belle was just over five feet tall, several inches shorter than the much younger Skitchy. She had delicate features, with a narrow nose and small well-formed mouth set in the same almost square jaw as her sister. Her brown hair was

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lighter than Skitchy's and she wore it in the latest bobbed style. The harsh West Texas wind and sun had barely begun to etch her face.

Playing the trumpet with Tom Floyd's band, Pink watched her from the platform where the band played. Annabelle the belle, as her family sometimes teasingly called her, stood out in a pretty lavender taffeta dress and close fitting laced boots with shapely heels. She danced gracefully and gaily with different partners. She was about Pink's age and one of the most attractive unmarried women in the county.

He introduced himself during a break. "Excuse me, ma'am, my name's Pinkney Campbell. People call me Pink. What might your name be?"

Belle looked up at him with a smile. "Belle Chapman," she said. Then in a direct manner that startled him a little, she added, "Don't think I've seen you at any of the dances before."

"I've only been here a short while. I work for George Norton and live out at his place. I play with the band."

"I noticed you'd joined Tom's band," Belle said lightly. "It's unusual to hear a trumpet in a band around here. Adds a nice sound, Mr. Campbell. You play very well."

Pink wished he had more time to spend with her but he knew the band's break would be over soon. "Miss Chapman, I'm sorry I can't ask you to dance. May I call on you?"

Pink Campbell was slender but muscular. A handsome man with sandy hair and clear blue eyes, his features were well proportioned, not unlike the pictures of men in the ads in magazines of the day. He thought himself short, however, and tried to make up for that by dressing nattily and moving with something approaching a swagger. Belle had been taken with his good looks and easy manner, and liked that he spoke

without the twang that saturated the West Texas voices she heard every day.

The Methodist preacher who came from Odessa once a month would be holding services in Pecos the following Sunday and Belle suggested, "Let's meet after church. We can eat together at the potluck, if you'd like that." Gathering for a potluck meal after church was a popular social event and Pink was delighted by Belle's invitation.

"Yes, ma'am. I'd like that very much."

....

At the dance, Skitchy had noticed Pink on the platform that served as a makeshift bandstand. She liked his casual sandy hair and blue eyes and the energetic style of his trumpet playing. She listened eagerly when Belle told her, "I met that new man living out at the Norton's. We're going to eat together at the potluck on Sunday."

"Oh, Belle, sure enough? He's so good looking! What's his name?"

Belle smiled when she said, "Pink Campbell. Isn't that a funny name? It's really Pinkney but he calls himself Pink. I've never known anyone with a color for a name but he seems quite nice. Maybe I'll wear my pink dress in honor of his name." Then when she saw that Skitchy had taken her seriously she squeezed her sister's hand lightly. "Law, I was teasing, Skitch. I wouldn't do something as silly as that."

On Sunday morning as they dressed for church, Skitchy thought Belle seemed very casual as she put on the yellow print cotton dress and straw hat she most often wore to church. "Aren't you excited?" Skitchy asked, her own voice excited. When Belle said nothing but just glanced at her,

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Skitchy said nothing more. She knew not to press her sister when she saw that look.

She thought Belle might be thinking of Sam. The young man she had planned to marry had been killed in the war, the first time he was in battle. Skitchy had heard Belle crying by herself many times but she rarely spoke about him. One day not long after Minnie, the oldest sister, had married and left the ranch, Belle had asked Skitchy, "Is there anything you want to say about Sam? Or anything you want to ask me?"

"I don't think so. Not right now anyway."

Belle said very quietly, "Then we'll not speak of him again." And they hadn't. But Skitchy thought she saw sadness still lingering underneath her sister's grace sometimes, like this morning. Belle hadn't married or even encouraged any of the young men who had been interested in her.

....

It was a cloudless morning, already fiercely hot by the time the church service began. Men carried their coats and put them on only as they entered the school building that served as the Methodist church when the preacher came to Pecos. Women fanned themselves as they sat in the chairs set up for the service. People visited with each other while they waited for Maud Dillingham to start playing the small organ. Pink made it his business to seat himself two rows behind the Chapman family, not too close but close enough for them to hear that he not only had a fine voice, but knew the hymns well. He sang robustly even in the heat. He wanted them to know he was a church-going man.

After the service while the older women set out casseroles, pots of beans and chili, platters of fried chicken,

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slices of watermelon and Pecos cantaloupe, peach cobbler, pecan pies, and applesauce cakes, Belle found Pink. “Good afternoon, Mr. Campbell. It’s blistering hot today. Wouldn’t you like to take off your coat? We’re very informal at the potlucks.” Pink appreciated how gracefully she made him feel comfortable. Smiling at him as he hung his jacket on the back of a chair, she said, “I’ll leave my hat on this other chair to save our places. Please come and meet my family before we sit down to eat.”

Pink liked all the Chapmans as soon as Belle introduced him, first to her father and mother, then to her brother Buddy and sister Skitchy. They all had a relaxed manner about them. If they were curious about him, it was not apparent.

Skitchy’s curiosity may not have been apparent, but she was afraid the spark she felt between herself and Pink might be. She was careful not to be too forward since it was Belle he was having the meal with. But she watched Pink as closely as she could without calling too much attention to her attention, and listened to everything he said that she could hear.

Pink felt the spark, too, he would tell her long after that day. He’d always been drawn to petite women who made him feel taller. But that day his eyes had followed the tall girl in the simple dark blue skirt and white cotton blouse he’d just met as she walked away with her family. As he turned to go with Belle to their places at the table on the other side of the room, he felt awkward and confused.

....

Pink was freed from his awkward and confused feelings by what happened two weeks later between Belle and Jackson

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Tieger. Jackson had been one of Belle's dance partners the evening Pink met her at the barn dance and had been with her at other social events from time to time. He had watched her at the potluck as she and Pink ate together. Jackson always watched her. He watched for any sign that her grief for Sam Mueller was subsiding enough for her to open her heart to another man. He wanted to be that man. But he had seen that any man who tried too hard or pressed her too much was quickly dropped. He took care not to make that mistake.

A slender man, Jackson was taller than Pink, not as tall as the Chapman men. He had a broad forehead, square chin and prominent cheek bones which seemed all the more prominent beneath deep-set brown eyes. At twenty-nine his dark brown hair was already receding and thinning. Jackson was not handsome but there was something about him -- a presence -- that often arrested peoples' attention.

In the middle of a morning already growing hot, Belle was coming out of the Pecos post office, carrying a large package, as Jackson was going in. Belle slipped on the stone steps. Jackson caught her as she fell, picked up the package which had slipped out of her arms and stood holding it. When she had looked up at him, in that unguarded moment he saw warmth in her usually cool hazel eyes.

"Thank you, Jackson. I can't believe how often you seem to be in the right place at the right time."

"Would you like to have coffee or something with me?"

Belle sensed something more than a casual invitation and hesitated. But then the moment when he had caught her as she was falling, when she had felt that hard place inside her melt just a little, that moment glimmered again. She said softly, "Thank you. I'd like to."

As they walked over to the Pecos Hotel Jackson's heart was pounding. Much to her surprise, so was Belle's. They

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ordered coffee in the hotel dining room, the only people there this time of day. Jackson didn't often find himself at a loss for words, but on this occasion he hadn't been able to think of much to say except for what he'd wanted to say to her for years.

"Belle, I care for you very much. There's nothing that would make me happier than to always be in the right place at the right time for you. Would you consider us seeing each other seriously?"

Belle, searching, did not drop her eyes from his. Finally she took a deep breath and answered, "If we start to see each other seriously, will you agree that either of us can just say if it isn't right? That'll be the end of it?"

"It'll be however you say, Belle. You have my promise on that."

....

Skitchy rushed up to her best friend, Brin O'Brien, at the high school the first day after Belle told the family about herself and Jackson Tieger. "Come with me," Skitchy said breathlessly, taking Brin's hand and leading her away from the other girls.

"Brin! You'll never guess what! You know that man I told you about? Pink Campbell? The one I met at our church potluck? Well, Belle isn't going to be seeing him after all. She and Jackson Tieger have gotten serious all of a sudden. So it won't be a problem if we were to get interested in each other."

"You mean you and Pink Campbell?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sure enough, Skitchy? Oh, he's so good looking."

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“You bet!”

“Will your folks let you see him? He’s a lot older.”

“Law, Brin, you sound like Mama! I don’t see why in the world everybody makes such a fuss about how old somebody is. Besides, he hasn’t even asked to see me yet. But I think he will. I saw how he looked at me when we first met.” The girls giggled. “Besides, what harm can it do if I talk to him at dances and after church and we get to know each other?”

....

Three months later, Skitchy and her mother worked together one afternoon in the kitchen. Kate Chapman was peeling potatoes at the sink. A small woman with an upright back even as she worked, her brown hair was heavily streaked with gray and pulled back into a bun pinned at the neck. She had the same straight nose and almost square chin as her daughter. Her mouth was narrow, the lips thin, and her once fair complexion had been dried and lined by years in the arid heat and cold of West Texas. Only calm hazel eyes that sometimes still held a twinkle didn’t look older than her fifty-two years.

Skitchy, cutting the potatoes into strips for frying, said in the calmest voice she could muster, “You were sixteen when you married Daddy. He was ten years older than you. I’m almost sixteen and Pink just turned twenty-seven. Isn’t that pretty much the same?” Skitchy was determined to go with Pink on the picnic Belle and Jackson had planned. Still, she took care to make her voice soft, knowing Mama wouldn’t stand for being pushed. “You’ve gotten to know him some from visiting after church. I thought you liked him.”

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“Well, he’s a pleasant enough young man. And he has a fine voice.”

Skitchy couldn’t see her mother’s face but thought her voice was softening a little. Church was important to Mama. They might not even be having this talk if Skitchy hadn’t met Pink at church and she took it as a good sign that Mama remembered Pink’s singing. She didn’t mention that she and Pink had also seen each other at barn dances. “And Belle and Jackson will be at the picnic,” she said, knowing that would help.

Hands still busy and without turning, her mother finally said quietly, “Well, I guess you can go if it’s all right with your daddy.”

Skitchy tried to catch the sound that came up into her throat, not wanting to sound too excited. “Oh, Mama, thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“I know it does, sugar.” Her mother spoke so softly Skitchy could barely hear her.

Skitchy found her father on the porch repairing a broken bridle. Ephraim Chapman was a tall man, almost gaunt, with a full head of silver hair and sharp features which still had a trace of the handsome man he’d once been. Years in the sun and wind had worn deep creases in his face. They had failed to conquer a sparkle in his eye or a ready easy smile beneath the full mustache he had kept from his youth.

It was usually easier for Skitchy to work things around with Daddy, but he spoke plainly and seriously as she sat near him on the porch steps. “Pinkney Campbell hasn’t been around these parts very long. Don’t know a lot about him, but he doesn’t seem to have made much of himself for a man his age. Isn’t making a go of farming cotton in ranch country. Don’t think he will. Not enough rain most years. Best you don’t get involved with him.”

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Skitchy didn't take up that argument. Instead she said, "Daddy, haven't you always said not to judge someone until you've walked a mile in his shoes? I'm just wanting to get to know Pink better." She didn't mention the way her body fluttered when she was near Pink. Or the thrilling that had come up into her throat when he had kissed her at the last dance, outside the Daniels' barn during one of the band breaks. She took her father's quiet thoughtfulness as a good sign, and waited. When he looked at her she looked back and said in a straightforward voice, "Please, Daddy?"

Daddy said yes.

....

Pink felt nervous when he and Jackson arrived at the Chapman ranch in Jackson's Model-T to pick up Skitchy and Belle for the picnic. This was the first time he'd been to the Chapman ranch and the prospect of being with Skitchy's parents in their home felt quite different to him from times they'd visited after church. He felt more nervous as Jackson turned off the main graveled road and Pink got out of the car to open the gate to the ranch and close it after Jackson drove through. He felt still more nervous as they drove up the scraped road in a cloud of dust and stopped at the edge of the swept yard, bare of any plants, surrounding the prosperous looking frame house. He was very glad to see Skitchy when she came out to greet them.

"Hi, Pink. Hi, Jackson," she called out gaily. "Come on in the house. Belle's not quite ready but she won't be a minute."

She took them across the yard and into the house, through the front room to the kitchen. Ephraim Chapman sat at the big well-worn oak table in the middle of the room, sipping ice tea

as he read the newspaper. His back was straight yet relaxed, his collar unbuttoned and shirt sleeves rolled up.

Kate Chapman, her muslin dress obscured by an apron faded from many washings, was stuffing a chicken at the drain board next to the sink. She smiled at them over her shoulder but did not stop her work. "I expect Belle will be down in a minute. Would you boys like some ice tea while you're waiting?"

Ephraim stood and shook hands, first with Jackson, then with Pink. Pink had thought he couldn't feel any more nervous, but he did as he felt the older man's eyes looking him over.

"Might as well sit down and have some tea. Likely to be more than a minute waiting for Belle," Ephraim said with an affectionate chuckle as he sat down himself.

"Now, Eph," Kate said reprovingly.

Jackson smiled broadly and said, "Well, sir, I've always thought Belle was worth waiting for."

Pink heard the warmth in Jackson's voice, felt the ease he seemed to have with the Chapmans. He thought of his own family. How rare it had been to feel warmth, to laugh freely. He had sensed that his own deep inner feelings were unwelcome in his family and had learned to keep them to himself. He felt stiff and clumsy sitting there in the Chapman's kitchen and said little as Jackson and the Chapmans chatted. He felt relieved when Belle finally came into the kitchen. Pink and Jackson both stood as she came in.

"Well, don't sit back down," Belle said, her voice bright. "Let's not waste a minute of this beautiful day."

Pink crossed the room to Kate Chapman, still feeling stiff but finding his voice. "Thank you, ma'am, for the tea." Shaking hands with Ephraim, he said "Sir," with a nod.

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Skitchy and Belle were already on their way to the car. Pink was glad to hurry after them.

Outside, Skitchy called out to her brother in the corral. "So long, Buddy. Don't be too hard on that horse!" She turned to Pink and explained, "Buddy would've come up to the house to say hello but he's breaking a new bronco. He's had his hands full with this one."

Buddy waved and Skitchy said, "He's quiet when he's working a horse. Doesn't want to spook it." Pink waved back.

....

McMinn Springs was an oasis in arid West Texas. Unexpected in the dry sandy soil sparse with plants, a natural spring bubbled up from a rocky outcropping and cool fresh water collected in a rocky pond before it flowed into a creek that had carried life for as long as anyone could remember. Tall cottonwoods had rooted themselves there, the only big trees for miles around. McMinn Springs saw less wind than most other parts of West Texas, sparing it all but the worst dust storms. Today the air was clear, the sky blue and high, laced with a few wispy clouds.

A perfect day for a picnic! Belle thought, as she and Jackson picked a spot, spread out an old quilt under the trees. "Let's go for a walk before it gets any hotter," Belle said to Jackson. Then to Skitchy and Pink, "You don't mind, do you, if we go off by ourselves for a bit?"

Skitchy grinned at her sister. "Have fun." She stretched out on the quilt with her hands behind her head, looking up through the trees at the lace clouds and the high high sky. This was her favorite place in the world and she was thrilled

to be here with Pink Campbell, alone with him for the first time.

Skitchy usually paid little mind to what she wore, but she wanted to make sure she looked nice today and had asked Belle to help her. She wore a dark brown muslin skirt, with dark stockings and sturdy laced shoes, and a soft rose colored blouse. She had borrowed a close fitting hat with light and dark rose colored stripes from Belle, who encouraged her to wear it to set off her complexion. And, Skitchy suspected, cover her straight brown hair.

Sitting there under the cottonwood trees, Pink watched Skitchy relaxing on the quilt. "A penny for your thoughts," he said.

"Oh, I was thinking how much I like this place. The spring here in the middle of nowhere. The pond. The water's always cool. And the trees. I like being this close to the mountains. I'm not sure if it's true but they say big sheep with big curved horns live in the mountains and can go any place they want, no matter how steep. They can jump across wide places without losing their footing. I'd surely like to see those sheep."

"Then I hope you will one day."

Skitchy was curious by nature and she'd never been more curious than she was about Pink. They'd talked together before, but at the dances or after church there were always lots of people around and she hadn't felt she could ask him about himself as she wanted to. Today she could. Shifting slightly, she turned her head toward him. "Why did you come to West Texas?"

Usually uncomfortable when people asked that question, Pink found that when Skitchy asked he wanted to tell her. "You knew George and Emily Norton?"

"Uh-huh, but not well."

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“My uncle Charley told me about George not long after I came home from the war. They were friends from the old days when they were army buddies in the Spanish-American War. George never really seemed to get over that awful flu that went around after the big war. My uncle said George was looking for someone to help him with his cotton farm till he could get back on his feet. He and a couple of other farmers were trying some new things with irrigation and new fertilizers and he wanted to keep that going, too.” Pink paused, looking to be sure Skitchy was really interested. He liked this young woman and didn’t want to bore her. She seemed to be listening intently so he went on, “I figured if George and the others were right, it could make all the difference in the world for farming, even here where drought’s such a big problem. So I decided to try my luck cotton farming. That’s why I came.”

Pink said nothing about how hard it had been to adjust to life on the farm in Iowa after the war. He was proud of having been a wagoner in the army, driving trucks and ambulances, one of only two men in his outfit who knew how to drive. He’d never been outside of Iowa before shipping out to France and all he had seen and done had changed him. He hadn’t joined in, even when his buddies ribbed him, when they drank or played poker or went to whore houses, and he hadn’t been more than friendly with the French girls who liked American soldiers. Still, when he came home he’d felt pinched by the strict Presbyterian ways of his family, especially those of his mother.

Skitchy could hear the sadness in Pink’s voice as he said quietly, “George didn’t get better, though, and he gave up on the new ideas.” As he stopped speaking and dropped his eyes, Skitchy dropped her eyes also, sensing his emotion, not wanting to embarrass him. When she looked at Pink again he

was looking at her with a kind of tenderness behind the eyes that she'd never seen before in a man. Afterward she would think that was when she had begun to love him.

Skitchy already had a good idea about the rest of Pink's story. Still, she listened as before when he began to speak again. "After George died, Emily told me she didn't want to stay here. She was going to move back to her family in Louisiana but she offered to let me stay and work the land. I keep a share of what I make and send her the rest." Skitchy knew it was hardscrabble farming in years with scarce rain and Pink was having a hard time of it. Neither of them spoke of that.

When Belle and Jackson came back, Belle and Skitchy laid out fried chicken, potato salad and pickles and poured ice tea from a thermos. Talking with each other easily as they ate, they decided to wait a while to cut the watermelon Jackson had brought.

"I have my camera in the car," Jackson said. "How about some pictures?"

"You bet!" Skitchy replied enthusiastically. "Wouldn't you like pictures, Belle? Pink?"

Jackson took Skitchy's picture sitting on rocks near the creek, her long slender legs stretched out in front of her. She was not smiling, excited but not wanting that to show too much. After Jackson took her picture Skitchy asked, "Will you please take one just of Pink for me? I'd like to have one very much."

"You bet. How about on the same rocks where I took your picture?"

Skitchy grinned. "Oh, that would be wonderful!" She thought Pink looked incredibly handsome in his straw hat, jacket and tie. She planned to put his picture in a box where she kept private things that meant a great deal to her.

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Pink stepped up quickly. He was glad Skitchy wanted a picture of him. He knew people, especially women, liked his clear blue eyes and thought him good looking, and that was apparent in the jaunty angle of his hat and the jaunty posture of his hand on his slouched hip. He was used to being noticed even though it often made him uncomfortable. He was especially glad Skitchy had noticed him because he liked her very much indeed. She was young but he felt at ease with her. And with himself when he was around her.

Jackson took Belle's picture, too. She was delighted to have her picture taken in her new dress even though she didn't want her delight to show too much, to seem too vain. Her mother had ordered white lawn fabric from Dallas to make the straight-topped low-waisted dress to look like a picture Belle found in a magazine, using a pattern she cut from newspaper. Belle wore a wide brimmed straw hat she had trimmed herself with ribbons.

Jackson had frowned a little at first when Belle told him she wanted to ask her sister and Pink to join them on the picnic. Belle explained, "Mama and Daddy will only let her see him, just the two of them, if they're with somebody they know. Please, Jackson. You'll see. They'll want to be by themselves some of the time. We'll have our time."

There wasn't much Belle wanted that Jackson would say no to, so he had said, "You bet, darling. I'm sure it will be fun."

"Thank you," she said, squeezing his hand, smiling up at the dark haired man whose deep-set brown eyes always seemed to smile at her.

When the picture taking was finished and they had eaten the watermelon, Jackson brought out coffee. He had one thermos laced with brandy for Belle and himself, another with just coffee for Skitchy, who wanted to drink brandy but

didn't, and Pink who didn't touch any kind of alcohol. They lingered for almost another hour enjoying the coffee and the light breeze that had come up.

As the sun dropped low enough in the western sky to cast its rays where they sat under the trees, Jackson said, "Well, as much as I hate to say it, I think it's time for us to get these ladies home, Pink." They talked and laughed as they slowly gathered things up, all of them still buoyant with the delight of the day.

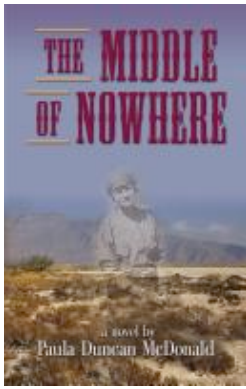
As they drove back to the ranch, Skitchy was full of ideas. She said gaily, "Buddy's riding in the rodeo in McAllister next week. I want to go. There's a dance afterward. I think it'd be lots of fun if we all went together."

"Well, I'd love to join you for the rodeo but I'm playing with the band for the dance," Pink said. Hating to see Skitchy's face fall, he'd also felt the old pull of having been taught from boyhood that dancing was somehow wrong. He'd come to terms with that during the war. After all, he played music for people to dance to. Still, he'd never felt completely comfortable dancing himself. Pushing down his discomfort, he said hastily, "How about if we go to the rodeo and let me see if I can work out something with Tom. Have a set or two off so we can dance some."

Jackson asked, "Belle, would you like to go?"

"Sounds like fun."

Skitchy began to think about being at dances where Pink played with the band and she didn't dance much. She said a little more petulantly than she wanted to sound, "Well, dancing some is better than not dancing at all. And of course the rodeo will be fun." She was still busy being annoyed when Jackson turned off the main gravel road and on to the narrow dirt ranch road.



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