

CHAPTER ONE
Sunday, May 11, 1930
The Dahlias in Full Bloom

Elizabeth Lacy had been a member of the Darling Garden Club ever since Mrs. Blackstone started it in 1925, and president for the last two years. But she couldn't remember a more important meeting. Today was a special day. They were celebrating the opening of their clubhouse.

Their *new* clubhouse, Lizzy thought proudly, as she called the meeting to order after their tour of the garden--although of course the house wasn't new at all. It was the old Blackstone house at 302 Camellia Street, one block west of the courthouse square and one block south, next door to Bessie Bloodworth's boarding house, Magnolia Manor. Mrs. Blackstone, a life-long resident of Darling, had died a few months before at the grand age of 82, leaving her house to the club, along with almost an acre of garden in the back, a half-acre vegetable garden in the adjoining lot, and two beautiful cucumber trees, one in front and one in back.

As usual, Lizzy started the meeting with the roll call. All twelve of their members were present on this special occasion. Since it was Sunday, the ladies were wearing their church outfits: summery flower-print cotton and crepe and rayon dresses with pretty collars of organdy and pique and dotted swiss and hats with ribbons and flowers. Their skirts were safely below their knees at last, now that the Roaring Twenties had stopped roaring. They were all very tired of the Flapper look (especially since most of them had never been Flappers) and ready for pleats and ruffles and those cute, perky angel bell sleeves that were (as Ophelia Snow put it) the very dickens to iron. Myra May was the only exception to the summer-dress rule. As usual, she wore trousers, light-colored, with a leather belt and tailored blouse.

After the roll call, Lizzy moved quick-step through Ophelia's minutes (adopted, with a correction by Earlynn Biddle, who wanted it known that she had given a book to the club library) and Verna Tidwell's treasurer's report (\$5.52 in the kitty). Bessie Bloodworth reported on the upcoming plant sale, which would be held the next Saturday at the Curbside Market on the courthouse square, and answered people's questions about where to go and what to bring. She also invited people to volunteer for garden cleanup, which (as they could see from their tour) was going to be a big job. They would need all the help they could get.

Next, Lizzy took up the most important item of business, which was renaming their club in honor of their founder and benefactress, Mrs. Dahlia Blackstone. Henceforth and forever, they would be known as the Darling Dahlias, and their clubhouse would be called the Dahlia House. Ophelia Snow made the motion, Verna Tidwell seconded it, and there was a loud chorus of ayes.

"Which is good," Lizzy said with satisfaction, "because Beulah has already painted our new sign. It's leaning up against the tree for now, but we thought we'd have a little ceremony." She reached for her Kodak. "Why don't we go outside and I'll take a picture for Friday's column."

For the last ten years, Lizzy had written the "Garden Gate" column for the Darling *Dispatch*, edited and published by Charlie Dickens. The paper came out every Friday morning--unless there was a problem with the printing press, in which case it

might be Saturday or even Monday, since Charlie would have to send down to Mobile for parts and the parts would have to come back to Darling on the Greyhound bus. Lizzy loved writing the column, but she had a full-time job as secretary in Mr. Moseley's law office and had to plan ahead, so she could use the typewriter at work. She never ran out of things to put in her column, though. There was always something in bloom or something interesting going on in somebody's garden.

Outside, the club members gathered under the cucumber tree--so old and large and beautiful that it was one of the town's landmarks--to witness the unveiling of the new wooden signboard. Myra May Mosswell did the honors. "Ta-ta-ta-TA-ta-ta!" she cried, imitating a trumpet, and pulled off the bed sheet that Lizzy had brought to drape over the sign. Beaming, she flung her arm around Beulah Trivette. "Didn't Beulah do us proud, ladies? Just look at that beautiful basket of dahlias!"

Lizzy peered down into her Kodak, focused, and snapped. Beulah (whose talents as a hairdresser extended to all things artistic) had really outdone herself this time. She had painted "The Darling Dahlias" in big fancy letters, in vivid green on a white background, arching the words over a basket of dahlias in every imaginable color, red, yellow, orange, peppermint striped, purple. It was really too bad that the newspaper photo would be just plain old black and white, Lizzy thought. If anybody wanted to see the sign in full color, they'd have to walk over to Camellia Street for a look.

"It was nothing, really," Beulah said in reply to Myra May. She tried not to look too pleased.

"Nothing?" Verna Tidwell chuckled. "Nothing short of gorgeous, Beulah. Beyond words." A wordless murmur of assent rippled through the group.

But Voleen Johnson had words, as usual. "Tad bit gaudy for my taste," she said, putting her head on one side. "Too many dahlias in that basket."

Lizzy sighed. When Voleen Johnson climbed onto her high horse, the only thing you could do was ignore her. "Okay, everybody," she called. "I've got a good shot of Beulah and Myra and the sign. So if you'll line up behind them, I'll get the rest of you."

Everybody dutifully lined up and put on their picture-taking faces. Lizzy looked through the camera, thinking that they were a pretty group, in their spring dresses and perky straw hats--no more of those silly felt cloches that hugged your head and smashed your hair. At thirty, Alice Ann Walker was the youngest. Aunt Hetty, nearly eighty, was the eldest, now that dear Mrs. Blackstone was gone. Next oldest was Mrs. Johnson, at fifty-five. The rest were spread through the middle, give or take a few years.

"I believe I'll just stand here," Mrs. Johnson said, planting herself comfortably next to Myra May in the front row. She always put herself out front, and why not? She was the wife of George E. Pickett Johnson, owner of the Darling Savings and Trust Bank. What's more, she was the spitting image of Mrs. Herbert Hoover, marcelled silver hair and all. Everybody thought so. (Mrs. Johnson must've thought so, too, because she framed the cover of the May 19, 1929 issue of *Time Magazine*, the one with Mrs. Hoover on it, with a string of real pearls wound around her throat and looped down the front of her black dress. Lizzy knew this because Danzie, who did the Johnsons' laundry on Monday and Lizzy's mother's ironing on Tuesday, had told her that the First Lady was hanging right beside Mrs. Johnson's dressing table.)

"A tad too many dahlias," Mrs. Johnson repeated, putting up a hand to push her Mrs. Hoover white hair under her stylish purple hat, which she had made for her by a

milliner in Atlanta, rather than Leona Champaign, who had a shop right on Darling's courthouse square and made hats for every other lady in town. She said it a little softer this time, but Aunt Hetty Little was standing right behind her and heard it.

"That's only *your* opinion, Voleen," Aunt Hetty said tartly. "If you had your way, there'd be nothing but lilies growin' in this world." She raised her voice. "Beulah, those dahlias are just fine. You have done us right proud, dear. Now, smile, ever'body, so Lizzy can get our picture and we can get on with our meetin'."

This time, everyone agreed with Aunt Hetty, so enthusiastically that Beulah Trivette turned pink with pleasure and Mrs. Johnson pressed her lips together. Lizzy smiled as she snapped the photo. Aunt Hetty was the only person in town who could use that tone to Mrs. George E. Pickett Johnson. This was because Aunt Hetty really was Mrs. Johnson's aunt, although the Littles were a big family and Hetty was either aunt or cousin or other near kin to just about everybody in town. And of course Aunt Hetty was right about the lilies, because Mrs. Johnson loved lilies with a passion, but only the pure white ones, never those common orange ditch lilies. The Johnson garden was full of white flowers, and Mrs. Johnson sent a big bouquet to the bank every morning all summer long, for the table by the front door.

Lizzy snapped another picture, and then a third, because Bessie Bloodworth had blinked. "All right, ladies," she said, "let's have our refreshments now. We can finish the meeting while we're eating."

The Dahlias were much too ladylike to shove, but nobody tarried. They trooped inside, the heels of their Sunday pumps clacking on the wooden floors, and straight to the back porch, where the table was spread with a pretty embroidered cloth and decorated with vases and bowls of flowers from the Dahlias' gardens: gladiolas from Aunt Hetty, iris from Verna, flowering quince and roses from Earlynne Biddle, Virginia sweetspire from Lizzy, and lacy ferns from next to the back door for greenery. Times might be just a little difficult, but that didn't stop the spring flowers from blooming or the Dahlias from gathering big bouquets to share with their friends. (1)

They'd brought plenty to eat, too. Bessie Bloodworth had piled a big plate high with those little deviled ham finger sandwiches that are so light and tasty you could eat a half-dozen before you knew it. Mrs. Johnson had brought a sandwich plate that was probably made up by her cook, the edge decorated with stuffed tomatoes and stuffed squash blossoms. Most of the Dahlias didn't have time to stuff squash blossoms, even for a party, but there were the usual dishes of pickled okra and watermelon pickles and pickled eggs, along with spiced figs, pear compote, and fresh strawberries. Verna Tidwell brought molasses cookies, Mildred Kilgore brought her famous ribbon cake with peach filling, and Lizzy brought some of those little thumbprint cookies filled with raspberry jam from the patch behind her house. Earlynne Biddle had brought a couple of gallons of cold rosemary lemonade. She had extra ice from Friday's delivery, so she brought that, too, and the lemonade was frosty cold. When their plates were full, the Dahlias carried them into the parlor and settled down to enjoy their friends' cooking.

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You're probably curious about the Dahlias' new clubhouse and gardens, so while they're eating and chatting, we'll have a quick look around. The house isn't very large, just two rooms in front, the parlor where everybody is sitting in wooden chairs, and the front bedroom, wallpapered in green and white roses. This room has been turned into a

sitting room featuring photographs of old Mrs. Blackstone and her beautiful garden--the way it once was, years before--and shelves that now contained the club's gardening library. On the wall was a big gold-toned plaque on the wall from the Darling Town Council naming Mrs. Dahlia Blackstone Darling's Woman of the Year. She earned the plaque three years running, 1926, 1927, and 1928, which annoyed Mrs. Johnson, who has never gotten it once

Behind the front bedroom is the back pink-check-papered bedroom, which the Dahlias are planning to use as a workroom. Behind the parlor is the kitchen, which has a gas range (installed just a couple of years before) and an icebox on one side, a sink under the window, and cabinets and a pine table with white-painted legs. The house, built sometime in the 1890s, is on city gas and water and there's an indoor bathroom at one end of the back porch. It also has electricity, for back in the mid-1920s, Ozzie Sherman installed a Delco generator to power his saw mill just outside of town. A smart businessman, he talked the Darling City Council into to install street lights around the square and letting him run electricity through the town. Last year, the council took over the Sherman Electric Company and bought two new generators. If the money held out, they planned to run electricity all the way out to the Cypress County Fairgrounds.

Mrs. Blackston's garden is much larger than the house itself. If you stand on the back porch and look down toward the creek, you can probably see why it has been written up in the *Montgomery Advertiser* and the *Selma Times-Journal* and who knows where else over the years. Back there beyond the trees are the ruins of what was once the splendid Cartwright mansion, Mrs. Blackstone's mother's family home. Built in the glory days of Old King Cotton, it burned to rubble after the Union troops occupied Darling during the War Between the States. Later--in the 1880s and 1890s--its manicured lawns and lovely gardens were carved into town lots along what is now Camellia Street. A row of houses stands there now, each one fronted by a row of white picket fence.

Mrs. Blackstone got the largest lots and a piece of the Cartwright gardens, which was only right, since her mother was the sole surviving Cartwright. Her share of the garden is full of blooming shrubs and trees--including another large cucumber tree--meandering down the hill and into the pines. Inside the fence that encloses the back yard are Mrs. Blackstone's wide, curving perennial borders, filled with iris, larkspur, phlox, and mounds of Shasta daisies and sweet alyssum. Mrs. Blackstone was sick the last few years of her life, so the borders are unkempt now and full of weeds, and the lilies she loved--Easter lilies, spider lilies, oxblood lilies, and more--need to be dug and separated and replanted. There are tangles of sweet peas and cardinal climber and honeysuckle on the fences and roses, roses, roses everywhere. Mrs. Blackstone was always very fond of roses, especially those big, floppy cabbage roses that smell like paradise, but all the plants are in need of pruning and general cleanup. Old Zeke, who lives in a tiny cottage the next street over, keeps the grass mowed, but that's about all. The rest is a mess. If the Dahlias want to enjoy their garden, they've got their work cut out for them.

If you step off the porch and follow the path to the right around the back of the house, you can see the big vegetable garden plot at the corner of Camellia and Vine. Mrs. Blackstone always grew enough sweet potatoes and okra and green beans and squash for the whole neighborhood. The garden hasn't been planted for a couple of years now, and the Dahlias haven't yet figured out what to do with it. But the soil is rich, the space large and sunny, and if they want to, they can turn it into flowers or landscape it, whatever.

They can even sell it, although times are hard and property isn't moving very fast in Darling. It might be difficult to find a buyer.

But we're not finished with our tour just yet. If you walk on around to the front yard, you'll see Mrs. Blackstone's prize hydrangeas, the old-fashioned wiegelas that came from her mother, the wisteria climbing the front of the house and the gorgeous azaleas, pink and lavender and white, massed under the front window, with a border of hostas at their feet.

And the cucumber tree, of course. It's such a big tree, and so pretty when it blooms, that it's earned quite a reputation. People driving or walking down Camellia Street always stop to admire it, especially at this time of year. It's in full bloom just now, and covered with beautiful creamy blossoms, nearly a foot across, some of them. The flowers produce little red fruits that look something like baby red cucumbers.

The cucumber tree. That's what everybody calls it, even though Dorothy Rogers, the town librarian and a Dahlia, insists that it really ought to be called by its proper Latin name, *Magnolia acuminata*. But that particular tree and its twin in the back garden are both over eighty years old and have stood tall and proud since before the War Between the States. They have always been cucumber trees, and cucumber trees they always will be. Aunt Hetty says that if you called it a *Magnolia acuminata*, nobody would know what in the Sam Hill you were talking about, and she's right.

For the club, inheriting the house (and the gardens and the cucumber tree) came as a huge shock. When Mrs. Blackstone died, everybody in Darling quite reasonably figured that her property would go to her husband's nephew Beatty Blackstone, the owner of BB's Auto Repair Shop and Sinclair Filling Station and the only living Blackstone. That's the way property is handed down in Darling, from one family member to another. If you're next in line, it's pretty much a sure thing.

Beatty had it figured that way, too. He'd been thinking of this all the while his aunt was declining, figuring that he could sell the house or trade it to the bank in return for the mortgage on his repair shop. Either way, he'd be free and clear forever. So on the day after Mrs. Blackstone's funeral, he locked up his repair shop, put on a clean white shirt and a tie, and sauntered jauntily over to Mr. Moseley's law office on Franklin Street to hear Mr. Moseley read the last will and testament of his aunt-by-marriage and pick up the keys to his new front door--only to learn instead that she had bequeathed the keys, the front door, the house, the garden, and the vacant lot at the corner of Camellia and Rosemont to the garden club. What's more, she had pre-paid the taxes for three years, so the club would have a little time for fundraising before they had to pay taxes again.

For Beatty, this was a stunning blow.

It was equally stunning for Lizzy, who was the first Dahlia to hear this news, partly because she was the club's president but mostly because she worked for Mr. Moseley. She was at her desk in the reception room, typing up the shorthand notes she had taken in a deposition about a cow that got loose and broke down a neighbor's fence, when Mr. Moseley opened the door to his office and asked her to come in and hear him read Mrs. Blackstone's will. He had a quirky smile on his face, which should have told her that something was up. Anyway, the next thing she knew, he was handing her the trust papers, the deed, and the key to Mrs. Blackstone's house, while Beatty Blackstone sat with his arms folded, glowering furiously.

Well, it knocked her for a loop, as she told Ophelia on the telephone the minute she got back to her desk. That is, the minute after Beatty had stomped out of the office and slammed the door behind him so hard that Mr. Moseley's framed Certificate of Recognition from the Darling Chapter of the American Legion fell off the wall and the glass broke. And since Myra May Mosswell (also a Dahlia) was on the board at the telephone exchange in the back room at the Darling Diner, the news of Mrs. Blackstone's astonishing gift to the garden club flew around town faster than you could say Hello-Central. Beatty's wife Lenora heard it from her cousin before her husband got home for lunch, and she gave him plenty of what-for-and-what-you-can-do-with-it. (It was Lenora's opinion that if Beatty would've been nicer to his aunt while she was alive, she would've been more generous to her nephew when she died.)

Beatty did get a consolation prize, however. His aunt left him her four-cylinder Dodge touring car with open sides and a canvas top, which hadn't been driven since Mr. Harvey Blackstone went to his grave in 1926, after sixty years of marriage. Oh, and \$42, which was what there was left in the checking account after her bills were paid, along with a big box of old Cartwright family papers and letters. These were of no interest to him, since he was a Blackstone, not a Cartwright, and had no interest in Cartwright family history.

But the car, the money, and the family papers satisfied neither Beatty nor Lenora, who had been planning the new drapes she was going to hang at the front windows of Aunt Dahlia's house ever since Aunt Dahlia got sick. Pretty soon, the story got around town that Beatty was going to challenge the will in court. That would cost him more than \$42, though, and Mr. Moseley advised him that his chances were about as good as a snowball's chance on the Fourth of July, so he let it drop.

Still, he slanted Lizzy a narrow-eyed, nasty look every time she saw him on the street and muttered something about fixing her wagon. Lizzy had the feeling that as far as the inheritance was concerned, they hadn't heard the last from Beatty. As events unfurled, it turned out that she was right.

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Back in the Dahlia House parlor, Lizzy called the meeting to order again.

"Before we adjourn," she said, "we need have a look at the calendar for this coming summer and fall. Nineteen-thirty is going to be an exciting year, with more than enough to keep us busy."

"Any more exciting than 1929, and I don't believe we can stand it," Miss Rogers remarked darkly. As librarian and the organizer of the Darling Chautauqua series, she was the nearest thing the town had to an intellectual (and she knew it). She lived next door at Bessie Bloodworth's Magnolia Manor but was saving her money so she could have her own little house, the dearest dream of her heart. She had studied the stock market for several years, and in the spring of 1929, had taken all her savings out of the Darling Savings and Trust. She wired it to a Wall Street brokerage firm to invest for her, with the idea of making enough money that she could say kiss-my-foot to Bessie Bloodworth and her Magnolia Manor. But her timing was terrible. After Black Tuesday, the only money Miss Rogers had to her name was a five-dollar bill in a mad-money envelope under her mattress. She had started saving again, but it would be a long while before she could recoup.

“We’re all in the same leaky boat, Miss Rogers,” Ophelia Snow said sympathetically. “But we’ll bail it out. You know the old saying. ‘Gardeners never give in, they--’”

“Just give out,” the Dahlias chorused, in sing-songy unison, and broke into giggles. Ophelia, round and bouncy, with flyaway brown hair and a sweet smile that never stopped, was an incurable optimist, and this was her favorite saying.

Miss Rogers bit her lip, and Lizzy was immediately sorry for joining in the laughter. Out loud, she said, “Miss Rogers is certainly right, ladies. None of us wants *that* kind of excitement, ever again. But gardening is a different kind of excitement. We’ve got a full calendar ahead of us, and I hope every Dahlia will roll up her sleeves and pitch in.”

She began ticking things off on her fingers. “This coming Saturday is the annual plant swap. June is the Flower Show, July is the Tomato Fest, August is the Watermelon Roll, September we are having our Garden Tour, and October is the Harvest Festival. Oh, and don’t forget: every Monday night, we get together for a game of hearts. Never let it be said that the Dahlias are lazy!”

Three or four people pretended to groan, but everyone else chuckled. There wasn’t a lot of entertainment in Darling, but the Dahlias always managed to find something to do. Lizzy was about to ask for a motion to adjourn, but Verna Tidwell raised her hand.

“One more thing, Lizzy.” The physical opposite of plump, pretty Ophelia, Verna was tall and thin, with an olive-toned complexion, a firm mouth, and intelligent, searching eyes. But while Verna was not everybody’s idea of a Southern belle, she had a razor-sharp mind. She worked in the office of the Probate Court clerk, where she was in charge of keeping the records. This was a big job that involved shelves and boxes and cabinets of dusty plat books and details of property ownership, tax liens, wills, elections--papers and documents went back generations. Verna always said that her job gave her a perspective on Cypress County that she couldn’t get anywhere else.

“As club treasurer,” she said, “I need to remind y’all to pay your dues. You can pay by the month--twenty-five cents. Or if you want to pay ahead, it’s just \$2.50 for the full year. That’s a savings of fifty cents.”

Myra May cleared her throat. “I thought we discussed making it fifteen cents a month,” she said. “I’m not speaking for myself, of course,” she added hurriedly, although everybody knew that business at the Darling Diner had begun falling off even before the Crash. Myra May and her friend Violet Sims (they shared the apartment over the diner) were working two full-time jobs, supplementing the income from the diner with money they earned as telephone operators. Myra May always said the hours didn’t matter--she and Violet were just glad to have the steady work. Everybody knew exactly what she meant.

“You know, Verna,” Lizzy said, “Myra May is right about the dues. I think maybe you weren’t at the meeting where we discussed this. But we did talk about dropping it down to fifteen cents.” She looked around. People were nodding. “As far as the club goes, we’ll be okay for money. Mrs. Blackstone paid the taxes on this house, so we won’t have to worry about that for several years.” She added, wanting to be fair. “Although there’s the electrical bill, of course. And the roof.”

They were lucky to have Dahlia House--there was no doubt about that. But the place was forty years old and hadn't been built all that well to start with. After the last hard rain, there had been puddles in the kitchen and the back room, and the leaks were only going to get worse. Sooner or later, and probably sooner, they would have to find the money to fix the roof.

Voleen Johnson frowned. "Personally, I think we should leave the dues right where they are. A quarter surely isn't too much to ask. If anything, we ought to raise them. We don't want to encourage--"

She stopped, because everybody knew what she had been going to say. She had been arguing for years that Darling's garden club ought to be more exclusive and that they should accept only people who were "serious" gardeners. Which meant people who had enough spare time to spend hours every day in the garden, or had the money to pay somebody else to spend the time, the way she did. The Johnson garden was a showplace, but Voleen Johnson never had dirt under her fingernails, the way the rest of the Dahlias did.

Lizzy saw that people were shifting on their chairs. "If somebody'll make a motion about the dues, we can discuss it," she said.

Aunt Hetty spoke up first. "I move that the 1930 dues be set at fifteen cents a month," she said firmly. "If somebody wants to pay it all at once, let's make it a dollar fifty."

"I'll second that!" Earlynne Biddle said, very fast. Her husband Hank was the manager at the Coca-Cola bottling plant. The plant was laying people off, and Earlynne knew that, for a lot of families in Darling, every nickel counted.

"I'll third it." That was Ophelia. Her husband Jed--Darling's second-term mayor--owned Snow's Farm Supply, on the northwest corner of the courthouse square. He carried as many farmers as he could on credit, but the past several summers had been dry and most crops hadn't brought in enough for folks to pay their seed bills. Jed hadn't laid anybody off yet, but he'd had to cut the employees' hours. Like everybody else, the Snows were pinching pennies.

"Moved and seconded and thirded," Lizzy said. "The motion's on the floor." She looked around. "Is there any discussion?"

"Just one thing," Lizzy," Aunt Hetty said. "You're right about the roof on this house. We can probably get some volunteers to help, but we'll have to buy roofing material. We can't expect to pay for something that expensive out of what we collect from our members, though. I think we ought to lower the dues and find another way to raise money for the roof."

"Hear, hear," Bessie Bloodworth called from a corner of the room.

"I'm in favor," Mildred Kilgore added, and others were nodding. "If we lower the dues, maybe we'll get some new members. There's lots of work out there in the garden. They could help."

Silence. After a moment, Voleen Johnson said, in a sour tone, "Well, I've said my piece. Might as well vote, I suppose."

"Mrs. Johnson has called the question," Lizzy said crisply. "All in favor, say aye. Opposed, nay." There was a loud chorus of ayes. Mrs. Johnson didn't say anything.

“Motion carried,” Lizzy said. “So everybody, pay your dues. At our next meeting, we’ll discuss what we can do to raise money to fix the roof. But for now, could we have a motion to adjourn? And of course, there’s still plenty of food.”

“I move we adjourn,” Beulah said. “I want a piece of Mildred’s ribbon cake--if there’s any left, that is.”

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Later, after everyone had taken their dishes and gone home, Lizzy, Opelia, and Verna put on aprons and tidied up the kitchen, washing the plates and silver, wiping the counter and table, and sweeping the floor.

“I sometimes wonder why she wants to belong to the Dahlias,” Ophelia said. “Voleen Johnson, I mean.” She put the clean forks into the silverware drawer. “The rest of us are way below her on the social ladder. Voleen was a Butler before she married into the Johnsons, you know.”

Lizzy carried the enamel dishpan to the back screen door and tossed the water onto the trumpet climber that arched across the roof. “Maybe it’s our friendly company she craves.” She chuckled. “Must be kind of lonely at the top of that social ladder. Nobody can afford to climb high enough to join her.”

Lizzy knew she was exaggerating, but what she said was mostly true. Darling had once had an aristocracy of sorts--the Blakes, for instance, and the Robbs and the Butlers and the Cartwrights, of course, Mrs. Blackstone’s mother’s family. They were the cotton kings and queens, with fine plantations on the richest bottoms and landings along the river, where the stern-wheel steamboats plied their weekly runs up from Mobile and down from Montgomery. The boats stopped at every landing to leave farm equipment and blocks of ice and barrels of flour and bags of sugar and pick up bales of cotton and wool and bushels of corn and sweet potatoes and barrels of turpentine--a strong commerce built on agriculture.

But that was in the old days, before the War Between the States, before Emancipation, before the Depression of the 1890s, before the Great War. Everything was different now. The Louisville and Nashville railroad had taken over the river traffic. The boll weevils that munched through the cotton fields in the nineteen-teens had finished off what was left of the cotton fortunes. The aristocratic families had sent their young men off to fight, first Mr. Lincoln and then the Kaiser, and those who had managed to come back more or less unscathed had gone elsewhere to seek their fortunes: to Mobile, Atlanta, Richmond, Chicago, even New York. There were no more Cartwrights now: Mrs. Blackstone was the last of that clan, just as Mrs. Johnson was the last of the Butlers. And now, the Darling Savings and Trust owned many of the old plantations and George E. Pickett Johnson (named for a Confederate general famous for his disastrous charge at Gettysburg) was the richest man in town. Voleen and George Johnson had friends among the professional people--the town’s three lawyers, the circuit court judge, the probate court judge, the doctor, the president of the Darling Academy. But times had changed and there wasn’t much in the way of a local aristocracy.

Verna put the broom back in the corner and replied to Lizzy’s remark with an ironic chuckle. “Nobody can afford to do anything right now. Working in the probate clerk’s office, I get to see how far behind on their taxes people are.” She gave the others a sideways look. “Even some of the ones who act like they own the top of the ladder. And there are rules, you know.” She picked the tablecloth up and took it to the back door to

shake it. "Everybody has to play by them, whether they like it or not. Eventually, they'll have to pay up." She folded the tablecloth and put it into the drawer.

Lizzy hung the dishpan on its hook under the sink, thinking that it sounded like Verna was talking about the Johnsons. But surely not. Mr. Johnson had the reputation of being a careful businessman and a person of solid strength in the community. He'd be the very last person to get behind on his taxes, if only because he didn't want his neighbors to think he was in trouble. These days, nobody in the banking business could afford to look like they were in trouble, or there would be a run on the bank.

Ophelia shut the silverware drawer and gave the others a quick smile. As the mayor's wife, she was right in the middle of all of Darling's current woes, but she tried as hard as she could to keep a steady outlook. And of course, she was an optimist.

"Folks do get behind, poor souls," she said sympathetically, "but I'm sure everybody will catch up. Times are hard now, but things'll get better soon. And in the meantime, we've got each other, and that's what counts. Friendship goes a long way."

"It does," Verna agreed in her usual blunt, practical way. "But friends don't pay your back taxes, Ophelia. At least, not that I've ever noticed. And they may line up to buy your house for pennies on the dollar at the tax sale, but I doubt they'll hand back the property deed, just because they're your friends. Everybody's got a bottom line. Some are closer to it than others."

Ophelia shook her head, frowning, but Lizzy had to agree with Verna. She saw that kind of thing in the lawyer's office all the time: people getting as much as they could, even at the expense of someone else. Ophelia always liked to say that bad times brought out the good in folks. In Lizzy's experience, it was just as likely to go the other way.

When her friends had left, Lizzy took one last tour of the house, making sure that everything was in order. She locked the front door from the inside and let herself out the back, locking it behind her.

Until recently, most people in Darling hadn't bothered to lock their doors. But in the past few months, that had changed. Hobos, down on their luck and hungry, had begun jumping off the freight trains and going door to door, asking if there was any work they could do in exchange for food. Two or three had come to Lizzy's house, and she'd done what she could--asked them to chop kindling or clean up a tree that had come down in a storm, in return for a good meal and a couple of extra sandwiches. They were polite and nice enough and she hadn't been afraid. But if they found a house unoccupied and unlocked, it might be a different story. There wouldn't likely be any vandalism--they were just ordinary men and boys, out of work and looking for a dry place to bed down. But she didn't want to take a chance. She wasn't as optimistic as Ophelia about people's good intentions.

Lizzy was going down the walk, thinking about this, when a low, cracked voice said, at her elbow. "Afternoon, Miz Lacy."

Lizzy jumped and put her hand to her throat. "Oh, Zeke!" she exclaimed. "You startled me!"

"Sorry," Zeke muttered. The old Negro was grizzled and thin, with a leathery face and a nose that was smashed to one side--he'd been a boxer in the old days, Lizzy had heard. He wore a shapeless felt hat mashed down on his head and bib overalls over a white shirt, clean, because this was Sunday. "Wonderin' if there was somethin' I could do to he'p out here." He gestured toward the garden. "Reckon the grass might oughta be

mowed purty soon. An' there's plenty of snippin' an' clippin' and cleanin' in them flowerbeds." He shook his head. "Sho' looks a mess. Pore Miz Dahlia must be turnin' over in her grave."

Lizzy looked around. Zeke was right, she thought. The grass was ankle-tall, and if it wasn't clipped soon, the job would be a lot harder--maybe too hard for Zeke, who must be in his seventies. But he was strong still, strong enough to make a living delivering groceries for Mr. Hancock and doing odd jobs around the neighborhood--when he wasn't drunk or recovering from an extended bout with the bottle.

"Thanks for pointing that out, Zeke," Lizzy replied. "Our club members will handle the cleanup on the flowerbeds, but maybe you could cut the grass for us." She looked again at the long stretch down toward the woods. "How much did Mrs. Blackstone pay you for the work?"

Zeke brightened. "A quarter's wot she paid, Miz Lizzy."

"Good." Lizzy opened her purse and took out a quarter. "Oh, and there's something else you might could do for us, Zeke. It doesn't have to be this week, but please dig a hole for the sign and plant it, out there in front of the house, under the cucumber tree. We want people to see it as they go past." Considering his habits, it would probably be better if she didn't give him all the money at once. "If you'll come by my house when you're finished, I'll pay you for it."

Zeke nodded, grinning a snaggle-toothed grin. "Yes'm, I'll do that." He pocketed the money, giving her a questioning look. "What folks're sayin' is true, then? Mr. Beatty Blackstone ain't never gonna live here? This place don't belong to him or his?"

There was something in the tone that arrested her, but she only said, "No, Zeke. Mrs. Blackstone left the house and the lot next door to the garden club. The Dahlias will be keeping the garden up--as best we can, anyway--and using the house for our meetings. It's what Mrs. Blackstone wanted."

"Yes'm," Zeke said, and looked away. "Reckon you know about the Cartwright ghost."

Many Alabama houses have their resident ghosts, of course, especially if the house has had a history of tragedy, or (as in this case) was burned during the War. The Cartwright ghost was said to wander through the old Cartwright property, looking for something it had lost, variously reported to be a baby, a family treasure, or even its shoes.

"I've heard about it, of course," Lizzy said. "I haven't seen it myself, though," she added.

"Lots of folks has seen it." Zeke was serious. "Never bothered Miz Blackstone much, 'cuz it's her fam'ly ghost. She wuz familiar wi' it. But other folks might be afeerd, if they ain't never seen it."

"Have you seen it?"

Zeke looked wise. "Oh, reckon I have. More'n onct, too, since I was a chile. Wears a long black cape, she does. Carries a spade and digs in dem bushes at the back end of the garden. You'll see her, too, if'n you come round here one night when the moon's full."

Lizzy nodded, although she had the feeling that Zeke's adult encounters with the ghost might be the product of his notorious adventures with the local moonshine whiskey--and his childhood sightings the product of an active imagination.

“Well, thanks,” she said. “Let me know when you’ve put up the sign, and I’ll pay you.”

She walked away, wondering if there was a way the Dahlias could exploit the legend of the Cartwright ghost to help them raise money to fix the leaky roof. Maybe a moonlight garden tour, with one of their members dressed in a long black cape, playing the part of the ghost? She did a quick calculation. If the roof cost twenty dollars to fix and they charged a nickel apiece for the moonlight garden tour (half the price of a movie ticket), they would need four hundred people.

She laughed at herself. Obviously a silly idea.

They’d have to think of some other way to raise that money. But it wasn’t going to be easy. Nobody in town had much of anything to spare.

(1) Thanks to Margaret Crowder of Auburn AL for recommending several changes in the flowers the Dahlias brought for their refreshment table. Her suggestions, as you see them in this posting, will be incorporated into the paperback edition of the book, which will appear in April, 2011.