

Chapter 1

September 1930

There's a storm brewing—a nasty one, judging by the heavy black clouds and high humidity. I dab my hankie against the back of my neck and glance at the long snake of men, waiting for a meal. Just yesterday, my best friend Bernie said that stock market crash finally filtered down to Georgia. She must be right. Today there're more men than usual. Where do they all come from? There can't be more than forty shanties in Hooverville, down by the Chattahoochee River. Yet somehow, hobos know if there's a soup line or a day job somewhere.

Ladle full and poised to pour, I peer into the eyes of one such man. Once proud, he stands slump-shouldered before me, hopelessness in his gaze, like Eeyore in *Winnie the Pooh*. That's why I do this—to offer a tiny ray of hope.

I empty the soup into his bowl and glance at the clouds. "We'll see rain by nightfall—the trailings of that hurricane in the gulf."

"Yes, ma'am. Uh, d'ya hear of any work, ma'am? I'll do anything."

Riding the rails in search of jobs is the story of so many lately, but I've already hired one man today to sweep the book shop. I can't afford another.

"Bona Allen Tannery in Buford has day work." I dip my ladle back into the pot. "I don't know about full-time jobs. See Mr. Teague at the last table." I point toward the picnic area. "He's over yonder—the one wearing a tan fedora. He's here for that very reason."

I'm rewarded with a speck of hope sparking behind his eyes. "Thank you, ma'am."

He moves on, and I pour soup into yet another bowl. Dip and pour. Dip and pour. Dip and pour. In the distance, an AWP train whistle blows. How I wish I could escape my mundane life and go somewhere exotic—somewhere I read about in books. Paris. Barcelona. Rome. Grandma's bloomers, I'd settle for Niagara Falls, even.

Sighing, I once again dip and pour. Finally, it's nearing noon, and the end of the line is only half a block away. Wait ... my gaze pauses on familiarity.

Will Slocomb.

My stomach twists like a tornado. I fell in love with him when we were in high school. I thought he loved me too, but when he graduated, he left town—and me. I heard he was back, but he's never come around. He's forgotten all about me.

Why haven't I forgotten about him?

Better yet, why is he in line? He's got a job—and a good one, I hear. He's a county deputy sheriff like he always wanted to be. I sneak another peek at him. He's out of uniform, wearing a worn-out shirt and dirty denim overalls. Did he lose his job? Keeping one eye on Will and a firm grip on my heart, I scoop vegetable soup into the next man's bowl.

The stranger dips his chin. "Thankee kindly, ma'am." He moves down the line for a chunk of bread.

When Will stands before me, our eyes meet. I find it hard to tear my gaze away. I'm lost in the depth of his gorgeous, golden-brown peepers. Just like I used to be. This is *not* good.

He peers at me, his brow furrows, then recognition brightens his eyes. “Christy?” He glances around and lowers his voice to a whisper. “Still in the book shop?”

All I can manage is a nod.

“I’ll come by.”

I open my mouth to ask him why, but a small shake of his head and a wink stops my words. Then, I realize what’s going on. He’s in disguise.

I fill the ladle, giving myself a mental shake. Handsome or not, if he left me without a word once, he’ll do it again. I empty soup into his bowl and strive for nonchalance.

“Here you go, sir. Eat hearty.”

Who’s he following? I glance over my shoulder. Oh, I hope it isn’t that nice man I sent to see Walter Teague about a job. That would be horribly sad. Well, now, how strange. He took a seat at an empty table. He leans over his bowl like he’s protecting it against someone bent on stealing his soup. He should know about stealing—stealing hearts, that is. I shove Will Slocomb out of my mind and close my heart’s door.

“Ma’am?” A man stands before me with his bowl extended.

“Sorry, I was gathering wool.” I fill his bowl and soon enough, I serve the last man. It’s a good thing too because my soup pot’s empty. As usual, the good Lord has provided enough. Aunt Nell will be tickled pink to hear it.

My pal Edith, who’s the bread dispenser, stops by my table. She has a glow about her, and her grin is infectious. Some people say it’s due to being a newlywed. I do a double-take. She’s cut her strawberry blond hair. It’s adorable. Parted on one side, it shows off her beautiful curls. She looks like one of those movie stars from Hollywood.

“I adore your new hair-do.”

“Thanks. I hope the rain holds off till I get home.” She peers into the empty pot. “Isn’t it strange how we always seem to have just enough? Except bread. We have leftovers.” She holds up a bagful. “Like the five loaves in the Bible. I wonder...” Her head tilts. “Do you think if we gave out fish, we’d have leftovers of that, too?”

Like Bernie, Edith grew up here and we’ve been friends since babyhood. She’s apple pie and firecrackers. Her husband, George, has his hands full with her.

Chuckling, I pick up my soup pot, balancing it on my hip. “I don’t know, but Aunt Nell always manages to make the exact right amount. I know she prays first, and there’s not even enough left for Barkis to lick the pot.”

Edith mops her brow with a hankie as she eyes me. “So, you’re keeping the dog?”

“It’s been over two months, and no one has claimed him. I can’t understand it, because he’s the sweetest thing. He was so skinny, it’s obvious he’d been on his own for a while.”

She shakes her head. “You are the easiest touch in the county.” Her chastisement is softened by her smile. “And I adore his name. It suits him. Did you pull it from *David Copperfield*?”

I hitch the soup pot higher on my hip. “You know me well. Speaking of *Copperfield*, are you coming to book club tonight?”

“As long as the storm doesn’t get too bad, I wouldn’t miss it.” She waves and heads toward the church doors to leave the bread in the kitchen. “I’ve got something to show your Aunt Nell. See you at seven.”

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I deposit our soup pot in the kitchen behind the book shop. Originally, this place was a general store with living quarters above it. Back when it was built, kitchens were in the yard, separate from the main building. I’m forever grateful to whoever persuaded the builder to design it with the kitchen on the back porch. Ours sits to one side of a large veranda, leaving ample space for sitting out on warm evenings.

After pumping water into the pot, I leave it in the sink to soak. Just before I step through the doorway, I spy a ball of yarn on the counter. A partially knitted item lays over the ball with two knitting needles stuck through it all. The sight makes me smile. Aunt Nell is rarely without her knitting—except when she absentmindedly lays it down.

I snatch up her work and enter my home—the TaleSpin Book Shop. I take a deep breath, inhaling the aroma of adventure and faraway places—along with lemon oil and old wood. There are so many mysteries in the world, and I want to read about them all. And maybe, if I’m lucky, experience one.

Barkis woofs a greeting and runs to get a thorough petting. I set Aunt Nell’s knitting on the small table by my office door and squatting, I run my hands over the little Scotty dog. From the moment I took him in, the bond between us grew strong and tangible. “Have you been a good boy?” His ears perk. “You have?” I rise. “Where’s Aunt Nell?”

The pup runs to the basement door and barks. His intelligence amazes me. I stick my head in the doorway.

“Yoo-hoo, Aunt Nell, I’m back.” I pick up my latest read, flipping the pages to find my bookmark. I’m eager to get back to the heroine’s adventure in Paris.

My aunt’s muffled voice floats up the stairs. “I’ll be right there. I’m digging through some old boxes for books we can use in the children’s library.”

I nearly forgot about the lending library. Sugar Hill School doesn’t have one, and Buford doesn’t either. The closest library is all the way down in Norcross.

“Do you need help, Aunt Nell?” I snap my book shut and set it back on the table, then pull off my hat, tossing it onto the newel post. I’ll take it upstairs in a bit.

“No, sugar, I’m fine. I’ll be up in two shakes of a squirrel’s tail.”

Since I promised Janette Davis, the teacher at the tiny school—and another of my gal-pals—I’d find some children’s books, I cross to the shelf holding those. I can add a few of Daddy’s too. He wrote the most mesmerizing mysteries and charming children’s books. Running my fingers over the spines of the books, I stop on *The Cicada’s Song*, by J. Quincy Adams. It was my favorite of all Daddy’s. I pull it out for the library.

As a child, I didn't know my daddy was a famous author. I only knew he could spin a tale like nobody else. I grew up in this book shop. When I inherited the business, I changed its name to TaleSpin to honor my daddy.

Aunt Nell's shoes clack on the stairs, pulling me from my memories as she ascends from the basement. Barkis announces her arrival with a joyful yap. Her housedress, made from a blue floral printed flour sack, accentuates her dark blue eyes. Curly hair, parted in the middle, spills onto the sides of her forehead. My aunt's perpetually happy face grins even when she frowns. Her roots are deep in Georgia soil and the good Lord. She can bear all our burdens with room left over.

She sets an armload of books on a side table. "How was the soup line today?" She gives Barkis a treat from her pocket, where she stows broken dog biscuits.

"It was long, but as usual, you made the exact right amount. Nobody got turned away—which reminds me, did the man I hired come by and sweep the shop?" I bend and peer beneath a book case. No dust. That's good.

"Yes, and he did a good job. I paid him a dollar and gave him a loaf of bread and a chunk of cheese."

He'll eat well tonight. I straighten. "Thank you." I run my fingers over the titles in the stack she brought upstairs. Two by Beatrix Potter, a selection of Raggedy Ann books, and *The Milly Molly Mandy Storybook*. "I was sure we had at least one copy of *Dr. Doolittle*." It's a must for boys.

"We do, but I didn't want to risk a tumble on the stairs balancing too many." Her breath comes in little wheezy huffs.

That wheeze is new. Auntie turned sixty this year. If anything happens to her—tears sting behind my eyes. *Don't cry! Nobody loves a crybaby*.

I blink and clear my throat. "Are you all right? Should I call Doc Fairbanks?" Not that we have any money to pay him.

She waves away my concern. "I'm just slightly winded from moving around those boxes." She clears her throat. "It looks like a tornado went through there. John Quincy wasn't the neatest person when he was alive. The basement needs a good sorting out."

Aunt Nell drops in one of the club chairs we have grouped in the center of the shop to invite people to sit and read a few pages of a possible purchase. Barkis jumps into her lap.

"It's ragweed that makes me wheeze." She pulls a hankie from her sleeve. "Since the drought finally broke, it's come back with a vengeance." She sneezes and Barkis takes great interest in her nose blowing.

I lean against the counter. "As long as you're sure that's all it is." I check the last book in her pile. "By the way, several of those old tomes of Daddy's are quite rare. A few are even first editions." They're also my inheritance. He made sure I knew that, but with Aunt Nell being so absentminded, I'd best remind her.

"I can hear Daddy now." I lower my chin. "'Christy,' he'd say, 'they will only go up in value, so don't sell them until you must.'"

“Your daddy was a wise man.”

I move the children's books to a half bookcase I set aside for the lending library, then grab a tablet and pencil to start a list of what I deem “must-reads” for children. I add *The Secret Garden*. No school library would be complete without it. But it's lacking books for older children and teens. I note that on the list.

After a moment or two, Aunt Nell pushes Barkis off her lap and is on her feet again. At the desk by the front door, she removes a ledger book from beneath its counter. “I've made a couple of pages in here for the lending library. I'll list all the books, then we can make sure we know who checks out which and when it's returned.” She stares for a moment, her right eye twitching. “Are you sure this is a good idea? We could sell these.”

I shake my head but smile and cross to her side. “This economic depression has even hit the schools. They don't have money for anything than a few bare essentials. How can children learn to love reading without storybooks to capture their imaginations?” I nod at the ledger. “Besides, we're creating future customers.”

“There is that.” She makes a final entry, closes her ledger, then surveys the shop. “Do you have any idea how many will be at book club tonight? We'll need to pull out more chairs.”

“Nearly everyone, I should imagine. Unless the storm turns ugly.” I mentally count as I give Aunt Nell my list to slip inside the ledger. “I'm fixing to set out a couple of extra chairs. Did you remember Cora's Aunt Clara is joining us?”

“I hoped she would. We have one of her mysteries on the list to read.” She glances sidelong at me. “I've been studying sign language with Cora for the past couple of months. I want to be able to know what her aunt is saying without bothering her or Fizzie.”

“You're an inspiration—always learning.”

With one finger, Aunt Nell taps her temple. “Keeping old age at bay.”

From her lips to God's ear. I pull back a club chair, widening the circle. Barkis, certain this is a game, growls and plays “attack the chair leg.”

Aunt Nell rests her hands on the back of one. “Let me help you with these.”

While she duck-walks the club chair back so it's on an even plane with mine, I bring two folding chairs from my small office at the back of the shop. Soon, they're in place and have her approval.

“How many did you say are coming?”

“We have enough chairs, Auntie.”

“Good.” She gives one a final push with her hip, moving an occasional table over a couple of inches. “I'll get cushions for the folding ones.”

She takes a step then stops. “Wait, I forgot something.” Barkis promptly sits. Aunt Nell frowns, taps a finger against her cheekbone, then after a moment brightens. “Ah yes, I remember now. The salesman from George Doran Company came by. He showed me their new publishing catalogue. I looked it over and made some recommendations for you. I left the list on your desk.”

“Are any of them children's books?”

“A few. They looked like good ones.”

I open the cabinet beneath the cash register at the front desk. “Thank you. I’ll take a look and call him.” I blindly search the dark cavern of the lower shelf, until my fingers grasp the feather duster. I swish it over the books’ spines then the shelves. “I’m excited about tonight. I’m eager to continue reading *The Good Earth*.”

“I am, too. But right now, I’m fixing to go pick some herbs so I can start on supper.” With her knitting in one hand, she exits to the porch. The screen door bangs shut behind her.

While she does that, I go to my office to get the rent money ready. It’s due on Tuesday, and our landlady doesn’t tolerate late payments. From my desk, I retrieve the cigar box from my bottom drawer and open it.

It’s empty. The money’s gone.