



THE SECRET LIFE

by Elizabeth McDavid Jones

Chapter 2

A Figure in the Window



The story so far: Susan and her younger sister Helen walked home and were alarmed when they saw someone in the window of their apartment. Their mother was still at work.

“Do you think someone’s broken in?” Helen’s eyes were large as saucers.

“Maybe our eyes are playing tricks on us,” said Susan.

“That’s not our imagination.” Helen pointed to a shadowy figure that had just appeared in the window. There was someone in their flat. Fear knotted Susan’s stomach. She glanced around, hoping to see a policeman. But the streets were empty.

Rain was falling in sheets now. Helen was soaked, and shivering.

Like Dad the night he took sick. And he was soon dead from pneumonia. Susan had to get Helen inside. They would have to go to the Cochrans’ and wait till Mum came home. Mum would know what to do. Up four flights of stairs and they were standing outside the Cochrans’ door.

We’re safe now, Susan thought. But now Susan wondered whether their fears would sound ridiculous to the Cochrans. Especially to Russell. He was one of Susan’s best friends, but he dearly loved to tease.

“Let’s not say anything about prowlers,” Susan began. Then Mrs. Cochran opened the door.

“There’s someone in our flat!” Helen cried. “Robbers!”

“We heard something in our flat, is all,” Susan said.

“You girls are soaked.” Mrs. Cochran was already stripping off their coats. “Tis only your boarder. She got here early, and I let her in with the spare key.”

Susan felt silly. Why hadn’t she thought of that? Susan saw Russell, his face in a textbook, laughing. She pretended not to notice him. “Where’s Lucy, Mrs. Cochran? We ought to get home and start dinner for the boarder.” “Lucy’s napping. You girls toast in front of the stove while I get her.”

Susan sat down and let her thoughts drift to the boarder -- Miss Rutherford, from England. How would it feel to have a stranger living with them in their cramped three-room flat? The boarder was to have Mum’s room, and Mum would sleep in the closet off the kitchen. Susan hated to think of Mum sleeping there while a stranger took over the room Mum

and Dad had shared. But Mum always said you do what you have to and make the best of it.

Then Mrs. Cochran emerged from the bedroom carrying three-year-old Lucy.

The girls left the Cochrans’ and stepped out into the freezing hallway. Lucy instantly announced she was cold and hungry. “I want some butter bread,” she whimpered.

The bread! Susan had left it at the Cochrans, but she wasn’t about to go back after it. But wait a minute. Wasn’t that meat cooking that Susan smelled? Drifting from their flat? “Something smells like roast,” Helen said. “Maybe the boarder’s fixing roast for dinner.”

“Maybe.” Susan’s mind was racing. Where on earth did the boarder get meat? Not in the empty O’Neal icebox. Susan pushed their door open. There was a pot bubbling on the stove, but no sign of any boarder.

“There’s no one here,” said Helen.

“Doesn’t appear to be,” Susan said. She was already checking the other rooms.

“The table’s even set for us,” said Helen.

“Maybe it’s elves,” Lucy piped.

“Well, I used to pretend I was an elf,” came a voice from the hallway. Then across the threshold stepped a young woman in a wide-brimmed hat, her eyes twinkling. “My name’s Beatrice Rutherford,” she said in her British accent.

“You can call me Bea. May I come in?”

Susan wanted to say, No, go back to England. But of course she couldn’t, so she stepped aside for Bea to pass. “Thank you, love. Since I arrived early, I picked up some things for dinner—a leg of lamb, some carrots and onions. Enough chatter, though. You must be hungry. We’ll eat straightaway.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Mum?” Susan asked.

“There’s plenty and more, love. Your mum would want you fed.”

The girls bolted down the meat and vegetables, and even took seconds. Bea was bright and cheery. Lucy and Helen were quickly taken with her, and even Susan couldn’t help enjoying herself. Soon Lucy’s head was nodding.

“Let me get this girl into bed,” Bea exclaimed.

“No!” Lucy’s head popped up. “I’m not sleepy!”

“Why, I didn’t mean you, dearie. I was talking about myself. I’ve had a long day. Would you sit in my lap and listen to a song while I rock?” Bea began to sing. Halfway through the song, Lucy was asleep.

Bea tiptoed into the bedroom and put her in bed.

Then she washed the dishes while Susan and Helen started on their lessons. “Can’t very well let those boys show you up in class,” she said with a wink.

Susan pulled out her English book, but she couldn’t keep her mind on it. All she could think about was Bea—humming away. Susan liked Bea. She couldn’t help it.

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