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THE SECRET LIFE

by Elizabeth McDavid Jones

Chapter 3

A Secret



The story so far: The new boarder, Bea Rutherford, has arrived and greeted the girls warmly with dinner ready.

Soon afterward, Mum came dragging through the door.

"It's raining cats and dogs," she said.

Bea scurried to take off Mum's wet things. "You look like you swam home, love," she said.

"You must be Miss Rutherford." Mum smiled and held out her hand in greeting. "I hope my girls had a nice dinner ready when you got here."

"They gave me a lovely welcome," said Bea. "I just added the meat and onions to spice dinner up a bit. Sit down and try some."

Bea took pains to get Mum warm and dry, then sat with her. She told funny stories about her relatives back in England.

There was a knock at the door. Susan feared it was Lester Barrow, but it was only a man bringing Bea's trunk from the depot. Then Susan had to tell Mum about Lester.

"A plague take that Lester Barrow!" said Mum. "Perhaps if I give him three dollars more on payday, he'll wait for the rest."

"That's half your week's pay, Mum!"

"Yes, but what else can I do?"

"Ask for a raise," Bea said. "It sounds as if your boss is taking advantage of you, love."

"That he does. Mr. Riley pays us women half what he pays his male clerks," Mum sighed. "I just might ask for a raise."

Mum's words worried Susan. Discontent was dangerous down on the docks where Mom worked. She remembered Dad telling them about some longshoremen who'd made the mistake of complaining about conditions. The next day they didn't show up for work and no one ever saw them again.

"Mum, I'm not sure you should do that," Susan worried. "Remember those men Dad worked with who disappeared ..."

"You think the same thing might happen to me." Mum patted Susan's hand. "I don't think so. Mr. Riley's hard to work for, but he'd never do such things to a woman."

Then Bea asked if Susan would like to help her unpack. Susan followed Bea into "her" room and eagerly watched her unlock the huge trunk. She "oohed" as Bea

began unpacking embroidered linens and nightgowns of fine fabric.

"I know they're fancy," said Bea. "They were my mother's. Her family was wealthy, but the fortune's gone now. But enough about me. Tell me about your schoolwork."

"We have to read a novel and write an essay on it. I love reading, but I have to help out a lot here—"

Bea's voice held understanding. "Not much time to do the things you enjoy, is there?"

Susan shook her head.

"I love reading, too," said Bea. "What book do you have to read?"

"Middlemarch by George Eliot."

Bea's face lit up. "One of my favorite authors! I love Middlemarch. My copy is here in the trunk somewhere." Bea seemed so genuinely interested in her that Susan found herself chatting easily, while Bea handed her things from the trunk to put away. Then Bea lifted out a package tied in brown paper and gently pulled the paper away to reveal a photograph with a frame of rich, polished wood.

Curious, Susan leaned over Bea's shoulder to look. The photograph was of Bea and some other women, arm in arm.

The women, Bea said, were some of her good friends back in England. "They helped me find direction in my life when I needed it." She smiled and carefully placed the photograph on the nightstand.

Susan wondered what sort of direction the women had given Bea. Had that direction led her here, to New York City? After all, it was a little strange that Bea, with all her beautiful things, should choose to rent a room in this old building.

Bea was rummaging through her trunk. "Here it is," she said. "Middlemarch, by George Eliot. You'd never guess by the name, but George Eliot was a woman. She feared her writing wouldn't be taken seriously if it were known she was a woman, so she used a pen name. I like her because her female characters are women who know their own minds. They rely on themselves to get what they want."

Susan took the book and eagerly began to turn the pages. When she did, a folded piece of paper—it looked like a letter—fell onto the floor. As Susan reached to pick up the letter, her eye fell on the words *must be kept secret for now*.

"I wondered what I had done with that letter," Bea said, whisking it up quickly and stashing it in the drawer of the nightstand. Then she said brightly, "What do you think of the book?"

Lying in bed that night, Susan thought about Bea's letter and the words that she had seen: *must be kept secret for now*. It was glamorous to think of having, not an ordinary boarder, but a boarder with a secret. Susan's heart beat faster with the adventure of it, and she couldn't go to sleep for a long time.

Next Week, Chapter 4

Bluffing