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**THE SECRET LIFE**

by Elizabeth McDavid Jones

Chapter 4  
**Bluffing**



*The story so far: Susan likes Bea, the new boarder, but she has already discovered that Bea has a secret.*

In the morning, Susan couldn't resist telling Helen and Russell about Bea's secret. Helen guessed it was a secret engagement. Russell thought it might be a spy mission, though he admitted nothing that exciting was likely to happen on 26th Street.

As weeks passed, and cold gray September drew to a close, it wasn't so much Bea's secret that fascinated Susan as it was Bea herself. Bea seemed different from other women. Bea had a talent for making everyday things special. She was a wonderful cook, and she talked to Susan, in a way that made Susan feel she truly valued her opinion. Talking to Bea made the drudgery of Susan's chores seem almost fun as Bea worked alongside her. Bea also encouraged her to pursue her dream about college.

"If something is important to you," Bea said, "you can usually discover a way to achieve it."

Susan noticed that Bea was skillful at discovering ways to do what she wanted. She found a job at the Nabisco factory the first day she went out looking. Her presence had made a difference in the family. Mum seemed happier, and Bea and Mum stayed up late at night talking, as Susan drifted off to sleep every night.

October came to Chelsea, warm and golden. One day when Susan came home from school, she found Mum already home from work, slumped at the table, looking pale and hollow-eyed.

"Lester Barrow came to see me at work today," Mum said. "He told me our time is running out. We'll be moving to Five Points, I'm afraid."

"If he believes there's a chance of getting paid," Bea said, "he's not likely to throw you out. Am I right?"

"But he knows I can't pay."

"Ah, there's a secret to dealing with men like him. You appear calm and confident when you talk to him. Never show despair. Men like Lester will always use it against us." Susan wondered who he was.

Mum's brow furrowed. "I can't see Lester being fooled by a change in my attitude."

"I'm not thinking he'll be fooled, simply unsettled. He'll see you can't be frightened by his bullying," Bea explained. Susan wanted to believe Bea was right, but she was almost afraid for Mum to try what Bea suggested. What would

happen to Mum when Lester realized she had been stringing him along? Susan didn't want to think about it.

She asked to be excused and headed to the fire escape outside her window.

As soon as Susan stuck her head out her window, she saw Russell on his fire escape.

"Did I tell you about my new job at the barbershop over by Penn Central Station?" Russell asked.

Susan rolled her eyes. "Only two or three times."

In fact, Russell had been bragging about all the money he was making selling newspapers and shining shoes at the

barbershop after school.

An idea was taking shape in Susan's head, a tiny grain of an idea that grew with every word Russell said about his job. It was a way she could help Mum get caught up on the rent. "I'm glad your boss likes you, Russell. That means you can put in a word for me, so I can get a job with him, too. Mum's behind on the rent, and I'd really like to help her out." Russell looked at her as if she were a dunce. "There's no way Delaney's going to give a girl that job."

"But he may give it to me," Susan said, "if I pretend to be a boy."

"You're telling me that you want to go to Delaney disguised as a boy?"

"Sure. I'll wear one of your caps and an old pair of knickers. He'll never know the difference."

Russell chuckled "I like it. Old Delaney's always working us to death, taking tips that should be ours. When do you want to go?"

"You talk to him tomorrow," said Susan, "then I'll go down the day after."

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"So you're Sammy MacGowan?" Mr. Delaney peered over his spectacles at Susan.

Susan's heart thumped hard against her ribs. Russell's clothes itched, and his cap was too big on her head. She concentrated as hard as she could on Bea's words to Mum about showing confidence even when you didn't feel it. Then she answered boldly, "Yes, sir."

Delaney scowled. Could he tell she was a girl? Susan's palms sweated.

"You're Irish, aren't you?" Delaney asked.

Relief washed over her. Susan was used to dealing with people's prejudices about the Irish. "Yes, sir, but I work hard."

"You're small."

"I'm quick, sir."

"You think so? We'll see about that. You've got one day to prove yourself, boy. Any tips you make today, I keep. Here's the barber you'll be working for." He scribbled down the address.

Susan swallowed hard. 36th Street. One of the toughest neighborhoods in the city. It was called Hell's Kitchen.

Next Week, Chapter 5  
**Inside Hell's Kitchen**