



THE SECRET LIFE

by Elizabeth McDavid Jones

Chapter 12

Bea's Job



The story so far: Susan found out that Mum didn't go to take care of Aunt Blanche. Mum was seen at a café on Saturday morning. She is sure that Bea knows more than she is telling about Mum, so Susan decides to follow Bea to learn the truth.

Susan waited in the drugstore until she saw Bea come out of the tenement, still wearing that outlandish hat. Susan dogged Bea down the avenue twelve blocks to 14th Street, where Bea disappeared into a tall building with arched windows. Susan ducked inside, but there was no sign of Bea.

"Did a woman with a funny-looking hat go up just now?" she asked the elevator attendant.

"Yes, that woman went to the tenth floor."

"Can you take me there, please?"

The elevator jerked to the tenth floor.

Susan stepped into a hall lined with doors that had nameplates. Down the hall she went, scanning the plates for something that might tell her which door was the right one.

Then she saw it—Committee for Woman Suffrage! Susan cracked the door and peered in. The reception room was empty, but she heard voices—female voices—coming from an inner office. One of the voices was Bea's. Susan could hear most of the conversation. Something about some friends who were in trouble. Then Susan realized—they were discussing the suffragists who'd been arrested at the rally and jailed.

"The organization is getting valuable publicity," someone said.

"People are outraged at the way our women are being treated, charging them with inciting a riot and trying to slap long prison sentences on them," said someone else.

"And it's not that our sisters aren't willing to serve prison time for the cause," said a third voice. "We've all done it before."

Then Susan heard Bea speak. "But a serious problem's arisen. You remember the friend I told you about who had so much potential for aiding the cause?"

A chorus of voices rose in acknowledgement. Susan's heart pounded. Was Bea talking about Mum?

Bea continued slowly. "We were near the front of the crowd when the violence broke out. In the commotion, we got separated. I was set upon by a policeman with a club, who gave me a nasty beating. By then, my friend had

disappeared. Later, when I couldn't find her, I was certain she'd been arrested and carted away to jail, but—"

Jail! Mum arrested and taken to jail. Susan couldn't bear it. She crept out of the room, but the outer door creaked as she closed it.

"Who's there?" one of the voices called. Panicking, Susan tripped over a loose floor tile. Behind her, she heard Bea calling her. Susan hesitated only a second, but it was long enough for Bea to catch up with her.

"What are you doing here?" Bea's expression was pained.

"Maybe I should ask you," Susan flung back.

"This isn't the Nabisco factory, is it, Bea?"

"I can explain that—"

"With more lies?"

Bea looked stricken. "Susan, I had to have a cover for my work. You don't understand the opposition we're up against, from blokes like Lester Barrow. I couldn't pop into your flat and announce I was here to organize your neighborhood for suffrage."

"What do you mean?"

"We need the working class, Susan. We can't win the vote without their support. The movement's been upper and middle class until now, and it's failed. We need the masses, the immigrants, the working people. And the working class will listen only to their own.

"That's why I was sent to find someone from their own class to lead them—like your mother—to win them over. Me, a blue-blooded Brit, they'd never listen to. I needed to go among you, with a cover, until I could find those leaders. Working at the factory was my cover. I wouldn't have lied to you without reason, Susan."

Susan was trying to comprehend what Bea was saying, but all she could think about was the anguish Bea had put her through. "What was your reason for lying about where Mum was?"

Distress—and guilt—came to Bea's eyes. Susan blinked back tears. A part of her had been hoping that Bea's deceptions would turn out to be a simple mistake. Now Bea's guilty face had destroyed that hope.

"Tell me one thing, Bea. Where is my mother?"

Susan knew the answer, but she wanted to hear Bea tell her the truth just once.

"Oh, Susan, I don't know."

Another lie. Susan's throat ached. "I heard what you said about what happened to Mum. You've done nothing but lie to us since the day you came." Tears were coming fast. Susan bolted for the stairs. She heard Bea calling, but she didn't stop.

Susan didn't feel like going home, but she didn't know where else to go. She tried to gather her thoughts. There was no point to thinking more about Bea. The only thing that mattered was Mum. Susan had to think of a way to get Mum out of jail.

Who could she turn to?

Next Week, Chapter 13

Jail