

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Dahlias Get Down and Dirty

Elizabeth Lacy took off her floppy green straw garden hat and fanned herself with it. The late April sky was leaden gray and the young leaves on the live oak trees hung limp and unmoving in the languid Saturday afternoon air. Lizzy hadn't checked the thermometer beside the back door of the Darling Dahlias' clubhouse, but she'd bet dollars to doughnuts that the temperature was nudging ninety. And judging from the weight of the air and the way her blue blouse was sticking to her shoulders, the humidity was way up there, too. She glanced nervously toward the clouds in the west, which were tinged with a darker, more ominous purple. As she watched, a flash of lightning zigzagged from the base of the cloud.

Lizzy raised her voice to the women working in the large vegetable garden next to the clubhouse. All three of them—Ophelia Snow, Verna Tidwell, and Bessie Bloodworth—were club officers. Ophelia was the vice-president and secretary; Verna was treasurer; and Bessie was the newlyelected club historian.

“Hey, everybody. Let's finish up as soon as we can. We don't want to be out here in the open when that storm hits.”

Startled, Bessie put a hand to her back and straightened up, glancing toward the west. “Gracious, Liz,” she exclaimed. “That looks like a lollapalooza.” She frowned down at the row she was hoeing. “I guess these beans can wait. But we'd better plan on putting in some sort of trellis. Kentucky Wonders are like Jack's beanstalk. They aim for the skies. If we wait much

longer, we'll have a mess of snaky green vines all over the ground."

"Those are the seeds your cousin sent you from Birmingham?" Lizzy asked. Good seeds weren't always easy to buy. The best often came from friends and family.

Bessie nodded. "She saved them from her last year's garden. Says they're the best green beans she's ever grown."

"I'm sure we can come up with some cane poles and twine for a trellis," Lizzy said. She glanced back at the clouds. "But let's work on it later. I'm not worried about getting wet—we won't melt—but I don't like for us to be out in the garden when the lightning is flashing." She was remembering poor Mr. Burdette, who had been struck dead by lightning when he walked out to the pasture to bring the cows home for milking one afternoon. Spring storms could be violent.

Bessie gave the sky another apprehensive glance. "And let's hope for no hail," she said. "I'd sure hate to see all our little plants beaten to death."

"I've just put in two more rows of okra, Liz," Verna called, coming along the path. She turned and pointed toward the far side of the garden, where an unpainted board fence and a row of crepe myrtles marked the edge of the clubhouse property. "And there's room for three more rows. By the time we get done planting, there'll be enough okra to feed everybody in Darling."

"That's the point, isn't it?" Ophelia asked. "Enough for everybody?" Ophelia had a hoe in one hand and a rake in the other, and her round, sweet face was sweat-streaked and dirty.

"There can never be enough okra," Bessie said emphatically.

"I suppose," Ophelia said. To Lizzy, she added, "The last of the English peas will need to be picked in the next few days, Liz. They've stopped blooming, so that will be our final picking. And there are more carrots and beets to pull." She paused. "I hope everybody comes to help, the way they did last time. It's a lot more fun when we have a good turnout."

"Many hands make light work," Bessie observed sensibly, and Lizzy smiled. She imagined Bessie's brain as a massive library of adages that were filed under various headings, at least one for every occasion. Of course, as the unofficial historian for the town of Darling, Bessie had

many other things filed away in her mind, such as important events in the past, historically important sites, and family trees.

Verna sniffed. "It would be nice if we would *all* show up," she remarked, with an edge to her voice.

Lizzy knew what Verna was thinking. The Dahlias had hosted a work party two weeks before, and thirteen out of the fourteen club members had attended. (Mrs. George E. Pickett Johnson was the missing person. She had offered to send her colored maid, Flossie, but Lizzy had declined. She knew Flossie and liked her, but she thought that Mrs. Johnson should come herself, not send her paid help.) Some of the Dahlias had picked and shelled peas, some had harvested lettuce and the last of the spring spinach, and some had pulled carrots, beets, and green onions. There was plenty for the Dahlias to share, as well as a big batch of fresh produce for the Saturday-morning farmers market, where they had a table. What they didn't sell, they gave away when the market closed. Lizzie had noticed that some of the poorer folks hung around until closing time and were glad to get whatever they could.

"We'll need to organize another garden party, I guess," Lizzy said. Organizing came easily to her—the reason, she supposed, that she'd just been elected for another term as club president. "This time, maybe Mrs. Johnson will come."

"Don't forget that we also have to organize a planting party at the cemetery next week," Bessie cautioned. "Miss Rogers will never forgive us if we don't get those Confederate roses into the ground before the Confederate Day ceremony."

"*Hibiscus mutabilis*," Verna and Ophelia said in unison, and they all laughed. Miss Rogers, the town librarian and a longtime Dahlia, always insisted on using the Latin names for plants. Two years before, she had taken cuttings from everyone's garden and propagated fourteen Confederate roses (not really roses, but hibiscus).- The young shrubs were now large and sturdy enough to be planted along the front fence at the Darling Cemetery. And since Confederate Day (an important Darling holiday, as it is across the South) was coming up shortly, it was time to get

the plants settled in their new home. Summer would be along soon—not a good time for transplanting.

Verna looked up at the sky and held out her hand, palm up. “Was that a raindrop?”

Lizzy grabbed the rake from Ophelia. “Come on, girls—let’s put the tools away and cool off with some iced tea. Maybe the storm will blow over before we’re ready to head for home.”

A few minutes later, the four Dahlias were sitting around the green-painted table in the clubhouse kitchen, a pitcher of mint-flavored tea and a plate of Dr. George Washington Carver’s peanut cookies in front of them. The cookies had been baked by Roseanne, the cook at Magnolia Manor, Bessie Bloodworth’s boardinghouse for “genteel older ladies,” next door to the Dahlias’ clubhouse.

“That was good work this afternoon, ladies,” Lizzy said, pouring the tea. She looked around the table, thinking how much she cherished these three friends. She enjoyed all the Dahlias—like different varieties of roses, each one had her own particular beauty, while some had a few thorns. But the three sitting around the table with her this afternoon were very special.

“That was *hard* work,” Bessie said, pulling an embroidered hanky out of her sleeve and wiping her sweaty face with it. “But as the saying goes, we can’t plow a field by turning it over in our minds.”

Gray-haired Bessie was twenty years older than the others, but she could work as long and as hard as any of the younger women in the club. She always said she’d grown up with a hoe in her hand and okra and sunflower seeds in her pocket. Everybody valued her gardening experience, especially now that the Dahlias had decided to start raising vegetables in a big way.

Lizzy had been on the lookout for projects that would keep the club growing and working together, and the vegetable garden—a natural, really—had been her idea. The front yard of the clubhouse they had inherited from Dahlia Blackstone had once been filled with azaleas, roses, and hydrangeas, and behind the house had been almost an acre of beautiful flowers, sweeping down toward a clump of woods and a clear spring surrounded by bog iris, ferns, and pitcher

plants. Mrs. Blackstone's garden had been so beautiful that it had been featured in newspapers as far away as New Orleans and Miami, and visitors from all over the state had come to Darling to see it.

But by the time the Dahlias took it over, the flowers and shrubs were disconsolate and abandoned and the garden looked as if it had completely given up hope. Determined to rescue it and restore its former beauty, the members had pulled on their gardening gloves and set to work. They repaired the trellises for the Confederate jasmine and mandevilla and cut back the exuberant cross vine and honeysuckle on the fence. They cleared the curving perennial borders so that the Shasta daisies, phlox, iris, asters, and larkspur could stretch out and bloom. They divided and replanted the Easter lilies, spider lilies, oxblood lilies, and Mrs. Blackstone's favorite orange ditch lilies. They also pruned Mrs. Blackstone's many roses—the climbers, teas, ramblers, shrubs, and the unruly yellow Lady Banks, who had spread her sweeping skirts of green branches across the back corner. ("Give a Lady Banks an inch and she'll take a mile," Earlyynn Biddle always said.)

But when all that was done, Lizzy didn't let the ladies rest on their laurels. Next door to the clubhouse, on the corner, was a large vacant lot that had once been Mrs. Blackstone's vegetable garden—the perfect place to grow vegetables. They had hired old Mr. Norris and his bay gelding, Racer, to plow the ground. Racer's name was sort of a joke, because he was as slow as molasses on a cold January morning. But once the old horse made up his mind to get to work, he was all business, and Mr. Norris pocketed a few dollars every spring by plowing and harrowing the town gardens.

After Racer had finished plowing and harrowing the ground, the Dahlias got started, raking the soil smooth and marking the rows for the corn, green beans, collards, Swiss chard, okra, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, squash, melons, cucumbers, and sweet potatoes they intended to plant. Lizzy had pointed out that the money they earned from the sale of their vegetables could go to fund other projects, such as the herb garden they were planning at the Retirement Haven, the old folks' home out on Rayburn Road, and the new landscaping they hoped to put in around the

courthouse.

With that incentive, all the Dahlias were eager to pitch in and help. All, that is, except for Voleen Johnson, wife of the town's banker. Mrs. Johnson didn't like to get dirt under her manicured fingernails. She did agree, however, to take money at the Saturday market, although she wore her fanciest hat and a pair of dainty white gloves to keep the dirty coins and bills from soiling her hands.

"Hard work and *hot* work," Ophelia put in cheerfully. "Wonder if it's going to be like this all summer. I swear, it must have been ten degrees above normal all this week." She got up from the table and turned on the small electric fan, aiming the cooling breeze at the group at the table. "If it gets any hotter, I'm going to have to sit down at the Singer and run up a couple of cotton sundresses for Sarah. Mrs. Snow gave me some material for them." She gave her head a rueful shake. "That girl is growing faster'n a weed. Seems like I'm always letting her hems down another inch."

Ophelia was one of the younger Dahlias. She and Jed Snow (the mayor of Darling and the owner of Snow's Farm Supply) had two children, Sam, a boisterous fourteen, and Sarah, just eleven but taller than her mother. A dedicated mother and a talented seamstress, Ophelia made their clothes instead of buying them at Mann's Mercantile, which saved quite a lot. She was also raising chickens so she could sell eggs at the Saturday market. Of course, Mrs. Hancock, at Hancock's Groceries, would buy the eggs, but Ophelia could earn more by selling them herself. Lizzy knew that every penny counted for the Snows right now, because business at the Farm Supply was falling off, and what trade there was, was mostly on credit. The farmers didn't have much cash money for seed and fertilizer and none at all for new equipment, which meant that it was lean times for the Snows—and for all the merchants who depended on the farmers' trade.

Verna Tidwell tilted her glass and drank. "Normal," she muttered darkly, pouncing on Ophelia's word. "These days, I wonder what normal is. I'm not sure *anybody* knows. And I'm not talking about the temperature, either."

Unlike Ophelia, who had a reputation for smiling through even the most calamitous events, Verna had a much darker view of human nature. She had a habit of peering “under the rocks,” as she put it, on the lookout for anything suspicious. Her prickly skepticism put some people off—but not Lizzy, who admired her friend’s sharp eyes and even sharper mind. Verna ably employed her talents as manager of the Cypress County probate clerk and treasurer’s office, in the county courthouse. That’s where she heard the whispers about who was doing this or that or the other bad thing and what was going to happen when word of these misdeeds got to the wrong (or the right) person.

And since Verna never expected to find anybody behaving any better than anybody else, she was never disappointed or distressed when she discovered that so-and-so had lied about his property boundaries or siphoned twenty gallons of fuel oil out of the tank behind the county road maintenance building or was operating a whiskey still over on Shiner’s Knob.

“Comes with the territory,” she always said in a matter-of-fact sort of way. “If you don’t want to smell folks’ dirty laundry, you should stay out of the probate clerk’s office. That’s where it all hangs out.”

But in the past couple of weeks, Lizzy had noticed that Verna’s expression was darker than usual, and more frowning. She was unusually silent, too, and there were fewer barbed remarks. Something was troubling Verna, and Lizzy could guess what it was. In the law firm of Moseley and Moseley where she worked, she often picked up bits of courthouse gossip. She’d heard that there was some sort of trouble—serious trouble—with the county treasurer’s accounts. But while Verna usually shared her personal life with Lizzy, she was always closemouthed about things that went on at the office. So Lizzy didn’t ask what was going on. If Verna felt the need to talk, she’d do it—in her own sweet time.

Now, as if to endorse Verna’s dark view of *normal*, there was a flash of lightning and an almost instantaneous clap of thunder so loud that it rattled the windows in the old house. All four of the Dahlias jumped.

“Sakes alive,” Bessie exclaimed. “That one was too close for comfort. Wonder if it struck somewhere here in town.” She shook her head. “One year, I remember, the Free Will Baptist Church was struck by lightning. Burned right down to the ground while the preacher and his flock were having a baptizing in the river. When they got back, there was nothing left but ashes.”

Lizzy chuckled. This was the kind of story that Bessie always came up with. She knew more local history than anybody.

“It’ll be over soon,” Ophelia reassured them. “Give it fifteen minutes and the sun will be shining again. That’s what normally happens around here.”

“I know what normal is,” Lizzy said, offering the plate of Roseanne’s cookies to Verna. “It’s sitting here with my best friends in the whole world, drinking tea and eating cookies, waiting for a storm to blow over.”

“Afraid we’ll have to wait a good long time for *this* storm to blow over,” Verna remarked as she took a couple of cookies. Lizzy guessed that she wasn’t talking about the rain that was beginning to lash furiously at the kitchen window. Verna was thinking about whatever was bothering her. Or about the dismal things that were happening around the country—people losing their jobs, families losing their homes, old folks losing their savings. Children going hungry, lots of people going broke. Hard times.

If that’s what it was, Lizzy had to agree with Verna’s gloomy assessment. As Mr. Moseley’s secretary, she met plenty of folks who had gotten themselves into some kind of financial trouble and needed a lawyer to help them get out. These days, it seemed like most people’s troubles occurred because they were trying to hold on to what they had or get what they needed, and they hadn’t gone about either in the right way. Mr. Moseley had recently agreed to represent (pro bono, without a fee) a fourteen-year-old vagrant from New Jersey who had ridden a Louisville & Nashville freight into town. The boy was accused of stealing five green peaches from Earl Ayers’ peach orchard, out on Pascagoula Road. Mr. Ayers was extremely proud of his prize-winning peaches (most of which—as everybody in Darling very well knew—went to making bootleg



peach brandy, a local favorite). He pressed charges against the boy for theft. The case looked like a winner for the prosecution, and it was expected that the thief would get at least thirty days in jail.

But Mr. Moseley had pointed out that there were usually about sixty-five peaches in a bushel of Mr. Ayers' finest early variety, and that the current market rate was one dollar and forty-two cents per bushel.

"Which means, Your Honor," he said to the judge (old Judge McHenry, who was known to have a very hard heart), "that each one of Mr. Ayers' splendid peaches—even when they are ripe and juicy—is worth just a little over two cents. Which further means that the three green peaches that poor, hard-luck kid ate and the two he stuffed into his overall pockets are worth a dime." He fished in his pocket and pulled out a coin, holding it up. "One dime, Your Honor. One thin silver dime, for five green peaches. Why, you couldn't *pay* me to eat five green peaches for a dime. For a dollar, either." He paused, scratching his head. "Way things are, though," he allowed, "I might do it if you gave me five."

A ripple of laughter had run around the courtroom. Old Judge McHenry had no doubt intended to throw the book at the boy. But he probably felt he'd look pretty silly if he did, so he directed Mr. Ayers to let the criminal work off his crime rather than going to jail.

At which point Mr. Moseley reminded the court that Mr. Ayers paid his peach-pickers a dollar a day for ten hours' work. At this rate, the boy ought to be sentenced to work for an hour. Which the youngster did, then hopped the next outbound freight.

Afterward, Mr. Ayers, highly incensed, had come over to the law office and threatened to get even with Mr. Moseley for making him look bad. That's what things were coming to these days. Lizzy thought that Verna was right: it would a long time before this storm would blow over and people got back to back to normal. Which in Darling meant being nice to one another again.

"Well," Bessie said with her usual stout common sense, "storms come and storms go." She looked up at the ceiling and raised her voice triumphantly over the sound of the rain pounding on

the roof. “But you can rain as hard as you want to. Y’hear? We’ve fixed the roof! We don’t have to worry about leaks.”

When the Dahlias had inherited Mrs. Blackstone’s old house, the garden wasn’t the only thing that had been in need of some tender loving care—and a sizeable investment of money, as well. The old shingle roof on the house had been in such terrible shape that the Dahlias kept busy emptying buckets every time it rained. And the plumbing was even worse. They couldn’t flush without fear of overflowing, so they couldn’t flush at all. Until they could afford to get the toilet fixed, Bessie had invited them to use the Magnolia Manor bathroom next door. Afford to get it fixed? They were delighted to have Mrs. Blackstone’s house, but there wasn’t a penny for huge expenditures like roofing and plumbing.

But then—hallelujah and praise the Lord!—they had unearthed a buried cache of family silver, hidden by Mrs. Blackstone’s mother to keep it from falling into the greedy hands of the damn Yankees as they stormed through Alabama near the end of the War Between the States. With the silver, they had found an emerald bracelet, a pair of pearl earrings, a diamond ring, and a velvet bag containing ten gold double eagles that were worth a great deal more than their twenty-dollar face value. The lucky find brought enough to fix the leaky roof and repair the plumbing, with some left over in what Lizzy called the club’s “Treasure Fund.”

Ophelia gave Verna small smile. “Or to put it a different way,” she said, “there’s always a silver lining to every dark cloud. All we have to do is look for it.”

“And if there isn’t,” Verna replied with a shrug, “you’ll get a bucket of silver paint and slap it on. Ophelia, you are the very most optimistic person I have ever met.” Seeing that she had hurt her friend’s feelings, she softened her tone. “Not that it’s bad to be hopeful, of course. I’m sorry. I apologize.”

Ophelia looked down. “I do try to look on the bright side,” she said, her voice thin and strained. “But sometimes it’s hard.” She swallowed. “To tell the honest truth, Jed says things aren’t looking just real good where the Farm Supply is concerned. So I’m a little concerned.”

Lizzy looked at her friend in surprise. Ophelia usually kept her family finances to herself, even when others were discussing theirs. She must really be worried about the situation. But worrying didn't do any good, of course. Like other businesses in Darling—Hancock's Groceries and Musgrove's Hardware and the Kilgore Dodge dealership—Snow's Farm Supply depended on local trade. If people didn't have money in their pockets, they couldn't spend it. And if they couldn't spend it, the businesses went broke. Already, one of the two printing companies in town had closed, and places like Mann's Mercantile were cutting back on employees. Of the businesses on the town square, only the diner and the Palace Theater were thriving. It seemed that people could usually find thirty-five cents for a plate of ribs and a piece of pie or a quarter to see a romantic comedy and laugh away their worries for an evening.

"I don't reckon we're any different than anybody else in Darling, though," Ophelia went on bravely. "Everybody seems to be having trouble making ends meet these days." She straightened her shoulders and put on a quavering smile. "But we'll get through. It helps to know that we're not the only ones."

Lizzy patted Ophelia's hand, knowing what it took for her friend to confess her family's troubles. "We're always glad for your optimism, Opie," she said. "If it weren't for you, we'd probably all be as gloomy as Verna."

"I'm not gloomy," Verna protested. "I'm just realistic, that's all. I'm pragmatic. I think we should all get down and dirty with the truth. If we've got to deal with a problem, it's better to know exactly what it is than to try to cover it up or pretend it doesn't exist." Lizzy thought she sounded determined, and wondered if she was thinking about the thing that was worrying her, whatever it was. Maybe she would say something more.

But Verna only handed Ophelia the plate of cookies. "Here, Opie. Have another cookie. It'll make you feel better. Cookies always do the trick."

"Thank you," Ophelia said in a small voice, and took a cookie.

Putting down the plate, Verna narrowed her eyes. "Wait a minute," she said, cocking her

head. "Did I just hear a drip?"

"It can't be," Bessie exclaimed. "We have a new roof!"

"You're hearing things, Verna," Ophelia said. "Or imagining them."

"I know a drip when I hear one," Verna said flatly. "And that's a drip."

Lizzy looked up. It was still raining but the wind had calmed a little and the thunder was moving to the east. The storm was rapidly blowing over. But there was no mistaking the *plink-plank-plunk* that they could all hear very plainly now.

Dismayed, she looked toward the stove, where the worst of the leaks had been before the roof was repaired. And there it was. A puddle of rainwater on their new blue and white kitchen linoleum.

"It's a drip, all right," she said.

As if to prove the point, three more *plinks* followed in quick succession.

"That's not fair!" Ophelia wailed. "How much did we pay Mr. Carlson to put on our new roof?"

"Enough so it shouldn't be leaking again," Verna replied bleakly.

"It never rains but it pours," Bessie said sadly, shaking her head. "I hope it's not an omen."

But it was. The Dahlias didn't know it, but things were going to get worse before they got better.

Much, much worse.