

Excerpt from Chapter One

The Naked Ladies

By Susan Wittig Albert

Elizabeth Lacy opened the small shed behind the Dahlias' Clubhouse and stowed the rakes, hoes, and spades inside. She closed the door, took off her floppy-brimmed hat, and turned to Verna Tidwell.

"The garden looks really swell, don't you think?" she said, surveying the result of the afternoon's hard work.

"Well, it ought to," Verna retorted crisply, stripping off her green cotton gardening gloves. Her brown hair was short and combed straight back from her face in a characteristically no-fluff style. "We've poured a lot of time and sweat into this place over the past few months. How many Dahlias were out here, slaving in the sunshine this afternoon? I counted ten. That's a good turnout."

Lizzy stretched down and touched her toes, working out the kink in her back that came from kneeling in front of the phlox bed for two hours, pulling weeds. "Ten is right. Voleen Johnson said she had company, and Ophelia's boy was playing in the baseball tournament at the fairgrounds. Oh, and Myra May had to work the switchboard because Violet is up in Memphis." She straightened up and stretched her hands over her head. "Her younger sister just had a baby and Violet's helping out. Myra May said the sister isn't doing too well."

Verna stuck her gloves in the pocket of her gardening skirt, wrinkling her nose distastefully. "Have you ever noticed that Voleen always manages to have company on

one of our work days? If you ask me, I think she invites them on purpose, so she doesn't have to come over here and risk breaking one of her fingernails, all pretty and polished up."

"You might be right," Lizzy said, in a noncommittal tone. She didn't like to criticize other people because you never knew when they might be criticizing you, and they might not be as nice as you were. But it was definitely true that Mrs. George E. Pickett Johnson rarely lent her perfectly manicured hands to the task when it came to the Dahlias' garden. Or her own beautiful garden, for that matter, since she had a colored man who did all the work for her. The George E. Picketts were among Darling's hereditary nobility and Mrs. Pickett's garden was a showplace, with never a leaf or a twig out of place.

"We managed all right without her," Lizzy added, looking around appreciatively. "The garden hasn't looked so pretty for quite a few years. Poor Mrs. Blackstone couldn't do much in her last years."

The small white frame house the garden club had inherited from Mrs. Dahlia Blackstone sat fairly close to Camellia Street, and behind the white picket fence out front, the yard was mostly hydrangeas and azaleas and roses. But behind the house, a large garden swept down toward a large magnolia tree, a clump of woods, and a small, clear spring smothered in ferns, bog iris, and pitcher plants. This garden had once been so beautiful that it had been written up in newspapers all over the South. But as Mrs. Blackstone grew older and less able to care for it, the plants had grown disheveled and shaggy, in the rag-a-muffin way of gardens when there's nobody to pull weeds or

deadhead or prune the roses or dig and separate the perennials or mow the grass regularly.

Then Mrs. Blackstone had died and left her house and the garden to the garden club she had founded, whose grateful members quickly renamed themselves the Dahlias in her honor. They (well, most of them, anyway) pulled on their garden gloves and picked up their rakes and hoes and trowels and clippers and set about restoring the garden to its former glory. They had yanked the smothering weeds--the dog fennel, henbit, ground ivy and (the biggest garden bully of all!) the Johnson grass--out of the curving perennial borders, so that the phlox, larkspur, iris, asters, and Shasta daisies could take a deep breath. They had dug and divided and replanted Mrs. Blackstone's much-loved lilies: Easter lilies, spider lilies, oxblood lilies, and her favorite orange ditch lilies. They had untangled the cardinal climber and crossvine and honeysuckle on the fence and repaired the trellises so the mandevilla and confederate jasmine could stretch up and out. They gently disciplined the hibiscus and the dozens of roses, including the climbers, the teas, the ramblers, the shrubs, and a charming yellow Lady Banks. Yet to be done: the cleanup of the woodland and spring at the foot of the garden, where Miss Rogers thought they ought to put the bog garden. And every time a Dahlia set foot on the place, she saw something else that needed to be done, such as painting the shed, or repairing another trellis, or planting a ground cover over a bare spot. Gardens, of course, are a labor of love, and love--and its labor--is never-ending.

"It is gorgeous, Lizzy," Verna agreed. Even she (by nature a wary, critical person who always saw the flaws in a thing while everybody else was still admiring the rest of it) had to admit that the Dahlias were well on the way to restoring Mrs. Blackstone's

garden to its former glory. And the only money they had spent on the project was the fifty cents they gave Old Zeke to cut the grass and trim the edges every other week.

Which had been a very good thing (as Verna, the club's treasurer, knew very well), because when the Dahlias inherited the house, they were nearly broke. Mrs. Blackstone had left them enough to pay the property taxes for several years, relieving some of Verna's worry. But there was barely enough in the club kitty to keep the lights on, let alone fix the leaks in the roof and replace the plumbing in the bathroom.

And then, glory be and hallelujah! When they dug the holes to plant their Darling Dahlias sign in front of their new clubhouse, the Dahlias had struck silver. That is, they had uncovered the chest of sterling flatware that Mrs. Blackstone's mother (a Cartwright) had buried to keep it from falling into the filthy hands of pillaging Yankees as they stormed through Alabama near the end of the War Between the States. When they began to look through the chest, they found a bracelet set with an old-fashioned square-cut emerald, a pair of pearl teardrop earrings, a diamond ring, and a velvet bag containing ten gold coins. Twenty-dollar double eagles, still as perfect as the day they were new-minted.

But the discovery of this buried treasure had resulted in a hot debate about what to do with it. Some wanted to keep everything. After all, the silver, the coins, and the jewelry were heirlooms, and all of it was very beautiful. But Earlynne Biddle had pointed out that these were Cartwright heirlooms and every last Cartwright was dead and gone from this earth and in no position to care about heirlooms. Aunt Hetty Little had pointed out that if the Dahlias kept the silver, the Dahlias would have to polish it. And Verna had added that the whole kit and caboodle must be worth a small fortune, and the club needed cash money a whole lot more than it needed heirlooms.

So the Dahlias voted (Mrs. Johnson being the lone dissenter) to sell. Verna and Lizzy took the silver, the gold, and the jewelry to Ettlenger's Jewelry store in Mobile, where it brought enough to fix the leaky roof, repair the plumbing, with some left over. The Dahlias could now face the autumn rains without fear of flooding, they could flush without fear of overflowing, and their savings account in the Darling Savings and Trust was, if not fat, nicely plump. They called it the "Treasure Fund."

"It's hard to believe we've accomplished so much in just five months," Lizzy replied, fanning herself with her hat as they walked around the house toward the front. She felt a justifiable sense of pride. After all, she was president of the club and she'd worked hard to organize the garden project.

"Hot months, too," Verna said. The Dahlias had held the first meeting in their new clubhouse in May, and the summer months in Alabama are not exactly the most comfortable months for outdoor work. But the Dahlias were not delicate Southern belles--most of them, anyway. When it came to gardening, they didn't wilt.

Lizzy pushed her brown hair out of her eyes, put her hat back on, and paused, looking at the large empty lot beside the house. The area had once been Mrs. Blackstone's vegetable garden, with a border of strawberries, two peach trees, and a fig tree in the back. Old Zeke had mowed the weeds for them, but the place still looked straggly and forlorn.

"I've been thinking about this area," she said. "What would you say to turning it back into a vegetable garden--not for just us Dahlias, but for everybody? There are lots of folks in this town who might be willing to trade some garden work for sweet potatoes, carrots, turnips, okra, collards--things like that. I'm sure we could get Mr. Norris to bring

Racer over and plow the ground early next year.” The name of Mr. Norris’ horse was a joke, because the old bay gelding was slow as blackstrap molasses in January. But he knew what to do when he was hitched to the business end of a plow, and he and Mr. Norris made a few dollars every spring by plowing gardens.

“Good idea,” Verna agreed cautiously, “but what makes you think people will be willing to help? Everybody loves a handout, but when it comes with work attached--” She shrugged.

Lizzy clucked her tongue. “Verna, you are so cynical.”

“Just realistic,” Verna replied with a chuckle. “Comes from working in the county courthouse. Want to see people at their worst? Sit behind my desk for a day or two.”

“Well, the folks who come into Mr. Moseley’s law office don’t win any happiness prizes,” Lizzy retorted. “They only need a lawyer when they’re in really bad trouble.” Mr. Moseley was one of Darling’s three lawyers, and as his secretary, receptionist, and legal assistant, Lizzy had an insider’s view into people’s problems. Unlike Verna, she had an innate sense of compassion and concern and always tried to put herself in the other person’s shoes. “But that doesn’t mean that everybody in town is unhappy or in trouble,” she added.

“Maybe not,” Verna said, “but at least half of them are. Times are tough. People are scared. They’re hanging on for dear life to their jobs or their farms or whatever. If they don’t have money, they’ll do almost anything to get it. If they have it, they won’t spend an extra nickel.”

They had come around the front of the house now. Mrs. Blackstone’s prize azaleas, hydrangeas, and weigelas had finished blooming months before, but the Autumn

Joy sedum was gorgeous, next to some red spider lilies that looked like a fireworks display. Lizzy smiled, thinking that while jobs and money and food were definitely important--you couldn't live without them--beauty was important, too. Vegetables could provide a feast for the table, but flowers were a feast for the soul.

“Aren't those lilies pretty?” Lizzy said admiringly. “Or *Lycoris radiata*, as Miss Rogers would say.” Miss Rogers, the town librarian and its leading intellectual, always insisted on calling plants by their Latin names, an insistence that drove everybody crazy.

“Yes. But not half as pretty as those naked ladies in front of old Miss Hamer's house.” Verna pointed across the street, where a two-story frame house, weathered gray with green shutters and in need of a coat of paint, was fronted by a few rose bushes and a mass of leggy lilies in a rainbow of colors: pumpkin orange, sunshine yellow, sizzling scarlet, as well as the quieter mauve, blush, and white. Verna chuckled and imitated Miss Rogers' high-pitched voice. “*Lycoris squamigera*, girls. ‘Naked ladies’ is not a respectable name for a plant.”

“My mother calls them ‘resurrection lilies,’” Lizzy said, and laughed a little. “When I was a girl, I always thought they were sort of magical, the way the leaves died in the summer and then the stalks poked up out of the ground, all of a sudden, and in the next day or two, here came the blooms--poof!” She waved her hand. “Maybe the new people will clean up the front yard a little,” she added. “Those naked ladies deserve a place to show off. You can hardly see them for all that grass and weeds.”

“The new people?” Verna asked, raising her eyebrows. “You mean, somebody has moved in with old Miss Hamer? I wonder who.”.....