

THE DARLING DAHLIAS AND THE TEXAS STAR

By Susan Wittig Albert

CHAPTER ONE

Monday Evening, July 11, 1932

“Well, it’s almost all over,” Mildred Kilgore said in her slow Southern drawl. She sat down at the table in the Dahlias’ clubhouse kitchen. “I don’t mind tellin’ you ladies that I, for one, am glad.”

Aunt Hetty Little came to the table with a pitcher of cold lemonade and began to fill the four glasses. “All over?” She chuckled wryly. “Why, bless your heart, child, it’s just begun!”

Mildred was all of forty, but Aunt Hetty was no spring chicken and felt qualified to call everyone “child,” especially when they were talking about presidential elections. At eighty, her memory of presidents went back to Abraham Lincoln, although she had only been able to cast her vote since Harding, twelve years before. “Can’t blame the mess in Washington on us women,” she liked to say. “It was there long before we got the vote.”

“The nominating conventions are just the beginning,” Elizabeth Lacy said, agreeing with Aunt Hetty. She put her Dahlias’ club notebook on the table and sat down, taking a deep breath. The kitchen door was open and the sweet scent of honeysuckle filled the room, along with the evening song of a perky Carolina wren, perched in the catalpa tree just outside the window. “It’s a long time to the elections, although Mr. Moseley says he’s pretty sure that—”

“We all know what Mr. Moseley says, Liz,” Verna Tidwell put in dryly. She took a chair on the opposite side of the table. “He’s been angling for months to get that fellow Roosevelt on the ticket. I sure hope he doesn’t regret it. We all know Hoover. Nobody knows what FDR will do.”

Verna was tall and thin, with narrow lips, an olive complexion, and dark, searching eyes under unfashionable, unplucked brows. She didn’t pay much attention to fashionable dressing, either. She had come to the meeting straight from her office in the Cypress County courthouse and was still dressed in her working clothes, a plain white cotton short-sleeved blouse and a belted navy gabardine skirt. But what Verna might lack in conventional prettiness, she more than made up for in smarts, which was why Lizzy Lacy liked her so much.

Lizzy reached for one of the old-fashioned pecan jumble cookies that Aunt Hetty had brought. The previous week, the Democrats had nominated Franklin D. Roosevelt, the governor of New York—on the

fourth ballot, after a floor fight that just about wore all the delegates out, according to the newspapers. What Lizzy herself knew about politics wouldn't fill a peanut shell. But for over a year, Mr. Moseley (her boss and the most prominent lawyer in Darling) had been working like a stubborn mule for Roosevelt, and she tried to keep up with what he was doing. She and Verna and several of their friends had got together in the Darling Diner after closing on Saturday night to listen to Mr. Roosevelt's acceptance speech on the radio. The governor had actually chartered an airplane and flown to Chicago to speak to the convention delegates. (An airplane!—that was a first for any presidential candidate and was a big story in the newspapers, even the anti-Roosevelt Hearst papers, like the Chicago Examiner.)

Lizzy wasn't sure how she felt about him. He had talked about the Federal government's responsibility to help people who needed to find work. But he'd been pretty vague about what he intended to do, except for promising a "new deal," whatever that was. Some people thought they could guess, based on his plans for an old-age pension and unemployment insurance, which he'd tried to push through his state legislature. But nobody knew for sure.

Lizzy was the kind of person who always liked to know as much as she could about what was going on, so she had asked Mr. Moseley for an explanation. But even he didn't know what a "new deal" was, at least, not specifically.

"It's something the Brain Trust cooked up," he said. When she asked what a "brain trust" was, he'd just laughed. "You might call it a kitchen cabinet," he replied, which left her even more mystified—until he had handed her the third volume of James Parton's *A Life of Andrew Jackson*. A scrap of paper marked page 183, where she read about the men who were "supposed to have most of the president's ear and confidence." The kitchen cabinet, she imagined, got together over coffee and cigars to cook up policy.

Aunt Hetty finished filling the lemonade glasses. "Mr. Moseley is doin' more than just angling," she observed wryly. "I read in the Dispatch that he's organizing a group called Darling for FDR."

"Roger is getting some supporters together to campaign for President Hoover," Mildred said in an offhand tone. She was wearing a new white tucked and pleated cotton shirtwaist dress—her golfing costume. The outfit looked very snazzy, Lizzy thought with a quick stab of envy. The Kilgores had plenty of money and Mildred—who was plump and rather plain—went to New York to buy her clothes and always looked like something out of *Vogue*, while the rest of them made do with the out-of-date clothes in their closets. Or, in the case of Verna, a gabardine skirt that was a little shiny in the seat.

"But we reckon it'll be an uphill fight," Mildred added ruefully. "Here in Darling, anyway."

That was probably true, Lizzy thought. Mildred and her husband, Roger Kilgore (the owner of the only automobile dealership in town) had cheered when Hoover and his vice president, Charles Curtis, were re-nominated at the Republican convention in Chicago in June, on a "balanced budget" platform. Back in 1928, the Republicans had coasted into the White House on a booming economic tide. But that was before Black Tuesday, when the bottom fell out of the stock market with a big, loud THUD, the banks started to fail, and people lost their jobs. The crash wasn't President Hoover's fault, of course. But in

Darling and around the country, his administration was being blamed for not doing anything to ease the miserable situation. People were ready for a change.

“You’re right about that uphill fight, Mildred,” Verna said with an ironic lift to her eyebrow. “People might not know Mr. Roosevelt from Adam’s housecat, but lots of folks are ready to cast their vote for good old A.B.H.”

“A.B.H.?” Aunt Hetty sat down at the table. “Never heard of him. Who’s he?”

“Anybody but Hoover,” Verna replied. “I predict it’ll be Roosevelt in a landslide.”

Aunt Hetty chortled, and even Mildred had to laugh.

But the Dahlias hadn’t given up their evening to discuss politics. Lizzy opened her notebook, picked up her pencil, and cleared her throat.

“Okay, everybody. We’re here to go over the last-minute planning for next weekend’s festival. There’s plenty to do, so let’s get started.”

Darling’s clubs and organizations took turns coordinating the annual Watermelon Festival, which would be held over the coming weekend at the Cypress County Fairgrounds, just outside of town. This year, it was the Dahlias’ turn to coordinate the event and make sure that things ran as smoothly as possible—which was usually not very smoothly, since the unexpected had a way of cropping up, well, unexpectedly.

Take last year, for instance, when the Masonic Lodge was in charge of the festival. A trio of Mr. Burley’s milk goats unexpectedly escaped from their pen in the livestock pavilion and nipped off all the blossoms in the Dahlias’ flower booth. Somebody kicked a tent peg loose and the Ladies Club tent collapsed on the unsuspecting (and newly shampooed and set) head of Voleen Johnson, wife of Mr. George E. Pickett Johnson, the owner of the Darling Savings and Trust Bank. The Eastern Star’s hot dog stand had run out of hot dogs halfway through the event. And Mrs. Peabody fell off the stage after she gave the Pretty Baby award to Mrs. Starks’ little Bluebelle. Bluebelle, whom Mrs. Peabody was holding at the time, was unharmed. Mrs. Peabody broke her nose.

But the worst happened when the motor on the Ferris wheel burned out, leaving a dozen juvenile Darlingians stranded some thirty feet above the ground. This was not a serious problem for the strandeers, of course. They were thrilled by every delicious minute of their extended ride, especially since they could look down and see everybody pointing excitedly up at them and yelling at them to be brave. But their mothers were hysterical, and with good reason, for it took two hours for the Darling Volunteer Fire Department to get their youngsters down from their precarious perch. The Ferris wheel motor turned out to be unfixable. The merry-go-round quit shortly thereafter, so that was the end of the carnival rides. The Darling children, who had been saving their hard-earned pennies for months, were inconsolable.

It was the Odd Fellows who had booked the broken-down carnival, so the Ferris wheel problem was rightly their responsibility. But the Masonic Lodge was in charge of the Festival and the fine finger of scorn was mostly pointed at them. It was months before they lived down the disgrace. Lizzy was determined that the Dahlias were going to do a better job. As the Dahlias' president, she wasn't about to let its sterling reputation be besmirched by a few unexpected incidents—not if she could help it! She was even more determined, because she knew that this would be the most exciting festival ever. This year, the festival was going to feature a special, never-been-done-before event that had the whole town buzzing