

“With her trademark narrative intimacy, Finkbeiner returns to the world of Pearl Spence, a heroine already beloved by readers of *A Cup of Dust*. Finkbeiner’s Depression-era canvas is replete with historical authenticity and colored by a voice both erudite and accessible. This coming-of-age story pairs its winsome heroine with a cast of salt-of-the-earth characters who will be welcomed by readers of Harper Lee and Julie Cantrell.

“With a stoic look at faith and resilience in a time of famine, *A Trail of Crumbs* is a perfect modern-day parable—destined to inspire, challenge, and beguile any who step into its fully realized world.”

—Rachel McMillan, author of *A Lesson in Love and Murder*

“Susie Finkbeiner takes us right into the heart of the devastating years of the Great Depression. Pearl’s story could have been my own grandmother’s. It’s as though I tapped into a piece of my own history that I didn’t know was missing. *A Trail of Crumbs* is a beautiful, heart-wrenching tale of grief, suffering, love, and the enduring hope that comes from piecing a family back together. This was one of those books I didn’t want to end.”

—Kelli Stuart, author of *Like a River from Its Course*

Praise for *A Cup of Dust*

“This is a suspenseful page-turner, intricately plotted and bursting with meticulously drawn characters who jump from the page. [Pearl’s] voice isn’t one you’ll soon forget.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“Riveting. An aching beautiful tale told with a singularly fresh and original voice. This sepia-toned story swept me into the Dust Bowl and brought me face-to-face with both haunting trials and the resilient people who overcame them. Absolutely mesmerizing. Susie Finkbeiner is an author to watch!”

—Jocelyn Green, award-winning author

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A Trail of Crumbs: A Novel of the Great Depression

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A
TRAIL
of
CRUMBS

A Novel of the Great Depression

SUSIE FINKBEINER

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*In memory of
Wendy Gingrich*



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CHAPTER ONE

Red River, Oklahoma
Palm Sunday, April 14, 1935

If a girl could go blind from too bright a sky, I would have gazed upward anyhow, burning the sight right out of my eyes. Far as I could remember, there'd never been a day so calm and blue, without a whisper of wind. Of all the things I could've done with that Sunday afternoon, all I wanted was to sit on the porch and let the sunshine warm my skin.

I believed it would have been a sin to stay inside when God had sent us such fine weather. According to Pastor Ezra Anderson, sin was the reason we'd gotten into the dusty mess we were in. The way I saw it, that day was God's way of letting us know He wasn't mad at us anymore.

Just maybe He'd seen fit to forgive us.

My older sister, Beanie, sat beside me on the porch, her eyes clamped tight against the sunshine like she didn't want it getting in. Every now and again she made one of her little grunting sounds that came from the back of her throat. I'd grown used to the noises Beanie made, and they didn't bother me like they did other people.

Thing was, most folks didn't understand Beanie on account she wasn't like anybody else in Red River. She wasn't smart like most people because she was born not breathing. Some people in town didn't seem to know it was wrong to say nasty things about a person just because they were different. They'd say my sister was an idiot or stupid or any number of other cruel things. Seemed to me they were the ones lacking in brains, to say something so hurtful.

Meemaw, though, never listened to what those folks said. She'd told me Beanie was just the way God wanted her and that no soul on earth had the right to question it.

Meemaw had always known just what to say to make me feel better. I wondered if she wasn't hobbling around heaven, spreading her wisdom and sweet smiles the same way she'd done on earth. I sure did miss her.

"I wanna hear a story," Beanie said, opening one of her lids and eye-balling me.

"You do?" I asked, giving her a half smile.

She grunted her yes.

"Then go on and get my book off the shelf." I nodded at the open front door. "I'll read something to you."

"Don't wanna go in."

"Well, I don't either." I sighed.

Some days I got tired of having to take care of her so much. She could do about anything for herself. Problem was, she was stubborn as an old mule. When she got in her mind that she didn't want to do a thing, there was no way of convincing her otherwise. She'd stay put until I gave up. I usually just shook my head and did for her on account it wound up being easier in the end.

"I wanna hear a story," she repeated in case I'd forgotten what she said.

"How about I just tell it to you?" I asked. "Which one you want?"

"The girl and the boy and the forest."

"You never remember their names, do you?" I asked.

She closed her eye again and shook her head.

"Hansel and Gretel," I told her. "That the one?"

She gave me an "uh-huh."

Silly smile on her face, she scooted on her backside so that she could lean against the slats under the porch railing. Tipping her head, she let the sun shine full on her face. Her wild dark hair fuzzed around her like a shadowy halo.

"All right," I started. "There was once a boy and a girl named Hansel and Gretel. They lived deep in the dark woods with their father and mother."

“She weren’t their real mama,” Beanie said. “Their real one was dead.”

“That’s right. They had a stepmother.”

“A wicked one,” she said. “She ain’t nice.”

Beanie opened her eyes just a slit and peeked at me a second before closing them again.

I thought of Mama, how she wasn’t my real mother. How she and Daddy had taken me in as their own, never treating me any different from Beanie. Mama loved me like I’d come from her.

My real mother had left me right after I was born. My mother, Winnie—best-kept secret in all the history of Red River. Much as I didn’t like to, I thought of her most days even if just a little. And when she did come to mind, it was her with glassy eyes and bleeding body, the life gushing out all over me.

That was hardly more than a month ago. I hoped after a while the memory of her getting shot and killed the way she did would fade away. I hoped that enough sunny days might work to do just that.

Beanie made another of her noises, pulling me out of the bad memory and back to that sunshine-soaked porch.

“Nope,” I said, sitting up straighter. “She wasn’t nice. That stepmother was real mean and selfish. When they ran out of food, she got even meaner.”

Turning, I saw Mama in the side yard, where she shook out a rug, Oklahoma dust clouding up from it, showing like gold in the sun. She caught me watching her and smiled.

“Well,” I went on. “That stepmother got the idea to send the children away.”

“Out in the woods,” Beanie added.

“But Hansel, he was a smart boy. He’d been listening and came up with a plan all his own.”

“He took him a piece of bread.” Beanie swatted at a bug that got too close to her face.

“He got that bread and broke it all to bits. As he and Gretel followed behind their father into the dark woods, he dropped pieces of it behind them, leaving a trail of crumbs so they could find their way back home.”

“They never went home,” Beanie said. “Once you go, you can’t never get back.”

Shifting, she turned her face toward town and opened her eyes. Her overgrown eyebrows twitched up and down, and she rubbed at her nose with the back of her hand.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She acted like she hadn’t heard me even though I knew well enough she had. Wiping her hand on the skirt of her dress she closed her eyes again.

“I don’t wanna hear no more,” she said.

I watched as she leaned her head on the slats again. After a minute she started on her snoring I knew to be fake. Sometimes she’d do that, pretend to be asleep, so I’d leave her alone.

On her lap she held her hand in a fist, the dirt-under-the-nails fingers tucked tight into her palm. I put my hand over it, covering it.

“I love you,” I said.

I meant it.

She opened her hand enough to hold my fingers just for a moment. She squeezed them before she went back to her pretend snoring.



Out back of our house, Millard had set up his horseshoes. He’d been mayor of Red River long as anybody could remember. He said he was born mayor, which I knew wasn’t true. He’d been born in Virginia. I never did remind him of that fact on account of it wasn’t my place to.

Ladies didn’t contradict old men, that was what Mama’d taught me. And they didn’t say somebody was old, either.

I tried being as much a lady as I could for Mama’s sake. I did. But it sure wasn’t easy.

“Now, you gotta hold that shoe just like this,” Millard said, lifting his hand in front of him so Ray could see. “That’s fine. Just like that.”

Ray Jones stood, nodding at Millard. He was eleven and a half, a whole year older than me, but didn’t mind being my best friend. Really, he was

about the only one left in town to be friends with. Still, if there'd been a whole truckload of kids in Red River, I would've picked Ray over all of them any old day.

He'd been staying with us since his old dugout had gotten flattened by a month of dusters. Meemaw'd always told me to see how all things worked together for the good of those who loved God. I supposed if there was any good from all the dust, having Ray around was it.

"Now, swing back before you give it a toss." Millard showed him what he meant, then threw the old rusted horseshoe toward the stake in the ground. It clanked, hitting the goal and circling round it before thumping on the dirt. "Just like that. Nothin' to it."

Ray stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth and wrinkled up his forehead, eyes trained on that old stake.

I shimmied myself up on the back porch, watching him and Millard play.

Ray's father never would've taken the time to teach him how to play a game like that. Mr. Jones had been too busy pouring whiskey down his throat and wandering all over creation doing who knew what. He'd say he was looking for work, but we all knew better than that. When he was at home, he'd spend his time whupping Ray and Mrs. Jones for something or other. But he couldn't hurt them anymore. He was dead, Mr. Jones was, and by his own doing. I wondered if Ray was haunted by seeing his father hanging like he had.

I hoped not.

The good thing that came out of Mr. Jones killing himself was that it left room for Daddy and Millard to show Ray all the man things he ought to learn. Still, I didn't think it took all the sting out of it.

It sure was an awful thing, losing your pa, no matter how nasty he'd been.

Their game done, Ray slumped his shoulders. He'd never liked losing much. But the way Millard made sure to shake his hand and smile, I knew Ray wouldn't be too sore about it.

"You're learnin'," Millard said, rubbing Ray's head so the tan hair stuck to the sweat on his forehead. "Pretty soon you'll be better than me, I bet."

“My, my,” Daddy said, stepping out the back door. He hopped off the porch and made his way to Millard. “What’ve we got here?”

“Thought it’s as good a day as any for horseshoes,” Millard answered, taking off his hat and wiping at his head with a bandana. “How about you try and beat me at a game.”

“I’d like nothing better.” Daddy rubbed his hands together. “It’s been a couple years.”

“Don’t worry.” Millard nodded his head at him. “I’ll go easy on ya.”

Daddy stooped and picked up one of the shoes off the ground, giving it a toss. He missed the stake by a good foot.

“Well, I might have to give you a lesson, too,” Millard said, laughing.

Ray came toward me, his hands shoved in his overall pockets and his bare feet shuffling through the dust.

“Wanna go for a walk?” he asked.

I shrugged, not wanting to say that Mama didn’t want me wandering around. She’d kept a close eye on me ever since Eddie DuPre had taken me and kept me hidden away in a cellar. With all the nightmares I’d had since then, I didn’t mind being watched so close.

“Come on,” Ray said.

“I don’t know.” I crossed my arms.

“You think your ma’ll say no?” he asked.

I shrugged again.

“Can’t hurt to ask, can it?”

I shook my head.

“You too scared?” Ray asked, but not in a mean way. And not in a way that tried to make me feel small. “You don’t gotta be scared no more, Pearl.”

I couldn’t look at him just then, so I turned toward the empty part of the yard where Mama’d once had a garden. It had long been lost to the drought and the dust like everything else that’d once been green and living. Life didn’t seem to stand much of a chance anymore there in No Man’s Land.

“I’m not scared,” I whispered. It was a lie, and I figured he knew it.

“I promise I won’t let nothin’ happen to you,” he said. “You trust me?”

I did and I told him so.

“Sheriff, sir?” Ray called out, turning toward Daddy. “Can Pearl go for a walk with me?”

“Go ahead,” Daddy said, not turning from the game. “Just don’t wander off too far, hear? We’ll be having supper in a little bit.”

“Yes, sir.”

Daddy tossed and missed again, making Millard laugh so hard his head tilted back and his face pointed to the sky. The sound of his laughter made me think the dry days were over after all, and that good days were coming.

His laughter stole away some of my fear. Not all of it, but enough.

Pastor had told us that morning in church that God’s wrath was spent. He’d said we weren’t going to be punished anymore for our transgressions. The wage had been paid and the blessings were on the way. I didn’t put much stock in his words, if I were honest.

Millard, though, he could’ve said that elephants could fly all the way to the stars or that horny toads could talk and I’d have believed every word of it.

“Come on,” Ray said, nudging me with his elbow.

I slid off the porch and chased after him at an almost run from the back yard.

“Ray,” Daddy called after us. “You take care of my girl, will ya?”

“Yes, sir,” Ray hollered back, looking over his shoulder.

We circled around to the front of the house. There Beanie still sat, her head against the slats of the porch. But when I saw her just then, her eyes were open wide as they could get, and she seemed to be breathing in the air like she was catching some kind of a scent.

I swallowed hard, pushing down the scared feeling that bubbled up in me. And I tried to tell myself that nothing bad would happen. Not that day, at least. All I had to do was look up at the blue sky to prove it was true.

Mama hadn’t pulled my hair back that day, so it fluttered behind me, long and blond and wild. Months before I might have broken into a gallop, pretending my hair was a horse’s mane and my feet hooves. But that was before, and I didn’t make believe anymore, not like I used to, at least. Those days were gone.

Still, running alongside Ray with my hair loose felt good. I thought we could have gone on like that forever, the land wide-open as the sky. It was as if the whole world had changed while we slept the night before. The air even smelled different, like fresh-washed clothes. I wondered if that wasn't the way spring had always smelled in the days before the dust had come. If it had, I'd forgotten.

Down the center of the road, Ray and I slowed. I hadn't taken off my shoes, and they'd gotten full of grit. I took a second to dump them out. He waited for me.

Standing up straight, I thought about Jesus coming into the town of Jerusalem and wondered if it'd been springtime there that day. Pastor'd gone on and on that morning in church about Palm Sunday, not saying anything about what the weather might've been like. I did hope it had been sunny and warm that day as Jesus rode along on the donkey.

Just then the street running through Red River was empty of people. I figured, though, if Jesus came to town they would come on out of their shacks or dugouts or from where some stayed in the Hooverville. They'd come from miles, happy enough to greet Him. There weren't too many still around, but enough folks for a good welcome.

I didn't know that Jesus would pick a donkey to ride into Red River. Maybe He'd come on an old, squeaky bicycle. Folks in town wouldn't have palm branches to wave for Him like they'd had in old Jerusalem. Nothing green had grown in Oklahoma in about forever, but they'd wave their hands and say "howdy," which I thought Jesus would like just fine. Since they were at it, that "howdy" would work for a "hosanna."

Once Jesus was in town, He wouldn't go straight to see Pastor just like He didn't seek out the scribes and Pharisees. Instead, I figured, He'd take His time shaking hands and slapping backs that belonged to the regular old folks in Cimarron County.

I just hoped He wouldn't find us the kind to wave our howdies on Sunday only to turn tail on Him by Friday.

Before I knew it, we were well past town and weaving around behind Pastor's house. Once we got by their backyard fence, Ray stopped and

dropped down to peep through a hole in the wood. He waved for me to come beside him. I looked around me to be sure nobody saw before I kneeled and took a peek for myself.

“What is it?” I asked, quiet as I could, trying to find a gap in the fence.

Ray shushed me and pulled me closer to him where there was a space to look through. Closing one eye, I focused my sight through the space in the crumbling wood. There on the other side of the fence was Pastor’s wife. Most people called her Mad Mabel on account she was loony in the head.

Mad Mabel scared me something awful, even though Daddy said more than once that she wouldn’t hurt a fly. But I’d seen the snakes she’d killed and set to dry on the fence line to try and bring the rain. If that didn’t give a body the willies, I didn’t know what would.

She stood at the back of the yard, Mad Mabel did, spinning in circles, a dingy rag in her hand that she waved up and down and all around. The dress she had on seemed like it had been fine long ago. Lace hung wilted off the yellowed fabric. When she turned her back toward us, I could see the buttons lined up from top to bottom. Years before, those buttons maybe had a shimmer to them. But just like most other things, they’d got the shine rubbed right out of them.

Mad Mabel’d only managed to get a couple of those buttons through the holes, though, keeping her pale, mole-spotted flesh open to the day.

The way the dress hung loose made me think she’d been a good deal bigger when she’d first worn it. She’d withered over the years, I imagined. I could see just about every bone in her spine and that made me feel embarrassed on her behalf.

“What’s she doing?” I whispered, glancing at Ray.

“Don’t know,” he answered before putting his finger to his lips, hushing me again.

We watched her strange dancing for a few minutes. It seemed something that wasn’t for us to see, but we didn’t move away or cover our eyes. I wondered if it wasn’t something she did just for herself, maybe for God even.

I made to get up to leave, but Ray grabbed hold of my arm, keeping me next to him.

Pastor called from inside the small house, his voice thinner than I was used to it sounding. Mad Mabel didn't seem to hear him. She just kept on spinning and waving her rag, her eyes closed.

He stepped out of the house, his suspenders hanging off the waist of his trousers, making them hang on his slender hips. The good shirt he'd worn to preach in that morning was unbuttoned all the way, showing his sweat-stained undershirt. Everything about him drooped, hung, sagged.

"Mabel, what in tarnation are you doin'?" He put his hands on his hips. "Come on in and take off that dress. You're fixin' to spoil it."

There wasn't a hint of authority in his words. Just weakness. Exhaustion. Plum wore out.

Mad Mabel didn't obey him. What she did was raise her voice, singing some tune I couldn't place. The words didn't make sense, like she was making them up as she went along. She went to swinging that rag even more wild in the air. Her dress slipped off one of her shoulders and she didn't bother to push it back up, like she didn't even notice.



Ray raced me to the old Watson ranch. I didn't know why I even tried catching him. He'd always been faster than me by a mile. Still, I pumped my legs, not caring how my skirt flipped up on my thighs or how my shoes rubbed against the backs of my heels. I'd not felt that free in months. It was worth a blister or two.

Yards ahead of me he dropped in the dirt of what used to be the Watsons' front yard. I made it to him, huffing and puffing, trying to catch a breath.

"What took you so long?" he asked, winking up at me.

I kicked dust on his feet. He laughed and put out his hand.

"Help me up," he said.

"Nuh-uh." I stepped back and crossed my arms, jutting out one of my hips like Mama often did. "Get your own self up, ya lazy dog."

He did just that, but not before tossing a handful of dirt at me. I shoved him, almost knocking him back to the ground. We never meant any harm.

I knew he could've hurt me if he'd wanted to. But it wasn't in him, much as it could have been, the way his father'd mistreated him.

"Come on," he said, nodding at the Watsons' house.

I followed him to the porch that wrapped all the way around both sides of the ranch house. I remembered Mrs. Watson'd kept rocking chairs on that porch back in the day when they still lived there. Mama'd sit in one, sipping sweet tea and chatting with Mrs. Watson about whatever it was women had to say when times were good.

We'd been invited to eat supper there many times. I'd made chase with their boys around the ranch, playing pirate ship on their porch on days when Mama and Mrs. Watson were inside putting up cans of food for winter.

It would've surprised me if Ray and his family ever got an invitation to so much as step inside that place. Rich people didn't like to rub shoulders so much with poor folk. Not in the long-gone days of plenty, at least.

The Watsons' house had stood empty more than a year. That was how long it'd been since that family had packed up their things, even tying the rocking chairs to the side of the truck, and rumbled away from Red River.

They'd lost everything, that was what Daddy told me. Their crop failed, their stock died out, and the bank came calling in their debts.

Same old story all over Cimarron County. All of Oklahoma, too.

Only thing that land was good for anymore was rounding up the plague of jackrabbits for the slaughter.

On the day they'd left, Mrs. Watson had promised Mama she'd write, let us know where they ended up and if they were all right. Far as I knew, Mama had never gotten that letter.

"Ray, you think you'll ever leave?" I asked.

"You mean Red River?" He turned toward the house, tugging at a loose nail in the porch.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Don't rightly know." Not getting the nail to budge, he gave up and put both hands in his overall pockets. "Guess it matters what my ma wants to do."

"I hope you don't," I said. "Leave, I mean."

He nodded and scratched at his chin.

“If my ma wants to go West, I gotta go, too,” he said. “Can’t stay here all my life. Ain’t nothin’ for me to do but go, I reckon.”

I held myself against a shiver that traveled up my skin. Seemed the day was getting colder.

“I’d miss you,” I said.

He squinted at me, giving me his most crooked smile. “Course you would.”

Ray Jones always did know how to make me laugh.

I shoved him, and he tried to run from me. In our chasing I got all turned around so I was looking in the direction of home.

My smile dropped hard as a brick along with any hope in the blue-sky day. My shiver turned to a shudder. Fear froze me all the way to the soles of my feet.

“Ray,” I said.

He was still laughing and kicked a toe-full of dirt on my shoes. “You’re gonna miss me so bad.”

“No, Ray.” My voice was full of panting breath and shaky quakes. “It’s coming.”

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

I lifted my hand and pointed, not knowing what words to use so he’d know what I saw. “It’s coming.”

He turned and was quiet, seeing what headed our way.

Birds came flying over our heads, moving fast along the pushing wind. So strong that wind blew, they hardly had to flap a wing. They didn’t squawk or twitter or scream even. No time for alarm. Only time to flee.

It was coming.

Needle pricks of flying sand stung my arms, my legs, my face. It worked its way into my eyes and my nose. When I opened my mouth it stippled on my tongue. My ears filled up with the angry, hateful roaring as darkness itself came rolling across the fields.

It was coming.