

“Susie Finkbeiner never fails to transport her readers through time and space, welcoming us into worlds we never want to leave. She is a master at drawing characters we begin to love and keeping us turning the pages as we share their emotional journeys with them.”

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A
SONG
of
HOME

A Novel of the Swing Era

SUSIE FINKBEINER

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A Song of Home: A Novel of the Swing Era

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*In memory of
Grandma Relf,
the original Pearlle Lou*



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CHAPTER ONE

Bliss, Michigan
December 31, 1935

It was no surprise to me that I'd lost track of time. The clock on the wall told me that soon I'd need to be heading on home for the evening. Seemed I'd only sat down in that velvety chair a couple minutes before. Instead it'd been a couple hours. A good story had that kind of power over me.

I turned the pages of my borrowed book to the very last story. There was a picture of a man, tall and lean, wearing yellow and red striped clothes and holding a flute to his lips. A river of rats followed along behind him. I knew without reading a single word that it was the story of the Pied Piper.

Leaning my head into the soft back of the chair, I closed my eyes. Much as I tried not to, I slipped just below the surface of asleep and awake. It was a shallow dream that floated along with me.

I didn't dream of rats and I was glad for that. But I did dream of the line of children, helplessly lining up behind the piper, lured by his song.

Then I pictured myself in that line of kids, following along unwillingly behind the piper. Away from home and away from what was safe and warm and good. I turned my head to see all the grown folks just watching us leave and not doing anything to stop us. Try as I might, I couldn't get my feet to step out of the line to go back home.

A woman came running out of one of the grimy old cottages, rushing toward all us kids, her mouth open and a melody lifting up and out of her. It was a song of home meant to call us all back to where we belonged.

Just as I was about to turn I felt two hands on my shoulders, jostling me, making me surface out of my dream with gasping breath and heart thudding so hard I was sure it was about to jump right out of my chest.

“Wake up, Pearl,” Ray said. He stood over me with a big old grin across his face. “You was snorin’ so loud I thought the librarian was fixin’ to kick you out.”

“Why’d you have to shake me like that?” I gave him my best scowl and shut my book hard so he’d know I wasn’t all too happy with him just then.

“Don’t you know you ain’t supposed to sleep in the library?” He stood up straight and offered me his hand. “Come on. Your pa sent me to come get you.”

“I can get up by myself,” I said, slapping his hand away.

My aggravation wouldn’t last too long. I never could stay mad at him no matter what he did.

Ray Jones was my best friend in all the world. Always had been since before I could remember. The way I figured, he always would be. Nobody understood me like Ray did. Seemed we shared an understanding that only came from losing so much.

If there was one good thing about moving away from Oklahoma it was that Ray got to come with us.

Ray and I made our way to the front of the library where Mrs. Trask sat at her desk, ready to help folks find just the right book. She smiled at the two of us and half stood. I wondered how it didn’t hurt her to stand, the way her shoulders stooped and her back curved into a hump. But no matter how much it ached her, she always had a sweet smile to give.

“Oh, Miss Spence,” she said, her voice gentle and her thick-knuckled fingers resting on the top of her desk. “Would you like to check out that book?”

“No thank you, ma’am,” I said.

“Then just put it here on my desk and I’ll put it away in the morning.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, putting the book within her reach.

“Happy New Year,” she said, her eyes crinkling in the corners.

“You too, Mrs. Trask.”

Ray waited for me to get bundled before we stepped out the library doors. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat and stopped once we got to the sidewalk.

“Hold on,” he said. “I wanna show you somethin’ before we go home.”

“What?” I asked.

“You’ll see.” He winked at me. “Just come on.”

He turned and I followed down an out of the way street. I wasn’t worried about where he was taking me. If there was someone I could trust it was Ray Jones.



The American Legion was a big, square building that looked as old as most any other place in town. There wasn’t a thing fancy about it other than the old cannon that sat at the ready by the front doors.

“You think that’s a real cannon?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Ray said. “Probably. That ain’t what I wanna show you, though.”

He nodded at the building. A group of young folks stood around the big double doors. Some of them smoked cigarettes and others talked real close to each other. Cars were parked along the sides of the road. As early in the evening as it was all the lights were on in the Legion and music boomed so loud I could hear it from on the walk.

“What’s going on in there?” I squinted up at the old bricks as if I could see through the walls if only I looked hard enough.

“A dance I guess,” Ray said. “Bet we could see in the window if we stood on top of that cannon.”

I didn’t give myself the chance to wonder if Ray’d had a good idea or not. I followed along behind him to the window. I even let him steady me while I climbed onto the canon, but only because it was a little slick with ice. Holding onto the window sill, I leaned close to the glass.

The jolting and jumping music rattled the glass in its frame. I felt of it with my mittened hand. Ba-ba-booming drums set the beat, wa-wahing

trumpets dragged out a note and then blasted another. The band was on the stage, clear on the far side of the room. From what I could see there were just a handful of instruments, but what they lacked in number they made up for in sound.

A line of people stood watching a man and woman dance like I'd never seen before. That pair pounded the floor with their feet like they were running in place, then they kicked to the sides and I wondered how they knew to do that at the same time. The lady's skirt flipped up, showing her thighs and the bottom hem of her underthings and I felt embarrassed for her. She didn't seem to mind, though. She just kept on kicking and moving her hips.

Using my mitten, I rubbed the steam from my breath away from the glass just in time to see the lady turn toward the man. He put his hands under her arms, lifting her so she could swing her legs from one side of him to the other. Then he dipped her down so she slid on her backside between his legs, her dress bunching up behind her, bloomers showing for everybody to see.

The man grabbed her hands, pulling her back up until she hopped to her feet. The folks in line cheered and clapped for them while they made way for another couple who waddled like a couple ducks to the center of the circle.

"Ray," I said, having to wipe the glass again. "It's Opal."

Opal Moon was the hired girl who'd taken care of us since Mama went away. She cooked and cleaned and watched after Ray and me so we didn't get into too much trouble. Seeing her there in the middle of the floor, dancing faster than I'd ever have thought possible, surprised me to no end.

And to see her with a boy who had white-blond hair and pale-as-paper skin only added to the shock. Even if Opal was only one-half Negro, it seemed against some kind of rule, her dancing with a white boy.

She spun, her skirts fanning up, and ducked under her partner's lifted leg. Shimmying and spinning and twirling, she danced like a wriggling worm. At the very end of their turn, the boy picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She pretended to pound her fists

on his back and she kicked her legs, but with a big smile on her face the whole time. Then her face turned toward the window.

Ray and I ducked just in time.

“Let’s go,” he whispered.

“You think she saw us?” I asked.

“Don’t know.” He grabbed my arm. “Ain’t stickin’ around to find out. We best get.”

He was right. I knew Opal would be real sore if she knew we’d been spying on her. We ran all the way home, even with the cold air burning in our lungs.

I didn’t think I’d get the sound of the ba-ba-booming music out of my head all night.



Aunt Carrie had our dinner ready in the kitchen of the house on Magnolia Street. She’d made a pot of soup with big chunks of vegetables from her cellar and hunks of chicken from one of the birds on her farm. Uncle Gus sat across from Daddy, where Mama should have been.

If somebody’d looked at the Spence family tree they’d see that Gustav Seegert was Daddy’s cousin. But to me he was Uncle Gus. And his wife was Aunt Carrie. It’d been so since the day we set foot in Bliss and I liked it that way plenty.

And I sure did like it when Aunt Carrie fed us supper. She never was one to scold us for slurping the broth or dribbling it down our chins. But when Uncle Gus would lift his bowl to his lips and tip it so he could swallow the last little bit, she’d shake her head and pretend to be upset.

The way her eyes sparkled at him, though, made me think she wasn’t too sore, really.

After we finished eating, we cleared the dishes and Uncle Gus got a deck of cards out of his shirt pocket, shuffling them with his large hands. He didn’t let even one of them fly out or tumble to the floor.

When he saw me watching, he moved his fingers to hide one of the

cards, making it seem to have disappeared. When he flicked his wrist and the card reappeared, I clapped.

“You know any more?” Ray asked, eyes wide.

“Nope,” answered Uncle Gus, smiling. “That’s the only one I ever could get the hang of. My hands’re too big for any of the others.”

“Where’d you learn it?” I asked.

“When I was in the service.” He started shuffling the cards again. “Had my ma known I was playin’ cards in the Army she’d have come all the way to Europe and dragged me home to Oklahoma by the ear.”

I didn’t doubt that one little bit. Playing cards was just as bad as dancing, the way we’d learned from Pastor in Red River.

“Some days all we had to do was sit in the trenches and wait,” Uncle Gus went on. “Playin’ cards passed the time. French fella I met could do all kinds of tricks. He’d have somebody pick a card and it would end up in some other guy’s helmet.”

Uncle Gus dealt the cards and shook his head. “Never did figure out how he done that.”

“My pa taught me a trick or two,” Ray said.

My eyes darted to Ray’s face. He hadn’t said so much as one word about his father since they’d found him hanging from the rafters of their dugout back in Oklahoma. He’d never been nice, Mr. Jones, at least not that I knew of. He’d been more the kind of man to smack Ray and Mrs. Jones around if he’d had too much to drink. How Ray ended up being such a good boy, I couldn’t figure out. It sure wasn’t any of his father’s doing, that much I did know.

“Gus knew your pa,” Daddy said, carrying a plate of cookies from the kitchen.

“Lord, yes,” Uncle Gus said. “Good old Si Jones. I remember him bein’ smitten with your ma. He couldn’t hardly think straight when Luella was around.”

“That true?” Ray asked.

“Yup.” Uncle Gus put the remaining cards in the middle of the table. “Poor fella didn’t eat for a week he had it so bad for her. His ma even sent

him to see the doctor, she was so worried about him. Thought he had a worm.”

Ray leaned forward so his chest pressed against the edge of the table.

“Weren’t no worm, Doc said,” Uncle Gus went on. “Just lovesickness. Him and your ma got married not two weeks later. Si and Lu. They run off and got married up to Boise City. Made their folks crazy.”

Aunt Carrie came in with a couple bottles of Coke and a glass for each of us.

“I only known a handful of people so mad in love as your folks was,” Uncle Gus said. “He sure was sweet on her.”

Mean as Mr. Jones was when I knew him, I never could’ve imagined him doing much other than hurting Ray and his mother.

Hard times had the power to change people. I knew that. They could change them for good or bad. Thing was, nobody could tell somebody which way to go. Folks had to figure it out on their own.

Ray’s mother and father, they’d gone the wrong way. Mama had, too. What I wanted to know was if somebody could come back after wandering off so far.

If there was a way, I sure did hope Mama would find it.

Aunt Carrie let Ray and me drink our Coca-Colas right out of the bottle and didn’t say a word when we ate so many cookies our stomachs started to ache. We played cards well into the evening, the room full of our laughing.

Ray didn’t even seem upset when he lost three hands in a row.



They didn’t stay up all the way until midnight. Uncle Gus said he’d ring in nineteen-thirty-six with his eyes closed and in his bed. Aunt Carrie said the only noisemaker he needed was his snoring.

Daddy did let Ray and me stay up, listening to the radio as the seconds ticked away to the new year. Soon as twelve o’clock struck, Daddy told us it was time to go to sleep.

I kissed him on the cheek. "Goodnight, Daddy."

"Thanks for my new year's kiss," he whispered to me.

"Night, Mr. Spence," Ray said, going for the stairs.

"Happy New Year, Ray," Daddy said. "Go on, Pearlie. It's real late."

"Will you tuck me in?" I asked.

"Course I will." He smiled at me. "Get in your nightie. I'll be right up."

With my nightie on and the blanket pulled up to my chin, I made room so Daddy could sit on the edge of my bed.

"You wanna say your prayers?" he asked.

"I'll do them myself," I answered.

"That's fine."

"Daddy, are Negroes allowed to dance with white folk?"

"I suppose they can if they want to." He pushed his lips together.

"There's no law against it in Michigan that I know of. Why do you ask?"

"There was a dance tonight."

"Down at the Legion?"

I nodded. "Ray and I peeked."

"Did you like how they danced?"

"Yes, sir." I smiled. "And I saw Opal."

"I bet you did." Daddy leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Now go to sleep, darlin'."

I shut my eyes. He stayed by my side a few minutes longer and I was glad. Having him near like that was safe. It didn't take long before I was deep asleep, dreaming of the new year.