

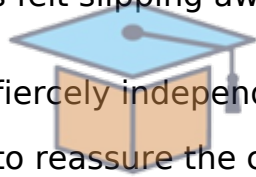
Chapter 1

Chapter 1 begins in the small town of Baileyville, Kentucky, during an unusually warm September, where the air is thick with heat and tension as the townspeople gather in the local hall. Alice Van Cleve, an Englishwoman who recently moved to America after marrying her husband, Bennett, finds herself trapped in a life she never anticipated—one filled with rigid social expectations, suffocating routine, and a marriage that feels more like an obligation than a partnership. The community meeting, which should have been a lively event, is yet another exercise in endurance for Alice, as she struggles to adjust to the slow and predictable rhythm of life in this conservative town.

As the meeting progresses, Mrs. Brady, a well-respected community leader, introduces an initiative that sparks intrigue—Baileyville has been selected to participate in the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Packhorse Library project. Inspired by the Roosevelts' vision of increasing literacy across rural America, this initiative seeks to bring books to isolated families who have little or no access to reading material. Mrs. Brady passionately explains that women will ride through the rugged mountain terrain, delivering books and newspapers to households miles away from the town center, but the idea is met with skepticism from the male-dominated audience.

The town's men express doubt about whether women should take on such a role, with some arguing that their time would be better spent tending to their homes and families. Despite the resistance, Mrs. Brady insists that the library's success depends on dedicated volunteers, willing to brave the long hours and difficult trails to bring education and entertainment to those in need. It is in this moment, as she listens to the dismissive murmurs and hesitant nods around the room, that Alice realizes this could be the opportunity she has been searching for—a chance to carve out a purpose beyond the limitations of her marriage.

Alice volunteers, much to the shock of her husband, Bennett, and the quiet disapproval of her father-in-law, Mr. Van Cleve, who believes that such an endeavor is unbecoming for a married woman. She is acutely aware of the weight of their expectations—that she should be focused on being an obedient wife, managing their household, and preparing for motherhood. But instead of conforming, Alice feels a flicker of rebellion and excitement; this library project is more than just delivering books—it is a gateway to freedom, a way to explore the land, connect with people, and reclaim a part of herself that she has felt slipping away since arriving in Baileyville.



Summary

Margery O'Hare, a fiercely independent and outspoken woman already involved in the project, speaks up to reassure the community that Alice will be trained and looked after. Unlike the other women in town, Margery does not concern herself with social approval, and her confidence in Alice further solidifies Alice's decision to move forward with the library work. With that, the meeting concludes, leaving Alice with a renewed sense of determination, despite the disapproving glances and whispered concerns that follow her as she steps out into the warm night air.

As Alice and Bennett walk home, the tension between them is undeniable—Bennett, raised in the shadow of his domineering father, is visibly uncomfortable with Alice's decision, yet he offers little resistance beyond a few weak protests. Alice, meanwhile, feels the first stirrings of real excitement since arriving in Kentucky, sensing that this job might be the key to unlocking a life she could actually love. The Packhorse Library, with its promise of adventure and purpose, represents a break from the monotony and a chance to contribute something meaningful, not just to the town, but to herself.

Thus, Chapter 1 lays the foundation for Alice's journey, not just as a librarian, but as a woman on the brink of self-discovery. Her decision to join the library initiative marks a quiet yet significant rebellion against the expectations placed upon her, setting her on a path toward independence, resilience, and an uncharted future in the hills of Kentucky. With the mountains stretching before her and the scent of change in the air, Alice steps forward, ready to embrace whatever comes next.