



## FINDING FLORA, CHAPTER ONE

Bracing herself against the jerk and pitch of the train, Flora leaped into the darkness.

Her long skirt billowed in the icy updraft. For several seconds she was airborne, trapped between her past life and an unfathomable future. Then her left foot struck the ground with such force that her ankle bent like a green twig and she screamed with pain, the sound lost in the thunder of the wheels. She tumbled down the steep gravel bank and landed in a shallow pool, shattering a thin crust of spring ice. There she lay rigid and gasping, terrified that someone had seen her shadow cross the lighted windows.

Flora clenched her chattering teeth and forced herself to play dead. Steel screeched against steel as the massive steam locomotive groaned around the curve and picked up speed. The ground vibrated, the boxcars creaked, and the wheels clattered across the cracks in the rails. Eventually the caboose rolled past and disappeared. The rhythmic chuffing of the engine faded, and the earth fell silent.

Only then did Flora struggle to her feet, the ice beneath breaking into shards as sharp as needles. Her hat had vanished, and her hair hung heavy and wet over one shoulder. Although her new tweed travelling suit and tartan shawl had saved her skin from abrasion, one side of her face throbbed with pain.

Flora had heaved out her calfskin valise before jumping, had watched it bounce once before it was swallowed up in the black night. After an unsuccessful attempt to wring the water from her sodden skirt with numb hands, she limped along the ditch, searching for her bag, straining her eyes in the gloom. Her left ankle was on fire.

For a moment she regretted her trunk, locked in the baggage car, now rushing away in the opposite direction. With a sense of urgency, she fumbled for the leather pouch strapped around her waist and gripped it for reassurance. Inside were her identification papers and her savings. Safely sewn into the seam of her petticoat was her secret treasure. Now that the contents of trunk were gone, everything else she owned in the world was in that valise. Flora bent over and renewed her desperate search.

The heavy clouds parted, and moonlight flooded the prairie. She spied the bag wedged under a clump of willows and gave a small cry of relief. Clutching it with one hand, she clawed her way up the bank with the other. The steel rails looked like two silver threads stretching away to the horizon. Flora hobbled a few steps and halted, her treacherous ankle pounding, as she came to the bitter realisation that she couldn't walk all the way back to Calgary. Nor could she remain beside the tracks and wait for help, since she knew there wouldn't be another train for three days.

Balancing on one high-heeled shoe, Flora scanned her shadowy surroundings. She was no stranger to the empty sweep of the Highland moors, but this landscape was an alien creature, bristling with hostility. Patches of stubborn snow lingered between the spiky blades jutting from its broad back. Even the air was thin and harsh and stung her panting lungs. Through the silence came an eerie howl. Flora started so violently that she bit her own tongue and tasted blood. Surely setting off into this savage wasteland was an act of suicide.

While she stood motionless, almost stupefied with shock and fear, something caught her eye. A yellow glow winked once, winked twice. Flora stared into the shadows, wondering if it were a star, unsure where the black earth met the black sky. Then she glimpsed it again, a tiny beacon that flickered and faded.

Flora slid down the bank and wrenched a sturdy branch from the underbrush. Wedging her makeshift staff under her left armpit and hoisting the valise with her right hand, she set out across the cold, dead plain toward the light.

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