

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER III: WILL'S LETTER

Amy's announcement—unexpected as it was—had two effects. It dispelled, for a time, the gloom that had come with the news of Will Ford's disappearance, and it gave the girls something to talk about, to speculate over and to plan for.

"I must confess," admitted Betty, "that our strenuous life this Fall and Summer, living in the outdoors, has unfitted us for the hum-drum sort of existence that used to satisfy us. We seem to want some excitement all the while now."

"That's so," agreed Mollie. "But outdoor life is a little too chilling these days."

There had been a series of storms and cold weather in Deepdale, ever since the girls had returned from the logging camp.

"But it must be perfectly lovely in Florida now," spoke Grace, who found that by joining in the conversation she did not think so much about her missing brother. "The weather there in our winter season is delightful. Where is Mr. Stonington's orange grove, Amy—near Palm Beach?"

"No, it is somewhere in the Indian River section, I believe. I don't know just where."

"And do you really mean to say you can take us there?" asked Betty. "Oh, you're a dear!"

"Uncle Stonington said he would be glad if I could take you girls," said Amy. "He got the grove through some sort of a business deal. He doesn't know anything about raising oranges, but there are men in charge who do. There is quite a big sort of place—a ranch I believe they call it."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Betty. "Ranches are only in the West. They are inhabited by—cow-punchers," and she seemed very proud of her knowledge.

"Why do they have to punch the cows?" asked Mollie. "Westerners use such funny words."

"Oh, they don't really punch them," said Grace. "I've heard Will and the boys talk about it. It's just a name. But there are no ranches in Florida."



“Well, then it’s just a plain orange grove,” said Amy. “There is a large house, some bungalows and other buildings. And there is a river and a lake—”

“My motor boat!” cried Betty.

“What’s the matter with it?” demanded Mollie. “Do you see it?”

“No, but I wonder if we could take it along?”

“I’ll ask Uncle Stonington,” said Amy. “I’m sure you can. Oh, I do hope you girls can go! Do you think you can?”

“I’m going—if I have to walk!” declared Betty. “I can send my boat by freight, and we can have the most delightful times ever! Oh, Amy!” and she hugged her chum again.

“I’m not sure I can go,” observed Grace, slowly. “If poor Will is in trouble—”

“We’ll get him out!” cried Mollie. “Of course you’ll go. And I’ll go, too! We’ll all go. We’ll be outdoor girls down where there’s no winter!”

“It sounds—enticing,” murmured Grace, who did not like the cold weather. “Think of orange blossoms—”

“And brides!” completed Betty. “Oh, girls!”

“Silly!” chimed in Mollie.

“Is Mrs. Stonington very ill?” asked Betty. “You said something about her going down there.”

“She is not at all well,” spoke Amy. “Uncle Stonington is quite worried about her. I think when it came to getting the orange grove he took it as much on her account as on his own. The doctor said the air down there would do her good.”

“Is it as bad as that?” asked Mollie, in a low voice.

“Well, she is not at all well,” Amy replied. “But we all have hopes that a change will benefit her. I do hope you girls will come with me. I’ll be so lonesome without you.”

“Oh, we’ll come,” said Mollie, with much confidence.

They talked of the Florida possibilities at some length, and Betty was a bit anxious as to how she could get her motor boat down to the Land of the Everglades.

“You’ll have to consult that sea-going uncle of yours,” suggested Mollie.

“Perhaps I shall,” Betty agreed, with a smile.

“Papa and Uncle Isaac are rather long,” complained Grace. “I wonder what they are going to do?”

“If your father has to go South I’m sure Uncle Stonington would be glad to have him stop at the orange grove,” said Amy.



“I don’t know that he’d have time,” remarked Grace. “If he has to search for poor Will—”

She was interrupted by the footsteps of her father and uncle as they came from the private library. Mr. Ford—as I shall indicate Grace’s father—was speaking.

“Well, I don’t see anything to do but to take a trip down there,” he said. “When I’m on the ground I can decide what course to take. Writing is only nervous work. And yet I don’t see how I can spare the time now.”

“Perhaps I could manage for you,” said Uncle Isaac. “If I find Will I can bring him back to the mill, and make him work harder than ever. Hard work—”

“No, no!” exclaimed Mr. Ford, quickly. “I think Will has been punished enough. I want to get him home, and then we’ll map out a course of procedure. Perhaps I gave him too heavy a sentence,” and, almost unconsciously, he glanced at his brother.

Certainly Mr. Ford, Sr., looked like an inexorable judge who would exact the last farthing of a debt, or the final round of punishment. Will had evidently had no easy time.

“Well, I must think about this Southern trip,” went on Will’s father. “Why, you girls look as though you had been talking secrets!” he exclaimed, not wanting to inflict too much of his family troubles on the visitors.

“We have!” cried Betty. “You are not the only one going South, Mr. Ford. We may go too.”

“Go South? What do you mean?” he asked.

“Mr. Stonington has purchased an orange grove in Florida,” Betty went on, “and Amy has asked us all down there. Do, please, say that Grace can go!” and she blew him a kiss, for the four chums shared their parents and friends as they did their—well, let us say—chocolates.

“Florida,” spoke Mr. Ford, musingly. “I wonder if, by any chance, Will could have gone there? Many young men go down South in the winter to work as waiters in the big hotels. But I hardly think he would be so foolish. Well, of course if Grace wants to go—”

“I do want to, Daddy, but poor Will—”

“Oh, I’ll find him. He has just gone off on some little trip, perhaps. Very likely he has written to us and the letter has miscarried. Or he may be carrying it around in his pocket, thinking he has mailed it. Yes, I think you may go, Grace, if the others do. Don’t worry about your brother. We’ll have trace of him soon.”

“I’m sure we all hope so,” said Mollie, impulsively. “We are thinking of taking Betty’s boat down with us.”



“A good idea. I wish I could go. And it is fortunate that, on account of a change in the school system, you will not miss a term.” For following a shift in the educational work of Deepdale, had come a reconstruction of the system. The outdoor girls were sufficiently advanced to permit of their taking several months’ vacation, and still remain up to the standard required by the State regents.

“And to think of going to Florida!” cried Betty, as she walked about the room. “I know we shall just love it there.”

“Young folks waste a lot more time than I did when I was young,” said Mr. Ford, Sr., with a sniff.

“Perhaps we should have been better off if we had ‘wasted’ a little more time, as you call it,” remarked his brother, as he thought of his missing son.

“Humph!” snorted Uncle Isaac.

“Well, let’s get down to my office,” suggested Will’s father, after a pause. “I’m going to have my hands full. To trace a missing boy—though really I don’t imagine that will be serious—and have a daughter go to Florida is ‘going some,’ as the boys say. But I guess I can manage it. Now, Isaac, if you’re ready—”

He was interrupted by a ring at the bell, and the shrill call of the postman’s whistle.

“I’ll go,” Grace exclaimed, intercepting the maid. She brought back several letters, and at the sight of the handwriting on the envelope of one she exclaimed:

“It’s from Will! It’s from my brother. Oh, Daddy, here’s a letter from Will!”

