

## CHAPTER V: MISSING AGAIN

“And to think that in a few more days we’ll leave all this behind us—all the cold, the icicles, the snow, the biting winds—leave it all, and sail into a land of sunshine and oranges and Spanish moss and magnolias and—”

“Alligators!” finished Betty for Grace, who was thus going into raptures over the prospect before them, as she looked over the wintry landscape that was in full view just outside the window of Amy’s home. I say Amy’s home, for, though it had developed that she was no relative of Mr. and Mrs. Stonington, still they insisted that she call their home hers as long as she liked. So it was at Amy’s home, then, that her chums had gathered to talk over the trip to Florida.

It was the day after the somewhat startling developments regarding Will Ford, and Mr. Ford, true to his determination, had telegraphed his son twenty-five dollars.

“Well, of course Florida will be lovely!” exclaimed Mollie, “and I love oranges—”

“To say nothing of orange blossoms,” interjected Grace.

“I said oranges!” went on Mollie, putting emphasis on the word. “I like them as well as anyone, but I love winter and skating and ice boating, too.”

“Oh, I just can’t bear cold weather!” said Grace, with a shiver, and a look toward the chair on which, in a fluffy pile, rested her furs—and Grace looked handsome in the sable set that her father had given to her at Christmas.

“You didn’t seem so cold when we were up in the old lumber camp,” remarked Betty. “You skated and ice-boated with the rest of us, and seemed to enjoy it.”

“I know, but it was a different sort of cold up there—so dry, and not so penetrating as down here. The wind seems to go right through me,” and again the tall girl shivered.

“It doesn’t take long—” began Mollie, and then she stopped short and bit her lips to keep back a smile.

“Long to do what?” asked Grace, curiously.

“Never mind,” spoke Mollie. “You might get angry.”

“I will not. I haven’t your—”

This time it was Grace who caught herself in time.



“Go on—say it. You may as well as think it!” snapped Mollie, with some asperity. “You were going to say you hadn’t my temper, weren’t you, now?”

“Well, yes, I was,” said Grace, slowly. “And you were going to say I was so thin that the wind didn’t take long to go through me; weren’t you?” challenged Grace.

“Yes, I was, and—”

“Girls—Mollie—Grace!” cried Betty, anxious not to see a quarrel. “What can I do to pour oil on troubled waters? Let’s talk about—Florida.”

“Don’t pour cod liver oil, whatever you do,” said Grace, quickly. “I had to take some of the horrid stuff the last cough I had, and I can taste it yet. Where are my chocolates? Oh, thank you, Amy,” as the latter passed them over. “Have some. These have maraschino cherries inside.”

“Leave it to Grace to discover something luxurious in the candy line,” observed Mollie.

“Well, I notice that you’re only too glad to eat them,” and Grace fairly snapped out the words.

“Oh, dear! It seems hopeless to keep peace between you two to-day,” sighed Betty. “Can’t you be nice? Especially after Amy has asked us over here to talk about the trip. Let’s talk about—”

“What to wear!” exclaimed Amy, with a bright thought. “You see we’ll have to take two sets of clothing. One to wear until we get to Florida, and the other after we arrive at the orange grove. We’ll need thin things there. Aunt Stonington is making me up some pretty voile and white muslin dresses.”

“I was wondering whether I ought to take my furs,” said Grace.

“Furs in Florida!” cried Mollie. “Never!”

“But it will be cold going down,” said Grace. “It’s cold even in Washington, now. I think I’ll wear them. I may not get another chance this winter if we stay there very long.”

“We can stay as long as we like,” said Amy. “Uncle Stonington says he’ll remain until Spring, anyhow, for the business will take until then to get going properly. Then, too, he is anxious about Aunty’s health. The doctor says the longer she stays in a mild climate the better she will be.”

“She doesn’t look very well,” spoke Betty in a low voice. Mrs. Stonington had greeted the girls as they came to call on Amy, and had then gone to lie down. The callers had all noticed how frail and worn she seemed. Perhaps the shock of almost losing Amy had something to do with it. But there also appeared to be the seeds of some deep-seated malady present in her system. And a look at Mr. Stonington’s face



told that he, too, was worrying. But the trip to Florida might work wonders. They all hoped so, at any rate.

“If we’re going to take Bet’s boat we ought to wear our sailor suits part of the time,” suggested Mollie. “Are you going to take the Gem?”

“What about that, Amy?” questioned Betty. “Did you inquire whether there are navigable waters near the orange grove?”

“There are. The grove is near the town of Bentonville, on the Mayfair River, which empties into Lake Chad, so I think there will be plenty of chance to go boating. The grove is in the Indian River section, where some of the finest oranges grow.”

“Then the Gem goes along,” decided Betty. “I’m going to stop at the freight office on my way home, and see about having it crated and shipped.”

Discussing what they would take in the way of dresses, and other feminine accessories, talking over prospective trips in the motor boat, speculating as to whether Will or any of his boy chums would go to Florida for a brief visit, made the winter afternoon pass quickly.

“It would be nice if Will and some of the other boys could come down,” said Mollie, reflectively.

“By ‘some of the others’ meaning Allen Washburn, I suppose,” said Mollie, slyly, for Betty’s liking for the young lawyer was no secret, nor was his for her.

“Speak for yourself, please,” said the “Little Captain,” a flush mounting to her already rosy cheeks. “Though of course if Will is coming home he won’t want to go back again,” she concluded.

“Hardly, I fancy,” agreed Grace. “That’s the last chocolate. I must get some more for to-night. Who’s going downtown?”

They all were, it developed, and on the way Betty stopped at the railroad freight office and arranged to have a man sent to the boathouse to crate the Gem. Then it could be taken to the railroad on a truck.

“And what will we do with it when we get to Bentonville?” asked Amy. “It does look so big out of the water,” for, after the visit to the freight office they had gone to where the Gem was stored in winter quarters.

“Oh, we can manage it there,” said Betty.

“There must be plenty of men and trucks down there.”

“Uncle Stonington says there are other motor boats on the river, so there must be ways of getting them on and off,” put in Amy.

Grace got her chocolates, and also insisted on buying hot drinks for her chums.

“For I simply can’t seem to get warm,” she declared, as she sipped hers.



“And with all those furs,” remarked Betty. “I guess you’ll have to live in the South in Winter, Grace.”

“I wish I could.”

As the girls walked with Grace toward her house, the Ford home being the first on their way, they saw a messenger boy with his little black-covered book and a bunch of telegrams just turning into the gate.

“There’s a message!” exclaimed Grace, breaking into a run. “I want to take it from him before he rings the bell. Mamma is so nervous at the sight of a telegram. She always thinks the worst thing has happened. I suppose this is from Will, saying he is on his way home. Poor boy! he has had a lesson.”

“I feel sorry for him, too,” said Betty.

“I’ll take the message,” spoke Grace to the boy, as she signed the extended book. “Prepaid? Yes. Here is a dime for yourself. Get a hot chocolate; you must be cold.”

“T’anks!” was the reply. “I kin git two for dat!”

“I hope he won’t buy cigarettes,” ventured Mollie.

“Nonsense!” answered Grace, as she tore open the message, which was addressed to her father. She felt she had a right to do this, as, had it been some business communication, she argued, it would have gone to Mr. Ford’s office. Grace felt sure it was from her brother.

Quickly she read the brief message in the waning light of the winter day. Then she swayed and her face paled.

“What is it—bad news?” asked Betty quickly, as she put her arms around her chum.

“Yes—yes. It’s about—Will. Read it. Poor mother! How can I tell her? And she has been expecting him so!”

Betty glanced at the few words. They were:

“Cannot locate Will Ford at Jacksonville address given. Am holding the twenty-five dollars subject to your order. Party was at address noted, but information to our agent here is to effect that young man left in company with a labor contractor who does not bear a very good reputation. Young man’s boarding mistress worried. What shall we do?”

The message was to Mr. Ford. It was from Jacksonville, and was signed by the telegraph operator there.

“Will is missing again!” sobbed Grace. “Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

