

The Secret Book of Flora Lea

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Excerpt

CHAPTER 1

Not very long ago and not very far away, there once was and still is an invisible place right here with us. And if you are born knowing, you will find your way through the woodlands to the shimmering doors that lead to the land made just and exactly for you.

HAZEL MERSEY LINDEN, 1939

October 1940

Binsey, Oxfordshire

On a red blanket by the river, six-year-old Flora Lea Linden awakens alone, a dome of blue sky above her and birdsong wild about her. *Someone called my name?* She glances around the green expanse, at the churning water of the River Thames furrowed with winks and puckers as it nearly overflows its banks, taking to the sea anything or anyone who dares to enter its rush.

The river surges toward Oxford where students hurry to and from tutors under pinnacled towers standing guard over cobblestone streets. Then the waters bend

and curve, gathering force, bouncing against the stone walls and locks of England until they reach London, where bombs are plummeting to city streets, delivering ruination, where smoldering cathedrals and crushed homes litter the river with their ember and ash.

Did someone call my name? Flora sits and rubs her eyes. She's not exactly alone. She has Berry, her stuffed teddy. And she isn't frightened. Why should she be? Her older sister, Hazel, told her many times that these woodlands belong to them, that the shadowed glade and the sacred sunlit puddles where the canopy of trees opens wide is a safe place meant for the two sisters, created just for them.

She stands and carefully steps closer to the river. Hazel refuses to go with Flora to Whisperwood anymore, so what's she to do but go alone? It's hers!—not to be abandoned: the glowing castle and the grove of alder, the chattering squirrels and animated trees.

Hazel had told Flora that the glinting lights on the river were stars and galaxies, rushing to meet the sea. Hazel had ordered her not to ever *become* the river, as they became other woodland creatures, nor should Flora ever drink from the river. If she did, she was told, she would never find her way back to Mum or Bridie or their warm cottage in the heather-strewn fields.

This enchanting river was—like the apple in the Bible—forbidden.

But Flora doesn't believe this beautiful, starry river can be dangerous. She clings to Berry by his worn, furry paw and ventures nearer to the water's rush, thrilled at her boldness. No one knows what might happen to her on this adventure or who she

might become.

She hears a voice nearby in the woods, familiar, but Flora ignores it.

The way here was through a shimmering door, and Hazel was too busy to see it.

The river is Flora's companion, her friend, and this intimacy has her creeping ever closer to its edge.

Hazel never wants them to pretend to be bunnies, so that's what she's decided today. Flora will be a bunny.

She stares down at the river's churned-up waters, looking for stars but seeing only mud and silt, humps of river-smoothed rocks underwater. She skids down on a soggy, earthy incline, her wellies slipping where the browned grasses of October change to mud. Falling on her bum, Flora laughs.

What an adventure!

Berry slips from her hand as her palms and fingers dig into the wet earth to keep herself from tumbling into the frigid waters. She scoots closer, wanting to grab Berry. He's too close to the river.

"It's okay," she says as she reaches for his paw, repeating her sister's words: "It's our land. We're always safe in Whisperwood."