

## THE ST. ALICE HOTEL

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1908

### Chapter One



“I don’t usually hire girls without experience,” said Mrs. Bannerman on my first day at the St. Alice Hotel.

She eyed me across the table in the small stuffy housekeeper’s room at the end of the hallway behind the kitchen and dining room. She wore a black dress, closed tightly at the neck with a cameo.

My sad lonely reference lay in the middle of the table – a badly spelled letter from our neighbour in Victoria, Mrs. Stokes, saying that I had minded her five children for over a year (two sets of twins and a colicky baby, all under the age of six.) She said I was a *respectable girl* and that she would *miss me sorely*.

Mrs. Bannerman stared at the letter and sniffed. My heart sank. Was she going to send me back on the next train?

She had another piece of paper in front of her, my carefully written application. She glanced down at it.

“You were born in Toronto, Charlotte, and moved to Victoria six years ago?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You’re fifteen years old?”

“Almost sixteen.”

“Your parents are deceased and you live with a Miss Virginia Lane?”

“Yes, Ma’am. My Great Aunt Ginny.”

“And you got as far as grade nine with your schooling?”

“I’m going back. As soon as I save enough money.”

Mrs. Bannerman studied me.

“I usually go to Victoria and Vancouver to interview my staff. But things have happened very quickly. One of the girls had to leave unexpectedly.”

She’d been sacked, I guessed. What had she done? Splattered gravy on one of those fusty old gentlemen I had spotted in the parlour on my way in? Tipped over a coffee pot on the ladies’ playing cards?

“Very well,” said Mrs. Bannerman. “I’m hiring you as a waitress in our dining room but you will be expected to perform other duties as well.”

“Thank you!”

“If you have any problems, come directly to me, not the hotel manager. Mr. Brown doesn’t have time to deal with domestic matters. You’ll be sharing a room with Lizzie. She’s been waitressing here for a year. I’ve instructed her to teach you the routine.”

Mrs. Bannerman stood up and handed me a stack of folded clothes. I was surprised how short she was, just past my shoulder. “Your uniforms. One for the daytime and one for the dinner hour. I expect your cuffs and collars to be cleaned and starched every night.” She placed a book on top of the stack. The title on the brown cover said *The Up-To-Date Waitress*. “You will find this a great source of information and inspiration.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“You can start tomorrow morning. I’ve told the cook Mrs. Wiggs to expect you at six-thirty sharp. The staff eat in the staff dining room at six.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Lizzie is waiting for you in the kitchen. She’ll take you up to your room. I noticed you came in the front door. Staff use the back entrance to the hotel and the back staircase at all times. The front door is for guests unless you are serving refreshments on the verandah. The annex behind the hotel, where the young men live, is strictly out of bounds.”

Mrs. Bannerman fixed me with cool grey eyes. “I want to make it absolutely clear that there is to be no fraternizing with the guests.”

She sat down again and ruffled through a stack of papers. Without looking up, she said, “You’re dismissed.”

I shifted the uniforms and book to one arm and picked up my small suitcase. I almost danced out the door. The advertisement in the *British Colonist* described the hotel as a jewel in the wilderness, nestled on the shores of beautiful Harrison Lake, surrounded by majestic mountains. It screamed *adventure!*

I set down my suitcase so I could shut the door. “You’ll have to do something about your hair,” said Mrs. Bannerman.



Lizzie took me up the back stairs to our room. It was small with a slanted ceiling, two iron beds, two dressers and a washstand with a jug.

I put my suitcase on the floor.

“My bed’s the one by the window,” said Lizzie. She was tall and freckly with shiny brown hair. “I have to go straight back to the kitchen and there’s so much to talk about. Are you awfully tired?”

“Yes. And grubby.”

“Well, one thing the St. Alice has is plenty of hot water. They pump it from the hot springs. You can have all the baths you want. There’s a bathroom at the end of the hall. And I do love your hair!”

My thick red hair had fallen loose and frizzed in the misty air. “It’s

a disaster,” I said cheerfully.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” said Lizzie.

I stripped out of my brown travelling suit, right down to my undergarments. I opened my suitcase and took out a photograph of my parents in a slim gold frame. I set it on the dresser beside my bed.

A warm bath? Heaven.



I sank up to my chin, washing away the dust and grime. I tried to sort out my impressions of my journey. I had never been away from Victoria before. Early that morning, I had crossed the strait from Vancouver Island, in the steamship *The Queen of Victoria*, and then I rode on the train up the valley. An omnibus with the words “Harrison Hot Springs” in green letters on the front met me at the CPR station in the tiny town of Agassiz.

I had always wanted to ride in a motorized vehicle!

Three hotel guests, a gentleman and two ladies with magnificent feathered hats, sat at the back. I perched on the edge of my seat behind the driver in a spiffy blue uniform who introduced himself as Frank. We bumped over the six miles of rough wagon road between towering dark trees and scattered farms.

I gasped at my first glimpse of the huge lake, slate grey under the cloudy skies, and the three-storey green-and-white building with the sweeping verandahs that was the St. Alice Hotel. Frank laughed. “It’s only the end of April,” he said. “Wait ’til you see this place in the summer!”

I splashed water on my face and scrubbed my cheeks. I thought of all the questions I was dying to ask Lizzie.



When Lizzie got back, I was lying on my bed reading *The Up-To-Date Waitress*. I read bits out loud while she changed into her nightdress.

*“A waitress needs to be quick and light of foot; thus youth and a trim figure, not too large, are the first requisites in one who wishes to make a success of the calling.”*

Lizzie snorted.

*“Her first duty in regard to everything she touches is to ‘keep it straight’.* What on earth does that mean?”

“The forks and knives. Line them up properly. There’s all kinds of rules about setting the tables.” Lizzie picked up the frame on my dresser. “Are these your parents?”

“Yes.”

“They look so kind.”

I already felt like I could confide in Lizzie. “They died when I was ten. Their carriage was hit by a runaway horse on Yonge Street in Toronto.”

“How awful. I don’t have a photograph of my family. There’s lots of us. I have three sisters and four brothers. We live in Chilliwack.”

Lizzie climbed into bed. “I was going to write about you coming but I’d rather talk. Victoria. That’s such a long way. I’ve never been but I want to.”

“Do you write every day?” I said.

“Yes. I’m going to be an author.”

“I’m going to be a pharmacist.”

We smiled at each other. I knew we were going to be great friends.