

Flora and Ulysses

By Kate DiCamillo

CHAPTER ONE

A Natural-Born Cynic

Flora Belle Buckman was in her room at her desk. She was very busy. She was doing two things at once. She was ignoring her mother, and she was also reading a comic book entitled

The Illuminated Adventures of the Amazing Incandesto!

“Flora,” her mother shouted, “what are you doing up there?” “I’m reading!” Flora shouted back. “Remember the contract!” her mother shouted. “Do not forget the contract!” At the beginning of summer, in a moment of weakness, Flora had made the mistake of signing a contract that said she would “work to turn her face away from the idiotic high jinks of comics and toward the bright light of true literature.” Those were the exact words of the contract. They were her mother’s words. Flora’s mother was a writer. She was divorced, and she wrote romance novels. Talk about idiotic high jinks. Flora hated romance novels. In fact, she hated romance. “I hate romance,” said Flora out loud to herself. She liked the way the words sounded. She imagined them floating above her in a comic-strip bubble; it was a comforting thing to have words hanging over her head. Especially negative words about romance. Flora’s mother had often accused Flora of being a “natural-born cynic.” Flora suspected that this was true.

SHE WAS A NATURAL-BORN CYNIC WHO LIVED IN DEFIANCE OF CONTRACTS!

Yep, thought Flora, that’s me.

She bent her head and went back to reading about the amazing Incandesto. She was interrupted a few minutes later by a very loud noise. It sounded as if a jet plane had landed in the Tickhams’ backyard. “What the heck?” said Flora. She got up from her desk and looked out the window and saw Mrs. Tickham running around the backyard with a shiny, oversize vacuum cleaner. It looked like she was vacuuming the yard.

That can’t be, thought Flora.

Who vacuums their yard?

Actually, it didn't look like Mrs. Tickham knew what she was doing. It was more like the vacuum cleaner was in charge. And the vacuum cleaner seemed to be out of its mind. Or its engine. Or something.

"A few bolts shy of a load," said Flora out loud. And then she saw that Mrs. Tickham and the vacuum cleaner were headed directly for a squirrel. "Hey, now," said Flora. She banged on the window. "Watch out!" she shouted. "You're going to vacuum up that squirrel!" She said the words, and then she had a strange moment of seeing them, hanging there over her head.

"YOU'RE GOING TO VACUUM UP THAT SQUIRREL!"

There is just no predicting what kind of sentences you might say, thought Flora.

For instance, who would ever think you would shout, "You're going to vacuum up that squirrel!"?

It didn't make any difference, though, what words she said. Flora was too far away. The vacuum cleaner was too loud. And also, clearly, it was bent on destruction. "This malfeasance must be stopped," said Flora in a deep and superheroic voice. "This malfeasance must be stopped" was what the unassuming janitor Alfred T. Slipper always said before he was transformed into the amazing Incandesto and became a towering, crime-fighting pillar of light. Unfortunately, Alfred T. Slipper wasn't present. Where was Incandesto when you needed him?

Not that Flora really believed in superheroes. But still. She stood at the window and watched as the squirrel was vacuumed up.

Poof. Fwump.

"Holy bagumba," said Flora.