

# Chapter One



I could hear a constant jingling of harness bells in the avenue and the voices of girls calling gaily to each other as they arrived in their sleighs and carriages at the big blue house next door. The neighbor girl, Ivy Victoria Blackmore Vandermeer, was having a costume party, but I wasn't going. I couldn't go. I hadn't been invited.

There was a good reason for that: I had threatened to scalp Ivy Victoria with an ax after she'd told me that my grandfather had been murdered. Murdered, she said, and planted in the vegetable garden by Grandmother and Buzzard Rose, the cook. That's what her mother had told

her, she said, and I believed it to be a true fact, because Grandfather had been a big mystery back when I first came here to live.

Nobody had ever wanted to talk about Grandfather. Not before, when my mother was alive in our little cabin over the mountains. Not here, after my pa brought me to live temporarily with Grandmother in her fancy gingerbread house. I believed Grandfather had been murdered until Grandmother took me to see him in the Utica Insane Asylum, where he'd been since before I was born and since he'd lost most of Grandmother's fortune and heard voices talking to him in the walls.

Then in December, he up and died. The telegram came right after Christmas, and Grandmother, who always wore pale lavender, put on black and a sorrowful face.

Everyone knew the truth about Grandfather now. Ivy's father had even come to pay his respects to Grandmother. But he was the only one who had.

After that, Ivy often watched me from her bedroom window. Did that mean that she wanted to be friends? Maybe. But maybe not enough to invite me to her party. I was pretty sure that her mother would not allow it. Mrs. Vandermeer wasn't the kind, forgiving sort.

I sighed and pretended not to notice all the happy

party hullabaloo. It wasn't easy, though, especially since Mr. Horace Bottle, my tutor, was agog over the event.

Horace now let the drapery fall over the dining-room window for about the eighty-seventh time. "The cakes, the confections, the lovely costumes," he said wistfully. Being left out was much harder for Horace than for the rest of us. He loved tables weighted down with cakes and confections. He loved watching people, and he loved the ladies and the girls in their colorful gowns with tiers of Swiss lace, their pink arms, their graceful necks, their baubles. "It's a costume ball," he said in a loud whisper, "spring flowers peeking out of dark winter capes. Do come and look, Hattie." He pulled back the drapery even more. "Most delightful to see bright blossoms on a winter's day when clouds do nothing but drag their bellies over us like fat, squashing gods."

Reluctantly I went over to watch with Horace. Girls in costumes and flowered bonnets paraded up the walk—a pansy, a daisy, a tiger lily, a daffodil. A bright-faced Ivy Victoria stood at the door, blue flowers sewn to her gown, a garland of ivy sprinkled with blue paper flowers on her head, her yellow hair arranged in soft waves, her fat sausage curls gone. She handed each flower-topped girl a slip of paper as she passed through the door.

“Conundrums. I do love the challenge of a good mind puzzler,” Horace said with a delighted hush just as Grandmother popped her head around the corner, her face anxious-looking.

“Teatime,” she said. “Cinnamon and nutmeg, nuts in the warm sweet buns.” Grandmother was a pale, twit-tery songbird, and when things took a bad turn (or just an unexpected one), she usually worried the lace on her cuffs and collar or the folds of her skirt, or fingered the cameo brooch pinned at her throat, or knitted her fingers together over and over. Today, though, her fingers were quiet. Since the telegram of Grandfather’s death, her hands had been still, sad as birds at night, waiting for the sun to come up again.

“Warm sweet buns? Cinnamon? Scrumptious . . . sublime,” Horace said. Inhaling deeply, he turned away from the window and the festivities next door. Dropping the drapery, he sprinted off.

I stood there a moment longer, peeking through the panels of heavy fabric. Suddenly Ivy looked over at Grandmother’s house, stared as if she knew someone was watching—and why wouldn’t she? Horace had pretty near pressed his nose to the windowpane ever

since the deliveries had begun this morning. I held my breath, motionless, clenching the dark drapery, hoping she wouldn't see me. Her smile faded. She bent her head, twisted away, and went inside.

"Hattie, dear?" Grandmother had come back and was standing right behind me. She touched my arm.

"It's snowing," I said. Cold white flakes were flying against the windowpane and sticking.

She rested a hand on my shoulder now. "I wish you could go to parties as I did, and your mother. I wish . . . oh, once upon a time, things were so different." Her voice dipped to a forlorn whisper, ending with a sad, fluttery sigh. All her thoughts had taken flight to once-upon-a-time. "Do you mind very much?" she said gently.

"Not very much, Grandmother," I said, letting the drapery panel fall back against the window. "I just wanted to see." But I did mind. Very much. I wanted to be one of those flowers bobbing up the walk—not a pale lily, but a tiger lily. I wanted to play games and conundrums, laugh and share secrets. A savage pang of longing snarled in my chest. I was desperate for a friend, someone my own age, a girl, any girl at all. It was my secret, something I didn't want the others to know. It would make Grandmother

sad. She would worry that she had failed me, and I didn't want Grandmother to be sad or worry any more than she had to.

Grandmother smiled faintly. "Let's have our tea then, shall we?"

"I'll be right there, Grandmother," I said. When she left, I pulled the drapery back once more and watched as more laughing flowers bobbed up the walk. And then came the sudden thumping of footsteps on the front porch, and the clink of the brass letter slot as something was shoved through. An invitation? *I wasn't forgotten after all.* Heart thrumming excitedly, I raced to the front hall and snatched up the smooth white envelope. With shaky fingers, I slowly turned it over. *Please, please, please . . .* I wished. But it was not an invitation. It was nothing good at all. Stamped in bold black print in the corner was CITY OF KINGSTON — TAX COLLECTION — PAYMENT OVERDUE.

I sucked in my breath and peered through the glass. The postman was gone. His single, telltale prints marked the fresh snow on the porch, down the steps, and along the walk to the street. But the snow was falling thick and fast now; the wind swept across the porch. In no time, the boot treads would be covered over.

The bell for tea clinked impatiently. I pressed the

letter against my chest. PAYMENT OVERDUE sounded bad. Poor, dear Grandmother had had money worries since long before I came to live here. Her only source of income was from the shipping business she'd inherited from her father, but business hadn't been good this past year. Then she'd been melancholy with the news of Grandfather's death. And now the party next door was a sad reminder that we were forgotten by society. What would Grandmother do if I gave her the letter now? Her face would go pale; she'd tap her chest nervously and fret horribly. Rose's special cinnamony treat would be spoiled, and all of us, even Horace, would sink into a cloudy gloom.

It wouldn't hurt to wait a bit longer to give her the letter. I gave a wild look around and darted over to the gilt-framed mirror that went clear to the floor.

With shaky fingers, I hurriedly stuffed the letter behind it, out of sight. I heard the whoosh as it slid down the wall and caught on something. Stuck. Halfway to nowhere and out of my reach. I tried to peek back there, but to my horror I discovered that the mirror was securely bolted to the wall. Trembling and feeling a little sick, I rushed down the hall to the library before anyone came looking for me.

## Chapter Two



Just as we had every other day since I had come here to live, we gathered in the library for afternoon tea and ginger cakes. Warm, sugary cinnamon buns were a special treat, and I guessed that old Rose the cook was trying to make up for my not getting invited to the party. I was just glad Rose was busy pouring tea when I came in breathless. If she had looked at me, she would have guessed right away that I had been up to something.

“Common school tomorrow, Hattie,” Grandmother said once I was settled in my usual place next to her on the chaise. Horace and Rose sat in twin wing chairs, the low table of tea things between us, the pleasant



*shush* of gaslights and the solid ticking of clocks behind us. Grandmother sounded forlorn, and her hands lay clasped and silent in her lap. She had planned for me to go to Kingston Academy one day, as soon as Horace had caught me up on all the required studies for entrance into secondary school. That hadn't happened yet, and hard times had made it necessary for Horace to find a teaching position in a common school and for me to be enrolled in one. Unfortunately, we were not at the same one.

"Madame Greymoor, it is a good common school. Some excellent faculty," Horace said soothingly as he helped himself to another bun. "She'll be ready for the Academy by semester's end, and, really, she has time. No reason to rush our girl."

Mr. Horace Bottle had been my tutor right up till the holidays, and he was like one of the family now. He was the easiest among us to like, maybe because he himself had so few dislikes. I was a picky eater, but Horace didn't just eat; he savored each bite, tasted it for its own special flavor—even things like cooked cabbage or raisins. He was tall and, despite his relish for eating, still as skinny as a hollyhock.

Grandmother was not soothed. "Only commoners go to common school. We are not commoners." She sighed.

“Still, Hattie’s education cannot, must not, be neglected. It is only a temporary measure.”

“Hmpf,” Rose grumbled with her usual scowling gruffness. “Mark my words, Hortensia—she’ll be catching some dread disease.” Rose may have been the cook, but she was much more like a sister to Grandmother because they had been together almost forever. Rose always wore black and a gloomy air, and she looked like a buzzard. She couldn’t see the bright side of anything even when she tried, which wasn’t often.

Grandmother sighed again. “Hard to believe that we’ve come to this. If my father were alive . . .” Grandmother’s father, Nathaniel Holmes, was revered and remembered for bringing wealth, social standing, and happiness to the family, but Grandmother’s husband, my grandfather, William Greymoor, had lost pretty much all of those things.

As for me, I was desperate to go to common school, because it meant I was going to make friends. It would be different this time, not like when I’d met Ivy Victoria. She’d told me I looked like a boy because my hair was so short. She said I talked funny, too. But my hair was longish now, and I didn’t talk as funny or tell scary lies. I was not about to threaten anyone with an ax either, and I

would watch out for my fiery tongue and ways. No matter what.

“If you don’t like it, dear . . .” Grandmother said suddenly. “If things don’t go well . . . If anything does not please you . . .”

“Don’t worry, Grandmother,” I said warmly. “If anything goes wrong, if anything bad happens, I’ll come straight home to you and Rose.”

Grandmother brightened, but worry still puckered her pale eyebrows. Grandmother never forgot, not even for the space between ticks on the clock, that I was on loan from Pa and that he’d brought me here, mainly, to get the best schooling. That’s why I had come. But I had stayed because Grandmother needed me to love her a whole lot. She had lost too many things and too many people already.

“But you will try, Hattie,” Grandmother said anxiously.

“You must,” said Horace.

I nodded slowly, my head lowered so the old ones and Horace couldn’t see in my face how very much I wanted to go to common school.