

# THE HOUSE ON HOARDER HILL



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## CHAPTER 1



# They're Just Tricks

*A* ball of gloom was growing in Hedy van Beer's chest as she stared out the car window at the snow-covered fields. With every mile, she was closer to what was sure to be the most boring two weeks ever.

It was so unfair of her parents—both archaeologists—to go on a dig in Spain without them. Well, perhaps it was sensible to leave Spencer behind; he was only eight. But Hedy was eleven, a Scout, and had already learned a few Spanish phrases from a language app.

“Will you come back early if there's an emergency?” she asked.

“What kind of emergency?” asked Dad. He was in the middle of choosing another song for the radio while Mom was driving.

“Say, if Spencer’s finger is cut off?”

Spencer looked up from his book of magic tricks. “Grandpa John’s a magician. He’d be able to stick it back on with magic.”

Hedy shook her head. “You’re so gullible.”

“What does ‘gullible’ mean?”

“It means you believe anything. Anyway, he’s not a magician anymore, so don’t expect anything interesting.” Hedy leaned forward until her face was between the front seats. “So *would* you come back early if Spencer’s finger got cut off? Since magic isn’t real?”

“Depends which finger,” said Dad.

Mom smothered a laugh. “Of course we would.” She reached back to pat Hedy’s cheek. “But try not to create any emergencies, okay? This trip is very important to Dad and me. It could mean a lot of new work for us. Then I promise: you, me, Spence, and Dad on other trips.”

*Other trips.* As the fields and trees and hills whizzed by, Hedy put her headphones on, cuddled into her mom’s striped scarf, and imagined herself in Egypt, gazing up at the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx. But out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Dad glancing at her to see if she was listening to them.

When he turned back around, she hit pause on her music, suspecting he might be about to say something interesting.

“They’ll be okay with him, won’t they?” Dad was asking softly.

“Of course,” Mom said. “He may be preoccupied and . . . *funny* about his things, but he wouldn’t let any harm come to them.”

“Isn’t this the time of year your mother . . . ?” Dad trailed off with a sympathetic look.

Mom sighed. “It’ll be good for him to have some company here. He never stays long when he visits us.”

At long last, their little red car stopped in the center of Marberry’s Rest. It was a sleepy, higgledy-piggledy village, dotted with only a few small shops. Although it had the feel of a place that never changed, Hedy’s family were confused by the five-way junction at its center every single time.

“Why can I never remember the street?” Mom muttered.

“Give me a second,” Dad said as he tried to get the map working on his phone.

Spencer had exhausted his pockets’ usual stockpile of lollipops and started munching the last of his cheese sandwiches, as though he thought they would be there for a while.

Hedy spotted a large white bird circling overhead. Now it came flapping toward them.

“Is that a white . . . raven?” she breathed.

Closer and closer it flew, until, to everyone’s shock, it landed on the hood of the car.

It was enormous, even bigger than the ones Hedy had seen at the Tower of London. It tilted its head to the side as though sizing them up, then cawed. With a lazy flap, it took off down one of the narrow streets. They all stared; Mom seemed frozen to her seat, too surprised to move. The raven circled back and landed on the hood of the car again. It hopped close to the windshield and gave Mom a stern look, then propelled itself down the same narrow street once more.

Hedy had a funny, thrilled feeling where her ball of gloom had been. “It’s like it wants us to follow it,” she said.

“I don’t know about that,” Mom said, “but I think it’s the right street.” She put the car in gear, and they followed the raven all the way to Grandpa John’s house.



Although they hadn’t visited in a long while, the house was exactly as Hedy remembered: three floors of pale stone with a dark roof rising steeply into the sky. On the roof were carved stone creatures and a short tower, which Mom said was called a belvedere and was built to show off the view, but which Hedy thought of as a turret from which you could watch the enemy approach. Nestled deep in the shadowy porch was the black

front door. The yard, behind a wrought-iron fence, was strewn with leaves and snow. There was none of the hustle and bustle of their own home, or the homes of Hedy's friends, but it wasn't unfriendly exactly. It was more like Grandpa John's house was taking a long time to think before it started speaking.

The white raven that had led them here—Hedy was sure it *had* been leading them—flew up to the roof and settled up there among the other small statues that were more fantastical, like dragons and griffins.

Hedy gave Spencer a nudge and pointed. At one of the windows on the top floor stood Grandpa John, his white hair sticking up in untidy crests. His face crinkled into a smile, and he stepped back from the window, disappearing from sight. And the very next moment, faster than anyone could cover the distance, he was opening the heavy front door. Spencer's mouth popped open, and Hedy blinked in surprise.

Grandpa John smoothed his hand down his shirt buttons and then did a nimble turn, all the way around, to face them again. To their astonishment, he was now wearing a brightly colored tie.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he called in his deep, warm voice, "welcome."

The children crowded around Grandpa John to give him a hug. He smelled of peppermints and pipe smoke, as always.

Hedy secretly measured how tall she was, pleased to find she was now up to Grandpa's third shirt button.

"Grandpa," Spencer burst out immediately, "if I've got a finger that's cut off, can you stick it back on with magic?"

Grandpa John lifted Spencer's hands to his face to study them. "All your fingers appear to be attached. Why do you ask?"

"Hedy doesn't believe in magic," said Spencer.

"Well," he replied, "one might say that magic is a very sensible thing *not* to believe in."

Hedy was surprised; Grandpa John used to be a very famous magician.

Grandpa John regarded Hedy for a long moment then, as though wanting to say something but not able to find the words.

"She looks like Mom, doesn't she?" Mom said, stepping up to join them. There was an awkward moment when neither she nor Grandpa John were sure which cheek to kiss or whether to simply hug.

Grandpa John cleared his throat. "More than ever."

They were speaking of Hedy and Spencer's grandmother Rose, which hardly ever happened. She had disappeared when Hedy's mom was still a young child. Looking like Grandma Rose gave Hedy a small glow of satisfaction until she realized that Grandpa John's eyes were shiny with tears. It made him miss her, Hedy thought. But before she could decide what to say next,



Dad stacked the last of the bags and came to greet Grandpa John with a handshake. The moment to ask questions disappeared.



The hallway seemed unchanged since their last visit three years ago. One wall was lined with sculpted heads and carved statues. On the opposite wall, over a hall table, hung two large paintings in gold frames. Hedy placed her new-old phone (a hand-me-down from Dad, which he'd given her to use while they were away) on the edge of the table.

Each painting was a portrait of a person with a human body but the head of an animal: One was a skunk and the other a magpie. They were dressed in really old-fashioned clothes and had strange collections of items around them: jewelry, gloves, fruit, a small knife. Curiously, there were also modern objects in the paintings: a Rubik's Cube, a set of keys, and a CD of some band called the Smiths.

"Look, my team!" Spencer said, pointing to a West Ham beanie painted in the corner. He snapped a photo with the Polaroid camera he'd taken almost everywhere since his birthday.

"I hope you kids don't mind sharing," Grandpa John was saying. "I'm afraid I haven't had time to clear out more than one bedroom."

That got their attention. Hedy had a sinking feeling that this

vacation was about to go from boring to downright annoying. “But I have my own room at home,” she said hopefully.

“What’s wrong with sharing a room with me?” huffed Spencer.

Hedy rolled her eyes. “You smell like monkey bum.”

“That means you go around smelling monkey bums!” Spencer cackled.

“Hey!” Mom wagged a finger. “No fighting. You’re sharing. And if you don’t share nicely, you’ll go on sharing when we get back home. Now let’s get these bags up to your room.”

With a sigh, Hedy picked up the phone—and frowned. It was now at the back of the table, leaning against the painting of the skunk, the earphones almost stuck to the painting. Had Spencer just moved it?

“Come on, Hedy,” called Dad from the stairs. “Don’t forget to bring your pillow.”

Hedy checked her earphones for paint and found nothing, so she grabbed her things and scrambled after the others.



“Why are the doors all different colors?” Spencer asked Grandpa John as he led the way up the stairs.

“This was a bed-and-breakfast once upon a time,” Grandpa John said. “Perhaps it helped guests remember which room they were in.”