

INTRODUCTION

Are you there, dear reader? Peeking inside, perhaps? Oh! Hello, hello! Don't run, don't hide! A hearty how-do-you-do, with a wink and a grin—I'm splendid; I'm swirling. Let the story begin.

Who am I, you wonder, with that curious look? I'm not a someone—I'm the actual book! If I were another, I'd be something quite new. But I'm pages and words, and I'm speaking to you.

"But books can't talk!" you might say with a frown. Yet here I am, chatting, not letting you down. How else could I whisper my tale in your ear? Who else would you question if I weren't here?

If you weren't reading, I'd be silent and still. But now I sense doubt—like a chill on the sill. Wait! Don't close me, don't turn away yet; there's a story inside you'll never forget.

If I couldn't speak, how would I start? With a hush in the air and a thump in your heart. You haven't closed me, so I'll quietly wait—patient as moonlight behind a locked gate.

That's the thing about books that can talk and can see: We never forget, never sleep, just wait patiently.

Now listen closely, lean in and beware—this tale is no ordinary yarn spun in air. It's whispered through time; it's chosen just you. It's a secret, a puzzle, a riddle or two.

It begins in a place few have wandered or known, tucked deep in the folds where old maps are thrown. Half-remembered dreams, a chill in the breeze—a wintry wonderland, not found with ease.

Not the kind in a snow globe or glossy postcard, but where snow whispers secrets and mountains stand guard. The air tingles sharp, like a clue in the night, and the wind tastes of cinnamon, mystery, and light.

There's a village—so tiny, so hidden, so sweet—with Swedish-style houses and gingerbread treats. But don't be deceived by the sugar and spice, for under the charm, there's a secret—think twice.

In mountains where snow hushes dreams in the night, Wintertown hides, far from most mortal sight.

Here, winter's a puzzle, a code to be cracked, warmth dares not linger; the cold pushes back.

Icicles shimmer, and riddles abound; my magic is restless, its answers unfound.

Peek through the snowdrifts, decipher the signs—clues swirl in cinnamon, pine, and in rhymes.

No gingerbread houses, just snow-dusted eaves, each rooftop a secret the winter wind weaves.

The air tastes of mystery, the treats warm and sweet, but listen—my whispers are never complete.

Once, laughter and carols would fill every ear, now silence and secrets are all that you hear.

A winding road twists, like a code to be cracked, leading up to a gate where the truth is unpacked. Beyond stands a castle, not just any old pile—it's the castle, the secret, the twist in the file.

It sits on a hill, like a crown on a king; its spires are icicles, sharp as a sting. The walls are pale stone, with frost in each vein; windows glow blue, remembering joy and pain.

The roof is a patchwork of turrets and gables; chimneys long silent—tonight, one enables. A single plume rises, twisting, unsure—a question mark curling, a sign to allure.

The doors are old oak, with holly and cane, golden stars swirling, a carol's refrain. If you listen, you'll hear a soft musical hum—echoes of secrets, of stories to come.

Frozen hedges stand guard, toy soldiers and deer—their faces snow-softened, their purpose unclear. A marble fountain gleams, polar bears take flight, eyes closed in dreaming, paws caught in mid-night.

Step inside, breathe deep—cinnamon, parchment, and snow. A spark in the air, like a clue you should know. Portraits watch closely; chandeliers shimmer and sway, crystal snowflakes above, shadows drifting away.

But the silence—oh, the silence!—it's velvet and thick, full of secrets and stories, of magic and trick. It wraps round the castle, mysterious and deep—a cloak for the whispers, the secrets you keep.

And somewhere inside, past the study, the attic, the gloom, something ancient is stirring in a shadowy room. Something old, something magical, something watching you now—a puzzle, a riddle, a furrowed brow.

You haven't seen it? Not yet? Don't fret! Close your eyes, count to five, don't forget. Do you see it now, in the hush and the dark?

Turn the page, dear reader, and lean in to see—for the heart of the mystery is waiting in me.

CHAPTER I

Are you still there, dear reader? Let me tell you what awaits: In Wintertown, snow whispers to clever minds—a riddle, a puzzle, a rhyme swirling in the frosty air. Only the sharpest will sense it, hidden beneath the hush.

Once, joy sparkled here—a month-long Christmas, the best time of year. The square glowed with a magnificent tree, glass baubles catching the light like fireflies. December turned the valley into a holiday dream, shimmering with hope and ritual. But those days have faded; the magic is gone, the songs of the season now only echoes at dawn. Wintertown is quiet, its laughter thin, old carols static, no tree to begin.

Now, the air holds a chill, and sorrow curls into homes as they sleep. Yet beneath the silence, a cipher remains—a secret, waiting for someone clever enough to crack it.

But tonight, something is different. The air stirs with mystery, ready to reveal a secret. The mountains glow with silvery light; snowy peaks enchant the night, and a whisper rides the wind—not a sound, but a clue. Old memories awaken, and new secrets wait to be discovered.

So, dear reader, keep your eyes open and your mind sharp. The story is about to begin.

A battered old Model T rattled bravely through the frosty night, its wheels crunching over the snow like tiny, determined beasts that never, ever lost their way. Behind the wheel sat a driver with a cap pulled down so snug you could barely see their nose, and—oh!—what’s that? A mitten, blue as a summer sky, waving cheerfully against the glass.

With a swipe, the mitten cleared a peephole in the icy window, and two curious eyes peered out, wide and wondering at the world. The car rolled beneath ancient gates, chained shut for twelve long winters. No light glimmered in the manor; no chimney sang its smoky song.

Icicles hung like glittering daggers, tears frozen in time. Forty rooms slumbered; six chimneys stood silent and old. Frost Hill Manor, some whispered, was a castle of toys, built by Charles Van Buyton for laughter and joy.

Time tiptoed in and changed everything. Grief filled the halls, and Charles locked the gates, draping the walls in silence. Some say he vanished in a blizzard; others whisper heartbreak turned him into something new.

Yet tonight, something is different. The gates swing wide, and a mystery stirs. Old secrets, tucked away for years, are ready to wake up and play.

A gray plume of smoke curled from the west wing chimney—a sleepy dragon waking from its slumber. In the kitchen window, a flicker of golden light glowed, warm and inviting against the icy blue of night. Something was stirring at Frost Hill Manor.

The car crunched to a stop near the kitchen door, its wheels crackling over the frost. The hinges groaned as the door swung open, casting a beam of yellow across the cold—a signal, a beacon in the winter dark. Out burst Molly Clemens, portly and red-haired, her maid’s uniform bouncing with excitement, cheeks rosy, eyes wide with joy.

“She’s here! She’s here!” Molly cried, her voice tumbling out in rhyme. “The little miss is finally here—bless the ice, it’s time!”

The driver hurried to the passenger door. “Miss Isabella Antigone, ma’am,” he announced, his words crisp as the winter air.

Molly peered into the car; her hand outstretched like a branch reaching for sunlight. “Come now, child,” she said, her words gentle and rhyming. “I’m Molly, your mistress—let’s get you inside, let’s climb!”.

No one in Wintertown knew that Charles’ daughter, Savannah Van Buyton Antigone, had run away twelve years ago, married a New Zealand proprietor, and was lost at sea a year past. But she had left behind a miracle—her daughter, Isabella.

Two small feet appeared, followed by hands clutching a shivering white puppy whose nose twitched at the scent of snow.

The driver scuffed his nose. “She has one item. That!” he huffed.

Molly took the puppy in one hand and Isabella’s hand in the other. The girl stepped out, her feet so light they barely dented the snow, as if the earth itself was reluctant to weigh her down.

“You’re from the same mold,” Molly whispered, a Seussian twist. “Bless her heart, you’re bold—now let’s get you out of this mist!”.

Molly Clemens was a guidy sort, with a thick Irish accent and a heart as warm as the hearth she tended. She had once been Savannah’s childhood mistress, and over the years had grown to love the girl dearly. Seeing Isabella now was like looking into the past—a memory made flesh.

But there was something unusual about this child.

CHAPTER II

But as every good story knows, when one chapter closes, another tiptoes in—sometimes on the hush of a snowy morning, sometimes with the thump of a well-worn boot. And so, as the last echoes of laughter faded and the manor’s secrets pressed close, a new adventure was ready to begin.

Molly swept Isabella inside; the door thumping shut with a sound that echoed through the hush of Frost Hill Manor. The manor seemed to hold its breath, waiting for something wonderful—or perhaps peculiar—to begin

By the kitchen furnace sat Bernard, old and haggard, puffing on a long English pipe. He wore a suit as black as midnight; his face narrow and chin pointed like a wizard's hat. A single lock of grey hair curled over his brow, glinting like a silver thread spun by moonlight.

"Bernard, you old goat," Molly called, her voice as bright as a bell. "Say hello to Isabella... Savannah's daughter."

Molly placed Diamond, the puppy, on a red rug near the fire, where it curled up like a snowball melting in a puddle of warmth. She whisked away Isabella's winter clothes, which steamed faintly from the cold, bustling about like a flurry of cheerful wind.

"He doesn't bite, my dear," Molly assured, her words swirling around the room like confetti.

Bernard stood; pipe held away like a professor about to deliver a most important lesson. He bent at the knees and peered at Isabella.

Isabella giggled. "You look like a penguin!" She declared.

Molly stifled a laugh. "First thing she's said since she arrived!"

Bernard didn't flinch. He puffed his pipe and replied, "And you, my dear girl, look like a blueberry. Umph."

"Come now, Bernard," Molly said, stepping between them as smoke curled from his lips like lazy ghosts. "You do look like a penguin, after all." She laughed heartily.

Bernard grumbled, pipe back in his mouth, one hand behind his back. "Blueberry indeed," he muttered, secretly agreeing Isabella looked just like her mother—but being called a penguin was a new insult, and it stung.

"Let's get some warm porridge in that frail belly," Molly said, clapping her hands as the fire crackled along, as if laughing too.

"Gran-papa?" Isabella asked softly.

“Your grandfather is a very busy and private man,” Molly replied gently, her words tiptoeing around the truth. “In time,” she lied.

Molly guided Isabella to a chair by the fire, laying her clothes beside the table. She stirred a large pot over the flaming coals; its contents bubbling like a cauldron of comfort.

“Now, child,” Molly said, her tone suddenly serious, “You may go anywhere in the manor.”

She poured a thick, white substance into a bowl, frowned, and poured it back, muttering as she stirred.

“There are only three rules you must obey at all times while under this roof. Heed my warning, child.”

She handed Isabella the bowl of porridge. Isabella looked at it and yawned.

“One: You must never go into the study. That’s the room between the wings of the house with the enormous doors.”

“Two: There are absolutely no toys allowed in the house outside your bedroom. Ever. If you want to play anywhere else, you’ll have to use your imagination.”

“No toys?” Isabella asked, surprised. “Mother said when she was young, they had toys filling up the house.”

It was odd—a toymaker’s house with no toys. Surely this was temporary? Isabella hoped so. How was a little girl to play all day in such a grand place without toys? Even Diamond, her puppy, could only go so long without a place to run and play.

Isabella slurped a spoonful of porridge, which tasted like warm snow and honey.

“The last rule,” Molly said, pausing to look her in the eye, “Never—and I mean never—go up to the attic. It is strictly forbidden and locked up tight. Not that you could find it anyway.”

“The attic?” Isabella asked.

“It is the most forbidden place in the manor,” Molly said, wagging a finger. “There’s only one way to reach it, and that door has long been sealed and covered.”

“Why?” Isabella yawned.

“Don’t worry yourself with that, dear.” Molly gently touched her head. “Eat up, and I shall show you to your room. It was your precious mother’s.”

Outside, unbeknownst to Molly and Isabella, small, soft flakes of snow began to fall—the first in years. They drifted down like whispers, settling on rooftops and windowsills with a hush.

Things were changing at the manor atop Wintertown. Whenever a child—a truly special child—arrives, peculiar things always seem to happen.

It was a cold and bitter night. Molly led Isabella down the shadowed hallway toward her mother’s old bedroom; the air thick with secrets. Then, a sound drifted through the manor—a sound so soft it might have been imagined. It was not the wind, nor the crackle of the fire, but something else entirely. A whisper. A melody. A voice, impossibly distant, singing a tune that seemed both familiar and forbidden.

Isabella paused, her hand on the banister, heart thumping. The melody grew clearer, threading through the walls like a secret code.

And then, from somewhere high above—perhaps the attic, perhaps a place no one had seen in years—a single note rang out, pure and cold as ice.

Molly turned, her face pale. “Come, child,” she said, her voice trembling. “We mustn’t linger.”

But Isabella could not move. The note hung in the air, a question without an answer.

Children are a curious sort, easily intrigued by mystery.

Somewhere in Frost Hill Manor, something had awakened.

And tonight, the secrets of Wintertown were no longer content to sleep.

CHAPTER III

A strange new place, dear reader, awaits—for a child; it’s daunting, behind frosted gates. Not merely a house, but a manor so grand, a castle with secrets, where staircases stand.

They sigh in the silence when no one is near; portraits blink softly—did you see them? Or hear? Windows catch moonlight and scatter it wide; silver secrets slip quietly, nowhere to hide.

For young Isabella, this world is brand new, Frost Hill Manor—its magic, its hush, its blue. Not just a building, but a realm all its own, where air shimmers softly and corners have grown.

Each shadow is waiting; each hallway holds breath, for you, little reader, and Isabella, too—a place spun from wonder; from mystery and myth, where the story begins, and magic drifts through.

The walls of Frost Hill Manor shimmered with velvet wallpaper—plum and midnight blue—catching starlight whenever the chandeliers flickered above. But these weren't ordinary chandeliers. No, these chandeliers floated; their crystal arms tinkling with laughter only the bravest could hear. Some said they whispered in a secret language made of light.

Rooms ranged from grand, with ceilings lost in shadow, to tiny, secret spaces you might miss if you blinked. The carpets beneath Isabella's feet were soft as moss and glimmered with shifting colors—hues that danced like northern lights, as if the floor itself were dreaming.

Isabella's bedroom was bright and airy, with windows framing the snowy world like paintings. Portraits of children and creatures lined the walls, and though they were still, Isabella could have sworn they blinked when she wasn't looking. Her bed was a mountain of feathers wrapped in silk, so fluffy it felt like sleeping inside a cloud spun from moonbeams and marshmallows.

Morning tiptoed in with a pale sky and gentle snowfall, making the world feel hushed and holy. Light crept through the Persian drapes, casting a soft shadow across Isabella's sleeping face, like a kiss from the dawn.

She stirred, startled. The room was brighter—it must be morning.

Then—a squeak! Was it a mouse, a secret door, or something else? The bedroom door was slightly ajar. Isabella watched, her breath held like a snowflake. Another squeak. "Is someone there?" She whispered. Silence.

A small round face with wide eyes and a cap peeked around the door. “Hello,” said the mouth—a hesitant greeting. “Who might you be?” Isabella smiled. The face vanished.

Suddenly, the door swung wide and in rolled a boy—not walking, but spinning—in a contraption part wheelchair, part carnival ride. Brass gears clicked and whirred; tiny bells jingled. He spun a full circle at the foot of the bed and stopped with a grin that sparkled like frost.

“Hi!” The boy announced. “My name’s Carver.” Isabella giggled.

Carver was no ordinary boy. His eyes were wide and flecked with gold, his hair a tousled mop of chestnut curls; his cheeks rosy from laughter. Though his legs didn’t work, Carver never saw himself as limited. He called them “wheels instead of feet,” and that made him faster than most. He had a tinkerer’s mind—quick, clever, and full of ideas. He could fix a lantern with a shoelace and a spoon; and once built a snow-melting machine powered by peppermint oil and candlelight.

He lived near the edge of Wintertown with his father and grandmother, who was rumored to be part elf. Every Monday, Carver arrived at Frost Hill Manor with a sled full of coal, a pocket of riddles, and a heart full of mischief.

He loved puzzles, secret passageways, and stories about lost things. He believed every object had a memory, and every room a mood. He could sense when a hallway was hiding something, or when a door was pretending to be locked.

Carver had one secret fear: mirrors. Not because of how he looked, but because sometimes, when he passed them, he saw things that weren’t there—shadows, flickers, faces that didn’t belong. Still, he never let fear stop him. He was the kind of boy who would follow a whisper into the dark, just to see where it led.

Isabella pointed at the contraption. “What is that you’re riding?”

“This?” Carver beamed. “This is my zoom trike! Watch this!” He spun again, the wheels leaving swirling patterns in the plush carpet.

The zoom trike was a whimsical fusion of invention and imagination—a gleaming, gear-spun marvel.

Its frame was polished brass and cherrywood, etched with curling filigree. The seat was tufted velvet, deep green, stitched with golden stars and snowflakes. It looked as comfortable as a throne.

Three wheels—two large in the back; one swiveling in front—were wrapped in thick rubber treads. Each wheel was rimmed with tiny bells that jingled softly as Carver moved.

At the front, a control panel gleamed with brass buttons, levers, and a tiny compass that spun even when the trike was still. A miniature lantern hung from the handlebars, glowing with a soft blue flame.

The trike didn't just roll—it glided, spun in place, climbed stairs, and sometimes hovered just above the ground when Carver was feeling daring.

And the best part? It had a nameplate: "Zoom Trike No. 7—Built for Wonder."

"Why do you sit in that?" Isabella asked. "Because my legs don't work," Carver explained. "I was born that way." He said it with a smile so bright it made the room feel warmer.

"Well, I think your zoom trike is clever," Isabella said. "Why are you here?"

"Miss Molly sent me to fetch you for breakfast," Carver replied. "I come every Monday with a sled full of coal for the chimneys." Isabella blinked. A sled? Through snow? With coal?

Now, I know what you're thinking—how could a boy in a wheelchair pull a sled full of coal up a snowy hill? But in this world, stranger things have happened. And at Frost Hill Manor, stranger things happen all the time.

"How do you get up the hill through all that snow, Carver?" Isabella asked.

"Easy!" Carver grinned. "My zoom trike, of course."

"It's a wheelchair," Isabella giggled.

"Come along, I'll show you." Carver spun and rolled into the hallway. Isabella followed.

As they rolled down the corridor, a sudden chill swept through the air—a hush pressed against the velvet walls. The chandeliers flickered, casting wild shadows.

Carver paused, his hand hovering over the trike's lantern. From somewhere deep within the manor, a door creaked open. A cold draft curled around Isabella's ankles, and for a moment, she thought she heard a voice—soft, urgent, and impossible to place—whispering her name. Isabella turned, heart pounding, but the hallway was empty.

Carver's eyes met hers, wide and uncertain. "Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Before Isabella could answer, the lantern on the zoom trike sputtered, its blue flame flickering. The compass spun in frantic circles. And from the far end of the hall, a shadow slipped silently across the wall—vanishing as quickly as it appeared.

Something was awake in Frost Hill Manor.

And it was waiting for them.

CHAPTER IV

The kitchen in the west wing of Frost Hill Manor was not just big—it was colossal! It bustled and clattered, pans leaping and light dancing, as if the morning itself had tiptoed in to join the fun. The brick oven glowed with a warm, buttery hug, and the grand fireplace crackled with laughter, tossing sparks like confetti. A table stretched so long you'd need roller skates to reach the end, and every inch was covered with plates and bowls, biscuits and gravy, and a cinnamon swirl that tickled your nose and made your tummy sing.

“Breakfast fit for a king—or a clever inventor!” cheered Carver, biscuit crumbs tumbling from his grin.

Molly, the kitchen's queen of bustle, zipped between stove and table, tapping Carver's head with a floury finger. “Ten years and still you gobble like a goose! Mind your manners, lad, or I'll tie your tongue in a knot!” She teased, sliding another golden biscuit onto the mountain of breakfast.

Isabella's giggle rang out, bright and silvery, like spoons chiming in a fairy's tea party.

Suddenly—BANG! The outside door flew open. In dashed a little white French Bulldog, nose twitching, ears perked, purple snow cap wobbling. The dog's harness jingled as it skittered across the tiles, leaving a trail of floury paw prints like tiny snowy stars.

“Come back here!” puffed a voice, and in tumbled a very tall, very thin man—pants faded, jacket sooty, hat perched like a bird on a windy day. He chased after the dog, legs flapping and flailing like windblown branches in a storm.

The children burst into giggles, their laughter bouncing off copper pots and pans, swirling up to the ceiling and back down again.

“Top o’ the mornin’ to ye all!” the man called, tipping his hat with a crooked grin as he hurried after the dog. “Smells mighty fine, Molly!” he added, voice trailing off like a kite in the wind.

Molly called back, “I’ll have a plate waiting for you when you get back!”

Isabella leaned in, eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Who is that, Molly?”

“That’s Boxer,” Molly replied, ladling gravy onto an extra plate, “and the tall, dangly fellow is Simon.”

Carver grinned. “You’d think Boxer was the boss, the way Simon follows him everywhere. Simon’s been cleaning chimneys and windows here longer than anyone. He even knew your—”

Molly tapped Carver again. “Hush now, finish your breakfast,” she whispered. “Some things are best left for another time.”

A loud crash echoed from the corridor, followed by Simon’s cheerful shout, “I’m fine! Everything’s under control!”

Molly just shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips.

Simon reappeared, carrying Boxer, both dusted in ash and soot. Boxer’s tail wagged like a metronome, sending flecks of black onto the clean floor.

“The chimney again?” Molly asked, setting a plate at the end of the table. “I told you, Simon, quit feeding that pup coffee beans!”

Simon winked. “And a hearty hello to you too, Molly.”

“Hey, Simon!” Carver called, waving a biscuit.

Simon set Boxer down, ruffling Carver’s hair. “The old zoom trike looks sharp this morning, my friend.”

A gentle voice chimed in. “Hello,” Isabella said, turning in her chair with a bright smile. She scooped Boxer into her arms. “I have a puppy too—her name is Diamond. She’s sleeping upstairs under my covers.”

Simon circled behind Isabella, eyes twinkling. “My, my, my. This must be Miss Isabella,” he said, crouching beside her and scratching Boxer’s ears. “You’re quite the celebrity in these parts, young lady.”

Isabella laughed, dodging Boxer’s playful slobber. “Popular?” She asked, eyebrows raised.

“Indeed, my girl,” Simon replied, his voice full of cheer. “The whole town’s buzzing—a VanBuyton grandchild at Frost Hill Manor! That’s news worth singing about.”

Molly grinned, her eyes sparkling with delight. “Eat up, my dears, and don’t start a fight. For secrets and stories are swirling today, and magic, perhaps, is not far away.”

But as the laughter faded, a shadow crept softly, refusing to hide. The manor grew quiet; the morning grew thin—and somewhere, a mystery waited within.

CHAPTER V

Ah, dear reader, can you feel it? The morning at Frost Hill Manor unfurled with a hush—like a secret whispered on cinnamon steam and biscuit crumbs, laughter swirling through my sunlit kitchen as delicately as snowflakes on a winter’s breeze.

Simon slid into his seat, boots dusted with frost, eyes twinkling with mischief. “Today’s the day, my friends!” he declared, voice ringing like sleigh bells. “Let’s hitch up the old miser’s one-horse sleigh—what say you, adventurers? Shall we chase the winter’s song?”

Molly, hands flour-dusted and heart wary, paused mid-stir. “Simon, I’m not sure that’s wise,” she murmured, her words curling in the warm air. “The snow’s deep, the wind’s sly—trouble could be waiting outside.”

Isabella’s eyes sparkled, cheeks rosy with hope. “It sounds like fun!” She chimed, voice light as a snowflake.

Carver, mouth full of biscuits, grinned. “Count me in!” he exclaimed, crumbs tumbling like tiny avalanches.

Isabella turned to Molly, hands clasped in gentle plea. “Please, Molly?” She whispered, her words soft in the morning’s hush.

Molly sighed, her resolve melting. “For Pete’s sake,” she muttered, “if I say no, it’ll be the death of me. Yes, yes—you may go. But bundle up, children, for winter bites those who wander unprepared.”

“Terrific!” Carver cheered. “You’ll love town, Bella—the snow, the secrets, the riddles in the ice.”

Simon polished off his breakfast; anticipation crackling in the air.

But then—a shadow at the door, a chill in the room. Bernard appeared, stooped and stern, clutching Isabella’s tattered teddy bear, Teddy, in his gnarled hand. “I presume this filthy beast belongs to our beloved blueberry?” He sneered.

“Teddy!” Isabella gasped, fear threading her words. “Why did you take him from my room?” She reached out, arms trembling. “Please, Bernard, give him back.”

Bernard’s eyes narrowed. “Toys are not allowed in this home,” he grumbled, the word ‘home’ echoing like a locked door.

Isabella pleaded, voice quivering. “Molly said as long as they’re in my room, it’s okay.”

Bernard huffed. “He was next to the door in the hall,” he insisted, clutching Teddy tighter.

Molly stepped forward, warmth in her tone. “Oh, come now, Bernard—the bear isn’t trouble.”

Simon chimed in, voice playful. “Give it back to the girl, you old grinch.”

Bernard’s grip tightened. “This bear is coming with me. Rules are rules—never did anyone get spoiled under this roof on my watch.” He turned, footsteps heavy, and vanished down the hall.

Boxer barked, a sharp protest in the quiet.

Isabella’s eyes filled with worry. “Where’s he taking Teddy?” She asked Molly, voice barely above a whisper.

Molly soothed her, removing the plate with gentle hands. “Don’t fret, dear. No harm will come to your little bear.”

Carver leaned in, a conspiratorial grin. “We’ll get him back, Bella—maybe after our trip to town.”

Simon rose, clapping his hands. “Upstairs with you, Bella—out of that nightgown! Carver and I will ready the sleigh.”

As Isabella climbed the grand staircase, heart heavy; she glimpsed Bernard slipping down the north hall, Teddy dangling from his fist. Dislike bloomed in her chest—a cold, creeping vine.

She darted around the corner, breath held, peering into the shadows. Bernard had vanished. At the end of the hall, only a vast wall remained, draped in a family crest—no doors, no passage, just silence and secrets.

Where had Bernard gone? The manor seemed to hold its breath; the air thick with mystery. Somewhere, behind velvet walls and ancient banners, a secret waited—watching, whispering, ready to change everything.

Turn the page, dear reader. The game has only just begun.