



CHAPTER
ONE



woke up and immediately felt under my hard pillow, just in case I'd dreamed it. No, there it was – a small wrapped package that fitted neatly into the palm of my hand. I fingered the outline hidden inside the thick brown paper. It was hard to make sense of it. There was a triangle shape at one end, ridged in some kind of pattern. Then there were little bumps further down and a slightly bigger one in the middle. I couldn't work out what on earth it could be.

I tried to edge my finger inside the brown paper, but it had been tightly wrapped and tied into place



with string. I *could* just tear it off. I'd taken such a long time to fall asleep, tossing and turning, and slipping my hand under my pillow again and again, checking that my precious package was still there. But I'd slept eventually, probably for hours. It *must* be Christmas Day by now.

I so, so, so wanted to know what was in my parcel. But if I opened it now, I'd have nothing else to look forward to at Christmas. Somehow the waiting and the wondering were part of the whole joy of receiving a precious present.

One girl turned over in her narrow bed, murmuring something in her sleep. Several were breathing heavily, and someone was snoring like a pig. Sheila, definitely! I wished there was some way of waking her up so that she could listen to herself. She'd die of shame. She never believed it when I told her she snored. Her toadying friend Monica swore blind to Sheila that she didn't snore, though she slept right next to her and her entire bed rattled with the noise.

There were no sighs, no whispers, no muffled sobs. Everyone was fast asleep. I thought of all the other sleeping souls in the Foundling Hospital. My little foster sister, Eliza, was down the other end of the corridor with the other small girls. My foster brother, Gideon, was right over in the other wing with the big boys. I ached when I thought of him, near but so far away. My second foster brother, Saul, was even further off, lying still and snoreless in a grave behind the chapel. Or perhaps great wings had burst through his nightshirt and carried him aloft up to Heaven. I hoped so – though when he was alive and we were all living in the country cottage with our dear foster mother and father, I'd frequently wished he'd go to the devil.

I went hot with shame now, though it was a very cold night and my blanket was thin. Matron Bottomly would only allow us one blanket each, even when there was snow on the ground and the pipes froze solid. I had glimpsed her bed once when I was

called to her room. It had two big plump pillows and was piled high with quilts and blankets.

I pictured her now, lying on her back, her nightcap crooked, her mouth open and drooling. Perhaps she slept clasping her cane, ready, even in her dreams, to chastize any rebellious foundling. How I hated her! I'd always detested her, even more than Matron Pigface, who had ruled over us when we were new girls. When Matron Bottomly had banished Ida, my dearest mother, I hated her more than ever. It didn't seem sinful to wish that *she* would go to the devil. She was so heartlessly evil, even the devil himself would surely shun her company.

Then I heard the chapel clock ring out: *one, two, three*, clear in the crisp night air.

It was so cold! I tucked my icy feet up inside my nightgown and tried hugging myself. If only I had someone else to hug me. When I was little, I climbed in beside Jem. He would grumble, half asleep, and say I should go back to my own bed, but then his

strong arms would wrap themselves around me. He'd rub his chin on my wild red hair, and I felt so comforted I fell asleep in an instant.

After I discovered that Ida was my real mama, I stole away to her kitchen as often as I dared, and if we could be sure of being quite alone, she would sit on the bench and pat her lap, and I'd climb on and nestle there like a baby, even though I was growing up fast. I was still small and slight, though, and hopefully didn't squash Mama too much.

'You're light as a fairy, my little Hetty,' she'd murmur. 'I can't get enough cuddles with you. All those ten lonely years when I had to make do without any opportunity. Oh, it was *so* hard.'

It's even harder now, because I know she's my mother and we love each other so much. She would still be working in the kitchen at the Foundling Hospital if it wasn't for Sheila spying on us, and Matron Bottomly sending Mama packing. She said she was wicked and deceitful, and when Mama cried

out that she'd only lied because she loved me so and needed to be near me, Matron Bottomly called her a fallen woman who had no right to her child because I'd been born in sin.

'All right, punish *me* if you must – but why deny Hetty a mother's love? She's just an innocent child. She can't help being born out of wedlock,' Mama protested bravely.

'Hetty Feather is a red-haired child of Satan, a wilful imp who needs to be shamed and tamed,' Matron Bottomly said.

Well, she's done enough shaming and taming me these past eighteen months to last me a lifetime, but I have a fiery spirit to match my fiery hair and she'll never, ever, ever change the way I feel.

She'll never change Mama, either. She has to work as a maid hundreds of miles away and we can't see each other any more, but Miss Smith acts as our secret postman. Mama sends short letters because writing doesn't come easily to her, but even if the

messages are brief – *Dearest Hetty, I love love love you and miss you horribly your own Mama* – they are more beautiful to me than any Shakespearean sonnet.

I've kept every letter, folding them again and again and tying them with ribbon. I roll the sweetest messages up in tiny spills and post them into my pillow. I imagine them whispering words of love in my ears as I sleep.

I write long letters back, printing in big letters so that Mama can read each word easily. Miss Smith gives me notepaper, but sometimes I run out and have to tear pages out of my journal. Miss Smith bought that for me too. She has been such a dear friend to me, a true fairy godmother.

I couldn't help smiling into the darkness at the thought of Miss Smith dressed in flouncy taffeta, with wings and a wand. In reality, she is a stout, white-haired lady with a long horse's face. However much I care about her, I could never call her pretty

or even handsome. But she is good and kind and she has been so, so generous to me.

Now that she has become a governor of the Foundling Hospital, I see her quite often. She paid a special visit yesterday, Christmas Eve, accompanied by a sturdy lad carrying a great trunk that rattled deafeningly. They had been to the bank to collect the Christmas pennies for all the foundlings. She left the lad recovering in the kitchen with a glass of something strong and said she might as well make a quick inspection of the premises while she was here.

I'm sure that request set Matron Bottomly all a-quiver. Years ago we older foundlings had discovered that she sells off half the food and most of the wool and linen sent to feed and clothe us. I dare say she'd like to get her hands on our coppers too.

She steered Miss Smith around cautiously, glaring at us all as we darned, sighing over our socks.

'It's practical for the girls to learn to darn neatly,

but it's such repetitive work,' Miss Smith said. 'Perhaps we could leave the darning to the little ones, and see if the older girls can tackle some proper sewing. If I had some fine linen and white embroidery silks sent to the hospital, they could make themselves some attractive undergarments.'

Our heads jerked up in surprise, and there were several pricked fingers. We'd never, ever been given *undergarments*! Our stiff brown frocks chafed against our bare skin. We barely knew what undergarments looked like, though I had a dim memory of my older foster sisters dancing about the moonlit bedroom in their white chemises and lace-trimmed drawers.

'That's a very interesting idea, Miss Smith, but embroidered undergarments would not be appropriate for our girls,' said Matron Bottomly, tight-lipped. 'They are being trained for service.'

'Well, I will bring the matter up at the next board meeting,' said Miss Smith smoothly. 'Now, let me

inspect these socks. Dear me, some seem to be more darns than wool!

She wandered around, peering at each girl's work. When Matron Bottomly tutted over Slow Freda's huge stitches, Miss Smith took the small brown parcel out of her carpet bag and dropped it in my lap.

'From Ida!' she mouthed.

I had tucked it down the front of my dress in an instant. There was plenty of room as I still have no chest to speak of, though a few of the girls my age are starting to look quite womanly. Sheila is as flat as me, but when we go to chapel on a Sunday and parade past the boys, she looks quite shapely. She wears her socks rolled up inside her dress instead of on her feet!

For the rest of the day I walked with my stomach sticking out so that the precious parcel wouldn't work its way down and shoot right out from under my skirts. While we were saying our prayers at

bedtime, I hid it under my pillow in a flash – and here it was now, tight in my hand.

I thought of Mama's hands carefully wrapping it in the paper and tying it with string. I mimed the motions, picturing it so vividly it was almost like holding her real work-worn hands and small nimble fingers. I thought of all the time we could have spent together but had been denied. I still had another two wretched years at the Foundling Hospital before it was time for me to leave, and even then I wouldn't be free to find her. All foundling girls had to seek employment as servants, living in someone else's house, at their beck and call from dawn till dusk.

I could only hope that Miss Smith might find me a position near Mama so that we might see each other for a stolen hour or two each week. It needn't be in the same town. I would walk ten miles to see my mama, even twenty. I would walk until my feet were one big blister so long as I could

have five minutes in her arms.

The longing for her was so strong that I had to close my eyes tight to stop my tears rolling sideways and dampening my pillow. I turned on my side, parcel held as carefully as a rescued fledgling, and tried hard to get back to sleep. I sang inside my head to soothe myself.

All week we'd been practising Christmas carols for today's service in the chapel. I worked my way through the repertoire, thinking of all those mild mothers and blessed infants in their lowly stable refuge, turned away by decent folk. All the foundlings had been born in similar secret circumstances. Our mothers probably loved us just as much as Mary loved the infant Jesus. Certainly Mama had loved me like that. But she couldn't find a job where she was allowed to keep me with her, and she had no husband to support us. She *had* to give me up. We'd all been handed in to the hospital and our mothers had stumbled away weeping while, in Matron's

cold arms, we bawled too. I hoped I'd wet right through my napkin and stained her starched white apron.

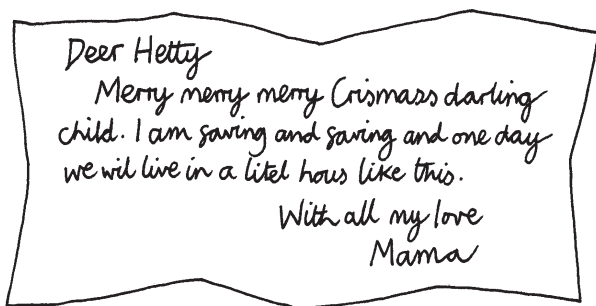
I fell asleep at last and dreamed I was a baby again, lying in Mama's arms, and Three Wise Women came to give me gifts. My foster mother, Peg, gave me a rag baby, Madame Adeline from the travelling circus gave me a tiny pink spangled dress, and Miss Smith gave me a leather notebook in which to write my future memoirs.

They all sang to me, but their voices were harsh and high-pitched and grew louder and louder – and I woke to the jangling of the morning bell.

'Wake up, girls!' the morning monitor shouted.

She wished each girl a merry Christmas as she paused to light our candle stubs so we could see to get dressed. There were groans and yawns and sleepy responses. I drew the blanket high over my head, leaving a little gap so that I could just about see by the flickering candle, then pulled off the

parcel string and wound it tight around my wrist like a bracelet. Then I carefully unpeeled the brown paper, trying hard not to let it crackle. I came upon a little note folded small between the layers. I held the blanket higher, straining to read it.



Dear Hetty
Merry merry merry Crismiss darling
child. I am saving and saving and one day
we wil live in a litel hous like this.
With all my love
Mama

I clutched the letter in shaking hands and then kissed the word *Mama* thirteen times – a kiss for every year of my life, and one extra for luck. Then I unwrapped the final piece of brown paper and gaped in wonder.

I was holding a little house – a perfect tiny house made out of driftwood, with a tiled roof fashioned

from minute shells. They were painted red, and the walls of the house carefully whitewashed. There were three windows outlined in green, with tiny scraps of curtain at each: matching blue gingham at the top two, red velvet at the lower one. The door was painted dark green, with a sliver of yellow stone as a door knocker.

Our little house, Mama's and mine. I couldn't hold back my tears.

'What are you doing under there, Hetty Feather?' Sheila demanded, and pulled my blanket off before I could stop her.

'She's crying!' Monica jeered.

'No I'm not!' I said furiously, sniffing hard. I tried to hide the little house under my pillow but I wasn't quick enough.

'What's that?' Sheila demanded.

'Nothing! Get off!' I said, trying to grab her hand, but she got there first.

'Whatever's this?' she said, holding it aloft so

that the whole dormitory could gawp at my precious present. 'It's a little toy! Hetty's got a baby toy!'

I sprang at her, pulling her hair and seizing her wrist.

'Ow! Stop it, you're hurting!' Sheila screamed.

'Give it back or I'll pull your hair right out of your head,' I threatened, and I tried to snatch my house back.

Sheila clung onto it and we struggled.

One of the tiny shell tiles flew off the roof and fell on the floor.

'Now look! Oh, the *roof!*' I said desperately.

'*You* did it!' said Sheila, but she let go of the house.

I cradled it in my hand, bending to pick up the little shell. 'You've spoiled it,' I said.

'Don't be so silly – you can easily glue it back on,' she told me.

'Where did you get it from, Hetty?' asked Monica. 'Did you steal it?'

'It's mine! It's a Christmas present from Mama,'

I said. ‘There! See how precious it is.’

The others gathered around, peering at it.

‘Is it really from your mama?’ Freda asked. Her voice wobbled when she said the word.

‘Yes, it is! None of *you* have Christmas presents from your mothers,’ I said.

There was a sudden silence. It was a word we seldom used. It brought back too many painful memories. We’d all lost our own real mothers, and then, when we were five and returned to the hospital, we’d also lost our foster mothers.

‘Oh, Hetty, you’re so lucky!’ said Freda, and the others echoed her.

Even Monica looked wistful and gazed at the little house in awe. ‘It’s wonderful, Hetty,’ she whispered.

Sheila’s face darkened. ‘I don’t know why you’re all making such a fuss. It’s just a silly home-made toy. A baby house made out of scraps. It’s not wonderful at all.’

‘It *is*! My mama made it specially for me,’ I said

proudly. 'It must have taken her ages and ages. It shows just how much she loves me.'

'Your mama's only *Ida*,' said Sheila, her face contorted. 'She was a kitchen maid. It's not as if she's anyone special.'

I gasped and then flew at her. I hit out blindly with both fists, so desperate to defend my dear mama that I didn't pause to think what I was doing.

I was still holding the little house in my hand!

The house glanced off Sheila's forehead, the shells scratching her, and then it jerked out of my hand onto the floor. It landed with a terrible thump. More shells flew off, and the walls came apart. My little house was ruined!