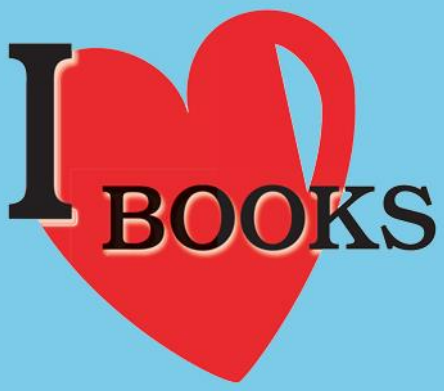


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Bring Me the Head of Ivy Pocket

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Chapter 1

'Why are we slowing?'

I wasn't asleep. Just lightly dozing, as young ladies do on long carriage rides. My mouth wide open. My head tilted back in a dainty manner. The odd musical snort escaping from my nose. All very elegant.

'Driver, why are we slowing?' It was a woman. She sounded rather annoyed. 'It's *miles* from our next stop. This is highly irregular.'

My peaceful nap was no match for such a loud creature. As she prattled on about *unscheduled stops*, I was suddenly aware of the rattling windows and the fading roar of carriage wheels coming to a halt.

'Excuse me.' I felt a sharp jab to my ribs. 'Would you mind moving over?'

I was pushed sideways as someone wedged themselves down between me and the window. My eyes sprang open. 'What are you doing, you mad cow?'

It was the prim-looking American – Miss Finch. The one who had been so appalled that I was making the journey to London alone. 'I can't see the road from my seat and I wish to know why we're stopping all of a sudden.' She pursed her lips and scowled. 'It's *highly* irregular.'

I was now squished against a handsome young man, fast asleep with a copy of *David Copperfield* resting against his chest. While on the seat opposite, three white-haired sisters were busy knitting matching yellow-and-blue scarves (I didn't know their names but I'm almost certain they were Shorty, Big Ears and Grumpy).

'Perfectly understandable,' I said, politely ramming Miss Finch with my shoulder. 'After all, what are carriage rides for, if not for being violently attacked in your sleep?'

Miss Finch pulled back the curtain. 'Well, I'm sorry for that,' she said, not sounding terribly sorry at all, 'though it was just a little jab.'

'True enough,' I heartily agreed. 'I'm certain it only *felt* monstrously painful because you are blessed with the arms of a lumberjack.'

Miss Finch blinked furiously. Looked down at her arms. 'I … I've always been described as *dainty*.'

'Which makes your bulging forearms all the more remarkable.' I slapped her knee in the way new friends do. 'You should join a circus, dear – you'd make a fortune.'

She frowned, shook her head and snorted. Which was the American way of expressing profound amusement. Then she turned and peered out of the window. 'It's so dark out there I can hardly see a thing.'

Which was very true. Though my watch told me it was two in the afternoon, the view outside was bleak – dark clouds hung awfully low, churning like smoking furnaces.

I sat back in my seat and sighed. Thinking on where I was. And why. The carriage was bound for London. And I was going there for the gravest of reasons. To save Rebecca and bring her home (Winslow Street was the only location that would allow me to cross directly into Prospa House). To find out why those guards keeping her prisoner had seemed to recognise me. And to liberate Anastasia Radcliff from that hideous madhouse in Islington and reunite her with the child she was cruelly separated from. But right at that moment the carriage was at a standstill. And for the first time, that struck me as rather odd. 'What can you see, Miss Finch?'

'Not a lot,' she replied. 'Though the driver's climbing down.'

'There's something on the road,' said Big Ears, peering out of her window.

'What could it be?' asked Shorty.

Grumpy clicked her fingers at me as if I were a poodle. 'Girl, go and tell the driver to pass around whatever is blocking

the road. Tell him my sisters and I must be in London by nine or we will miss our boat.'

While I positively hated doing what I was told – especially by rude old bats – I *did* want to find out what was holding us up. So I squeezed past Miss Finch and stepped out of the carriage. Thick wheat fields bordered the road, the golden stalks rendered a rusty brown by the brooding storm clouds. I could hear the murmur of agitated voices in the distance – but it wasn't until I walked around the horses and got a clear view of the road ahead that I understood why.

A small wagon loaded with trunks had overturned. The driver lay on the ground, blood oozing from his head. A hefty woman stood nearby sobbing madly while our driver, Mr Adams, was untethering a pair of black stallions hitched to the wagon.

When the horses were free, Mr Adams bent down and tended to the injured man, who seemed more concerned about his wagon. As the two drivers discussed what had happened, Mr Adams pointed to a small farmhouse in the distance and said a few extra hands might help.

'Shall I go and sound the alarm?' I said helpfully.

'I could have been killed!' shrieked the chunky woman. 'It's a miracle I didn't break my neck!'

'Are you hurt, ma'am?' came a voice behind me. I turned

and discovered Miss Finch looking on with a furrowed brow. 'Can I help?'

'I landed on my shoulder,' said the woman, clutching her arm, 'and it aches something fierce.' She sobbed again. 'I could have been killed.'

'What happened?' I asked her.

She pointed at the injured man. 'He was driving like a madman, that's what!'

Above us the rain began to fall, pushed about in all directions by the wind.

'You poor woman,' said Miss Finch solemnly. 'Come and take shelter in the carriage with us – we will send for a doctor.'

'That's very kind,' said the woman, 'but I should stay here and keep an eye on my belongings.' She nodded her head in my direction. 'Perhaps the girl could keep me company? I'm a bundle of nerves, I am.'

Miss Finch thought that was an excellent idea – pushing me towards the whimpering lady and hurrying back to the carriage. The woman took my hand tightly in hers and repeated how close she had come to death. I noticed that she kept stealing glances at the road behind us.

'It's a bad knock to the head you've taken,' said Mr Adams, pulling the wagon driver to his feet.

'I've had worse,' said the driver, wincing in pain. 'I just … need to rest a spell.'

Mr Adams helped the driver hobble to the side of the road, setting him down gently. But I wasn't paying much attention – for my gaze was still fixed on the blubber guts clutching my hand. She was magnificently beefy for a damsel in distress. Beady eyes, terribly close together. Skin so full of craters and dints it resembled a crumpet. Shaggy eyebrows. A nose that took a sharp right turn about halfway down. The hint of a moustache. All in all, she was tremendously convincing. Just not to me. For I knew *exactly* who was lurking beneath that artful disguise.

'Very impressive, Miss Always,' I said, snatching my hand away. 'The overturned wagon, the injured driver – it all looks so real.'

The villain stepped back, startled. 'Whatever do you mean?' she cried. 'I nearly died! I could have broken my –'

'Yes, yes, your neck could have snapped clean off your head. But it didn't, for this whole thing is a monstrous trap. Only I am far too clever to fall for it.'

'You are delirious.' The wicked woman looked to Mr Adams. 'Did you hear what she said to me? The girl is mad!'

The sky trembled violently as Mr Adams scratched his chin and regarded me. 'I can't speak for her mind,' he said slowly. 'I only know she's travelling alone and has no luggage.'

'There!' cried the woman. 'What sort of child travels across the country *alone* with no possessions?'

Hysterical accusations tend to attract a crowd – which is why the three wrinkly sisters had their heads stuck out of the carriage door, gawking furiously. 'Is there a problem?' said Big Ears rather eagerly.

'This girl has accused me of being an imposter!' shrieked the devious woman.

The three sisters gasped as one.

'Because she *is* an imposter,' I declared, pointing at the scoundrel. 'Just a few months ago she was masquerading as a chunky librarian. And now she is wearing another disguise – beneath this hulking monstrosity is a thoroughly devious bookworm. She is here to capture me and make me her puppet queen.'

The sisters gasped again. Mr Adams shook his head. And the beastly woman in disguise began to sob. What a masterful performance Miss Always was giving!

'What is going on?' Miss Finch was walking towards us, arms folded. 'And why is everyone staring at the girl?'

'She's made some *allegations*,' said Mr Adams solemnly.

'What sort of allegations?' said Miss Finch.

I stated my case again.

Miss Finch listened. Then sighed. 'I see.'

She did not believe me either!

'We must not blame the child,' said the disguised scoundrel, shaking her head. 'I know a doctor in the next village – you go on your way and I will take the child there myself and see that she is given the help she needs.'

My fellow travellers seemed to think that was a sensible idea. As such, urgent action was required. 'Look,' I said forcefully, 'I will prove that what I'm saying is true.'

I lunged at the imposter and grabbed her crooked nose, yanking it in a winning fashion. Once Miss Finch and the others saw the artificial nose come off in my hand, they would be full of humble apologies.

'What is she doing?' shrieked Shorty.

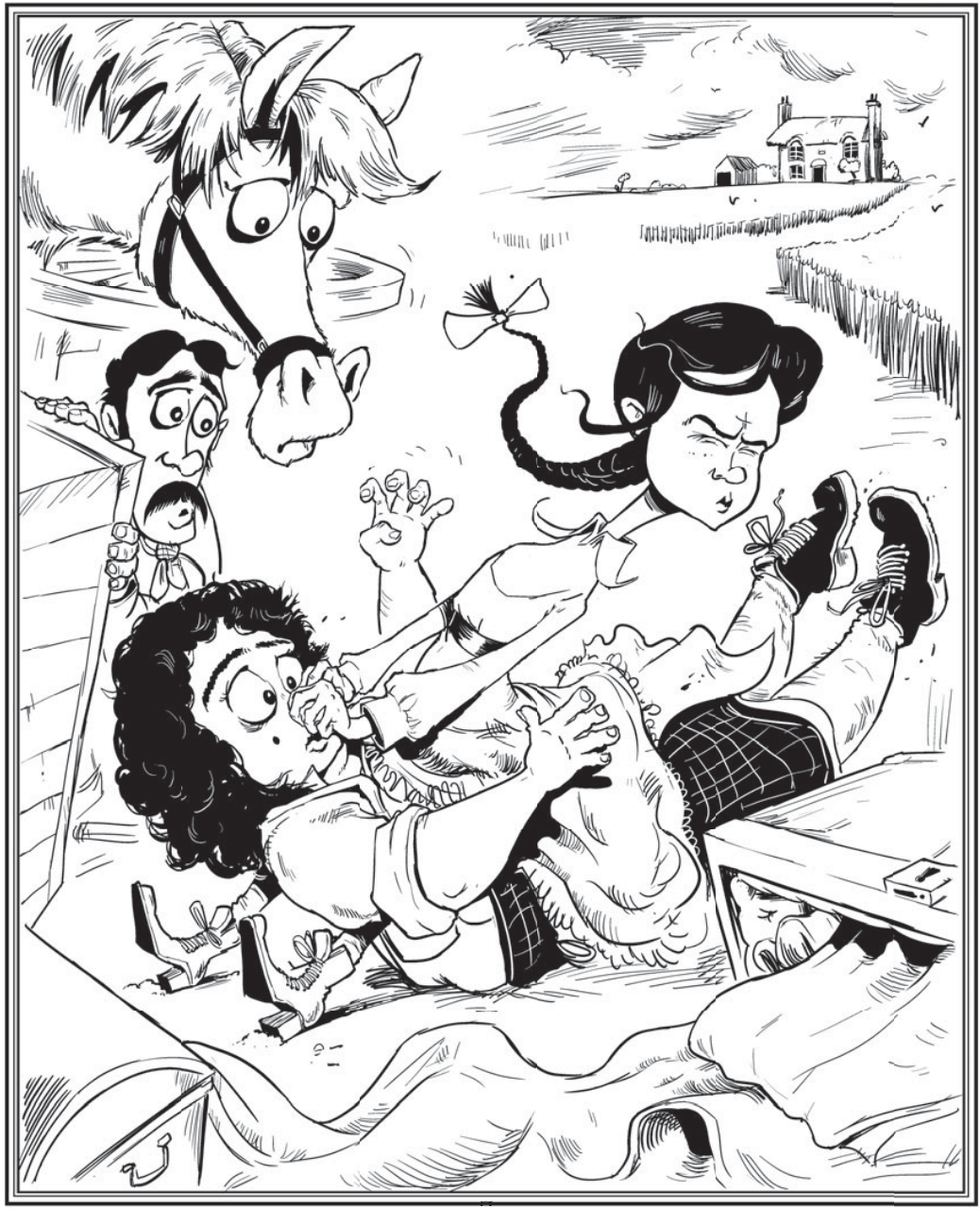
'Unhand that woman!' cried Miss Finch.

'In a moment, dear,' I called back. 'Just let me pull her face off first.'

I continued to yank the nose. Unfortunately, it was rather stubborn and would not come off – no matter how hard I tugged. With time against me, I left the nose and went for her bushy eyebrows. Determined to rip them off. But they would not budge either.

'Stop!' shrieked the devious trickster, slapping me away. 'Get off me!'

Her nose was surprisingly red after all that yanking and I



noticed a small trickle of blood slipping from her left eyebrow. Which was terribly unexpected.

'Leave her be, little one,' said Mr Adams, gently pulling me away. 'You're only making things worse.'

'She's deranged,' said Grumpy.

'And violent,' added Big Ears.

'I've never been treated so viciously!' wailed the injured woman. 'Not in all my life!'

I felt the smart thing to do was offer a few kind words to smooth things over. 'You mustn't blame yourself, dear. Having features so delightfully grotesque that any right-thinking person would assume it was a hideous disguise is hardly *your* fault.' I walked over and patted her shoulder sympathetically. 'Blame the parents, I say.'

The woman's hand flew up and slapped me straight across the face.

'What a wicked tongue,' she said fiercely. 'A girl like you should be locked away.'

My right cheek stung a great deal, but I refused to show it. 'If it's any comfort, I was recently held prisoner in a madhouse. Which wasn't nearly as much fun as it sounds.'

There was a small amount of chatter about me being bonkers. I was giving an impassioned defence of my sanity and didn't notice the small carriage charging up the road towards

us. Or coming to a screeching halt just a few feet away. In fact, I only glanced over as the carriage door swung open and a grim figure in black leapt out. Her face a mask of cold determination and wicked delight. The *real* Miss Always fixed her eyes upon me and began to sob.

'Thank heavens I've found her!' She pointed at me, her eyes overflowing like two buckets in a rainstorm. 'My darling daughter, my little Ivy, ran away, and I've been scouring the countryside all night looking for her.'

'And you want her *back*?' said Grumpy.

I turned and bolted, but did not get far. For the sobbing creature I had accused of being Miss Always lunged and ensnared me in her tight grip. 'It's a terrible thing you've done,' she said, 'running away from your poor mother.'

'She's *not* my mother, you hefty halfwit!' I looked to Miss Finch in desperation. 'Miss Always is a murderous hag from another world – please don't let her take me!'

'You are unwell,' said Miss Finch gravely. 'You must go with your mother.'

The three sisters and Mr Adams nodded in agreement.

'I just want my darling daughter back!' blubbered Miss Always.

'Of course you do,' declared the woman gripping my arm. I struggled wildly, but could not break free. As she pulled me

towards Miss Always, she pressed her head close to my mine and whispered, 'The Gatekeeper has plans for you.'

And in that moment it all made sense. This whole thing had been an elaborate plot to ensnare me. My only hope was to create a moment of distraction. Which is why I stopped struggling. 'I'm acting like a lunatic, do forgive me,' I said loudly. 'Of course I'll go with dear Mumsy. It's only right.'

The rain grew more urgent, hitting the road like sparks.

'I thought she was a murderous hag from another world?' sneered the crooked-nose henchwoman.

I shrugged. 'Nobody's perfect, dear. Just look at you.'

And with that I kicked her as hard as I could in the shin. She shrieked rather violently and began to hop about, releasing her tight hold. Miss Always stormed towards me. Which seemed like a perfect moment to push the hopping heifer into her. They both tumbled over, hitting the damp road. Glorious! But my victory did not last long. For the wagon driver jumped up (he had never been injured to begin with) and began to charge.

Thunder shook the sky as I turned and ran.



Miss Always let out a treacherous war cry as I darted into the field, the wheat parting and crushing beneath my feet. I knew

that cry well and felt certain she had unleashed an army of Locks to come after me. This was confirmed when I heard the terrified cries of my fellow travellers – no doubt stunned by what they were seeing.

Rain thrashed the vast field and the sky seemed to darken by the second.

'Fan out and be quick about it!' I heard Miss Always bellow from behind.

The brutish henchwoman and the driver shouted their obedience. Then I felt the ground rumble and shake as the wheat was trampled in every direction. Which told me the Locks were spreading far and wide – ferocious and on the hunt.

Something shot past me in a blur. I pulled up and saw a trail of flattened wheat twisting away. It *had* to be a Lock. And as I glanced across the darkened field, I saw dozens of such tracks being carved into the field – each one a tiny hooded beast.

I considered using the Clock Diamond to reach Prospa, but with Miss Always and her goons about, the stone's luminous glow might see me captured before I could cross. So I took off again, rain streaming down my face and clouding my eyes. The field stretched out to the far horizon – I wasn't sure which way to run. Or where I might hide.

'You won't get away, Ivy.' Miss Always sounded rather

amused. 'You are outnumbered and outwitted. Surrender to your fate – you might even enjoy it.'

'Never!' I wanted to cry out. But as I wasn't a complete idiot, I held my tongue.

I kept running at speed. Then heard the sound of loud, ragged breaths. Twisting my head, I glimpsed the wagon driver charging towards me through the wheat stalks. So I swerved left. Which is when I spotted the stone farmhouse we had seen from the road. With no other options, I charged towards it.

But not for long. A clawed hand shot out, grabbing my ankle. And I tumbled to the ground. My fall cushioned by the clusters of wheat beneath me. I looked up and saw the little robed villain, its face hidden inside that menacing hood. I heard it hiss like a steam train. Then it lunged, its talons unfurling.

With an outpouring of savagery – having all the natural instincts of a drunken sailor – I unleashed a violent kick. The pint-sized scoundrel was thrown back, hitting the soggy ground and rolling several times. By then I was back on my feet and barrelling towards the farmhouse.

'There she is!' shouted the henchwoman. 'Boss, she's over here!'

I instantly dropped to my knees. Began crawling between the wheat stalks like an infant. I heard someone whistle and the sound of footsteps close behind. I dropped lower. Kept going.

Which is when I noticed the stone well. Just beyond the farmhouse.

'Where is she?' barked Miss Always.

'I've lost her, boss,' said the henchwoman.

'Well, find her again, you fool!'

The sky shuddered and the ground trembled. I could hear two or three Locks nearby hissing up a storm. So I scurried towards the well. Climbed over the small stone wall. And placed my feet in the wooden bucket. A length of rope was knotted to the bucket and curled around the winch. I grabbed the handle and turned it slowly.

At least, that was the idea. Unfortunately, the winch had other ideas. The rope began to unspool rapidly as the bucket dropped into the darkness. I was about to close my eyes and pray for a soft landing when the bucket hit the bottom, breaking apart beneath me. It was an impact of the hard and bruising variety. I'm too much of a young lady to record that my bottom ached and throbbed with all the agony of a thousand thrashings.

Water pooled around me – the rain pouring in with nowhere to go. The smell was hideously dank, the rounded wall rather slimy. I heard the henchwoman huffing and puffing up above. Then a shadow passed over and I guessed she was there. I pressed myself against the wall. Shut my eyes.

'So?' It was Miss Always. 'Is she down there?'

'Don't think so, boss,' came the wheezing reply.

'Blast! The girl cannot have vanished into thin air.'

'I reckon she's crossed into Prospa,' said the wagon driver.

'No,' said Miss Always, 'we would have seen the stone's light if she'd done that.' A long silence. Then Miss Always shouted above the rain, 'I know you can hear me, Ivy, wherever you are hiding. You might be interested to know that I paid a visit to your little cottage by the sea – your friend Jago didn't give me the warmest of welcomes.'

I covered my mouth to trap the gasp which threatened to escape.

'He put up an admirable fight.' Miss Always laughed wickedly. 'I'm afraid I may have broken his arm – terribly unsporting of me. Ivy, if you wish to see Jago again then show yourself. Show yourself or the boy is dead.'

How I wanted to give myself up. But could I trust Miss Always to release Jago once she had me? She didn't strike me as one of the more honourable murderous lunatics. For now I had to believe that Jago was of more value to her alive than dead. So I stayed silent.

'Come, we will search the farmhouse,' ordered Miss Always.

The rain fell hard. It was relentless. Angry. Even as I huddled against the rounded wall it came for me. Filling the well until my body began to stiffen and ache. The chill was so sharp and

cruel I believed the rain had leached into my skin, cracked my bones and filled my marrow until it froze. The sky rumbled like an angry giant. The water was up to my waist now. And I could no longer feel my lips.

That is the last thing I recall from my great escape.