

## Seven



### A Scary Hallway

Dinner was as big a disaster as the whole day had been. Lottie figured that getting dressed for dinner meant that she should put on a clean T-Shirt and wash her hands. As soon as she got to the dining room, she found out that her grandmother had expected her to wear a dress. When Lottie told her that she never wears dresses except for special fiestas and church things, her grandmother looked at her like she was dog doo-doo in the middle of a walking trail.

“Wild horses couldn’t have gotten me to pack a silly dress for a fun vacation at my grandmother’s,” Lottie blurted out, somewhat sassy-like. This outburst kept her grandmother from saying anything else, but it didn’t keep Judith from boring eye-holes in her head. Not caring anymore, Lottie crossed her eyes and looked directly at Judith.

Several months ago, Sophie had told Lottie that when she crossed her eyes, she looked scarier than anyone she’d ever seen. Judith glared back but after awhile, gave up and headed for the kitchen. Only then did Lottie uncross her eyes. She had to roll them around several

times to ease the strain. Luckily, her grandmother had been staring at her plate of food during this time.

“Where’s Samuel?” Lottie missed him.

“Most likely, he’s in his apartment over the garage,” Mrs. Harrolton replied.

Lottie couldn’t believe all the utensils around her plate. She had three forks, two knives, and two spoons. Which one was she supposed to use? She also had three plates - a small one on top of a larger one and then a really small one by her forks. She wondered if all rich people set their tables like this. It was crazy to say the least. Lottie crossed her fingers several times, hoping she wouldn’t be the one washing all these dishes.

Suddenly, she got the brilliant idea to pretend she was playing the mirror game with her grandmother. Whatever, her grandmother did, she would follow. Pick up small fork, take one bite of lettuce, put fork down, pick up roll from small plate and take one small bite, put roll down, take a sip of wine, only in her case, it was milk, and so on and so on.

The food, fish with a yellow sauce and asparagus and weird-looking potatoes, was gross for the most part. Lottie took the tiniest of bites, and sometimes just pretended to take a bite. Even the dessert, a stiff pudding, which was served on yet another plate, wasn’t all that good. Lottie had just about decided that rich people had pretty sad, boring lives. No wonder her dad had left it.

After dinner, Lottie’s mom called, and they talked for a long time. Lottie didn’t tell her any of the bad stuff about crying and missing home. She didn’t mention a thing about her grandmother not being very nice because she didn’t want her to worry.

She even got to talk to Chester for a few slurpy licks. Her mom told her that Chester had been so sad all day he hadn’t even chased the neighbor’s cat whom he disliked from his head to his tail-tip.

Afterwards, feeling really happy, Lottie was skipping back to her room when she rounded a corner and bumped into Claire, another one of her grandmother's maids.

"Oh, faith and begorah! I'm so sorry, Missy." Claire bent down to pick up some towels she had dropped. "You must be the little granddaughter. How are you? You are the prettiest ever. That wild hair is a keeper. I'm Claire O'Shea." Finally, she stopped long enough to give Lottie the sweetest of smiles. Then in the next moment, she dropped her towels and squeezed Lottie in a tight hug to her tall thin frame. It felt a little like a hug from her mom.

Claire was young, maybe still a teenager. She looked as young as Lottie's Cousin Ana who had just turned eighteen. Claire was beautiful, but in a way different from Ana. Claire had blonde hair, blue eyes, and really white skin that looked like milk in a glass that had no fingerprints. She sort of sang her words and said them different, not the way her relatives speak English, but strange in another way.

"And what might your name be, precious? Claire held onto her shoulders.

"Lottie. But my grandma... grandmother wants me to be called Loretta," Lottie said.

"Well, then it's Lottie, except when the Grandmother is around. A deal? Claire spit on her hand and held it out for a shake. Lottie laughed and returned the spit shake.

Then Claire started down the hall pulling Lottie towards her room, talking ninety miles an hour about how she tried to dress up that dreadful room, but couldn't find much girlie stuff in this museum of a house.

When they entered the room, Lottie saw that Claire had added a couple of lacy white pillows and a rainbow striped comforter to her bed. She had replaced the huge brass lamp on the bedside table with a smaller one of a ballerina with a pink shade. A step bench had also been

put next to the bed so that she could climb in without having to take a running jump.

Claire pointed to the open door of the bathroom, “Well, precious, you now have pretty lavender towels. If you need anything else, my apartment is down the hall from the kitchen. It’s a ways, but you can find it. All right, then, I’ll be off. Sleep well and dream only of the angels. You want that I should tuck you in first?”

Lottie smiled and shook her head. “I want to read some chapters first. Will you go swimming with me tomorrow?”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Now can’t you just see Grouse Judith givin’ me time off for a swim?”

“I’ll ask Grandmother,” Lottie offered.

With that Claire gave a short laugh, “She wouldn’t think it proper for a servant to play with the upper-crust.”

“But I’m not upper-crust!” Lottie thought a moment. “What is upper-crust?”

“Oh you are a precious one. We’ll talk tomorrow. I’ve got the kitchen to mop-up.” Claire was out the door. Lottie could hear her humming down the hallway.

Hurrying to the closet, Lottie grabbed her backpack and made a running jump for the bed. Once up there, she kicked off her shoes and socks and rummaged through the pack. She pulled out the newspaper, her journal, and finally retrieved the bag of chocolate chip cookies her mom had baked for her. She was starving.

Before a person could count to ten, the cookies were gone, and she needed a drink. She jumped off the bed, darted to the bathroom, got a drink, and returned, jumping back on the bed. That’s when she noticed the mattress had a really good spring, almost as good as the trampoline at the gym.

She started jumping, going higher and higher. Maybe she could touch the roses painted on the ceiling. While she was in mid-air, a loud knock on the door frightened her half to death. She fell flat on her stomach.

“Miss Loretta?”

Oh no, it was Judith. Lottie looked at the mess on the bed, cookie crumbs, rumpled sheets. As she was dusting off the cookie crumbs, Judith entered carrying a tray.

“Your grandmother was worried. Said you hadn’t eaten much and wanted me to prepare this for you.” She set the tray at the foot of the bed.

Lottie watched as her heavy black tie-up shoes clumped around the room, stopping for her to pick up Lottie’s shoes, socks, and dirty blouse. Lottie knew that her mother would be disappointed that she had scattered her clothes and belongings all over the room.

“I was going to pick them up.” Lottie said meekly.

“All I ask is that you don’t upset your grandmother? She’s been through enough, and I won’t have her hurt any more.” Judith warned her.

Lottie didn’t dare look up. She stared at the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, the apple, and glass of milk on the tray. She figured Judith was waiting for her to say something, but she couldn’t think of what to say. Finally a weak “Thank you” slipped through her lips.

Judith put her hands on her hips and said, “I tried to tell her not to do this. Just dredging up memories.” With a very firm voice she added, “Don’t jump on the bed again. This is a respectable house.” She closed the door with a bang. Lottie picked up the sandwich, took a bite, and slapped it back on the plate. Even the peanut butter tasted yucky in this place.

She looked down and saw Charles Ray’s face staring at her from the newspaper by the tray. She picked it up and read about the story she’d seen on TV. He’d gotten off a school bus in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and disappeared. His bus stop was only a half-block from his home. A neighbor said she saw a big black car with dark windows in the neighborhood about that time.

Lottie really studied the picture, before putting it down. She thought about how scared he must be. She decided then and there that she wouldn’t get angry or

feel sad because Judith was an old grouch, and her grandmother didn't act at all like a grandmother. Compared to Charles Ray, she was very lucky. Besides, she had Samuel and Claire. They seemed to like her.

Long after Lottie had turned out the bedside lamp, she continued to toss and turn. She couldn't stop thinking about Charles Ray. The paper said his nickname was Squeak. She wondered how he'd gotten a nickname like that. The light from the bathroom was making scary shadows on the walls: a Frankenstein with long stringy fingers, a baboon with two heads, a laughing crazy vampire. The hole in the fireplace kept getting closer and closer and closer, about ready to gobble her up. With a shudder, she knew she couldn't stay in this room one more minute.

Grabbing her backpack and the apple off the tray, she headed for the door. In a flash, she was out the door. The marble floor shot freezing needles into her feet. As she lightly tiptoed/hopped down the dimly lit hallway, she glanced up to see the paintings of her dead relatives, all fixing their lifeless eyes on her.

Earlier, her grandmother had told her that one was her great-grandmother, another was her great-grandfather. Lottie couldn't remember who the others were, but no matter who they were, they were closely watching her every step.

Then it was as if someone had squeezed all the air out of her body. Two green eyes hovered just above the balcony rail, floating in air. Could they be the eyes of a witch about to cast a spell on her? With a slight shriek, Lottie broke out into a gazelle run, heading lickety-split towards her father's bedroom. As she passed the green eyes, she heard the familiar hiss.

"Darn cat, scared the pee out of me." she screamed crashing through the door and flicking on the switch. A soft lamp by her dad's bed lit up. She slammed the door shut and with a flying leap, landed in his bed and pulled up the covers around her ears. Almost as soon as she hit

the bed, she felt safe. Nothing bad could happen to her as long as she was in this room.

“Daddy? Daddy,” she called softly. “Nighty night.” She fell asleep instantly.