

The
H O U S E
on
F O S T E R
H I L L

JAIME JO WRIGHT



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*To Nathan. My Cap'n Hook.
The pirate I despised, then tolerated, then finally loved.
I don't need my heart back. You can keep it.
Pirates treasure those types of things.*

And to Daddy. We did it.

I washed the weather and the journey from my face and hands, and went out to the memorable old house that it would have been so much the better for me never to have entered, never to have seen. . . .

That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it, and think how different its course would have been. Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

CHAPTER I

Ivy

OAKWOOD, WISCONSIN

MARCH 1906

Death had a way of creeping up on a soul, and Ivy Thorpe was determined that when it visited her, she would not be surprised. Her story would be recorded and remembered. There was nothing worse than seeing the casing of a soul that had drifted into eternity, knowing the body would return to dust while the life lived became a tin-plated photograph with a forgotten name. Lives lost in the passage of time. Unremembered. Like Andrew.

Ivy averted her eyes from the path leading to the pond where her brother had died. A different soul needed her attention today. Shedding tears over Andrew would only waste time and leave her dehydrated.

“Where did they find her?” She posed her question to her father, whose long strides were in rhythm with the medical bag swinging from his hand at his side.

He stepped over a tree root buried just under the surface of the dirt road. “In the hollowed oak tree.”

Ivy hoisted the hemline of her green wool skirt. She frowned. The tree was ancient, and the memories it had witnessed fascinated Ivy’s curiosity. Stories hidden in its leafless soul—if such a thing were possible.

“The oak that has no bark on its trunk?”

Her father gave a curt nod. He was as focused as she was but for different reasons. The mind of a doctor dubbing as medical examiner would be spinning with the questions about how the deceased died. Or what the method of death could tell them about her last moments? But for Ivy, separating the person from the science of her death was impossible. Who was she? Not just her name, or if she struck a familiar chord, or could be identified. But, what was her story? What memories did she leave behind, and what hearts were broken in the wake of her passing? Ivy blinked to shove away a surge of unwelcome sentiment. Grief was a high currency to pay for loving someone, and she paid her dues on a moment-by-moment basis.

Trees arched over the road, their scraggly arms outstretched. Spring was on its way, though ice was still trapped in tree crevices, with patches of snow in the shaded pockets of the root base. As they rounded the corner, Foster Hill came into view, so named for the town’s founding family. At the top, glaring down at them with empty eyes, was Foster Hill House. It had been abandoned before Ivy was born. The years had not been kind to the old house.

Ivy squinted into the sudden glare of sunlight as the bright orb escaped from behind gray clouds. Several men congregated at the bottom of Foster Hill, their backs to her and her father as they surrounded the base of the largest oak tree in Oakwood, Wisconsin. Three of the men she recognized: the sheriff, his

deputy, and Mr. Foggerty, who liked to trap animals on the abandoned property—mostly raccoon and mink by the stream that ran into the pond, and . . .

“For all that’s holy.” Ivy froze, releasing her grip on her skirt and allowing the hemline to settle on the muddy earth.

“Ivy!” Her father should be used to her unorthodox exclamations by now.

“Joel.” She knew the lifeless expression in her voice did nothing to represent the pounding of her heart in her ears. Her vision grazed the broad back encased in a black wool coat. The fedora that tilted on his head hid the majority of the familiar dark brown hair, but Ivy still narrowed her eyes at the strong column of his neck.

“Who?” Her father resumed his long strides, unwilling to allow Ivy’s momentary shock to dissuade him from reaching the body discovered only an hour earlier.

Ivy matched his pace, yet this time she questioned whether uncovering the dead woman’s story was as critical as avoiding Joel. The orphan. The childhood miscreant. Her best friend, who had abandoned her when she’d needed him most so many years before.

“Joel. Cunningham.” She reminded her father. “Andrew’s Joel.” *My Joel.*

“Oh!” The name jolted her father’s memory and earned her a sideways glance.

Yes. Him. Ivy’s unspoken words to her father sparked a different light in his eyes. Would he defend her now, or did he still believe Joel had a reasonable explanation for his behavior that night? Her relationship with her father had never been quite the same since Andrew’s death and Joel’s subsequent actions.

The men turned as they neared. Joel’s hands were deep in his trouser pockets. He twisted just enough so she could see

his squared jaw, furrowed brows in that old familiar look of concentration, and his blue eyes. Blue eyes with a hint of gray. A flicker of recognition lighted in them, then vanished, as if he'd snuffed it out along with their past. Their friendship merely a speck on the timeline of their lives. Ivy avoided his gaze, stiffening her shoulders. He wasn't worth her consideration. She bit her bottom lip as a rush of memories threatened to overwhelm her. He really wasn't, she convinced herself.

"How old is she?" Ivy's father dispensed with formal greetings, and he brushed between the men to approach the tree.

"No idea." Sheriff Dunst's voice carried on a cold gust of March wind.

Ivy set her focus on the tree. It was long rumored that the Foster Hill oak tree was not only the largest but also the oldest tree in Oakwood. While its top rose to a marvelous height, it was still dead and its branches never blossomed. The trunk was very wide at the base and split open to reveal a hollow inside. Many a child had hidden there during a rambunctious game of hide-and-seek. They wouldn't hide there anymore. Not after today.

The petite body was curled into the position of a babe, inside the tree's womb. Blond hair hung free over her cold, bare shoulders and floated out on the wind. Her torso was covered in a paper-thin dress of gray calico. It was nowhere near enough to keep her warm, but it was more than the cold that tinted the young woman's skin blue. It was death.

Ivy watched as her father fingered the wrist. It was clearly too late. As Ivy tilted her head to see around his shoulder, she sensed a presence beside her. Joel. Their eyes met, locked, and then broke. The next breath Ivy took shuddered, and she hated herself for it. Years had passed. Joel should no longer affect her with such magnitude.

“What done her in?” Mr. Foggerty begged the question they all wondered.

“It’s too soon to tell.” Joel’s answer for her father caused her to give him a questioning raise of her eyebrow. He had no right. No medical expertise.

But, one might argue, neither did she.

“No one knows who she is?” Joel’s voice sent vibrations through Ivy’s body. She edged away from him.

“None of us, anyway.” The sheriff shrugged. “I’ll start to investigate her. Maybe she’s from a surrounding farm or part of a gypsy group passing through, what with the circus down south and all.”

Dr. Thorpe grunted. Ivy saw what her father saw. The bruises on the body. Her wrists, her forearms, her neck. They told a frightening tale of abuse, whether long-term or suffered at the time of her death, they wouldn’t know until they moved the body to the clinic. Ivy wrapped her arms around her torso, not from cold and certainly not from being squeamish. This had not been an accident. The girl had suffered and it seemed she had suffered alone, with no one to hear her cries and no one to care that she had gone missing. Already, in the early spring chill and the gray mist that rolled from the forest to the base of the tree, the girl was a mystery at risk of being lost for eternity.



Ivy squeezed the cloth over the porcelain washbasin. The drips from the rag into the water were the only sounds in the room. She draped the damp cloth over the edge of the bowl. It was ready to minister to the poor young woman who appeared shy of twenty years of age.

“Now?” Ivy met her father’s eyes. He gave a short nod.

She reached for the top button of the girl’s dress and paused.

Fine cheekbones, pale in the pasty white of death, light blond brows, lips in the shape of a perfect rosebud minus color . . . she was beautiful. Even in death. It was moments like these that tugged at Ivy's empathy, even though Oakwood thought she was half crazy. Had the girl's last breaths been frantic, filled with terror and panic? Or had she passed in her sleep, and someone disposed of her body in a bewildered state of grief?

Ivy grimaced as she spread open the girl's threadbare garment. Not with the bruising. There was nothing peaceful in this death. Distinct markings curled around the base of her throat, and Ivy touched them with her fingertips as she raised her eyes to meet her father's.

"Strangulation?" Ivy murmured. The horror of suffocation stuck too close to another death that haunted her daily. An accidental one, but accidents never diminished trauma.

Her father pushed his spectacles up his nose and bent over to eye the markings. "Most likely." He folded the dead girl's dress off her shoulder to reveal more of her skin. "She's also been manhandled. We definitely need further examination."

Ivy ached for the girl in a way she couldn't explain to anyone. It wasn't sadness, it wasn't even grief. It was a throbbing fury for what this young woman endured. This was why Ivy wrote the stories of the dead in her journal. Oakwood residents called her the "memory keeper" and referred to her book as her "death journal." They formed the assumption that Ivy had developed a morbid fascination with death since Andrew. What the citizens of Oakwood didn't understand was that no one, ever, deserved to be forgotten, and Ivy would do everything possible to preserve their stories beyond a factual obituary in the newspaper.

She smoothed away a lock of hair that lay across the girl's forehead. Ivy's eyes narrowed in focused determination. No one should die nameless.

“Ivy.”

Dr. Thorpe’s mouth was hidden by his full, white mustache. The wrinkles around his eyes were gentle, but her father’s stern expression told her she needed to continue. Ivy was thankful he didn’t have pity in his eyes. He understood what many didn’t. She saw Andrew in every person who struggled and passed away in spite of her father’s meticulous and caring practice. She saw Andrew in the face of the unremembered girl in front of her. Ivy fingered the empty locket that dangled around her own neck. Andrew had given it to her, and one day she would fill it with something precious. Something that promised life had a beginning, instead of an unending line of passages into eternity.

Ivy chose to ignore her thoughts. They would only distract her and take her to places in her grief that would result in nothing good. She pulled the tail of a stained ribbon that held the scooped neckline of the deceased’s chemise together. More bruising peeked from beneath the soiled cotton, just above the girl’s breasts. Fury mingled with Ivy’s impassioned need to find justice for this victim. She unbuttoned a tiny white button on the chemise that rested between the young woman’s cleavage.

“Stop.”

Dr. Thorpe leaned forward to examine a small mole.

“It’s not dirt,” Ivy observed, and her father nodded. Turning, he made a note of the potential identifier in his medical journal.

“Keep going.” He motioned with his hand.

She did.

Ivy admired her father’s hidden talent of postmortem examination. It wasn’t something all doctors were schooled in, but with newer medical practices coming to the fore, her father wasn’t one to be surpassed by the younger doctors. On occasion, a medical examination needed to be completed, and Oakwood boasted of a practitioner who was more than capable. Her

father's immersion into the medical world after Andrew died was even more wholehearted than when Andrew was alive.

The clearing of a throat jerked both Ivy and her father from their intensive examination. Joel Cunningham lounged in the doorway, overflowing with the self-confidence Ivy so easily remembered. That confidence had once attracted her as a young woman of fourteen. She waited for his look of discrimination at the sight of a lady assisting with a postmortem medical examination. There was none. He looked beyond her. Ivy squelched the sting of being passed over.

“What have we found?”

Joel stepped into the room. He was all business, wasn't he? Ivy narrowed her eyes. Thank goodness her father wouldn't answer Joel. Just because he had been at the site of the body's discovery didn't mean they owed him any explanations.

“It appears she may have died of strangulation.”

Well then. Maybe she was wrong.

Joel approached the table, and Ivy yanked the sheet over the young woman's body. Indecent. The man had no propriety. He most definitely had not improved with age.

She gave him a hasty glance. Well, his *personality* hadn't improved with age. His lean form hinted at a chest that had matured from a young man's lanky frame into strength and breadth. The tailored suit coat he wore suggested he'd stepped up in the world from the orphan he once was. Why was he home in Oakwood? And why was her father handing over information as if Joel Cunningham was working for the sheriff?

“Anything you can tell about how she died might help with my investigation. The sheriff has engaged my assistance with this case, as his detective.”

Oh goodness no. He *was* working for the law.

“There are many variables.” Ivy couldn't hide the snap in her

tone. Detective? Was that why Joel had finally returned, to take a job with Sheriff Dunst? Or was it for another reason? What Ivy knew, and what really mattered, was that for this moment the young woman was still theirs.

Protective, Ivy leveled a glare on Joel that hurt her eyes, but when he ignored her, Ivy looked away. The sweetness of the young woman's face, stilled in permanent sleep, increased Ivy's irritation. The girl wasn't a "case." She was a lost, nameless soul. She had been a person with a story, a *life*.

Ivy's hand hovered over the body before coming to rest on the shoulder with every ounce of possessiveness in her spirit. The cool skin of the young woman pressed beneath her palm.

"No one has identified her yet." Joel's statement ripped through the intimate connection of souls, and Ivy jerked her hand away from the body.

The woman had no identification yet. Even so, it dawned on Ivy with clarity, though she knew immediately it wasn't supernatural. The young woman had named herself and whispered it into Ivy's soul. Maybe this was why the town of Oakwood speculated as to whether Ivy Thorpe really was just an over-curious woman investigating the lives of the dead, or if she had some undefined connection to the afterlife. To Ivy, the dead were still alive.

She tried to control her breathing as she inhaled slowly. "Gabriella."

"What?" Joel tipped his head, his features sharpened with suspicion.

"Call her Gabriella."

"You know her?" Even her father was surprised. Ivy avoided looking at him. It was poetic. Gabriel. He'd been an angel. And she was—Ivy couldn't help but transfer her gaze back onto the silent woman—she was an angel now too. She deserved a name.