

Chapter One

The Secret

Avalina Jones slowly sank to the bottom of the giant claw-footed bathtub. Her arms floated at her sides and her long dark hair drifted about her shoulders. Bubbles trickled from her open mouth while her wide blue eyes blinked and gradually closed. One minute passed. Then another and another. Five long minutes and still, Avalina Jones remained at the bottom of the giant tub.

Small bare feet padded across the bathroom's black-and-white tiled floor and stopped at the bathtub's edge. Macy, a young orphan of seven-years-old, clutched her long white nightgown and peered into the water. She gasped and then wailed in horror. Such a racket roused every orphan on the third floor of *La Maison des Oublies*—the House of the Forgotten. Within moments twenty fearful girls huddled around the tub, horrified by what they saw. And then more orphans raced up from the second floor, shrieking at the sight of Avalina Jones lying quietly at the bottom of the tub.

It was enough to bring Miss Ward, the orphanage's owner, stomping into the bathroom in her own nightgown. An unhappy woman, Miss Ward brought her scowl with her wherever she went. Her dark hair, always pulled back from her pale face, was wound into a tight bun atop her head and captured with a small black net.

"What now?" she demanded and then stopped abruptly upon seeing the young girl in the tub. Miss Ward stared openmouthed for a moment before narrowing her eyes with suspicion. Then she leaned over, slapped the surface of the water, and yelled. "Get up!"

Avalina bolted upright, sputtering and coughing water. She blinked furiously and brushed water from her face. "Jumping junipers! What's all the fuss?" Avalina blasted. A sea of astounded expressions surrounded her.

"Oh, Avie!" wailed Macy, wiping tears from her eyes. "We thought you were—"

"That's enough of that!" snapped Miss Ward. "Avalina Jones can hold her breath longer than most! Big deal! Now back to your rooms! All of you!"

Without further explanation, Miss Ward herded the girls out of the bathroom and closed the door. She grabbed a towel from one of the pegs lining the long wall and threw it across the room at Avalina.

"Get out of the tub! At once!" she barked, her dark beady eyes flashing with anger.

Avalina carefully climbed out and dried herself off. She slipped into her long white nightgown and faced Miss Ward.

"You know I wasn't holding my breath," she said quietly. Miss Ward sniffed and raised her chin.

"Yes, I know."