

CHAPTER ONE:

The Arrival

The air around the two children was crisp and cold, with the scents of damp dirt and grass holding genuine promises of summer.

The day was the kid's official move-in day to a dilapidated manor in the English countryside their father had purchased.

The girl was shorter than the boy and younger; however, both children had the careless countenance of those with very few responsibilities. The girl's hair was damp, and wisps exploded from the two braids she wore. Her clothing was decidedly boring; a plain brown dress with a red ribbon was the single decoration, and it was currently tied around her arm. She wore buff stockings and unremarkable black shoes.

She looked tremendously excited, her cheeks flushing, her eyes wide and sparkling, a contented and joyful expression on a fair face.

The boy at her side was wearing blue jeans and a black t-shirt with an unintelligible logo on the front.

Mud covered their feet and soaked both the teenager's clothes. They had been trekking up the long driveway for quite some time, and the rainy and muggy English air had turned the old dirt drive into a veritable river of muck. The boy and girl were chilly but held their jackets in hand as opposed to wearing them. Covering up was incredibly uncomfortable due to the close air.

The boy was constantly licking his lips of the water that dripped from his hair, and he did not look nearly as excited as the girl. His energy was nearly spent.

Nevertheless, both exuded happiness. As they walked, they observed the countryside that was now theirs. They were not always in silence but would occasionally burst out about their plans for summer play, exploration, and fun until they were both speaking at once and too quickly to catch their breath, which was so exhausting that they would let quiet descend once more.

Finally, they entered through a large wrought-iron gate and saw for the first time their new home looming before them. It appeared to be a dark object, with its two visible wings resembling dark yet welcoming maternal arms.

They had lived their entire lives in cramped American apartments, so the prospect of moving into such a spacious home filled them with excitement and wonder. Their steps quickened as much as possible through the mud, which slurped under their shoes.

As they grew closer, they began to realize the mansion wasn't what they expected, and their enthusiasm began to wane. Before them, the house was all broken windows, peeling paint, and some cracked statues. The lawn was overgrown, and ivy was overtaking the walls.

Their stomachs dropped as they climbed the brick steps, seeing them break and crumble. Together, they stood at last in front of what they now knew was a dilapidated manor—perhaps a very grand thing one hundred years ago, but now a dismal sight indeed.

The girl, now confused and disturbed, turned her gaze to her older brother. He smiled at her, although she could see worry in his eyes.

"Well, let's wait for dad. Maybe he can explain," the boy said dejectedly.

"Ok. I want to take off my shoes, though." The girl balanced on a broken bench and peeled off her ruined shoes; they landed on the brick with two little *plops*.

The more the children surveyed their new home, the worse they felt. The children's expectations upon hearing about their move were drastically different from the actual situation.

"Here he comes," the boy announced, and the girl turned. Evidently, someone had picked their father up after the car broke down some ways down the road because he was a passenger in an unfamiliar vehicle. The girl remarked, "I still can't get over the thought that he's sitting on the wrong side," to which the boy responded with a distracted, "Yeah."

The car pulled up to the brick staircase; their father got out and thanked the driver, and he climbed up toward the two gray faces.

"What's wrong, you guys? We're home!" He spoke happily.

The disaffected stares he received were enough to reply enough.

"Alright, alright, I know it isn't as perfect as you thought. But the place has excellent bones, and we have the money now to fix it up. There are rooms that are still in good condition, and I already blocked those parts off so the weather can't bother us while we fix the rest up."

The kids looked at their father with disbelief.

"Dad, are you serious? The place is falling down." The boy said, "I want to go back home."

"Me too," the girl chimed, "at least our apartment was new."

Their dad pursed his lips and wrinkled the corners of his eyes, and they knew there was no arguing. It was the look he had whenever he felt hurt by their words. "Come inside; I'll show you what I mean. You're just going to have to give it a chance. We have nowhere else to go, and my uncle made it a condition in his will, remember?"

They remembered only too well. Their father's English uncle had left him a substantial amount of money, and if he used it to renovate the family's old mansion, the little family would have a secure future. The struggling widower was only too delighted at the prospect of being able to finally give his kids the life he knew they deserved.

He unlocked the giant double doors, and they entered.

"Luckily," their father said, "most of the livable house was wired for electricity by my uncle already." He flipped a switch, and a chandelier high above them lit the foyer. Dust settled on everything, along with the kid's sense of despair. There were even mouse droppings in the corners.

"And there won't be a chill. Like I said, the livable parts are sealed from the elements. It'll take some time, but restoration will make this place great. You'll see." The kids were silent, and the girl considered putting on her muddy shoes again. Her feet were going to tread through the dust.

"Ava, Zach, come on, I'll show you your rooms—for now." Their father's sly smile did nothing to improve their moods, but they followed him down a hallway to their right. "Technically," he went on, "we'll be living in the servant's quarters. But that's just for now. Your real rooms are a top priority; wait until you see them!"

Both Ava and Zach felt they could wait as long as possible to see their rooms, maybe even forever. But they followed their father, trying to swallow the lumps in their throats.

"Dad sure is excited about this," Ava whispered to her brother. "Yeah, I was too." Zach replied. "But you know, maybe he's right." There is a lot of money, after all. We can't show him we're too disappointed. He's worked so hard." Ava nodded, and they continued on in silence as their father

described various tidbits about the house.

"The glass on the lights is original, and many even have stains left over from when they had flame lamps inside. My uncle wanted everything to be as original as possible. And if we do that, the mansion can be turned into a tourist attraction or a bed and breakfast, and we'll have a steady, permanent source of income unrelated to the restoration. Some of the antique furniture is still in excellent shape, too. There is even a grand piano in the ballroom that just needs some tuning. The marble in there is cracked, so a lot has to be replaced, but the old paintings are still hanging. The will mentions a library; I hope the weather hasn't gotten to the books. Imagine the cool old books we might find!"

They made it to their bedrooms, and their father opened the first door with a flourish. "Ta-da! I fixed it up for you, Ava." Ava couldn't help but feel a little better when she saw her new room. "Dad, it looks great!" It really did. Everything in the room was modest, but new. The room featured a day bed, a desk with a brand-new computer, a TV, two dressers, a brand-new carpet, and a sizable window overlooking the moors beyond.

"Thank you, dad; this really does help a little." Ava hugged her father, and he led them to her brother's new room. It was located right across the little hall and outfitted similarly, but where Ava had a DVD player, Zach had a PlayStation complete with a headset. "Oh, dad, sweet! Thanks!" Zach rushed forward to investigate.

"Ah, I'm not done with the initial tour yet, and anyway, you don't know the wifi password." They chuckled, and Ava was starting to feel a little better. How could she have doubted her father? He always took care of them.

They followed him down the hall once more to a small kitchen area. "Now, this was the servant's kitchen also, when the manor was running at its height. But for now, it's our kitchen. I got all new everything—granite counter-tops, even a walk-in freezer and pantry." He pulled open a cupboard, and the teens gasped with delight; he'd filled the pantry to the brim with all their favorite food.

"And the kitchen's piece-de-resistance," he said with pride. "Check out the table."

Ava and Zach turned, and now they were laughing. "Oh, dad, you brought the old table? Mom's old table?"

"I sure did, kiddos." Their dad smiled. "I wanted you guys to know that the move doesn't mean we are getting rid of her memories. It's no antique, but I know it is priceless to you guys."

"Thanks, dad." "Thanks, dad," Ava said as she settled into the simple wooden chair. She smiled as she looked down at the matching table and its familiar markings. *This could work*, she thought to herself.

"Now, come this way. I'll show you the bathrooms, and then," their father's eyes sparkled, "I'll show you your *real* rooms."

Their dad explained that there were two bathrooms because the servants each had one for men and one for women. They were modest, like the bedrooms, but everything was new; their father had installed new claw-style bathtubs, so they still fit the manor's decor.

They followed their dad back out into the large foyer and started up one set of stairs. "This is the east wing," he explained. "The west wing is where the bulk of the damage to the house is, and that's all sealed off for now. The east wing already has work started, and that's where your bedrooms are. For awhile, the house will probably feel a little confusing; it is so huge, I know. But you'll get used to it, and maybe even have some fun exploring."

"I hope so," Ava said, growing a little more talkative. "Otherwise, we'll be out of luck, bored to tears. How many floors does this place have anyway?" As they ascended, she was growing a little out of

breath.

"There are seven stories," their dad replied. "But only the first five were in use for a long time, and then when Uncle was living here, he was only using the first floor of the East side, where we are. I'll be staying in his rooms until we get mine fixed up."

"Here we are. Ava, we'll check out your room first." They had reached the third floor, and Ava was exhausted. But now her excitement was growing again. They walked past the banister to a set of double doors, which their father unlocked with an ancient set of keys.

"Wow, dad. You look like the cryptkeeper with those things." Zach remarked, nodding at the heavy iron keys on their ring.

"Yeah, well, the locks have never been changed to my knowledge. This is what the attorney gave me at the will reading." He pushed the doors open wide, and Ava gasped when he turned on the light. "A hallway?!" She said it in consternation.

"Yep!" Her dad winked mischievously. "The house is big enough that you get an entire floor of the east wing all to yourself, kiddo! There's a master bedroom and bathroom; you can have a playroom if you want; another room for a closet; a couple guest rooms for when you have girlfriends over; and then some!"

Ava was speechless, but she grinned.

"Me, too?" Zach said, a little concerned that perhaps his baby sister was going to get preferential treatment. "You too, buddy!" Their dad mussed Zach's hair. "You've got the fourth floor just above us, and I gave myself the second floor."

"Oh. My. God." Ava was stunned, and she looked at Zach in shock. She led the way into what was to be her living area, opening doors. The interior was gray, dusty, and dirty, and there were mouse droppings again. But now Ava could see that the house did indeed have potential. And there was another plus: she was going to have a ton of friends once school started. Everyone would want to see her house!

"I feel like a princess, dad. This is too good to be true." She hugged her father, and they headed up to see Zach's rooms. They were a perfect copy of the floor below, and their dad agreed that they would be involved in the decoration.

"We can't go crazy or we lose everything, but you can put up your posters and choose furniture and all that." The kids were happy now, and when they went back downstairs into the kitchen, they sat happily at the table their dad had shipped from their old home.

"I'll make your favorite," he said. "We'll mark the occasion." He cooked them each breakfast for dinner: bacon, sausage, eggs, and pancakes. They topped everything off with chocolate milk and ate their fill.

As they finished, an ominous gonging sound echoed through the empty space. "What was that!" Ava jumped.

"Just the doorbell," their father said. "Probably the guy with the car." Indeed, it was, and now the three had all their suitcases. They said goodnight, and Ava entered her room happily. She fell asleep under fluffy comforters in her new bed, looking out into the English countryside's twilight.

Rays of orange light woke Ava, and for a moment, she didn't know where she was. But as soon as she remembered, she smiled as she stretched.

"I'm in my new house!" She spoke to herself and stood up, yawning. She dug out her slippers from a suitcase and then walked out into the kitchen. Although she was excited about the prospect of her

room, the truth remained that the unused parts of the house were filthy and broken, so she couldn't bring herself to go back there just yet. She didn't fully see her father's vision.

Zach joined her, and they both made cereal in their new spacious kitchen. When they sat down, Zach smiled through his meal. "This place is gonna be great. All this room in the house? And I wonder what the outside is like?"

"It looked pretty overgrown," Ava replied. "I think Dad'll focus on the house first."

"I wonder if he'll let us get a basketball court! That'd be so cool." Zach thought for a moment. "Do they have basketball in England?"

Ava shrugged. "I know they don't have football. Or at least, not like we did at home. They call soccer football."

Zach nodded. "Maybe I'll be the weird American kid who likes basketball." Between huge mouthfuls, he wondered, "We're out in the middle of nowhere. How close do you think other kids even are?"

Ava didn't know, and just then their father walked in. He smiled at them, looking tired. "Glad you guys found the cereal," he said, readying a bowl for himself. "I have some news."

"Oh, no," thought Ava. After all, was the house not theirs? She looked across at Zach, worried.

"No big deal," their dad said. "But you know how I told you the ballroom needs new marble?" The kids nodded. "Well, I ordered it before we came here after my first trip to get everything ready. The company in charge of it says there is some sort of problem with customs in India, of all places. They won't send it any farther unless I am personally there to accompany it across the border."

"What does that mean?" Ava asked.

"It means I have to go to India," their dad said, defeated. "There's just nothing else I can do. If I don't get that particular marble here and install it, we lose the house."

"How long?" Ava knew Zach didn't like the sound of this. Ever since their mom died, he hated being away from their father. He might have been 16 and three years older than Ava, but he was still very attached to their dad.

"I'm really not sure," their dad replied helplessly. "The guy said he didn't know. They have to find a better translator."

"So what are we going to do? I want to stay here and explore and see everything as it starts to look nice." Ava couldn't help but feel a little whiny. "I'll even help!" She spoke desperately.

Their dad finished making his cereal and sat down at the table with them. "Look," he said kindly, "I know we just got here and you guys are sick of traveling. You're free to stay here if you want. A nice lady, who used to babysit me when I visited my aunt and uncle as a child, owns the cleaning company. She'll be here every day, working with her employees. Just a bunch of local older ladies who enjoy restoration projects, really. And there will be people here working on the house itself, though mostly on stabilization and weatherizing. You guys will be fine."

Zach was looking down at his cereal, deadly quiet.

"Or," their dad said when he noticed this, "You can come with me. It won't be much fun, just business and traveling, but you're more than free to come with me."

Zach smiled and looked up in relief. "Thanks, dad! I won't be too much, I swear."

Ava was a little sad, though she tried not to show it. She *did* want to stay, and she wouldn't be

alone. She wasn't scared, especially when her dad said the lady had told him she was more than happy to stay overnight if Ava grew uncomfortable or nervous.

Their dad waited until the woman came to meet Ava before starting to fill the rental car he'd called. The woman was nice enough and gave Ava a warm hug, telling her, "Call me Nana; your father always did, even when I was a young thing." Her accent was thick but warm, and she made Ava feel a little better.

Zach and her father headed out the door, and Ava couldn't help the feeling that overpowered her as she stared out the window after them. Everything was happening so quickly. It was as if a train were moving toward her, powerfully, speedily, and noisily.

The car disappeared into the fog, and Ava headed to her room.