

Chapter One

Charlie slammed the boot of the car. He was holding an enormous holdall, which he flung onto an ever-growing pile of luggage that lay on the gravel.

“Two shops,” he said. “Two shops, one of which sells hats.”

His younger sister Ellie emerged from the rear passenger seat.

“What?”

“Two shops,” Charlie said. “One pub. Called the Jolly Ferret – I mean, who thinks these things up?”

“What are you on about?” Ellie asked.

“This place.” Charlie pulled up the hood of his top. “Two shops. One pub. A church.”

“Have you seen my portfolio?” Ellie poked about among the pile of luggage.

There was a crash as a plastic laundry basket that Charlie had balanced on top of the pile collapsed sideways onto a box of groceries.

Charlie ignored the mess.

“Two shops,” he said, “one pub. A church. A village store. Two people riding moth-eaten horses, and a maypole.” He shuddered. “Welcome to our new home.”

Ellie walked around the car and opened the rear

door on the opposite side.

"Here it is." She lifted out the concertina-like folder that contained her most recent work. "Hey, give me a hand with my easel, will you?"

Charlie rolled his eyes.

"Why couldn't I have been an only child? There you go." He lifted the wooden easel from the back seat, shoving it down in front of Ellie. "So that's what's been digging into me since Watford."

Ellie wasn't listening. She turned to look up at Inchwood Manor.

The house was huge, and white, and lined with timber frames. Tall chestnut trees surrounded, reaching out towards the upper floors. A stone archway framed the open front doors. Written above were some words in a language Ellie couldn't understand. *Veritas... vos...*

Charlie was looking at the Manor like a prisoner being shown his cell.

"I can just see us, in a year's time," he said. "You up there, painting the Mona Lisa. Me, trying to make a fire to keep out the cold in this dump."

"We'll be OK," Ellie said. "Mum says our flat's got central heating."

Charlie ignored her.

"I read up about this place," Ellie went on. "It's been here over five hundred years."

Charlie grimaced.

"Bet the bogs have too."

"It's got a priest's hole," Ellie said. "And a hidden chamber in the library."

Charlie smirked.

"I suppose there's a gang of diamond thieves hiding there?"

The smirk disappeared from his face as he tried to lift Ellie's suitcase out of the back of the car.

"Oi! Miniature one! Why am I doing all the work?"

There was another crash.

"Hey, careful!" Ellie ran back. "Those are my oil paints!"

There was a crunching of gravel as three adults stepped out of the house.

The first was Ellie and Charlie's Mum. The second was a plump young man in a pinstriped suit that was slightly too tight for him.

Last to come was an elderly lady in tweeds. She was carrying a small suitcase, which she set down upon the gravel.

Mum viewed the family chaos beside the car.

"These are my children. Charlie... and Ellie. This is Marcus, our Site Manager from Journeyback UK."

"Chas," said Charlie. He moved in front of Ellie to shake hands with Marcus. "Hi."

"And this," said Mum, "is Miss Harvey. Who has very kindly given us the job of looking after Inchwood."

Ellie shook hands.

For a second, the sunlight caught Miss Harvey's brooch. It was oval, with a three-dimensional picture – a strange, swirling design...

A car horn sounded. Ellie turned to see a minicab waiting across the courtyard.

Miss Harvey turned to Marcus.

"Well. I wish you every success." She frowned. "Make sure you look after the place. My family has been here for over a hundred years. I don't want Journeyback turning it into some kind of theme park."

"Don't worry, Miss H," Marcus said. He failed to notice her wince. "That's what we do. Journeyback UK."

"Where the past –" Charlie spoke up, "– is now!"

Marcus looked impressed.

"Someone's done their homework."

"And I shall be popping back," Miss Harvey said, "to make sure everything is in order." Her voice softened a little. "Remember, I'll only be down in the village, if you have any queries."

"I'm sure we'll be calling on you quite a bit," Mum said.

Ellie's attention had wandered. Stepping away from the group, she stood looking up at the house.

She stared at a window on the first floor.

She blinked.

There was a face there. Someone was watching her.

It looked like... Ellie squinted to see.

It was the face of a boy.

Of about her own age.

She was distracted by the scattering of gravel as Miss Harvey's taxi drove away.

"And now," said Mum to Marcus, as they waved her off, "it's over to us."

"Mum?" Ellie ran up to her mother. "I thought you said we were on our own here?"

Mum smiled, puzzled.

“We are.”

“‘Til all the visitors start flocking in,” said Marcus. “And that’s what your wonderful Mum is gonna help us with.”

Mum smiled modestly.

“Then –” Ellie pointed to the window. “Who’s that up there?”

“Where?” Mum turned and looked up. The others did the same.

The window was empty.

“Must have been a trick of the light,” Mum said. “It’s the glass they used in these old windows.”

“And that reminds me,” Marcus said. “The first thing you and me need to do, Judith, is look over this place from top to bottom. There’s woodworm, damp, so much dust we’d have every asthmatic suing us. I don’t know how the old bat lived in the place.”

“Better get started, then,” Mum said.

She headed after Marcus, calling instructions back to Ellie and Charlie.

“Just bring the essential stuff in to start with! We can unload properly later...”

Charlie turned back to the mountain of luggage. His face said it all.

Ellie remained where she was, staring up at the empty window.

Chapter Two

Ellie and Charlie entered the cold and draughty hallway. Charlie still had his hood up, as if to protect himself from his surroundings.

He sniffed.

“What a dump.”

“I love it.” Ellie was scuttling along, drinking in the dark oak panelling, the black-and-white checked floor tiles, the portraits, the worn chairs, the ferns in a bowl on the hall table... “Can’t you just *feel* history all around you?”

Charlie sniffed. “I can smell it, all right.”

“It’s going to be fun,” Ellie went on. “I can write here, and paint. The estate’s massive. There’s a lake, and an island with a stone folly. Maybe we can have a picnic there!”

Charlie rolled his eyes.

Ellie moved faster, catching up with the adults. Mum and Marcus were talking.

“We’ve already got most of the staff organised,” Marcus was saying. “Wardens, cleaners, maintenance. That kind of thing. But what we really need is to make this place happen.”

He quickened his pace.

"I'm thinking...fun days, actors doing the historical bit, concerts on the lawns later in the summer..."

He smirked at Mum.

"And for that, we need you. 'Soon as I mentioned Events Organiser, everyone told me: Judith's your woman."

"I've been in the commercial sector two years." Mum smiled. "I think my good works might be a little rusty."

Marcus wasn't listening.

"Then," he went on, "after that... who knows? Weddings, conferences... I'm not just in this for old biddies buying tea towels. Inchwood Manor is going places. And you, Judith, are coming too."

Ellie followed the adults up a vast staircase.

"I'll give you the tour," Marcus said. "Then after that I'll take you to your flat."

"Fine," Mum said.

"I've set up the Site Office on this floor," Marcus continued. "Used to be the housekeeper's room. Right in the centre of things, but still away from prying eyes..."

He reached the top of the stairs a second ahead of Mum and Ellie. A slouching Charlie brought up the rear.

The corridor in which they found themselves had the same red carpet as the staircase. There was more panelling, and there were paintings, with a suit of armour standing guard.

"You could have had rooms up here," Marcus said, "but we do have to think of the winter time. It's gonna get *way* colder than this."

Ellie grinned as she saw Charlie's face.

As the others moved off along the corridor, she paused to look at an oil painting on the wall.

A sound reached her ears.

Nearby, someone was whistling.

Ellie turned.

It was coming from behind a door at the end of the corridor.

She realised that this door must lead to the room she had viewed from outside. The room with that window.

Ellie hesitated a moment. Then she approached the door.

"Hello?"

There was silence suddenly.

Ellie cleared her throat.

"Anyone in there?"

There was no answer.

Slowly, Ellie reached out, turned the handle and pushed open the door.

Her eyes widened.

She found herself in a children's nursery that looked as if it hadn't been disturbed for decades. Dust-covered toys lay everywhere... a rocking horse with a mane of real horsehair ... several ranks of brightly-painted tin soldiers parading on a shelf... a magnificent clockwork train set laid out on a large table.

Bookshelves lined the whole of one wall. She read some of the titles. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Gulliver's Travels. The Boy's Book of Railways.

In the window, framed by faded pink curtains, stood a piano. It looked dirty and disused, like everything else in the room, yet its lid lay open, ready for someone to play.

Ellie paused.

"Anybody here?"

She took a few more steps into the room.

"Hello?"

Slowly, she advanced towards the window. Slowly, she reached out a hand towards the piano...

"BOO!"

Ellie jumped.

She turned.

Charlie stood there, grinning.

"Charlie!" Ellie aimed a swipe at him. He dodged, effortlessly.

"Mum and Marcus were looking for you," Charlie said. "You shouldn't have wandered off. Hey, you'll be all right in here."

He picked up a piece of the train set, a white-painted model of a signal box.

"Somewhere for the little children to play."

"Hey, leave it, Charlie!" Ellie took the signal box and returned it to its place in the layout. "That's not ours, you'll get us in trouble."

She turned away and headed back to the window. There was a wonderful view from there. They seemed to be incredibly high up, and she almost felt she could reach out and touch the tops of the old chestnut trees.

She could see hills and fields beyond.

It was weird. To think that, once, all this had belonged to just one family...

She winced, as a horrible, jarring note came from the piano behind her. She turned to see Charlie idly pressing keys.

"Stop it, Charlie!"

"Just thought you might want to add composing to your many talents." Charlie pressed a couple more keys randomly. "Don't suppose this has been used much since Beethoven slung it out -"

There was a crashing of chords, as the piano lid slammed down.

"Aaagh!" Charlie clutched his hand. He glared at Ellie. "You did that deliberately!"

"I never touched it!" Ellie yelled.

"Well, someone did." Charlie felt his fingers tenderly. "Ow."

"Serves you right," Ellie told him.

Charlie headed for the corridor, still rubbing his hand.

"Didn't want to come here, anyway. Sooner we go back to London, the better."

He slammed the door.

Ellie stood for a moment, staring around the empty room, at the piano, the dusty toys, the faded spines of the books.

She was on her own again. Yet somehow she felt that someone else was in there with her.