

WAYWARD HOUSE

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CHAPTER ONE

The sunlight coming in through the car window dazzles Ivy. Unlike the steam train, where the gentle rocking had lulled Ivy almost to sleep, the bump and jerk of the car is stomach-churning. Or maybe her tummy aches because they've almost reached Wayward House. She closes her eyes for a moment and blocks out the sound of the driver talking. *I could be anywhere*, she thinks and tries to be in the one place she longs to be: the kitchen at Northey Manor with her step-brother, Ray, and their half-sister, Lola.

'There is hope for you yet, Ivy,' the man driving the car says, lurching it into gear.

Ivy squeezes his voice to silence and it's Ray saying those words, laughing at her attempt at baking fairy cakes. The mess in the kitchen is worse than ever. A flour fight. She and Ray are powdery white. Little Lola stickily holds the icing spoon.

Ivy tries to conjure the smell of cakes but the car bounces off a bump in the road which rattles her head and forces her eyes open. She sees the truth of her situation and shudders; she's a long way from the kitchen at Northey Manor.

'Your father,' the man goes on, raising his voice over the car's clatter, 'is entrusting us to make things better for you.'

'For me,' Ivy repeats, dully.

'Yes,' the man says.

What was his name again? He'd told her when he picked her up at the train station but it flew away from Ivy in the freezing blast of wind that struck her as she stepped onto the platform.

'Wayward House,' he continues, 'is at the forefront of education. Pioneering, some might say.' His pale eyes sweep over her – not unkindly but there's something hard in them. Unyielding. 'You want to please your father, I'm sure of it, and learn how to be good.'

‘Oh, yes,’ Ivy says, her fear rising. Not even her mother ever said she was *good*. ‘I want to be that. To be good so I can go back home.’

The man nods, his eyes like pale blue ice. ‘You’re fortunate to have been placed here. Not many – *troubled* - children have such caring families as yours. You should know, Wayward House has very high standards. Behavioural expectations as well as personal hygiene.’

Ivy runs a hand over her unbrushed hair. ‘I didn’t have time,’ she falters, ‘to properly get ready this morning. Maman – I mean, my mother - she was French so I call her Maman like the French do – she was – is – well she disappeared a year ago and so – she’s somewhere out there still, I know it. She brought me up very well. She taught me to make sure I always wash my face and scrub my nails.’

‘Quite,’ the man breathes, inhaling Ivy’s flurry of words as though they have an odd scent to them. Ivy wonders if perhaps her breath smells. She clamps her lips together; it’s true she often forgets to brush her teeth. ‘Well, don’t worry about your appearance right now,’ he says, not unpleasantly. ‘Miss Charlotte will sort you out before Matron has a chance to... Inspect you.’

Inspect? A smile flickers onto Ivy’s face, lights her up like a candle. ‘I have to be inspected?’ she says.

‘You *must*,’ he lets the word ‘must’ hang in the space between them for several seconds and Ivy’s smile falls, ‘pass Matron’s inspections.’

Ivy exhales and stares out of the window, at the sweep of purple hills. She’s never been inspected before – or been so far from home. Why did she have to come to a school in the north? Ray attends a school not ten miles from Northey Manor. But Lord Northey, Ivy’s father, had been insistent.

‘Wayward House,’ he’d said, a frown permanently scored on his brow, ‘is the only place which can make your behaviour - *improve*.’

What did he even mean by that? What was so bad about her that needed *improving*? She thinks of the empty place inside her. In English, the things that you miss are separate from you. In English, Ivy would say: I miss home. I miss the blue edged plates with the yellow flowers. I miss Ray's smiling eyes. I miss Lola's sticky fingers.

But Ivy doesn't miss her mother in English. She misses her in French: *Ma Maman me manques*. My mum is missing from me. It's why Ivy's chest hurts. The empty space left by her mother is a hole that everyone can see. It makes her strange somehow. It makes people uncomfortable – *she* makes people uncomfortable, or that's what Lord Northey would say while his wife, Ivy's step-mother, Lady Northey would only sigh.

Ivy sighs. The view outside the car window begins to change, the purple hills giving way to dark green pine trees. The world darkens. *Is it evening already?* she wonders. *Or is it just my own mood making the world gloomy?* She grits her teeth to stop the burning tears threatening to fall. *As soon as I can, I'll run away, she thinks. I'll get back to Ray and Lola and make Father love me. I'll find Maman and we'll be a family, like we were.*

Just as she makes these promises, something snags at her focus. There. A darting flash of gold among the trees. A presence, keeping up with their car.

'What's,' she begins but then it's gone.

'The woods,' the man says, having maybe seen the thing too. Ivy twists to give him her complete attention. His leather gloved grip seems to tighten on the steering wheel. 'Never enter the woods. They're out of bounds.'

She watches the muscles in his jaw tense. 'Why?'

He seems to think this over before he says: 'There are – dangers there. Children can be lost in woods like those. Lost forever.'



Ivy turns back to the window. The darkening outside has now made her own reflection brighter than the thick trees beyond. She makes out two glowing orbs – or she thinks she does - but then they're gone and the man says: 'Here we are.'

The car's wheels' spin onto the gravel driveway. As the man makes several attempts to stop the car rolling, Ivy has time to read the blood red sign: *Wayward House, An Independent Boarding School for Girls and Boys aged 10-14*. The sign is shiny and hard-edged. At the bottom of the sign are several names – one of them is the man's name. How had she forgotten? *Mr Whistler*. Like the whistling wind.

The sprawling building is just visible in the dimness. Only two of the downstairs windows are lit, the rest are gloomy, secretive, closed. Like the building shields its eyes from this newcomer. And yet it watches her - or someone, out of sight in one of those darkened windows, watches her.

Ivy swallows as Mr Whistler opens the car door with a rattle. She smoothes her trousers and imagines she has the heart of a lion. But it beats too fast as she steps out of the car. Her hand too shakes as Mr Whistler passes her the one suitcase of clothes and things from home she was permitted to bring.

'Ready?'

She forces herself to nod and follows Mr Whistler toward the grand entrance, turning to look behind her twice, to peer into the waiting woods beyond.