



The
Ash House

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Chicken
House

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www.chickenhousebooks.com



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To my parents, with endless gratitude.



1: THE NEW BOY

He wanted to change his mind as soon as they turned off the main road.

‘Perhaps I should speak to my old doctor,’ the boy said to the man driving him. ‘Just in case.’

‘We’re here now.’ These were the first words they’d exchanged since they left the hospital at dawn.

‘I know, but maybe just to check . . .’

The car slowed to a crawl and the driver turned around to look at him.

‘The people at the hospital told me you either try this place or get discharged. Which is it?’

The boy looked at the dripping, bristling trees through the windscreen.

‘I’ll try it.’

‘OK, then.’ The car picked up pace again.

They passed a cluster of trees, where he noticed an old

phone box with half its glass panes smashed in, then there were green fields, a stream, and towering horse chestnut trees surrounded by shining conkers. They turned a corner and started down the long, winding driveway. The main road disappeared behind a wall of evergreens.

After a twist in the drive, he saw a dirty gold gate and a boy perched on top of it. The car drew closer and the boy uncrossed his arms and climbed down, bouncing on the balls of his feet and waving. The new boy leant forward in his seat to get a look at him, but the droplets on the windscreen distorted the other boy's face, smudging it in places. The driver got out and went to speak to him.

Alone in the car, the new boy wanted to go back to the hospital.

He wasn't sure that this was the right choice after all. He remembered the stiff fingers prodding his muscles while his foster dad tapped on his phone. More questions. More tests. A night in the hospital, when strange dreams crept out of the shadows and twisted around his sleeping thoughts. A rough shake at first light – a porter ready to usher him out and, of course, the promise the night nurse had made about this place, before driving all day.

The driver came back. He opened the door and stuck

his head inside.

‘Time to go, then,’ he said. When the boy didn’t move, he added more kindly, ‘Always funny, isn’t it? The first day at a new place. But you’ve got a new friend right here. He says he’s going to show you around.’

The new boy told himself that he didn’t care about friends. He clicked the door open, then stepped out into the relentless rain.

The other boy was tall and thin, and his brown hair was wet through. His shirt was soaked and the peaks and grooves of his shoulders, collarbones and ribs showed clearly through the fabric. An old pair of binoculars hung around his neck on a leather strap. His face was pale and perfectly round, like his body had let go of every ounce of fat except on his cheeks.

‘Hello. I’m Freedom. I’m going to help you find your way around.’

The ridiculous hippie name was almost enough to make the new boy jump back into the car and tell the driver to take him back after all, no matter what had been promised to him.

‘You can call me Dom,’ Freedom continued. ‘The others do.’

‘OK.’

‘There’s Wisdom, too, but no one calls him Dom.’

I'm Dom.

'Right.' This boy seemed as simple as he looked.

The driver clapped his hands together. 'I best be off.'

'OK.'

'OK,' Dom echoed, even though the driver clearly hadn't been speaking to him.

The new boy guessed that Dom was about his own age, and was the daydreamy, dopey sort of boy who lived with a target on his forehead. At his old school, boys like that got beaten up and thrown in the skip down the road on their first day, no questions asked. He'd need to keep his distance, otherwise he might become a target too.

They stood side by side as the man drove away so fast that the car screeched.

When he was out of sight, Dom asked: 'Want to see the house?' He was hopping from foot to foot in excitement.

'Sure.'

The new boy followed Dom through the golden gate. It squealed open in the rain. He felt his resolve wobble again, and he reminded himself why he was there. After all, he told himself, things certainly couldn't get any worse.