

Jack stands in the dark on the landing of the old house, and looks at his feet. He is outside the last of three doors, the one that is underlined with flickering light. He doesn't move. He stares down at the twin crescents of light reflecting on the toes of his shoes. He looks at the thin highlights along the edges of the bare floorboards and at the pattern of the grain in the wood in the pale puddle of light that leaks under the door. He has been here for minutes, his hand on the door handle, debating whether or not to go in. Common sense insists that he must not, because there is no way of knowing what might be inside. But curiosity insists the opposite, for the same reason.

And Jack is a curious boy.

So he holds a breath behind clamped lips, turns the handle, and goes in. And there they are, twelve of them, sitting around a big circular wooden table and looking at him as the door creaks loudly to announce his arrival. It takes him a moment to see them properly—the room is only dimly lit by candles, but after the darkness outside it still seems bright—and it takes his eyes some time to adjust. When they do, and the indistinct figures settle into focus, it is the pale man, farthest from Jack, whom he notices first.

He is a small man, soberly dressed in a dark suit that is neatly tailored and primly buttoned, a crisp white shirt with a wing collar, and a plain dark tie. His hair is short and well behaved. His posture is excellent. He is neat and tidy and quiet. There is nothing about him, his slightly old-fashioned clothes aside, to mark him out as extraordinary, and yet he exudes a quiet authority that draws Jack's eye. His face is lit from below by the candle on the table in front of him, giving it that torch-under-the-chin spooky effect, but his measured smile is reassuring.

"You're late," says one of the others, one of the women over to the right, her voice scratchy and irritated.

"We're *all* late," says another.

Jack doesn't understand what she means, but he's grateful that she sounds friendly. Looks it, too, when he turns his head to see. She has an attractive smile, which she must have used a lot judging by the laugh lines on her face, and she watches Jack with wry amusement, her dark eyes glinting in the candlelight, short silver-gray hair shining.

"Come on in, then," she says, raising an arm and beckoning with long fingers, tickling at the air. "No skulking in the dark. Over here where we can see you." Her voice is a soft and lovely thing, round and warm with a sweet tang of teasing laughter. Jack does as he is told and steps three sleepwalking paces into the room as the door creaks shut behind him.

It is a large room, with high ceilings, bare wooden floors, and empty walls. The only light comes from the candles on the table, one for each of those seated there, casting shifting, looming shadows onto the crumbling plaster of the walls. There is one large window, off to Jack's left, with long pale curtains pulled not quite completely closed across it. Jack remembers himself a few minutes ago, outside on the gravel drive, looking up at the thin vertical line of light at the window, and shivering at the small thrill of fear that it gave him.

"You *will* be joining us," says the pale man, and it doesn't sound like a question, though Jack answers anyway.

"Yes."

"We'll need another chair," says the pale man in a soft, calm voice. "Lee, could you, please?"

There are children in the two nearest seats: a boy, a few years older than Jack, and a girl, a little younger. The boy rises from his seat. He is tall, and he'd be taller still if he stood up straight, but he does not. He stoops, as if embarrassed by his own height, and he bows his head shyly, his mop of hair hiding his eyes.

"Sure," he mumbles. "I'll go and, um . . ." He pulls out his own chair and indicates it with a fuzzy gesture of his hand. "Here, have mine and I'll . . ."

"Thanks," says Jack and, almost without thinking, sits down. He hears the door creaking open and then shut behind him once again.

“Welcome,” says the pale man. “You are welcome.”

He is more or less directly across the table from Jack, who stares at him with what he knows must be a ridiculous grin on his face, so tight and tense it threatens to shatter his teeth. The pale man is a full head shorter than either of his neighbors, yet somehow his is the more powerful presence. It’s difficult to know how old he is. He might be thirty or he might be sixty. There are no obvious signs of advancing age: no hair loss, no graying, very few lines or wrinkles. But there is something about him, in his eyes perhaps, that suggests more years lived, more experience, more sadness.

Jack is still working hard on trying to appear relaxed when he hears the door again. He looks around to see the stooping boy, Lee, enter, carrying a chair.

“Excuse . . . can I just . . . ?” Jack shifts his chair a little to the right, and three bearded men seated beyond Lee all shuffle left a little, and Lee apologetically slides the thirteenth chair into place at Jack’s side and folds himself down onto it. “Oh, and . . .” He places a candle on the table in front of Jack and the girl lights it from her own, her grin highlighted in the light of the flame, her eyes thrilled wide.

“Thank you, Lee,” says the pale man. “Thank you, Amelia.” Then he turns his attention back to Jack. “And you are . . . ?”

“Oh! Yes. Sorry. Jack,” says Jack.

“Jack. Good. Welcome.” His eyes are still and dark, each with a twisting worm of reflected candlelight

dancing on its surface. "Let me introduce you." He raises one hand just barely off the other and turns its thin fingers the smallest amount to gesture toward the stooping boy at Jack's left-hand side.

"Lee," says the pale man, and Lee bows his low head even lower in acknowledgment.

"Mr. Blackmore," says the pale man, continuing clockwise around the table. "Piotr, Mr. Harlow." These are the three bearded men in a row, but Jack only really takes in Piotr in the middle. He is enormous. He looks as if he might have been carved from a mountain. From within his extravagant rust-and-ashes beard there appears a wide and welcoming grin of crooked teeth.

"Ha! Jack! Is very good meeting you! Yes!" He raises his impossibly large hands aloft in a gesture of welcome that only just falls short of smacking each of his neighbors in the face.

"Mr. Fowler," says the pale man, and the fellow seated to his right gives a deep, slow nod. If Piotr has been carved from stone then this man's features are etched in wood. He has an angular, bony face that is weathered like ancient timbers: salted and windblown and ragged and worn. He looks as if he has seen more than his share of troubles, but for all that his mouth and eyes are smiling now as he dips his head in Jack's direction.

"Mr. Randolph," says the pale man, and raises the fingers of his left hand now, and the fellow on that side stiffly nods.

“Miss Crane,” says the pale man.

“Frances,” says Miss Crane, the friendly woman with the short gray hair and the laugh lines. “Hello, Jack.” She smiles that warm smile again.

“Professor Cleary, Mrs. Trent, Miss Mulligan.”

“Ms. Mulligan,” says the last, a smartly dressed young woman with a determined haircut.

Frances smiles and mutters, “You tell him, Katy.”

“And Amelia,” says the pale man, ignoring them both.

The young girl to Jack’s right points a curious stare at him that would be disturbingly intense even if it were not magnified by the thick lenses of her spectacles.

“Very pleased to meet you, Jack. Thank you very much,” she says quickly, in a blank tone, as if reciting the words from a script without any understanding of their meaning.

“Hello,” says Jack, leaning away from her continuing stare, and then turning his attention back to the pale man, expecting him at last to introduce himself. But he does not. He stares placidly back at Jack, and once again Jack’s attention is entirely drawn to him, as if the rest of the room has somehow dimmed.

“Very good,” says the pale man, with the tiniest nod of his head, then he places the one hand back on top of the other. “Shall we begin?”

*Begin what?* wonders Jack.

But he likes not knowing. He's always liked not knowing what will happen next. He really shouldn't be here, for all kinds of reasons. He has no idea who any of these people are, and he's heard the rumors, of course: the things that are meant to happen here. There was a boy who told him all about it ages ago. Amazing stories. He doesn't believe them for a second, but still, he can't help feeling a little scared.

At least he's closest to the door, so if he decides he needs to get out in a hurry then he can. He's a fast runner. Faster than any of this lot anyway, he reckons. So he's nervous, but not too nervous. Not quite so much that it overcomes his curiosity. Not quite so afraid that he'll give up on finding out what happens next.

"Mr. Blackmore," says the pale man, keeping his head perfectly still and turning only his eyes to face the man he is addressing. The man sitting next to stooping Lee, the nearest to Jack of the three bearded men, has a shaved head, and is dressed all in black. His beard, a carefully shaped, neat enclosure around his mouth, is black, too. He looks up, turns his head in the pale man's direction.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you might take the first turn?"

"Yes, of course." Mr. Blackmore turns his head back to face front, purses his lips as he gathers himself. His nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath, and another.

Jack wonders what's coming, and tries to look as if he already knows.

Then it turns out that one part of the rumors is true, because what happens next is that Mr. Blackmore tells a story.