

# Chapter 1

## The Arrival of Dr. Fell

The large brick house at the end of Hardscrabble Street had been empty for a generation. During that time it had been a royal castle, a haunted ruin, an alien spaceship, and anything else the children of the neighborhood wanted it to be.

Lindsey Brackentwig said the last people to live in the house had been a family of circus performers, who had practiced their skills on the abnormally flat roof. Josh Gallowsbee said they had been three witches who had stirred magic potions in the enormous bathtub on the second floor. Hannah Festerworth said they had been the parents of a young boy whom they kept locked away in the unfinished basement.

Every child had a story about the house, each wilder than the last. It was a house of imagination, a blank canvas just waiting to be painted with the gleeful brushstrokes of youth. Every parent in the neighborhood had forbidden their children from entering the house, and every parent in the neighborhood knew full well their children were disobeying them.

But when local real estate agent Dorothy Canvaswalter placed a Sold banner atop the aged, weather-beaten For Sale sign that had stood sentry on the front lawn for years, even the parents were disappointed.

“It’s like the heart of the neighborhood is being ripped right out,” said PTA Co-President

Candice Gloomfellow.

“I still remember when little Johnny broke his arm falling down those rickety stairs,” agreed PTA Co-President Martha Doomburg with a wistful tear in her eye.

Every adult on Hardscrabble Street, as well as all those on nearby Vexington Avenue and Von Burden Lane, and nearly all on Turnabout Road (Old Lady Witherton could not be bothered), wondered about the new owners. Would they be a tidy family? Would they be a handy family? Would they be a noisy family?

The children of Hardscrabble Street, Vexington Avenue, Von Burden Lane, and Turnabout Road did not wonder about the new owners. As word spread of the sale, they gathered in twos and threes to stand in front of their magnificent former playhouse and sigh, pout, even weep. Some felt childhood was over. Others felt they had lost their best friend. All felt mildly resentful of the sale and were determined to dislike whoever ultimately moved in, no matter what.

“Why would anyone buy that house?” asked ten-year-old Gail Bloom, staring longingly at a second-floor balcony on which she’d fenced the imaginary-yet-dastardly Lord Dunderhead only days before.

“Maybe they’ve got kids,” answered her eight-year-old brother, Jerry, with his rose-colored viewpoint, eyeing the flat roof where only last week he’d set up his slot-car track and raced the cars wildly in circles for hours on end. “This is a good neighborhood for kids.”

“But it’s our place,” complained Gail’s best friend and Jerry’s worst nightmare, ten-year-old Nancy Pinkblossom, imagining the infamous Stairway of Death down which she’d tumbled each and every one of her Pretty Patty dress-up dolls. “Who said they could just come

and take it away from us?”

The three children stood in place a moment more on that warm spring Saturday morning—each gathering and storing away an admittedly short lifetime’s worth of memories. Finally, at some unspoken signal, they turned away almost in unison.

“What should we do today?” asked Gail.

“We could go to the river,” answered Jerry, referring to the tiny trickle of a stream that snaked behind Hardscrabble Street. “There’s lots to do near the river.”

“She wasn’t asking you, Snothead,” said Nancy automatically, too upset to muster up a real insult.

“Wanna go see if Lindsey Brackentwig’s home?” suggested Gail.

“Sure,” said Jerry. “She’s fun.”

“Go find your own friends, Dorknose,” said Nancy.

“I’m not a dorknose.”

“Yes, you are. You’re a total dorknose.”

“You’re a dorknose.”

“Oh God, grow up, Dorknose.”

“Guys, who’s that?” interrupted Gail.

Jerry and Nancy put their epic Battle of the Dorknose on hold to follow the line of Gail’s finger to a tall, frail-looking man shambling toward them, hunched over as if he had long ago lost the struggle against gravity. He was dressed all in black except for a huge, purple top hat, and he carried a small black leather bag by its polished white handle of bone. Even though he was still a ways away, the kids could make out a repeating creaking that sounded with each

footstep, as if he were walking on a squeaky wooden floor rather than a concrete sidewalk.

The children stared at the strange man as he approached, and he at them. But where the children gawked in openmouthed wonder, the man merely smiled.

“A supremely pleasant good morning to you, urchins,” announced the man slowly in a high-pitched, weak, warbling voice. “Are you residents of this fine enclave of humanity?”

The children remained slack-jawed a moment more until the man chuckled good-naturedly.

“Forgive my manner of speech, young ones. What I mean to say is . . . do you live here?”

Gail and Nancy remained immobile, but Jerry managed to nod slightly.

A wide grin forced its way across the thin, heavily wrinkled face. “Then I am delighted to make your acquaintance. My name is Dr. Fell. How do you do?”

Dr. Fell extended a pale, bony hand toward the children. They watched it approach as if in slow motion, each knobby knuckle looking like it were ready to crack into dust at the faintest breeze. Finally, Gail, not wanting to be impolite, met the hand with her own and gave it a limp shake, careful not to exert too much pressure for fear of crushing the old man’s fingers.

“Hi” was all she said.

“I’ve just purchased the very house you stand before,” wheezed Dr. Fell. “I’m your new neighbor.”

The children looked the man up and down. Gail, who had released the hand, wondered why such an elderly individual would choose to move into this loud and boisterous community so late in life. Jerry tried to imagine the decrepit figure climbing up and down the Stairway of Death each day without breaking a leg.

Nancy, however, got right to point. “That was our playhouse.”

Dr. Fell raised first one eyebrow, then the other, before looking out over the heads of the children at his new home. “Was it? How dreadfully rude of me,” he said, then smiled back down at Nancy. “I do apologize. I trust this will not forever damage our relationship?”

Nancy, who normally would stand toe to toe with anybody, felt the need to take a step back, bumping into Gail, who gently nudged her aside.

“What she means, sir—” began Gail.

“Please,” interrupted Dr. Fell. “I’m not a sir. Heaven knows I’ve not been knighted. I am simply Dr. Fell.” As he spoke his name, he bowed his already-bowed body even more. There was a sudden flash of sunlight as something shiny slipped out of his jacket pocket and clattered to the ground at his feet.

“Oh!” cried Dr. Fell in sudden alarm.

“I got it,” said Jerry, quickly stooping to pick it up. He moved to hand it to the old man but stopped when he saw what it was—a solid gold pocket watch.

“Thank you, young sir, for retrieving my little trinket,” said Dr. Fell. “I’ll take that now.”

Wordlessly, Jerry handed the watch back, and Dr. Fell carefully tucked it into his pocket. “Now then,” he continued, “you were in the midst of explaining how my recent real-estate purchase had upset the unwashed masses.”

“Well,” continued Gail, “your house has sort of been the unofficial playground for the neighborhood as long as any of us can remember.”

An odd, mute understanding slowly dawned on the face of Dr. Fell. “Oh, my dear bones. I imagine there are quite a number of disappointed young urchins hereabouts due to my arrival.”

He looked back at the house, his eyes seeming to focus inward for a moment. “I shall have to find a means of making amends.”

Despite his pleasant words, friendly smile, and easygoing nature, something about Dr. Fell gave all three children the briefest of shivers on that warm spring Saturday morning.

“Indeed,” continued the good doctor. “That will be paramount.”

Jerry tugged on his sister’s arm. “Come on—let’s go to Lindsey’s house,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Nancy, happily going along with the lie. “She’s waiting for us.”

“Running along, are you?” asked Dr. Fell. “Well, it has been an absolute pleasure to meet you. Do have yourselves a festive and fantastically fun day.”

He jerked his hand up toward his purple top hat, struggling to lift his arm above his shoulders. Finally, his shaking fingers reached the hat’s brim, and gripping it tightly, he tilted both his hat and head slightly downward in greeting. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing each of you again soon enough.”

The children ran all the way to Lindsey Brackentwig’s house.