

The sun was setting over Pinewood, casting long shadows across the narrow streets. Sixteen-year-old Emily Carter tugged her scarf tighter around her neck as she hurried past the old bakery, her thoughts drifting to the letter she had found that morning. Being a girl of boundless curiosity, she had a habit of noticing things others overlooked, and this letter promised a mystery that she couldn't resist.

James Miller, seventeen and usually the voice of reason among their small group, walked beside her. His brown hair fell into his eyes as he frowned, muttering about the risks of venturing into the abandoned mansion at the edge of town. Though cautious, James had a sharp mind, and he often balanced Emily's impulsiveness with clever plans.

Trailing slightly behind was Sophie Bennett, fifteen and still finding her place in Pinewood after moving here last winter. Sophie loved drawing scenes from the world around her, and today she kept her sketchpad tucked under her arm, hoping to capture the mansion's eerie silhouette on paper before darkness swallowed it whole.

The trio paused at the iron gate that creaked in the wind, the mansion looming over them like a dark sentinel. Emily's heart raced with excitement; James's hand hovered near the gate latch, hesitating, while Sophie's eyes sparkled with both fear and fascination.

"Are we really doing this?" Sophie whispered, her voice barely audible.

Emily smiled, the fire of her sixteen years shining through. "We have to. There's something here waiting for us, I just know it."

And so, beneath the crimson sky, the three friends stepped into the shadow of the mansion, unaware that what they were about to discover would change their lives forever.