

WHAT LIVES IN THE WOODS

Lindsay Currie
Sourcebooks Young Readers

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To John, Rob, Ben, and Ella.

Thank you for sending me on the writing retreat that sparked this book.

You're the best!

Chapter One

“We’re going where?” Leo exclaims, spraying bits of pretzel from his mouth onto Mom’s favorite rug.

Dad winces, then reaches out and gently puts his plate down on the table. I smother my laugh, thinking that he looks like a zookeeper cautiously feeding a lion. Except Leo wouldn’t be a lion. He’d be...I don’t know...a wild pig, maybe?

“We’re going to Saugatuck,” Dad finally answers with a flourish. “It’s in Michigan.”

“You guys will love it!” Mom peeks through the kitchen door and gives a reassuring smile. Her hair is held back by a red bandanna and her cheeks are a splotchy pink, probably from the heat of the oven. Mom’s never liked to cook, but lately she’s trying to change that. Mom says learning to bake is her new resolution, even though it’s the summer. Unfortunately, her new resolution is off to a rocky start. Yesterday she baked a tray of charred cookies. And last week she served homemade bread that tasted (and smelled) like someone put Leo’s gym socks in the oven. I think she just needs a distraction from her busy tutoring business but *wow*. “Saugatuck is a quaint little town on Lake Michigan.”

Leo’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. “But *Chicago* is on Lake Michigan. Why would we go to Michigan for the lake when we can walk a few blocks and see it right here?”

Dad chuckles. “Fair enough, but Saugatuck is a little more than two hours away and very different. It’ll be a pleasant getaway for us this summer. Nice shops, galleries...” He eyes Leo’s pretzel. “And restaurants! Plenty of those.” He swivels his head toward me. “Haven’t heard anything from you yet, Gin. What are you thinking?”

Good question. Truth is, I haven’t said anything about this idea because I’m not sure what to think yet. I like the idea of a vacation, but this seems...sudden?

“Ginny?” Dad prompts, looking concerned. “You okay?”

I nod. “Mm-hmm. Just wondering when we’re leaving.”

“In three days,” Dad answers.

Three days would be Saturday. Still seems sudden, but at least I have time to pack.

“Okay. So, we’re gone for the weekend then?”

He hesitates a moment too long before finally saying, “Yes and no. We’re actually going to be gone for a month.”

“A month?” Leo and I shout in unison. We’ve never gone anywhere for a month! In fact, since Dad is a restoration expert, he’s always busy researching and fixing up old buildings in Chicago, so we hardly go anywhere at all. Between his clients and Mom’s students, it’s basically impossible to leave.

It *would* be nice for once, though. Mom and Dad both seem excited about this place. Maybe it could be a good thing. Except...

“Wait! What about my writing class? It starts in a week. If we’re gone for a month, I’ll miss most of it.”

Dad exchanges a somber look with Mom. “We need to talk to you about that, honey. There’s another class starting in September. We’ll need to switch you into that one.”

“September?” I squeak out. By then, I’ll be in eighth grade. School will be in session, so I’ll have homework. Field hockey. Choir. I’ll be too busy to go to a class two nights a week no matter how much I want to. “I can’t go in September!”

Dad lifts his hands up, palms facing me surrender-style. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t ideal, but this trip is a good opportunity. We can’t turn it down.”

I’m speechless. I’ve been signed up for the Mystery Writing Workshop with my best friend, Erica, for weeks. Nothing that makes me give that up is a good opportunity.

“And I know a month sounds like a long time, but you’ll be glad once you see it. We’re not just staying in a little place on the lake. We’re staying in a *mansion*.” He places extra emphasis on the word *mansion*. “It’s called Woodmoor Manor and it has twenty-six rooms! Imagine having that much space all to ourselves. You could practically write in a new room every day!”

I smile weakly at his room-hopping idea. But twenty-six rooms and we’re the only guests? That seems weird. “What is it? I mean, is it a hotel or a bed-and-breakfast?”

“It’s neither,” Dad says with a lopsided grin. “It’s technically not a resort, but I pulled a few strings and got permission for us to stay there.”

I narrow my eyes. If this were a mystery novel, this would be the moment I realize someone is either lying or covering up the truth. Things don’t add up.

“If it isn’t a resort or a hotel or an inn, then what is it?” I ask.

“It’s kind of a museum,” he answers. “Woodmoor was built in the nineteen thirties by a millionaire from Chicago.”

“We’re staying in a *museum*?” The more Dad talks, the fishier this sounds. I lean over and elbow my brother in the ribs, then widen my eyes at him. He gets my drift and stops picking salt off his pretzel to refocus on Dad.

“Tours, huh? What kind of tours?” Leo asks.

“Oh, you know, mainly architectural.” Dad slides a picture in front of us. It’s a sprawling brick building that looks like it’s sitting on a hill. “I wouldn’t have a job if people didn’t like seeing old buildings restored to their original beauty!”

Ugh. I knew it! This isn’t a vacation. It’s another one of Dad’s projects. I may not totally understand his job, but I understand enough. He studies the history of different buildings so they can be fixed up the way they were meant to look originally. That means pretty much everything he works on is old. And most of the time, old equals run-down.

I glance back at the picture. I bet this mansion is a mess. Dark and cold with cobwebs in every corner. I’m going to miss my workshop for *this*?

“But is there a gym there? How will I practice and run drills?”

“You can go one month without basketball, Leo,” My mother’s voice echoes in from the kitchen. “We need a break from our schedules anyway. It’s too hectic around here.”

I can’t believe this. Why are we changing around our entire summer just for one job?

Because the owners are paying Dad a lot. This mansion could be like the hotel he helped renovate a few years ago. It was old and shabby and the owners said they were going to go out of business if something didn’t change. Dad took the job and now he says it’s always booked and almost as popular as some of the famous hotels. The hotel people were desperate. Bad desperate. The people in Michigan must be desperate, too. The question is, why?

“Is there a lot of stuff wrong with the mansion?” I ask. “Like is it falling down or covered in mold or something?”

Dad opens his mouth, then promptly shuts it again. Mom peeks back through the kitchen door, her expression suddenly more “oh, no” than “yay, vacation.”

Uh-oh.

“Not wrong with it, no,” Dad starts, his tone unsettling. “It’s just that the owners would like to start using it as an event space. You know, host weddings and other large parties there. They want me to come in and find ways to spruce up the place a bit, make it a little more...*welcoming*. But historically accurate, of course.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “If it’s as big and awesome as you say it is, wouldn’t that be easy? People would want to book events there, right?”

“Well, it’s not exactly set up for that right now. Plus, there *might* be some rumors about it.”

“What kind of rumors?” I ask, a chill sliding up my spine.

“Nothing for you guys to worry about. All you need to know is that the town is nice, Woodmoor is beautiful, and our summer is going to be incredible.”

Well, that settles it. He’s definitely hiding something. I try to brush off the goose bumps forming on my arms, but they won’t budge. The rumors about the mansion are bad. They have to be. If the owners are desperate like the owners of the hotel were, then there’s a serious problem they want Dad to fix.

Maybe someone died there. Or maybe more than one person! Maybe all the museum people got food poisoning, or a bear broke in and killed them all! Wait, do they even have bears in Michigan?

I drop my head into my hands, horrible thoughts swimming around in my brain. This is why I am going to be a writer someday, like Agatha Christie. I didn’t even know who she is until earlier this year when my whole grade had to read one of her books for English. It. Was. Amazing. Since then, I’ve read as many as I can. I also decided I’m going to write mysteries someday, too. My imagination just never turns off.

“Looks like we’re gonna be staying in a haunted house,” Leo says with a chuckle. “Perfect for you, right, Nancy Drew?”

I shove him and groan. This Michigan trip means Erica will probably take the workshop without me. Even if I can take it in September, I’ll be alone then. And now I find out we’ll be stuck in a crumbling, old mansion for four whole weeks? No way. If Dad is planning to spend half the summer in Michigan, then he’ll have to do it without me. I am one hundred percent, absolutely, positively *not* going.

Chapter Two

One Week Later

Saugatuck, Michigan

“Thought you weren’t going,” Leo mocks.

“Shut up,” I snap, stretching out my legs as far as our cramped minivan will allow. When Dad said Saugatuck was a little more than two hours away, he must have forgotten about traffic, because we’ve been in the car for over three. Add in the one-hour time difference, and it’s after three o’clock already. “You could have had my back about this whole thing, you know.”

“Chill out, Gin,” Leo says, tossing his basketball from one hand to another. “You’re being a baby. It’s not gonna be that bad.”

I shake my head. My brother can be really dense sometimes. He’s eighteen months older than me and you’d think that would make him wiser, but no. It only makes him bigger and smellier. “Whatever. Just don’t come crawling to me when you finally realize Dad is moving us into some leaky old building with asbestos in the walls.”

“How do you know it’s leaky or has asbestos?” he says, then laughs when I scrunch up my face. “Oh, right. You don’t.” He’s quiet for a moment before asking, “What’s asbestos?”

“Never mind the asbestos.” I angle myself so I’m facing him. “And since when are you Mr. Positivity, anyway? You’re going to be here with no basketball and no friends. For a *month!*”

My brother waves me off. “Yeah, yeah. I know. But there’s two public basketball courts in Saugatuck. Mom said she’ll drive me over there anytime. I’ll be able to pick up some games with people around here for sure.”

He pauses and gives me one of his looks I hate so much. The one where he’s trying to act like an adult even though he’s only fourteen. “I think you’re being extra annoying about all this because you wanted to go somewhere fancy. Well, we aren’t. So, get over it.”

I huff and sink back down into my seat. Of course, that’s what my brother would think is wrong with me. He pays less attention to me than he does his homework. But I expected more from my parents. I thought they knew how much the writing workshop meant to me. Guess I was wrong.

“Hey,” Leo says, nudging me. “Don’t you want one of those old typing machines?”

“You mean a typewriter?” I ask, fighting off a laugh. “What’s that have to do with it?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “I think I just saw one in the window of that antique store back there. You were too busy pouting to notice.”

“What?” I crane my neck and plant my palms on the window, but it’s too late. The shop is too far behind us. “You’re sure it was a typewriter?”

“I know what they look like, Gin. You should buy it,” he says, laughing. “You already read weird, old books. If you get that typewriter, you can do your homework on a weird old machine, too.”

“Agatha Christie’s books are not weird! If you’d try reading something other than potato chip bags, you’d know that!” The typewriter I’ve been dreaming of for months pops into my mind. It’s black and shiny and so perfect. I can imagine myself sitting at it, plinking out the next bestseller just like Agatha would have. Of course, without the writing workshop I’m going to be teaching myself this summer.

We turn off the highway and onto a smaller street. A sign at the side of the road reads *Saugatuck*. We’re here.

Dad pulls into a parking spot. I sneak a glance at him in the rearview mirror as he unbuckles his seat belt. His eyes meet mine. “You aren’t still mad at me, are you?”

“Not mad. Just disappointed.”

He sighs. It’s long and drawn out, like he’s just heard the worst news possible. “Please don’t be. Just give it a chance, okay?”

I clench my hands together in my lap until my knuckles are white. “What about the rumors? The *legends*. Am I supposed to give those a chance, too?”

The car goes silent. Up until now, Mom and Dad had no idea I’ve done my own research into Woodmoor. But a good mystery writer *always* researches.

Dad closes his car door, then opens mine. His expression is serious. “Okay, Sherlock. Spill it. What have you dug up now?”

“Oh, just that that everyone here believes mutant creatures live in the woods around the mansion.”

Hitchhikers. That’s what the locals call the creatures with large heads they swear prowl around the woods that surround the mansion. Rumor has it a mad scientist was performing

horrible experiments on people a hundred years ago, and they became these twisted-up creatures. One day the creatures killed the doctor, escaped into the woods, and created a tunnel system where they supposedly live today. Some people swear they've seen glowing eyes watching them from the woods at night. Others say if you stop your car for too long, they'll crawl under it and ride home with you.

One thing everyone agrees on: they live in the woods around the mansion we'll be staying in. *Greeeeeat.*

Leo's eyes widen. "What kind of mutant creatures? Like coyotes or something?"

I shake my head slowly at him, a feral smile on my lips. "Oh no. The creatures are worse, so much worse than coyotes."

"Stop," Dad says sternly. "Those rumors are not true. They're just silly campfire stories people around here tell to scare each other, that's all."

Maybe. "But if the mansion is awesome *and* the Hitchhiker stories are totally fake, then why did the museum people hire you?" I pose. Mom always says, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." And these creature rumors are the smoke. Question is, is there actually fire, or is Dad right and it's all made up?

"I already went over this with you, Ginny. Please don't fire up that imagination of yours and come up with a reason to panic, okay?" Dad answers.

I sink back into my seat, frustrated. Of course, he would blame me for the Hitchhiker stories. Mom and Dad think I ask too many questions and panic when there's no reason to. But I just like to look at all the possibilities. I feel around in my pocket for the wild animal whistle I got at the local camping store before we left. The internet told me there *are* bears here and if one of them shows up, my family will be pret-ty grateful that I'm prepared!

"Hold up," Leo hops out of the car and tosses his basketball on the seat before shutting the door. "What the heck is a Hitchhiker?"

"It's a made-up thing and we're done talking about it!" Dad snaps. He rubs his temples and sighs. "I'm sorry. I just don't want to start this trip off on a bad foot. Can we all just agree not to pay any attention to these ridiculous stories?"

"I agree with your father. Let's try to look on the bright side. You two will be staying in a sixteen thousand-square-foot mansion. A mansion! You're going to feel like royalty." Mom pulls Leo in for an awkward hug. I step away. Maybe I'll eventually forgive them, but not yet.

Dad notices. He motions for Mom and Leo to walk on ahead. Refocusing on me, he makes a face that reminds me of the time I convinced Leo to eat a whole lemon. “Look. Your mother is giving up an entire month of tutoring to be here with us and your brother probably could have found a basketball camp to attend. The two of them are making the best of it. If you tried, I think you’d find that not everything here is miserable.”

Just as the words leave his lips, the sun comes out. A gentle breeze wafts the smell of lake water past my nose. I scan the area, noticing for the first time that the street we parked on is nice. Cute, actually. Flowers line the sidewalks and boutique shops advertise everything from homemade jam to hand-knit scarves.

“I guess it’s not that bad. Is the mansion close?” I ask, trying to be positive even though my insides feel as black as Mom’s charred cookies.

Dad fishes his cell phone out of his pocket and presses the home button. A map lights up the screen. “It’s only about three miles away. Here’s where we are now.” He points to a little blue arrow. “And here’s Woodmoor.”

A long silence draws out between us. Dad stuffs his phone back in his pocket. “Did I mention you get to pick your room first?”

I perk up. “Before Leo?”

“Before any of us.” A wide smile stretches across his face. “All I ask in return is that you go into this with an open mind. Just focus on enjoying the beautiful place we’re staying in and having a good summer. Deal?”

I take another look around downtown Saugatuck. There’s a *help wanted* sign hanging in the window of a bookstore across the street. Maybe they would hire a twelve-year-old. I’d be great at recommending mystery books to their customers. I’d even do boring work like shelve stuff if they’d let me. I glance back at Dad, feeling hopeful for the first time. “Deal.”

Chapter Three

Swatting Leo away from the last of my sub sandwich, I jam it into my mouth before climbing back into the car. Can't take any risks when you're around my brother. Mom jokes that he has a bottomless stomach, but I think it might actually be true.

The car rumbles to life as we head toward our home for the next month. Outside my window, the cute restaurants and shops vanish one by one. Soon I'm left staring at a stretch of deserted-looking road. Tall, spindly trees wind up toward the sky on each side, giving the street a dark, canopied feeling.

"The websites weren't kidding," I mumble.

Mom looks up from her phone and out at the trees in question. "About what, honey?"

"This place really is in the middle of nowhere." The road narrows until it becomes just two thin lanes weaving through more dense forest, the forest that the Hitchhikers supposedly live in.

"The mansion is on the edge of a nature preserve. It will be quiet...peaceful," Dad says. "No noisy traffic or police sirens. Just us and the beauty of Michigan." Dad catches my skeptical expression from the rearview mirror. "I'm serious! The city is great but tiring. Consider this an opportunity to unwind and truly rest for once."

The next road we turn down is even more narrow than the last. It's two lanes and snakelike, winding through thick, towering trees. When the trees on the right side finally open to reveal a pasture and a mammoth brick building sitting in the middle of it, I gasp. That's it? That's Woodmoor?

It's... It's...

"Spooky," Leo says, reading my mind.

"Pffft," Dad answers with a snort. "Woodmoor Manor is amazing. If it looks spooky to you, that's only because it's on the outskirts of town. You're city kids! You're not used to staying in remote places."

"Plus, it's cloudy out. That makes everything look more somber," Mom adds in a chipper voice.

Nope. The mansion isn't spooky because it's remote, or because the clouds suddenly snuck in and swallowed the sun. It's spooky because it looks like a giant Halloween decoration.

My eyes sweep across the building as we draw closer. It's not just big; it's huge. At least thirty darkened windows are nestled into brown brick, and several aging columns flank the large doorway. Zero chance this place is anything but ugly inside. It's probably a wreck and I'll end up sleeping on a cot or in a sleeping bag. Or maybe I'll get super unlucky and fall through some hidden weak spot in the floor.

We follow the winding road as it curves around the side of the mansion and ends at a parking lot. A cluster of people at the edge are taking pictures of the house. When they see us, they quickly lower their phones and start walking toward the only other car sitting in the lot.

"What were they doing? Why were they taking pictures of the house like that?" I ask.

"Probably just interested in the history," Dad replies. "Or the architecture."

I watch as their car slowly idles past, their wide eyes trained on Woodmoor. They don't look like history nerds. Or architecture nerds. They look...excited? Just before their car leaves the lot, I notice the bumper stickers plastered all over the back. One of them reads:

Warning: this vehicle makes sudden stops at haunted houses.

So that explains it. The same kind of people that like haunted houses probably also like Hitchhiker legends. They were probably here taking pictures of the place where the Hitchhikers roam around at night, looking for campers to snatch up. *The place I'm staying for the next month.*

Getting out of the car, I stare, unblinking at the sight in front of us. A field of green stretches out into the distance. It's surrounded by curtains of dark swaying trees.

Mom heaves my suitcase from the trunk and plops it on the cement in front of me with a thud. She gently jostles my shoulder. "Ginny?"

"Yeah. Sorry." I snag my suitcase absentmindedly, my gaze snapping back to the mansion. It's dark. Unsettling. The shadowy tree line lingers in the background like a warning. I narrow my eyes on a wooden sign dangling lopsidedly from a post. The words NO CAMPING are scrawled across it in white paint. An unseasonably cool breeze suddenly snatches my hair and whips it into my face. I fight off a shudder.

Summer wasn't supposed to be like this.

"You're right," Leo says in a hushed tone.

I turn toward my brother, startled by the grim expression on his face. "What?"

“This *is* bad.”

Chapter Four

I drag my suitcase up the path toward the house. Scraggly flowers sit in chipped planters along the path and a rickety old wooden bench is perched outside the front door. The grass in the front lawn looks half-dead. It's light green, almost yellow, with patches of brown here and there. My eyes flick back to the building, pausing briefly on a section of brick by the front door that looks like there's writing on it.

To...

The bushes shift in the wind, covering the rest of the words.

The heavy, wooden door of Woodmoor Manor swings open with a groan. Dad drags a few suitcases inside, then holds the door while we follow him in.

Squinting to adjust to the darkness, I get my first glimpse of the inside of our summer home. A hallway stretches out in front of us. Old-fashioned light fixtures hang on the faded yellow walls, a few random paintings perched in between them. At the end of the hall, a large square window allows just enough sunlight in for me to make out the stairwell leading upstairs.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick...

The distant sound of something ticking draws my attention from the steps. I squeeze my suitcase handle tighter, suddenly wishing we were anywhere but here.

"Well? What do you guys think?" Dad asks, shaking me from the trance I'm in.

I think it smells weird. Musty, like the clothes in Grandma Annie's old cedar chest. "It's nice," I say, gritting my teeth around the lie. Dad already feels bad and I don't want to make him feel worse. He's just clueless sometimes. Even though I'm annoyed with him, with *this*, I know he didn't bring us to Michigan to ruin our summer.

"It *is* nice, isn't it?" Mom chirps, grinning. "It's exactly what we need this summer. Fresh air, friendly people."

I smile weakly, wishing I could be more like Mom and ignore the awful vibe this place has going on. She's one of the most positive people I know.

Still. I'm not sure how she can be quite so positive about the mansion we're standing in

right now. Even if I was into old buildings—which I’m definitely not—this place would give me the chills.

Running a hand over the frame of a painting, Mom smiles wistfully. “They did a wonderful job of restoring the first time, but I do see why they want to work with you. It could be a little less...ahh, ominous?”

An impish grin breaks out on Dad’s face, the one he wears when things are going his way. Funny how his way always seems to be the opposite of mine. We’re like oil and water, Dad and me. He sees possibilities in this place. I see...well, old stuff mainly. Whatever. It’s the things I *don’t* see that bother me most, anyway. I don’t see Erica, and I don’t see my cozy bed, which I was planning to sleep late in every day. I don’t even see a television!

“Agreed. The tone is a little somber in here,” Dad says, peeking into the next room. “I just hope it isn’t too late to change the perception of this place. It’s so charming.”

We leave our suitcases in the hallway and follow Dad on a tour of the main floor. There’s a huge room with an old-fashioned couch and with a fireplace in it, a dining room with walls completely covered by a mural of a castle and men riding horses, and a kitchen. It’s the kitchen that catches my eye, mainly because it’s so simple. Plain white cabinets adorn the walls. No fancy appliances. Even the stove is small; it only has four burners instead of our six-burner one at home.

There goes Mom’s resolution.

“How are you going to bake here?” I say. “Looks kinda small and empty.”

Mom drops her hands to her hips and nods. “Oh, I don’t know. I think it’s just fine. I’m not a professional so it’s not like I need much.”

“What about a mixer?” I think of the brand-new mixer Mom has at home. She just bought it a month ago and now it’s her pride and joy. Maybe if she left it, we’d have to go back. And maybe if we had to go back, Dad would decide this whole idea is a waste of time and he’d change his mind. “You can’t bake without a mixer.”

Mom flashes me a knowing smile. “I’ll be fine. The mixer is in the trunk of the car and if I discover I’ve forgotten anything important, there’s a wonderful cooking store in town.”

My shoulders sag.

After seeing the library and another eating area, we circle back around to the front hall where our luggage is waiting. I squint at the light streaming in through the windows on either

side of the front door, realizing for the first time how dark the rest of the house is. Like a tomb.

Nudging my shoulder, Dad's smile widens. "So. You gonna go?"

I blink at him, confused. "Go where?"

"Pick out your room! Remember?"

Oh. That. I glance back at the darkened stairwell, anxiety rolling around inside me like a summer storm. The bedrooms are probably all upstairs. They are in our house back in Chicago. Do I want to go upstairs? I swallow hard, try to ignore the ticking sound that's beginning to suffocate me.

My brother sighs and takes a step toward the stairwell. Oh no he doesn't. I snag his T-shirt and tug him backward. "Not so fast. Dad said I have first pick."

"Fine," he grumbles. "But make it fast, okay? I'm starving."

I snort. When is my brother *not* starving?

"So, um, anywhere? Just go up and look around?" I ask, hoping Dad will offer to go up with me.

"You got it. There's eight bedrooms up there, so I'm sure you'll find one that suits you." He goes to grab some luggage but turns back abruptly. "Oh, I almost forgot. No touching the display items."

Leo's eyebrows knit together. "Isn't everything here a display item? It's all old, right?"

Dad waffles his hand in the air. "Yes and no. In some rooms there are displays meant to show a little about the life of the man who owned this home. There's some original clothing and personal items like vases and mirrors. They're labeled, so it shouldn't be hard to tell what's off-limits. I promised the head of the historical society that we'd be respectful, so no hands—okay?"

I nod. I don't want to touch the old clothes, anyway. I don't even really want to go upstairs right now, but no way am I gonna let Leo get first pick.

Dragging my suitcase behind me, I make my way up the stairwell. My luggage thumps against each step, sounding more like a warped heartbeat than wheels on wood. By the time I reach the top, I'm sweating. Literally. Tiny drops of sweat are beaded up at my hairline and my pits are swampy.

No air conditioning. *Awesome.*

A wooden bench rests at the top of the stairs and a stained-glass window sits above it. I'd planned on just claiming the first room I came across, but as I step into it, I realize that's not

gonna work. It's pink. *Really* pink. Pink walls, pink rugs, and pink bedding. It looks like a unicorn puked in here.

The second bedroom isn't much better. It's decorated in a delicate floral pattern, which isn't awful, but instead of one big bed there's two twin beds. I shake my head and laugh. The person who bought this furniture must not have been a big sleeper because everyone knows big beds are better for sleeping in than small ones.

Turning on my heel, I walk toward the opposite end of the hall where light is coming in from a doorway on the left. I follow it, my mood lifting when I find myself standing in the center of an enormous bedroom with an even more enormous bed.

Jackpot!

Unlike the pink room, it isn't bright or too pink. There's a fireplace on one wall and two windows on either side. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling. I swallow back an unexpected pang of excitement. I'm still not happy, but a fireplace *and* chandelier? Nice! I turn a full circle, noticing there's another room connected by double doors. It's pretty empty except for a small desk and couch. It's also *all* windows—like a sunroom! Probably the reason this room feels so much brighter than anywhere else I've seen.

Brighter.

Yup. This is it. This is my room.

I'm just about to explore the bathroom situation when Leo's annoyed voice drifts up the stairs.

"You get lost, dork? C'mon!"

I roll my eyes even though he can't see me. "I'm done. Sheesh. Come on up. Plenty of choices left for you."

Stifling a laugh with my hand, I imagine my six-foot-tall brother in the pink room or squished into one of the small beds. Even though he's not that much older than me, Leo is huge. I don't get it. He just keeps growing. Meanwhile it seems like the growth fairy pushed the pause button on me.

Pulling my suitcase into the corner, I lean it against the wall and make my way back to the stairs. Unpacking can wait. Besides, I want to be around when Leo notices there's no...

"Hey! Where are the TVs in this place?"

The laughter I've been trying to hold in escapes. My brother abandons his suitcase in a

room down the hall from mine, then crashes past me, his face scrunched up into a mess of confusion as he searches one room after the other.

“What kind of mansion doesn’t have proper entertainment equipment?” he asks Dad, who is wrestling the rest of our luggage to the top of the steps.

“The original kind,” Dad answers flatly. “This home was built in nineteen thirty-eight, Leo. Televisions had been invented but weren’t common in households yet.”

Leo eyes my parents warily. “So, there’s none here? Not one?”

“It wouldn’t be very authentic if there were, would it?” Dad poses.

Mom purses her lips together into a tight line. It looks like she’s trying not to smile. “You’ll survive, Leo. Look at this as an opportunity to read a good book or take a walk. Explore the state park. I’ve heard it’s amazing!”

My brother looks crestfallen. I don’t blame him. He plays so many video games at home sometimes I wonder if he’d die without them. Guess we’ll find out.

Leo wanders back into his chosen room, muttering something about a nightmare, and how there’d better be actual bathrooms and not outhouses.

Dad pauses in the doorway of the room I’ve chosen. “This is your room, huh?”

There’s a strange tone in his voice. I stop snooping around long enough to look at him. His eyebrows are pinched together, and his mouth has settled into something that’s not quite a frown, but definitely not a smile, either. “Yeah. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Of course.” He glances around and taps on the doorframe. “Alrighty, then. Guess I better go see if Mom has picked out our room yet.”

I nod and follow him into the hall. That was weird. Maybe I accidentally took the room he wanted?

Mom apparently settled on a room in the middle of the hallway. I peek in, noting it’s similar to mine, only smaller and doesn’t have a sunroom. It’s also on the opposite side of the house, so the view from their window is of the chapel and the tree line. My eyes linger on the chapel again, then move instinctively to the trees. The trees that seem dark even in broad daylight. A breeze sends them swaying, their movements synchronized and eerie. I watch the inky darkness stretched between the trunks, and for a second, I understand why everyone around here thinks the forest is scary. It doesn’t just look dark or spooky.

It looks alive.

