Crap! Crap, crap, crap!” Emma bolted off the oversized chair shaped like a leaf and tore for the front door.

The Willoughby Library had been everything she imagined it would be—and somehow more.

Each room, thirteen in total (thirteen!) had been transformed into its own unique world.

What must once have been the first living room—because yes, there were multiple living rooms—who were these Willoughby’s, seriously?—was now the children’s section. It sat just off the foyer where the librarian’s desk stood, and it was by far the most wicked children’s section Emma had ever seen.

Half-sized shelves painted into a twisting corn maze brimmed with colorful hardcovers. Beanbags spilled across the paths. Dollhouses huddled in the corners, and everywhere Emma turned, some kinetic contraption clicked or spun or wobbled as if it were alive.

Connected to the children’s center was what looked like an old formal dining room, now crammed with tables and chairs. Beyond that sat the oh-so-convenient coffee-and-pastry bar, which Emma guessed had once been a grand kitchen. The mosaic tiles still gleamed behind the ovens and espresso machines—clearly original to the estate, and easily a century old.

Other rooms were equally wild: a murder mystery wing with chalk outlines and fake blood splatters, a Sci-Fi section that launched you into outer space, and even a nonfiction hall lined with statues of the world’s great thinkers. That one was… well, let’s be real—still boring. But compared to every other nonfiction section Emma had trudged through, this was at least the least boring of them all.

But the crown jewel of the palace—the part that stole Emma’s heart—was the Nurturing Tree.

They’d gutted the second living room and whatever room sat above it—and potentially above *that*—to build a colossal tree with a spiral staircase spiraling up the trunk.

Each level carried title after title that carried you through the nightmarish dimensions of Stephen King, all the way to the fantastically romantic landscapes of Nora Roberts.

Branches sprouted at every height, each hollowed into a nook or miniature treehouse, all begging for someone to curl up with whatever title they grabbed, and disappear into a new world.

Which, of course, was exactly what Emma had done—curled up, lost track of time, and, completely by accident… fallen asleep.