

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Mandatory Vacation

Kendra stared out the side window of the SUV, watching foliage blur past. When the flurry of motion became too much, she looked up ahead and fixed her gaze on a particular tree, following it as it slowly approached, streaked past, and then gradually receded behind her.

Was life like that? You could look ahead to the future or back at the past, but the present move too quickly to absorb. Maybe sometimes. Not today. Today they were driving along an endless two lane highway through the forested hills of Connecticut.

"Why didn't you tell us Grandpa Sorenson lived in India?" Seth complained.

Her brother was eleven and heading into sixth grade. He had grown weary of his hand held video game. Evidence that they were on a truly epic drive.

Mom twisted to face the backseat. "It won't be much longer. Enjoy the scenery."

"I'm hungry," Seth said.

Mom started rummaging through a grocery bag full of snack food. "Peanut butter and crackers?"

Seth reached forward for the crackers. Dad, driving, asked for some Almond Roca. Last Christmas he had decided that Almond Roca was his favorite candy and that he should have some on hand all year long. Nearly six months later he was still honoring his resolution.

"Do you want anything, Kendra?"

"I'm fine."

Kendra returned her attention to the frantic parade of trees. Her parents were leaving on a seventeen-day Scandinavian cruise with all the aunts and uncles on her mother's side. They were all going for free. Not because they'd won a contest. They were going on a cruise because Kendra's grandparents had asphyxiated.

Grandma and Grandpa Larsen had been visiting relatives in South Carolina. The relatives lived in a trailer. The trailer had some sort of malfunction involving a gas leak, and they all died in their sleep. Long ago, Grandma and Grandpa Larsen had specified that when they died, all their children and their spouses were to use an allocated sum of money to go on a Scandinavian cruise.

The grandchildren were not invited.

"Won't you get bored stuck on a boat for seventeen days?" Kendra asked.

Dad glanced at her in the rear-view mirror. "The food is supposed to be incredible. Snails, fish eggs, the works."

"We're not all that thrilled about the trip," Mom said sadly. "I don't think your grandparents envisioned an accidental death when they made this request. But we'll make the best of it."

"The ship stops in ports as you go," Dad said, deliberately redirecting the conversation. "You get to disembark for part of the time."

"Is this car ride going to last seventeen days?" Seth asked.

"We're nearly there," Dad said.

"Do we have to stay with Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson?" asked Kendra.

"It'll be fun," Dad said. "You should feel honored. They almost never invite anyone to stay with them."

"Exactly. We barely know them. They're hermits."

"Well, they were my parents," Dad said. "Somehow I survived."

The road stopped winding through forested hills as it passed through a town. They idled at a stoplight, and Kendra stared at an overweight woman gassing up her minivan. The front windshield of the minivan was dirty, but the woman seemed to have no intention of washing it.

Kendra glanced up front. The windshield of the SUV was filthy, smeared with dead bugs, even though Dad had squeegeed it when they last stopped to refuel. They had driven all the way from Rochester today. Kendra knew that Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson had not invited them to stay. She had overheard when Mom had approached Grandpa Sorenson about letting the kids stay with him. It was at the funeral.

The memory of the funeral made Kendra shiver. There was a wake beforehand, where Grandma and Grandpa Larsen were showcased in matching caskets. Kendra did not like seeing Grandpa Larsen wearing makeup. What lunatic had decided that when people died you should hire a taxidermist to fix them up for one final look? She would much rather remember them alive than on grotesque display in their Sunday best. The Larsens were the grandparents who had been part of her life. They had shared many holidays and long visits.

Kendra could hardly remember spending time with Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson. They had inherited some estate in Connecticut around the time her parents were married. The Sorensens had never invited them to visit, and rarely made the trek out to Rochester. When they came, it was generally one or the other. They had only come together twice. The Sereneness's were nice, but their visits had been

too infrequent and brief for real bonding to occur. Kendra knew that Grandma had taught history at some college, and the Grandpa had traveled a lot, running a small importing business. That was about it.

Everyone was surprised when Grandpa Sorenson showed up at the funeral. It had been more than eighteen months since either of the Sorensens had visited. He had apologized that his wife could not attend because she was feeling ill. There always seemed to be an excuse. Sometimes Kendra wondered if they were secretly divorced.

Toward the end of the wake, Kendra overheard Mom cajoling Grandpa Sorenson to watch the kids. They were in the hallway around a corner from the viewing area. Kendra heard them talking before she reached the corner, and paused to eavesdrop.

"Why can't they stay with Marci?"

"Normally they would, but Marci is coming on the cruise."

Kendra peeked around the corner. Grandpa Sorenson was wearing a brown jacket with patches on the elbows and a bow tie.

"Where are Marci's kids going?"

"To her in-laws."

"What about a baby-sitter?"

"Two and a half weeks is a long time for a sitter. I remembered you had mentioned having them over sometime."

"Yes, I recall. Does it have to be late June? Why no July?"

"The cruise is on the time frame. What's the difference?"

"Things get extra busy around then, I don't know, Kate. I'm out of practice with children."

"Stan, I don't want go on this cruise. It was important to my parents, so we're going. I don't mean to twist your arm." Mom sounded on the verge of tears.

Grandpa Sorenson sighed, "I suppose we could find a place to lock them."

Kendra moved away from the hall at that point. She had quietly worried about staying with Grandpa Sorenson ever since.

Having left the town behind, the SUV climbed a steep grade. Then the road curved around lake and got lost among low, forested hills. Every so often they passed a mailbox. Sometimes a house was visible through the trees; sometimes there was only a long driveway.

They turned onto a narrower road and kept driving. Kendra leaned forward and checked the gas gauge. "Dad, you're under a quarter of a tank," she said.

"We're almost there. We'll fill up after we drop you kids off."

"Can't we come on the cruise?" Seth asked. "We could hide in the lifeboats. You could sneak us food."

"You kids will have much more fun with Grandma and Grandpa Sorenson," Mom said. "Just you wait. Give it a chance."

"Here we are," Dad said.

They pulled off the road onto a gravel driveway. Kendra could see no sign of a house, only the driveway angling out of sight into the trees.

Tires crunching over the gravel, they passed several signs advertising that they were on private property. Other signs warned off trespassers. They came to a low metal gate that hung open but could be shut to prevent access.

"This is the longest driveway in the world!" Seth complained.

The farther they advanced, the less conventional the signs became. Private Property and No Trespassing gave way to Beware of .12 Gauge and Trespassers Will Be Persecuted.

"These signs are funny," Seth said.

"More like creepy," Kendra muttered.

Rounding another bend, the driveway reached a tall, wrought-iron fence topped with fleurs-de-lis. The double gate stood open. The fence extended off into the trees as far as Kendra could see in either direction. Near the fence stood a final sign:

Certain Death Awaits.

"Is Grandpa Sorenson paranoid?" Kendra asked.

"The signs are a joke," Dad said. "He inherited this land. I'm sure the fence came with it."

After they passed through the gate, there was still no house in sight. Just more trees and shrubs. They drove across a small bridge spanning a creek and climbed a shallow slope. There the trees ended abruptly, bringing the house into view across a vast front lawn.

The house was big, but not enormous, with lots of gables and even a turret. After the wrought-iron gate, Kendra had expected a castle or a mansion. Constructed out of dark wood and stone, the house looked old but in good repair. The grounds were more impressive. A bright flower garden bloomed in front of the house. Manicured hedges and a fish pond added character to the yard. Behind the house loomed an immense brown barn, at least five stories tall, topped by a weather vane.

"i love it," Mom said. "I wish we were all staying."

"You've never been here?" Kendra asked.

"No. Your father came here a couple of times before we were married."

"They go the extra mile to discourage visitors," Dad said. "Me, Uncle Carl, Aunt Sophie. None of us have spent much time here. I don't

get it. You kids are lucky. You'll have a blast. If nothing else, you can spend your time playing in the pool."

They pulled to a stop outside the garage.

The front door opened and Grandpa Sorenson emerged, followed by a tall, lanky man with large ears and a thin, older woman. Mom, Dad, and Seth got out of the car. Kendra sat and watched.

Grandpa had been clean-shaven at the funeral, but now he wore a stubbly white beard. He was dressed in faded jeans, work boots, and a flannel shirt.

Kendra studied the older woman. She was not Grandma Sorenson. Despite her white hair streaked with a few black strands, her face had an ageless quality. Her almond eyes were black as coffee, and her features suggested a hint of Asian ancestry. Short and slightly stooped, she retained an exotic beauty.

Dad and the lanky man opened the back of the SUV and began removing suitcases and duffel bags. "You coming, Kendra?" Dad asked.

Kendra opened the door and dropped to the gravel.

"Just place the things inside," Grandpa was telling Dad. "Dale will take them up to the bedroom."

"Where's Mom?" Dad asked.

"Visiting your Aunt Edna."

"In Missouri?"

"Edna's dying."

Kendra had barely ever heard of Aunt Edna, so the news did not mean much. She looked up at the house. She noticed that the windows had bubbly glass. Bird nests clung under the eaves.

They all migrated to the front door. Dad and Dale carried the larger bags. Seth held a smaller duffel bag and a cereal box. The cereal box

was his emergency kit. it was full of odds and ends he thought would come in handy for an adventure. Rubber bands, a compass, granola bars, coins, a squirt gun, a magnifying glass, plastic handcuffs, string, a whistle.

"This is Lena, Our housekeeper," Grandpa said. The older woman nodded and gave a little wave. "Dale helps me tend the grounds."

"Aren't you pretty?" Lena said to Kendra. "You must be around fourteen." Lena had a faint accent that Kendra could not place.

"In October."

An iron knocker hung on the front door, a squinting goblin with a ring in its mouth. The thick door had bulky hinges.

Kendra entered the house. Glossy wood floored the entry hall A wilting arrangement of flowers rested on a low table in a white ceramic base. A tall, brass coat-rack stood off to one side beside a black bench with a high, carved back. On the wall hung a painting of a fox hunt.

Kendra could see into another room where a huge, embroidered throw rug covered most of the wooden floor. Like the house itself, the furnishings were antiquated but in good repair. The couches and chairs were mostly of the sort you would expect to see while visiting a historical site.

Dale was heading up the stairs with some of the bags. Lena excused herself and went to another room.

"Your home is beautiful," Mom gushed. "I wish we had time for a tour."

"Maybe when you get back," Grandpa said.

"Thanks for letting the kids stay with you," Dad said.

"Our pleasure. Don't let me keep you."

"We're on a pretty tight schedule," Dad apologized.



"You kids be good and do whatever Grandpa Sorenson tells you," Mom said. She hugged Kendra and Seth.

Kendra felt tears seeping into her eyes. She fought them back. "Have a fun cruise."

"We'll be back before you know it," Dad said, putting an arm around Kendra and tousling Seth's hair.

Waving, Mom and Dad walked out the door. Kendra went to the door. Kendra went to the doorway and watched them climb into the SUV. Dad honked as they drove off. Kendra fought back tears again as the SUV vanished into the trees.

Mom and Dad were probably laughing, relieved to be off by themselves for the longest vacation of their married lives. She could practically hear their crystal goblets clinking. And here she stood, abandoned. Kendra closed the door. Seth, oblivious as ever, was examining the intricate pieces of a decorative chess set.

Grandpa stood in the entry hall, watching Seth and looking politely uncomfortable.

"Leave the chess pieces alone," Kendra said. "They look expensive."

"Oh, he's all right," Grandpa said. By the way he said it; Kendra could tell he was relieved to see Seth setting the pieces down. "Shall I show you to your room?"

They followed Grandpa up the stairs and down a carpeted hall to the foot of a narrow wooden staircase leading up to a white door. Grandpa continued on up the creaking steps.

"We don't often have guests, especially children," Grandpa said over his shoulder. "I think you'll be most comfortable in the attic."

He opened the door, and they entered after him. Braced for cobwebs and torture devices, Kendra was relieved to find that the attic

was a cheerful playroom. Spacious, clean, and bright, the long room had a pair of beds, shelves crowded with children's books, freestanding wardrobes, tidy dressers, a unicorn rocking horse, multiple toy chests, and a hen in a cage.

Seth went straight for the chicken. "Cool!" He poked a finger through the slender bars, trying to touch the orange-gold feathers.

"Careful, Seth," Kendra warned.

"He'll be fine," Grandpa said. "Goldilocks is more a house pet than a barnyard hen. Your grandmother usually takes care of her. I figured you kids wouldn't mind filling in while she's gone. You'll need to feed her, clean her cage, and collect her eggs."

"She lays eggs!" Seth looked astonished and delighted.

"An egg or two a day if you keep her well fed," Grandpa said. He pointed to a white plastic bucket full of kernels near the cage. "A scoop in the morning and another in the evening should take care of her. You'll want to change the lining of her cage every couple days, and make sure she has plenty of water. Every morning, we give her a tiny bowl of milk." Grandpa winked. "That's the secret behind her egg production."

"Can we ever take her out?" The hen had moved close enough for Seth to stroke her feathers with one finger.

"Just put her back afterwards." Grandpa bent down to put a finger in the cage, and Goldilocks instantly pecked at it. Grandpa withdrew his hand. "Never liked me much."

"Some of these toys look expensive," Kendra said, standing beside an ornate Victorian dollhouse.

"Toys are meant to be played with," Grandpa said. "Do your best to keep them in decent shape, and that will be good enough."

Seth moved from the hen cage to a small piano in the corner of the room. He banged on the keys, and the notes that clanged sounded different from what Kendra would have expected. It was a little harpsichord.

"Consider this room your space," Grandpa said. "Within reason, I'll not bother you to pick things up in here, so long as you treat the rest of the house with respect."

"Okay," Kendra said.

"I also have some unfortunate news. We are in the height of tick season. You kids ever hear of Lyme disease?"

Seth shook his head.

"I think so," Kendra said.

"It was originally discovered in the town of Lyme, Connecticut, not too far from here. You catch it from tick bites. The woods are full of ticks this year."

"What does it do?" Seth asked.

Grandpa paused for a solemn moment. "Starts out as a rash. Before long it can lead to arthritis, paralysis, and heart failure. Besides, disease or no, you don't want ticks burrowing into your skin to drink your blood. You try to pull them off and the head detaches. Hard to get out."

"That's disgusting!" Kendra exclaimed.

Grandpa nodded grimly. "They're so small you can hardly see them, at least until they fill up on blood. Then they swell to the size of a grape. Anyhow, point is, you kids are not allowed to enter the woods under any circumstances. Stay on the lawn. Break that rule and your outdoor privileges will be revoked. We understand one another?"

Kendra and Seth nodded.

"You also need to keep out of the barn. Too many ladders and rusty old pieces of farm equipment. Same rules apply to the barn as apply to the woods. Set foot in there, and you will spend the rest of your stay in this room."

"Okay," Seth said, crossing the room to where a little easel stood on paint splattered tarp. A blank canvas rested on the easel. Additional blank canvases leaned against the wall nearby, beside shelves stocked with jars of paint. "Can I paint?"

"I'm telling you twice, you have the run of this room," Grandpa said. "Just try not to destroy it. I have many chores to attend to, so I may not be around much. There should be plenty of toys and hobbies here to keep you busy."

"What about a TV?" Seth asked.

"No TV or radio," Grandpa replied. "Rules of the house. If you need anything, Lena will never be far." He indicated a purple cord hanging against the wall near one of the beds. "Tug the cord if you need her. In fact, Lena will be up with your supper in a few minutes."

"Won't we eat together?" Kendra asked.

"Some days. Right now I need to visit the east hay-field. May not be back until late."

"How much land do you own?" asked Seth.

Grandpa smiled. "More than my share. Let's leave it at that. I'll see you kids in the morning." he turned to leave and then paused, reaching into his coat pocket. Turning back, he handed Kendra a tiny key ring holding three miniature keys of varying sizes. "Each of these keys fits something in this room. See if you can figure out what each unlocks."

Grandpa Sorenson walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. Kendra listened as he descended the stairs. She stood at the door,

waiting, and then gently tried the handle. It turned slowly. She eased the door open, peered down the empty stairway, and then closed it. At least he had not locked them in.

Seth had opened a toy chest and was examining the contents. Then toys were old-fashioned but in excellent condition. Soldiers, dolls, puzzles, stuffed animals, wooden blocks.

Kendra wandered over to a telescope by a window. She peered into the eye piece, positioned the telescope to look through a windowpane, and began twisting the focus knobs. She could improve the focus but couldn't get it quite right.

She stopped fiddling with the knobs and examined the window. The panes were made of bubbly glass, like those in the front of the house. The images were being distorted before they reached the telescope.

Unfastening a latch, Kendra pushed the window open. She had a good view of the forest east of the house, illuminated by the golden hues of the setting sun. Moving the telescope closer to the window, she spent some time mastering the knobs, bringing the leaves on the trees below into crisp focus.

"Let me see," Seth said. He was standing beside her.

"Pick up those toys first." A mess of toys lay piled near the open chest.

"Grandpa said we can do what we can do what we want in here."

"Without making it a disaster. You're already wrecking the place."

"I'm playing. This is a playroom."

"Remember how Mom and Dad said we need to pick up after ourselves?"

"Remember how Mom and Dad aren't here?"

"I'll tell."

"How? Stick a note in a bottle? You won't even remember by the time they get back."

Kendra noticed a calendar on the wall. "I'll write it on the calendar."

"Good. And I'll look through the telescope while you do that."

"This is the one thing in the room I was doing. Why don't you find something else?"

"I didn't notice the telescope. Why don't you share? Don't Mom and Dad also tell us to share?"

"Fine," Kendra said. "It's all yours. But I'm closing the window. Bugs are coming in."

"Whatever."

She shut the window.

Seth looked into the eyepiece and started twisting the focus knobs. Kendra took a closer look at the calendar. It was from 1953. Each month was accompanied by an illustration of a fairyland palace.

She turned the calendar to June. Today was June 11. The days of the week did not match up, but she could still countdown to when her parents would return. They would be back June 28.

"This stupid thing won't even focus," Seth complained.

Kendra smiled.