

LEVELED BOOK • S

THE HIDDEN ROOM



Written by Rus Buyok
Illustrated by Thomas Boatwright

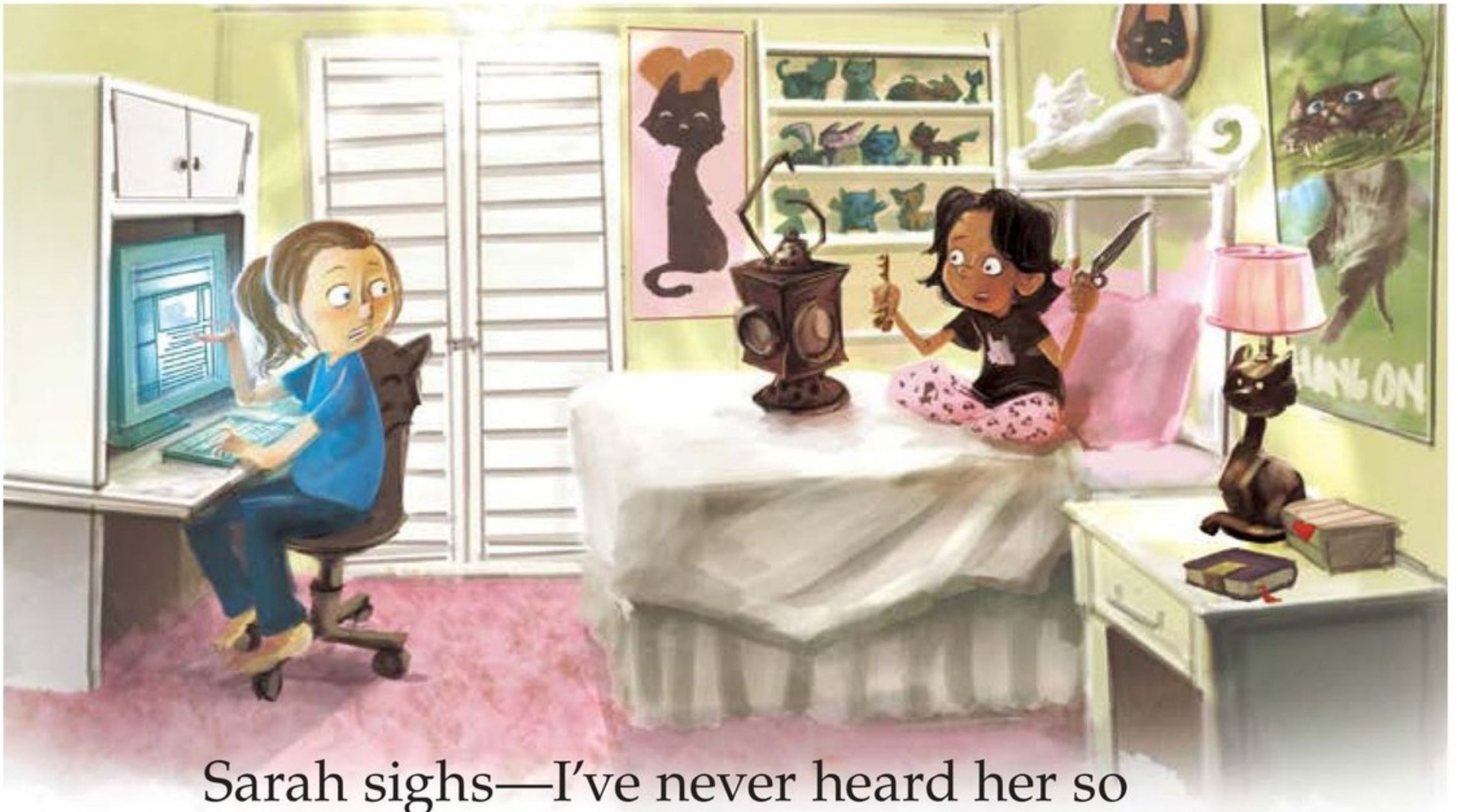
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Sarah sighs—I've never heard her so exhausted. "Why do these **bizarre** things keep happening to us? What's with this key, the lantern, and these scissors? Nothing's making sense."

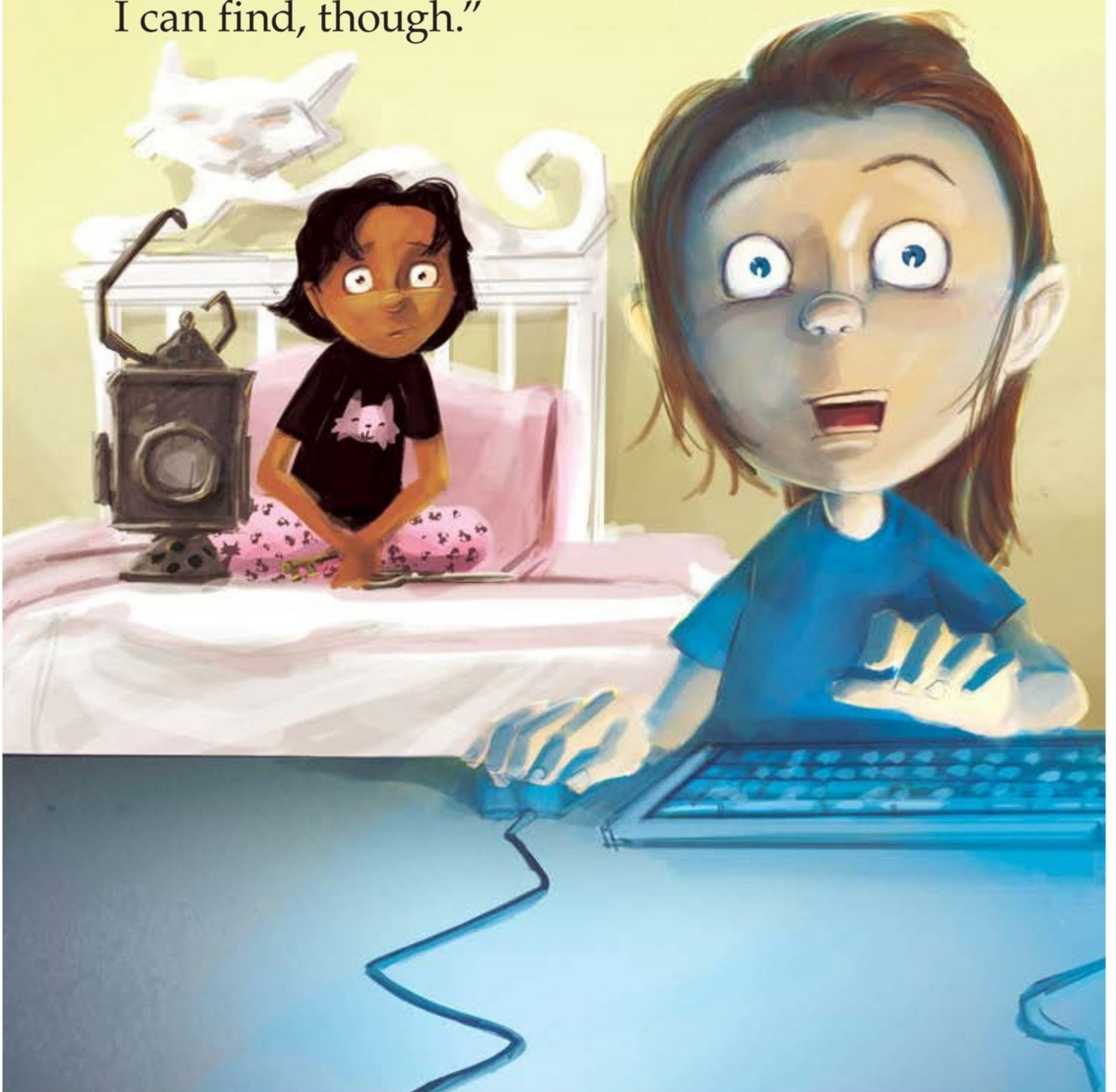
We're sitting in her room; I'm at the computer, while she sits cross-legged on the bed. The key, lantern, and scissors are spread before her. "We'll figure it out," I say.

"I'm starting to hear those kids laughing all the time, especially when I'm trying to sleep."

"You mean you actually hear them, as if they're in the house?" I ask.

"Yes . . . no . . . I don't know." She shakes her head. "Any luck?"

“I’ve searched everywhere I can think of on the Web, but I’m not coming up with anything we didn’t learn in school,” I say. “John Porter founded the mill, and the town grew up downriver. I did uncover something about his wife. She was considered very **charitable**, taking in children who had nowhere else to go and caring for them. That’s all the information I can find, though.”



Just then, Sarah's Aunt Terra opens the door. "Children—" she begins and stops short. Her smile fades and her eyes grow large as she steps inside, not shifting her intense gaze away from the bed. "Where did you get these things?"

"We found them," Sarah says.

"Nonsense—to get these things, you'd have to seek them out," Aunt Terra says. Her accent is extraordinary. Sarah told me her mom's family **immigrated** from a village on the border between Nepal and India.

"It's true," I begin. "We haven't been looking for these things at all—we just sort of find them. It's almost as if someone is leading us to them or bringing them to us."

"Along with some **creepy** laughing kids," Sarah adds. I didn't think it could happen, but Aunt Terra's eyes intensify as she shuts the door.



“Come, child,” she **beckons** for me to join them on the bed. “Tell Auntie everything.”

Sarah and I exchange glances, unsure if we should continue—or if Aunt Terra would actually believe us.



“It started on Halloween . . .” Sarah begins slowly, and soon the story pours out of us. We **divulge** everything: the strange kid in the Hollow; the lantern, scissors, and key; and the disturbing laughter that continues to follow us. When we finish, Aunt Terra runs her fingers over the items on the bed.



“Children should not speak such tales,” Aunt Terra says, picking up the items, “and children should not have such toys.” We try to protest, but one stern look from Aunt Terra silences us. “Now return to your homework and games, and think no more on these things.”

With that, she departs, leaving Sarah and me in stunned silence.

“What just happened?” Sarah says.

“She believed us,” I say. “You saw her expression and the way she reacted when we told her about the laughter. She knows something.”

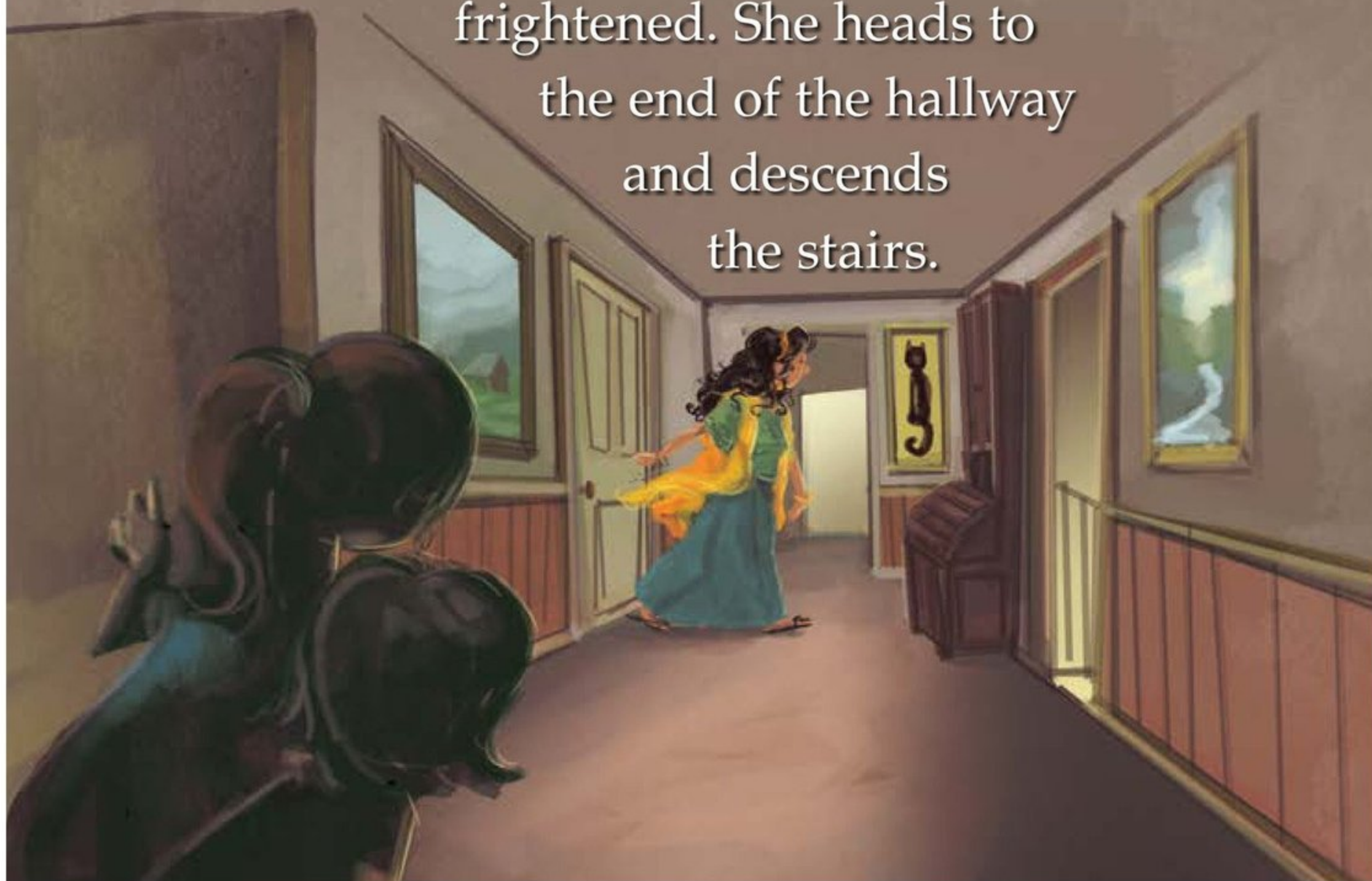
“Aunt Terra has many secrets, and we’re not going to learn any of them unless she wants us to.”

I roll my eyes and say, “Don’t be so dramatic—we just need to follow her to find out where she put those things.”

“Oh, well, she certainly won’t like that, either,” Sarah says, but I’m already at the door, peering into the hallway. It’s filled with doors. Sarah lives in an old **Victorian** house, one of the oldest in town, and it has a ridiculous number of tiny rooms.

“Is she out there?” Sarah asks.

“*Shhh!*” I snap. “I can hear her.” We wait, listening to Aunt Terra’s movement. Suddenly, she emerges looking very concerned, almost frightened. She heads to the end of the hallway and descends the stairs.

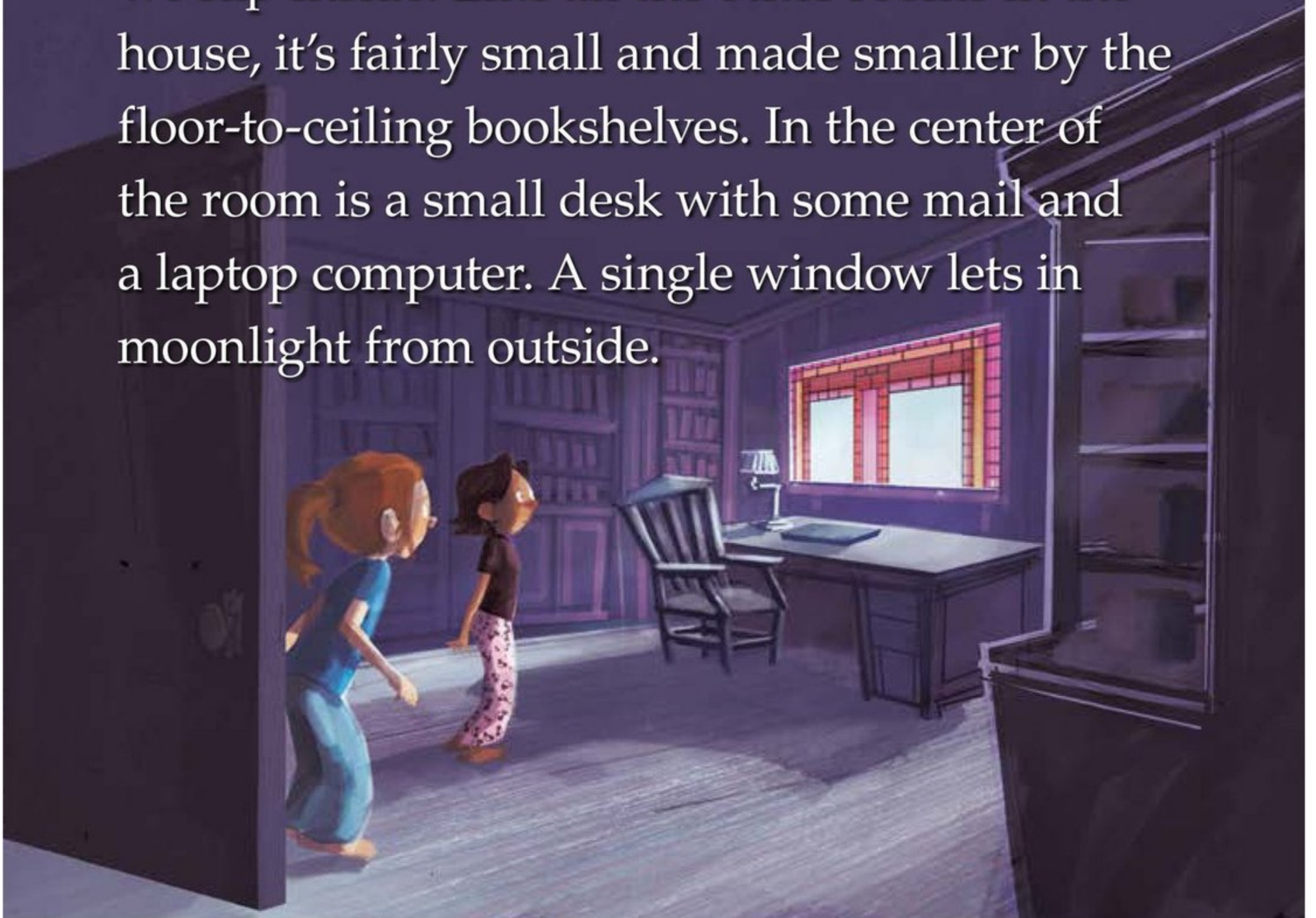


I open the door and point. “She came out of that room.”

“That’s the office,” Sarah replies. “Dad doesn’t like me to go in there without him. He says I might break something.”

“We’ll be careful,” I say and step into the hallway. “Besides, Aunt Terra knows something.”

“That she doesn’t want us to know—probably for a reason,” Sarah hisses. The door to the office opens with barely a creak, and we slip inside. Like all the other rooms in the house, it’s fairly small and made smaller by the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. In the center of the room is a small desk with some mail and a laptop computer. A single window lets in moonlight from outside.



“Quick, let’s look around,” I say. Sarah starts opening drawers, and I start **combing** through the shelves.

I find nothing, but when I turn around, Sarah is sitting at the desk, holding a photo.



“I remember where I saw the scissors before,” she says. “They belonged to my mother.” She shows me the photo. It’s of a beautiful woman sitting at a sewing machine. “Dad says she was always making clothes for people who needed them.”

I don't really know what to say, so I just place my hand on Sarah's shoulder. She has told me about her mother's disappearance before. It's not easy for her to talk about. One day her mother was simply—gone. Some people claimed they saw her walking into the Hollow, but the police searched the woods and never found anything. I had an uncle who disappeared, too, but I barely knew him. I couldn't imagine how Sarah felt.

"Wait, I hear something," Sarah says. She stands up and presses her ear against one of the shelves. "Here, listen."



I follow suit and quickly hear it—a soft scratching, like fingernails against wood.

“What’s on the opposite side of this wall?”
I ask.



“I don’t know. Nothing, I think,” Sarah replies. I start pulling out books and stacking them on the desk. Sarah takes the cue, grabs the desk chair, and stands on it to reach the higher shelves. As she grabs the first book, an entire section comes down.



“They’re fake!” she says and tosses the hollow books down to me. “I can see some kind of handle.”

“Pull on it!” I say.

She does, and the entire bookcase shifts and swings toward us. She pulls harder, and it swings open more to **reveal** a dark room.



I flick on a lamp on the table. The room is small—no bigger than a closet, really. Little bottles filled with herbs and other things I can't really make out line racks on the wall. Everything looks neat and organized. The scissors, key, and lantern sit on a small table beside a small book with yellowed papers hanging out of it.

"Whoa," Sarah says, "Dad said this house had some hidden places."

"We should get our stuff before Aunt Terra figures out we're in here."



Sarah nods, and we gather our things. She hesitates and grabs the book, too. We close the bookcase again and replace all the books before sneaking back into Sarah's room.

"Children, dinner!" Aunt Terra calls from downstairs, and we quickly hide all our finds before heading down the hallway. Then it hits me.

"Wait," I say, grabbing Sarah's arm. "Who was scratching inside the hidden room?"

Glossary

beckons (<i>v.</i>)	invites a person to come closer or follow (p. 6)
bizarre (<i>adj.</i>)	very weird or unusual (p. 3)
charitable (<i>adj.</i>)	generous and caring toward those in need (p. 4)
combing (<i>v.</i>)	carefully searching to find something (p. 10)
creepy (<i>adj.</i>)	scary; causing uneasiness or fear (p. 5)
divulge (<i>v.</i>)	to give secret or unknown information to another (p. 6)
immigrated (<i>v.</i>)	moved from one country into another with the intention of settling there (p. 5)
reveal (<i>v.</i>)	to make something known or seen that was previously unknown, secret, or hidden (p. 13)
Victorian (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the style, values, or tastes that were popular during the reign of Queen Victoria of England (1837–1901) (p. 8)

The Hidden Room
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