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If you had asked me a year ago if I believed in ghosts, I would have said, in one word:

*No.*

Sure, I know lots of people believe they've seen ghosts, but I'm not one of them. I like to read ghost stories, but even when I was little I was never afraid of ghosts. I used to be afraid of monsters under my bed or in my closet, but that was when I was very young. There are no monsters in closets or under the bed, just like there is no such thing as ghosts. And I wasn't afraid of them.

All that changed one horrifying summer, when

we moved into a bigger house on the other side of the city.

My name is Hannah Bayford, and I live in Concord, New Hampshire. Concord is the state capital. I have one brother named Clay. I'm twelve, and he's eight. He's a lot of fun to hang around with . . . most of the time. But he does a lot of things that gross me out. He catches frogs and puts them in his pocket. Toads, too. He used to catch worms and put them in his pocket. One time he forgot about it, and Mom found them when she was doing the laundry. She totally freaked out! It was actually pretty funny . . . but Mom got mad. Clay doesn't put worms in his pocket anymore.

We moved for a couple of reasons. Number one, Mom has always said she wanted a bigger house. And number two, Dad has always wanted to move away from the city to somewhere that wasn't so busy. I thought that would be cool. I like the forest, and I thought it would be fun to be able to wander among tall trees and build forts with my brother.

So, beginning in the spring, we started house-hunting. Every weekend, we would go for a drive and look at homes that were for sale. We looked at a lot of

them. Some of them were big, but Mom and Dad said they hadn't found one that was perfect.

Until one gray, rainy, Saturday afternoon.

Looking back, I should have known something was wrong. I should have known right away that the house at the end of Cedar Mill Street wasn't what it appeared to be. Something told me right away—a little voice in my head—to stay away from the old house surrounded by huge, lofty trees.

Someone seemed to whisper in my ear:

*Don't go inside. Don't go near that house.*

But did I listen?

*Don't go inside. Don't go near that house.*

Nope. I told that little voice to go away, that it was just my imagination.

Very soon, however, I'd be wishing I'd listened to that voice. In fact, there was something that happened that very day—the day we first saw the house—that should have told all of us to stay away.

And it all started when we explored a room at the end of the hallway on the second floor of the house . . . .



We'd been driving around for about an hour. Rain had been falling most of the morning, and the roads were shiny and slick. An iron-gray sky loomed low, and a cool mist hung in the air like smoke.

Mom spotted the HOUSE FOR SALE sign first. The sign was black with orange letters: the kind you see for sale in department stores. There was a hand-drawn black arrow pointing to the right.

"There's something, right there," Mom said, and

Dad turned the car onto Cedar Mill Street. We saw several houses, but they weren't very close together. They were old and big, too . . . at least twice the size of the house we were living in. The yards were large expanses of deep green grass filled with dozens of dandelions that looked like little sunbursts. Huge trees, their gray and black trunks glossy from the rain, stood silent and still, sleeping in the morning drizzle. Rain dripped from sagging, green leaves.

"I wonder which house is for sale?" Mom said as our car crawled down the deserted street. We continued until the road came to a dead end. There, a tall, two-story house loomed behind several enormous, old trees. It seemed almost hidden behind branches and leaves.

And there was a big sign in the yard that read:  
FOR SALE BY OWNER.

"This is the place," Dad said, and he pulled the car into the driveway. He stopped in front of an attached two-car garage.

I looked up at the big, old house—and that's when I first heard the faint voice in my head.

*Don't go inside. Don't go near that house.*

Oh, I knew it was only my imagination getting

to me. The house looked a little creepy with the gray sky and the rain, but it wasn't scary looking or anything. The house was old, but it was in good shape. Someone had taken good care of it. It looked like it had a fresh coat of white paint, and the rain made it glisten. Even the black shingles on the roof seemed to shine. There was a large garden on the left side of the house, with a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors. Like the leaves of the trees, the flower petals were shiny from the rain.

"Nice place," Dad said.

"I wonder if anyone is home," Mom said.

The car idled quietly, and rain tapped on the roof and windows.

*Don't go inside. Don't go near that house.*

There was that voice again. Sure, I knew it was only in my head. I knew it was my own voice.

But why? We'd looked at over a dozen homes in the past couple of months. Why did I have a strange gnawing of doom in my head? What was different about this house?

Lots . . . and I was about to find out why.



“Wait here,” Dad said as he opened the car door and stepped into the rain. He hustled to the covered porch and rang the doorbell.

“It sure is a big house,” Clay said.

Through the rain-streaked car windows, we watched as the front door opened and a man appeared. He had gray hair and glasses. He and my dad shook hands and began talking, but we couldn’t hear what they were saying. The old man nodded

several times, smiled, then closed the door. Dad jogged back to the car and got inside.

“His name is Mr. Hooper,” he said. “He says we can come inside and take a look around.” He turned the key in the ignition. The car engine died.

“We have to go out in the rain?” Clay complained.

“You’re not going to melt,” I said. “All we have to do is run to the front door.”

I pushed the car door open and stepped out. Clay climbed out my side. Mom and Dad got out, too, and the four of us hurried to the porch. The front door opened, as if automatically. Mr. Hooper appeared again, standing aside.

“Come in, come in!” he said. “I don’t get visitors very often. Come in from this rainy, cold weather!”

Upon entering, there were several things I noticed right away. We were in a big living room. The floor was made of dark brown wood, with even darker grains that looked like hair fibers. It was shiny and polished. There were several large, colorful rugs placed about, including one very big one centered in the living room. On the other side, a real fire burned real wood in a real fireplace. We have a fireplace in our home,

but it burns gas and the logs are fake. All you have to do is flick a switch and *poof!* you have a fire. But *this* fire was real, and I could smell the musky odor of burnt wood. It made the room feel cozy and homey.

There was a large, fluffy black leather couch and two matching recliners. They were so big and soft they looked like they would swallow you and trap you forever. A white cat with one black ear was nestled on the arm of one of the recliners. He was sleeping, and he probably didn't even know we were there. To the left of the couch, a staircase went up to the second story. Like the floor, the steps were made of dark wood, all glossy and shiny.

I counted twelve pictures hanging from the walls. They were all portraits, and they all looked to be very old. The pictures were black and white, but several had turned a dirty yellow color over the years.

Mr. Hooper closed the door.

"That awful rain," he said as he shook his head. "It hasn't stopped since Thursday. But I hear that it's supposed to stop this morning, and we might even see a little sunshine this afternoon."

*I hope so*, I thought.

"Thanks for letting us take a look around your

house,” Dad said. He started to take off his shoes, but the old man stopped him.

“No, no,” he said. “Please. Keep your shoes on. Be comfortable. A little rain or dirt won’t hurt this old house. She’s seen much worse over the years. Can I bring either of you some tea?”

“That would be nice,” Mom said.

“Sure,” Dad said. “That sounds good on a rainy day like today.”

Mr. Hooper smiled. “Good, good,” he said. “Please, feel free to look around, anywhere you wish.” He looked at me, then at Clay. His eyes twinkled. “And you two might want to go upstairs,” he said with a widening grin. “There is a certain room at the end of the hall I think you will find very interesting.” He winked, then he looked at Mom. “Be right back with your tea.” He turned, walked across the living room, and vanished into the kitchen.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said to Clay. I was curious about the room Mr. Hooper mentioned.

“Don’t touch a single thing,” Mom warned. “Remember: we’re guests in this house.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We won’t.”

Clay and I crossed the living room, walked

around the recliner and past the white cat with the black ear. He woke up and looked at me curiously. Then, he tucked his nose in his paws and closed his eyes again.

The steps creaked beneath our feet as we walked upstairs. The smell of wood smoke faded.

“I wonder how old this place is,” Clay said as he climbed the steps and dragged a finger along the paneled wall.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But it’s *old*. Probably older than Grandpa.”

At the top of the steps, a long hall opened up. Two large glass chandeliers—like swarms of glittering diamonds—burned from the ceiling. Like everything else in the home, they, too, looked very old.

There were several dark doors on either side of the hall. All were closed. The end of the hall was capped with yet another door. It, too, was closed.

Downstairs, I heard Mom and Dad talking with Mr. Hooper, but by then we were halfway down the hall, and I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

And a strange thing happened as we walked toward the door at the end of the hall. A strange darkness seemed to fall over us, like a cloud slipping in

front of the sun. I looked up at the glowing chandeliers, but they seemed to be just as bright as ever. The air became cooler, too, and I wondered if there was a window open somewhere.

Strange.

We reached the door at the end of the hall and stopped. The door wasn't closed all the way, and I could see a thin blade of darkness beyond the door and the frame.

The doorknob was faded brass, the color of a weathered penny. It had curious designs and patterns engraved over it. Clay reached out, but before he grasped it, he stopped suddenly.

We heard a squeak—and the door began opening . . . *all by itself!*

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I was so shocked, I couldn't move. I stood at the end of the hall, watching in horror as the door slowly creaked open. Darkness poured out like ink, and a feeling of dread made my skin crawl. It felt like a million spider legs all over my body.

Clay had seen enough. He spun on his heels and ran, screaming, all the way down the hall like his hair was on fire. He stormed down the stairs, yelling at the top of his lungs.

But I never took my eyes off the door. It was still moving, opening slowly. Lights from the chandeliers in the hall illuminated a trunk against a wall. A window in the room also provided a murky, gray light.

There was a flurry of sounds on the stairs, like a herd of stampeding elephants. It was, of course, only Mom and Dad and Mr. Hooper. They reached the top of the stairs and rushed toward me. Clay was following them from a safe distance.

“*What’s wrong?!?!*” Mom asked me.

I pointed. “*The door!*” I replied. “*It opened all by itself!*”

Mr. Hooper chuckled pleasantly. His eyes sparkled. “Not really,” he said. “Take a few steps back.”

I did as he asked.

*The door began to close all by itself!*

I was just as freaked out as I had been when it opened on its own . . . only now, I knew something was going on. Sure, the door was opening, but it couldn’t be doing it all by itself.

“Let me show you something,” Mr. Hooper said with a smile. I moved aside, and he stepped up to the door and said, “Door! I command you to open!”

*The door started to open again!*

Mr. Hooper took a step back.

“Door! Close!”

As soon as he spoke, the door began to close again.

He turned and looked at me. His smile was even wider. “The secret is right here,” he said, and he pointed to his feet. “The floorboards are old and a little weak. When you put weight on this exact spot, it pushes the floorboards down a tiny bit. This causes the other end of the floorboards—right there at the door—to rise and put pressure on the door frame. In turn, the door opens and closes, depending on where you put your weight.”

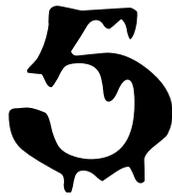
“That’s cool,” I said.

Clay was peering around Mom’s leg. “I wasn’t really afraid,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “You were screaming like you’d seen a ghost,” I said.

“If you saw a ghost, you’d be screaming a lot louder than I did,” Clay said.

Turns out, Clay was right—because I’d be seeing a ghost, all right . . . and it would be my turn to scream!



The five of us were still standing at the end of the hall, and Mr. Hooper spoke.

“Go ahead and take a look inside the room,” he said. “It’s one of my favorite places in the house. I spent lots of time in there when I was little, as have many others in my family.”

He stepped toward the door. It began to open on its own, but he grabbed the knob and pushed it. Then, he reached around the wall. A light clicked on.

“And while the kids are having a look in the room,” he said, glancing at Mom and Dad, “I’ll show you some of the other rooms up here.” He turned and walked down the hall, and Mom and Dad followed. Footsteps echoed, and Mr. Hooper began telling Mom and Dad about the house. I didn’t pay attention. I was staring into the room through the doorway, mesmerized.

It was a playroom. Trees were painted on the walls, and paintings of cartoon characters were nestled within the branches. A large, smiling monkey swung from one of the branches. A colorful toucan was flying on the wall near the window. The only object in the room was a very large wooden trunk pushed against a wall, and I figured it was probably an old toy chest.

“Hey, this is cool!” Clay said, and he stepped into the room. I followed.

All four walls were colorfully painted with trees and animals. It was like stepping into a cartoon forest. Even the ceiling was painted. It was blue with a few white, puffy clouds. A yellow sun smiled down upon us. It had kind eyes and a wide grin. There were seagulls flying around it.

“Wow,” I said. “This is awesome.”

There were two windows on the far wall. I walked across the room and looked outside. The rain had stopped, but it was still gray and dreary. Droplets of water clung to the glass like little shiny beads.

Below, the backyard opened into a vast mesh of green lawn, as flat and smooth as a pool table. Like the front yard, there were several large trees growing. To the left was the garden, and there was another house in the distance.

And far back in the yard, I saw a black iron fence, and I drew a quick, startled breath. A tingle of nervousness trickled up my spine. The nervousness became fear, and the fear turned to horror.

But it wasn't the fence that frightened me. It was something on the other side that completely freaked me out . . . .

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