

A NOVEL

THE
SECRET
ROOM

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The Secret Room



STARTING SCHOOL RIGHT after Labor Day weekend closed off the summer. All the months of open time vanished into a teacher's discussion question: "What did you do last summer?" And it didn't add up to a lot. At least, not for me. My family never goes on vacations. Summer on the farm is work time, and even though I walk in the woods, swim at the pond, and escape sometimes to the old treehouse that my brothers built at the edge of one of our fields, there's never much of anything to put into an essay. So the first weeks of school didn't really count.

Luckily, my life changed after a month of eighth grade. In the first week of October, really the start of autumn, I helped to measure the foundation of Thea Warwick's house.

It was a school assignment. Mrs. Labounty, who teaches math for all the middle schoolers, is really into hands-on learning, and every Friday she gives us a "project." Mostly they're things you do on your own, but sometimes she makes us work in groups, which as far as I'm concerned is about the worst thing a teacher can do. Leave me alone and I can always earn an A. But group and team

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projects—nobody wants to work with me really, so either I have to do the whole thing for the group and everyone gets an A from what I've done, which if you ask me is truly unfair, or else I stay quiet and let the group sink. Once last year I tried that, and the teacher gave everyone in the group a C, including me. And I am absolutely never a C student.

Anyway, I felt things might not be as bad as usual when Mrs. Labounty said, "Shawna Lee and Thea, you live close enough to do this one together." Thea's not so bad, really. New, and pretty smart, and thin of course. Everyone who moves here from out of state is thin, I've noticed. Last week Thea even stood in the lunch line with me, because we're the only two girls in grade eight who can do math in our heads, and it was square roots that week in class, which was especially cool because we both got it. So we practiced out loud while we waited in line.

Plus, Thea hasn't said anything about me being, well, fat.

So this afternoon, we needed to measure the foundation. The idea was to measure the outside of the house first, draw it, and then measure each of the rooms and map them. For extra credit, calculate the square footage taken up by the walls inside the house. Of course, that's the difference between what you get for the room sizes and what you get for the outside house size. I could write the equation, but who needed to? It was so simple. We didn't even discuss whether we'd do the extra credit part, we just knew, both of us, that because it was numbers, it would be fun.

The thing was, the numbers weren't coming out right. Not the extra credit part—that would come at the end. I mean, the numbers for the room sizes on the first floor weren't coming out to match the foundation we'd already drawn, which was the outside of the cellar walls. At least, we'd tried the best we could; a couple of rooms at Thea's house have been added on and in some places you can see where bits aren't original, sometimes even with cement blocks and stuff under them. We knew we should do the outside measurements over again and draw the add-ons more carefully. But because it was a rainy October

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day in Vermont, even at five o'clock the cold wet weather and dimness made measuring the outside again a real pain.

So we measured the inside of the cellar instead. Spiderwebs and dusty strings of spider silk made this very icky, frankly. I give Thea credit—she slapped any spiders she saw with the back of her notebook and kept hold of the measuring tape. I hate it when other girls scream and run and leave me looking like I'm not a real girl, just because I stand my ground and don't run away. That's not fair, either.

"Twenty-two feet, nine inches," Thea read off the tape, squinting in the light of a flashlight as she held the tape tight into the dim corner of the furnace area. "Mark it down for width." She put down the flashlight and reached up to twist her long, nearly black hair into a knot. She can do it without even an elastic.

I wrote down the numbers on my page. We could copy them over into her notebook, too, when we got upstairs. "Length?"

"Just a minute, let me climb up on the dresser so I can get around the water tank with the measuring tape." We'd need to get the length in five measurements and add them up. Thea's house used to be a stagecoach inn here in North Upton, and it's really, really long. The cellar is five rooms long. Really big rooms, honest.

I made a quick chart in my notebook. Room 1: twelve feet exactly. Room 2: ten feet four inches. We rounded off fractions of inches. Room 3 (half full of split wood for the living room woodstove): seventeen feet eight inches. Room 4: fifteen feet exactly. Room 5: ten feet six inches.

I changed all the feet into inches by multiplying by twelve, and added the total. "Seven hundred and seventy eight inches. What about the walls in between the rooms?"

Thea pushed her hair out of her eyes and squinted again, standing between rooms 4 and 5. "Five inches thick," she decided finally. "Each. So twenty inches for the four dividing walls."

"Umm. Wait a minute. Seven hundred and ninety-eight inches, then. Sixty-six feet and six inches. Six six six. Eeyou."

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“What is it?”

“Oh, you know, in the Bible. The number of the Beast is supposed to be six six six.” I could see from her face, though, she didn’t know what I was talking about. That’s the trouble with new people in town. My mother says none of them really know their Bible.

I told her I’d explain some other time. Bending over the notebook, I compared the numbers to the ones from the upstairs rooms, and groaned. “We’re almost five feet off. We have to do it over.”

I tugged the waistband of my jeans up in back and tucked my t-shirt back into the pants, pulling my sweatshirt down. Thea shook her head and pointed the flashlight down at my notebook page. “Add it again,” she suggested. “On the paper. You watched me measure it, we can’t be off by a whole five feet.” But on paper, we were. When we measured the second time, the numbers came out exactly the same way, five feet wrong.

That’s how we found the secret room, of course. The secret room at the north end of the cellar of the old North Upton Inn, with the boarded up entrance, the doorway so short we climbed into it with our heads bent down practically to our chests, and for a long moment I was afraid I’d be stuck in the doorway, my jeans dragging against the rough stonework and my sweatshirt getting absolutely filthy with more spiderwebs and dust.

I pushed on in, and in the beam from Thea’s flashlight, we both saw the numbers and the letters on the wall at the same moment.

“A code,” I breathed out, barely whispering.

“A code,” Thea agreed. At that moment, we both knew what we’d do next. Look for clues, and solve the code. Of course.

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SOLVING ANYTHING, FROM a math problem to a mystery, comes down to clues and evidence. Thea held the flashlight, while I copied the numbers and letters from the wall into my notebook. There were a lot of them. That's a good thing: A code where you only have a few letters or numbers on a piece of paper is much harder to solve than one where you're looking at lots of messages. When there's a lot that's been said, as long as it's in English, you can pick out groups that happen often and guess at what they might be. Like, in English anyway, there are really only two words that happen a lot that have just a single letter in them: *I*, and *a*. Thea and I made some guesses as we marked down what was on the wall. But time ran short—I could smell chicken cooking and knew supper must be almost ready. Thea had already invited me to stay, so we could do homework together for longer.

Thea's mother, Mrs. Warwick, called down the cellar stairs before we'd finished copying all of it. Quickly we agreed we'd come back later and get the rest of the code onto paper, and we propped the old boards so they blocked the opening into the

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secret space. Still, we had enough to start with, I was sure.

“Girls, come set the table,” Mrs. Warwick warbled at us as we emerged into her kitchen, swiping bits of spider silk from our hair.

I didn’t see Thea’s brothers, but I could hear their voices along with a TV. They’re younger than Thea: Thaddeus is ten, and Teddy’s just three. Mrs. Warwick started to hand us plates, then pulled them back and sent us to wash our hands first. It was my first time there, so I just followed along. It turned out the Warwicks have two bathrooms, one downstairs that doesn’t have a bathtub or shower, and the other one upstairs. Thea and I washed our hands downstairs, and as I looked down the hallway toward the TV sound, which was the news, I realized that was the room over our hidden room in the cellar.

“Do you think your father or your brothers heard us?” I asked Thea.

She frowned. “No way. The TV is way too loud, and anyway even if they did, it’s no big deal. Dad said he won’t mess with the wood much until Thanksgiving. And Mom’s not going to let the boys go down to the cellar.”

“Right.”

Thea tugged off her smudged sweatshirt, dropping it into a laundry hamper, and I brushed off the dust from my own as best I could. My sweatshirt was just an ordinary one, green with a blue logo for North Upton School; Thea’s, though, had a Hard Rock Café logo on it, and when she pulled it off, I noticed her T-shirt said University of Vermont—I wondered how she got it. A length of red string with a bead carved in the shape of a turtle hung at her throat. People from down-country wear necklaces and even earrings on ordinary days, not just for church, I’ve noticed. I told her, “I like that turtle.”

“Thanks! I got it at Disney World. Come on, we better get back to help.”

We laid out the silverware and carried the plates as Mrs. Warwick filled them with grilled chicken on top of some kind of salad, except for Thea’s plate, where she put a handful of grated

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cheese. Thea is a vegetarian. I handed the boys their dishes and put my own down where Thea pointed. A white dressing coated the lettuce, and I could see black olives and what looked like bits of toast mixed into the salad. It looked pretty weird for supper, to me. I mean, where were the potatoes or macaroni? And the bread?

Oh. The bread arrived in a basket a moment later, and so did the boys, and Mr. Warwick. Aside from his bushy black eyebrows, he came as just a bigger size of Thaddeus, dark hair falling into his eyes and thin shoulders. Skinny. And glasses.

“So,” Mr. Warwick said as he boosted Teddy up onto a higher chair and strapped him in, “what have you young women been doing this afternoon? Homework?”

“Just math,” Thea told him. I nodded.

“Algebra? Geometry? Calculus?”

We looked at each other and grinned. I answered, “We don’t do calculus until high school. I guess we’re doing algebra and geometry at the same time—we’re measuring the perimeters and areas of rooms in your house, and mapping the rooms too.”

“Great! I’d like to see that when you finish. Barb,” he said to his wife, “pass the bread down this way, please.”

I looked at the salad on my plate, and wondered if maybe it was some kind of separate salad course, with the main course coming after. But if it was just salad, why was the chicken on top of it? I was baffled. Nobody else asked anything, they just ate it, with their forks, so that’s what I did, too. It was good; warm chicken on top of salad, though, that was pretty strange, I thought. The little black olive rings scattered in the lettuce leaves tasted salty and good. When Mr. Warwick passed the bread, I took two slices and found the butter to spread on them.

“I don’t have any homework,” Thaddeus announced, sitting across the table from me. “I did mine at school. Can I watch TV, Mom?”

“Not tonight,” Mrs. Warwick said. “It’s a school night. Do you have something you can read?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He looked disappointed for a minute, then

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started to take his piece of bread apart and make little bread “pills” out of the soft inside.

I asked Thea, “Is that the rule for every school night? No TV?”

“Yeah. But sometimes we have videos on school nights, if there’s time.”

More weird stuff. What was Thea going to think if she came over to visit at my house, where the television never went off until bedtime? Not that I watched much of it when there was homework to do. Well, I decided, if I knew ahead of time that Thea was coming over, I could talk with Mom and Harry about keeping the TV off maybe for that evening. Big maybe. Getting to be friends with Thea Warwick wasn’t going to be easy, I could tell.

When we all finished our salad, we passed the plates to Mrs. Warwick, who took them to the kitchen. She came back with dessert: carrot cake and chunks of apples and oranges in a big bowl that she put in the middle of the table. The cake was good, but it was hard to eat it as slowly as everyone else. I filled in with some apple slices to slow down.

Mrs. Warwick wiped Teddy’s face and hands with a wet washcloth and let him run around. Then she turned to Thea and asked, “How was history today?”

“Better,” Thea said. “The boys didn’t goof off so much, now that we’re done with the Boston Tea Party and all that. And next week we’re doing the Civil War.”

“Seems pretty fast, getting from the Revolution to the Civil War in a week or so,” Mr. Warwick put in. “Any projects to go with all this?”

“Well,” Thea started, and I said with her, “there’s the History Fair.”

We explained about the competition, how everyone had to do something about American history, from the Pilgrims to the end of the Civil War. “I think it’s, like, a new program for our school,” I added. “Some of the projects will go on to the state History Fair in March. So we’re supposed to do research on our

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topics this fall, and then teach each other, in small groups, and that's going to be part of our grade, too."

Thea's parents made approving comments. Mr. Warwick said to Thea, "Why don't you look up some things about our house? I read in the town history that when our house was an inn, people met here to plan their politics. Maybe you can find something about the Civil War and our own inn."

"Cool!" Thea jumped right at it. She turned to me and said, "Have you picked a topic yet?"

"No," I admitted. "I was sort of thinking I might read that book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and maybe write something on slavery, you know? But I haven't signed up for it yet."

"Wonderful, Shawna," Mrs. Warwick said. "And are you going to do a local angle for it, too? Like maybe the Underground Railroad?"

I didn't know what she was talking about. Actually, I guess I didn't really remember it from grade four history, the last time we'd done Vermont at school. But when she started to talk about it, even with Teddy running around making noise, it came back to me some. Mrs. Warwick told about white Americans who saw how bad slaves had it, how they helped them to escape from the Southern plantations, to escape all the way north to Canada. People from New England stood up for freedom, the way they always had. I don't know why it was called a railroad, though. It wasn't with trains at all.

Mr. Warwick, standing up from the table, nodded enthusiastically to his wife. "Probably even this village helped out," he commented. "Of course, by the time escaped slaves got this far north, I imagine they felt pretty safe. But I've read that some of the towns hid them from Boston slave hunters, and why not here, too?"

He headed out of the dining room, and Mrs. Warwick already was washing the dishes and calling out something about Thea taking Teddy upstairs for his bath. I didn't see him. I didn't know where Thaddeus had gone, either.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was Thea and me,

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staring at each other and wondering, with Thea holding one finger to her lips in case I didn't know to keep quiet about it, and pointing with the other hand toward the far end of the house and down.

A hiding place? Could the secret room be a hiding place for escaped slaves?

I whispered, "Let's go work on the code."

She nodded, and together we ran upstairs to her bedroom, where she piled a bunch of big cushions on the floor, and we copied the code out of the notebook onto two separate pieces of paper so we could both have it.

This could be really big. This could be the History Fair project that would win first prize, not just at our school but for the state fair, too. And we had a real secret to work on. And best of all, as far as I was concerned, it looked like Thea's history project and my project would fit right into each other. We had more than just a math project here, for sure. This could be the start of a real best friend. For a moment I remembered how awful seventh grade had been, trying to be friends with Marsha Willson and always knowing she and her twin sister Merry were laughing about me behind my back. Then I pushed the memory away, and focused on Thea Warwick instead. A friend who liked math. And me.

I was so excited, I almost didn't feel hungry.

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OUTSIDE, RAIN WHIPPED in sheets against the house. Through Thea's windows I could hear the wind, too. Her bedside lamp, sitting on the floor next to us, lit the pages enough to see clearly. Numbers. Letters. Mixed together.

I pulled a pencil stub out of my back pocket and started to circle similar clusters on the page. "These have got to be dates," I guessed. Thea agreed.

"But there are a lot of them," she pointed out. "So it's got to be more like a list than, you know, sentences and paragraphs."

"What about directions, or where somebody's going to go?" I imagined an escaped slave in the hiding space. "Wouldn't they want to tell people where to find them later? Like in Canada or something?"

"Can't be." Propped on her elbows, Thea shook her head emphatically. "I mean, I'm thinking about it, Shawna. They probably didn't even know really where Vermont was, even though they were here, and I don't think they'd know enough about Canada to code the places there. Think how lost we'd feel if we were in, like, Tennessee or something. But names, they'd

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want to put their names, right?”

Definitely. Names and dates. Up behind our farm, on the ridge, our family had a hunting camp—a cabin—and everyone’s names were on the wall, with their birthdays, and how many deer they got and whether it was a buck. That’s important for hunting season.

“Look for J,” I suggested. “Like John, and Joseph, and Jeremiah. Bible names. If it was the old days, there were lots of Bible names.”

Thea pounced. “Here. And here.” She underlined each one and the letters that followed. “What about J, then this little n?”

An image of a cemetery stone flashed in my mind. “When you saw it on the wall, did the little n have a line under it?” I asked eagerly. “And was it sort of up, compared to the J?”

She looked blankly at me. “I don’t know. You saw it too. Why, what would that mean?”

I drew for her what I was remembering: A J with a little n that had a line under it, pushing it up. And then a W with a little m. “John. William. See? That’s how the old gravestones show it. To save the stone-cutting time, I bet, but maybe people did it even on paper back then.”

Thea found five places where there was a J, then a little n. And one—I saw it first—a W with a little m.

Even while we marked them, even while we knew we were on the right track, it was like both of us realized at the same moment: It wasn’t math at all, but some kind of list of complicated abbreviations.

“But we still have more numbers to figure out,” I said, trying to look for the bright side. “Those can’t all be dates. Maybe there’s still a code in here somehow.” Just a list of names and dates would definitely not be as interesting as something that included equations. But it would still mean figuring it all out.

So we circled and underlined, looking this time for what was left.

“All the numbers are under a hundred,” Thea pointed out.

“Yeah.” I started to write a list of the numbers on a separate sheet of paper.

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“Are they prime numbers? Or squares?”

“Hmm. No, I don’t think so. But—” a quick look back at our original page—“Thea, look how many of these are products of twelve. See?”

“You’re right! Thirty-six; twelve; forty-eight.” She wrinkled one of the pages as she grabbed it closer. “Shawna, look for products of six instead. That brings in lots of the other numbers, right?”

She was right. So maybe there was something hidden in the numbers after all.

I rolled over, head on a huge fluffy pillow, staring at the ceiling. What would be coded into products of six? “Eggs,” I said out loud. “Dozens and half dozens. But you’d count those out in the barn.”

Thea took another sheet of paper. “There are things we need to know,” she announced. “I’m making a list.”

Number 1: Check the little letters. Are they raised up and underlined like on the gravestones? “That would prove they’re old, too,” I mentioned. Thea nodded and wrote *Old* next to the question.

Number 2: Is it all one person’s handwriting? “What do you mean?” I asked her.

“Well, if it’s all one person, then somebody was making a list. Like maybe how many slaves were hiding there and how long. But if there are different handwritings, then maybe it’s the escaped slaves leaving messages.”

“Okay. Good.”

Number 3: What years are the dates? “We have to prove these are from before the Civil War,” I emphasized.

Number 4: Who could get easily to the cellar when this house was an inn?

We lay on the pillows, thinking about that and imagining. I asked Thea, “Does your father have a copy of the town history? We could start there, find out who was running the inn, and who the closest neighbors were.”

“I think so. Let’s go get the book.”

“Wait a minute.” I grabbed her arm, then pulled my hand

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back quickly. Some people freak out if you touch them. “Sorry. I mean, let’s think of more things first, before we go downstairs. Because it’s almost eight o’clock and I’ll have to go home. I think my mom and Harry have a copy of the history, too. We could both read it tonight.”

“Yeah, that’s good. Wait a minute—who’s Harry again?”

“My mom’s husband,” I answered. “He came from New Hampshire.”

“Oh yeah, right. I couldn’t think for a minute if maybe that was your brother.”

“Carl,” I told her. “The brother who’s on the farm is Carl. The other one’s Emerson.”

She rolled back onto her stomach, and wrote the names down. “Now I’ll remember better.” Thea tipped her head to one side. “We could work on this over at your house tomorrow,” she offered. “I mean, it’s Saturday.”

“Maybe,” I said cautiously. “After lunch, I guess.” The afternoon would be good, because then Mom would make cookies or something. But I wasn’t supposed to invite people for a meal without permission. And besides, sometimes Mom and Harry just wanted to unwind after working all day in the barn. I thought fast. “But we need to do more research in your basement first, don’t we? To check the handwriting?”

“Sure. Okay, let’s meet tomorrow after lunch here, while there’s more light. Oh no, you know what?” Thea sat up in a hurry. “We have to finish the math project this weekend, too. We have to make the drawing and write it up.”

“I’ll do the drawing at my house,” I offered. “I can take a copy of the measurements with me. You write out the equations for Mrs. Labounty. All right?”

“Good.” And at the same moment, we both said, “But!”

We laughed together. We knew what we both were about to say: No secret room in the drawing or the math. We’d just make the north room larger by six feet in the drawing and the equations.

For now, this was our own secret.

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It was five minutes to eight. I hurried to copy the measurements, and stuffed the paper into my backpack, tying the flap across to keep everything dry. “I’ve got to go. See you tomorrow.”

Thea ran down the stairs with me, and stood at the kitchen door. Behind her I could hear her mother calling, and with a last quick wave, she shut the door and vanished inside the house.

PREVIEW

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4

EVEN THOUGH IT was all the way dark out now, and raining, the first part of the wet road had patches of light on it from the front windows at Thea's house. I managed to not step in any really big puddles for that part. Then there was a dark part, not too far, but enough so I felt my sneakers get really wet. I held the bookbag under my arms, curving my body over it as I hurried.

Part of our farm was exactly across the road from Thea's. Unfortunately, that was the part with the little vegetable stand and, behind it, the manure pit. I had to go through the dark around the littler barn to get to the house at the far end. I cut across the grass and the cold seeped to my feet and legs, with the water from the wet grass soaking my jeans and socks. Past the barn corner, the light from the back porch lit my way.

One of the cats stood up and meowed at me, stretching, then darted toward the back door and waited for me to open it. I stepped into the warm, dim kitchen and put my bookbag down so I could pull off my sneakers by the door.

Mom and Harry nodded to me from their twin recliner

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chairs just inside the living room, where the blue light of the TV flickered. It sounded like a game show on, maybe *Wheel of Fortune*. Mom called out, "There's chocolate cake still, honey. Help yourself. And make sure you drink some milk, no soda." She always said milk was the healthiest drink. Since I was her "surprise" late-life baby, I guess she figured she had to take special care of me.

Harry said, "Did you kids get all your homework done?"

"Mostly," I called back to him. "I just have a little bit to finish." I was supposed to get homework done on Friday night if I could, because Saturday was always busy and Sunday was church, of course. But if there was a lot of reading, I could finish that on Sunday afternoon or evening. I'm good at planning how it all fits together.

I turned on the light over the kitchen table and pulled out my notebooks and the page of house measurements. On the side table past the sink, where the breadbox and the boxes of cereal huddled, I spotted the big cake holder with its rubbery Tupperware top. From the dish rack I pulled a cereal bowl, wide and deep, and cut a slice of cake. Then, thinking about how strange supper had been, I poured a glass of milk.

"Make sure the fridge shuts all the way," Mom called. She could tell what I was doing from the sounds in the kitchen, even when I was around the corner from her.

"Got it," I called back.

"Good girl." Somebody turned the TV sound up higher.

I pulled my papers toward the other end of the kitchen table, well away from the the angle of the TV, and dug for a ruler in the pencil-and-scissors jars by the phone. Then I settled down to draw Thea's house: outside dimensions, first floor, basement. It was hard to draw the walls with some thickness because of the proportions I was using: Thea's house, with the attached sheds and all, was nearly eighty feet long. The paper was eight and a half inches across, and eleven inches long. I turned it to draw the house along the longer direction of the page and tried a couple of numbers. If I made the drawing eight inches long, there would

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be ten feet of house to each inch. So a five-inch wall would be, how much, in the drawing? Five twelfths of one tenth of an inch. Ick.

I changed the proportions. Suppose the house uses ten inches across the length of the page. Then that's eight feet of house per inch of paper. One foot of house per one-eighth of an inch. A five-inch-thick wall would be about half a foot thick, or one-sixteenth inch of the page. I looked at the tiny divisions of the ruler and knew I couldn't really make the walls that thin on the paper.

Sighing, I stood up and scrounged in Mom's "everything drawer" close to the phone and found a roll of Scotch tape. It wasn't the clear "magic" kind, just the thick sticky stuff. So I'd have to use it in a way where I wouldn't need to mark on it, because you can't write in pen or in pencil on that thick old stuff. Okay, I could handle it.

I fastened two sheets of paper together, end to end, with a long strip of tape on the back, and two short bits on the front, near the edge. Then I started again on drawing Thea's house. This time, with two inches of paper for every eight feet of house, I could make the walls show up as having about half a foot of thickness.

Working slowly, and sharpening my pencil often, I got the first floor and outside dimensions drawn. I inked over them with a ballpoint pen. Another two pages taped together gave me the space for drawing the basement.

Mom's hand on my shoulder made me jump.

"Sorry, honey, I thought you heard me," she said with a little laugh. "Hey, that looks good. Is that the inn?"

"Yeah, where the Warwicks live," I said. "I'm almost done."

"Good. Harry and I are headed to bed. It's been a long day. Make sure you turn the lights out when you're done. And bed by ten, okay?"

"Okay."

Mom leaned over the table and put a finger on the first floor drawing. Her hands were rough from working with the cows and

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washing them so often, and the paper rasped as she touched it. “So that’s the kitchen now?” I had labeled each room and marked the dimensions.

“Uh-hunh. It’s pretty big.”

“Used to be bigger,” she said, surprising me. “Used to be a canning kitchen off the back, over here.” She pointed to the rear of the house. “And the tavern was in here.” The Warwick living room.

“You mean it was still an inn when you were a little girl?”

She smiled. “Even when I was a teenager. But the fire happened in the summer kitchen and part of the regular kitchen, and the inn closed up, long before I started dating your—” she coughed, “your father. So I can’t say I ever did spend much time there. Not after I was married, anyway.”

I found the page of measurement notes. “So Mom, what year was that fire anyway? How old were you then?”

She looked a little away from me, lost in her thoughts, and brushed one hand against her hair, pushing it back behind her shoulder. In the daytime she wore it in braids, pinned up, the gray and black braids circling her head and kept out of the way for baking or barn work. At night, when she sat with Harry, she took out the braids and brushed it all out. She looked just about exactly her age, I thought, forty-eight. I watched her remember and think.

“I guess I was twelve when the inn took fire,” she finally said.

I did the math quickly: “Nineteen seventy-five?” I wrote down the fact, to share with Thea tomorrow. “And did you, umm, did you used to explore it or anything, when you were a little girl?”

“Not me! Whenever I got away from the kitchen or the barn, it was the mountain I explored,” my mother emphasized. “Get me outdoors and give me a chance, and I was up that hill in a flash.”

“Oh yeah. Well, thanks, Mom.”

“Sure.” She turned toward the stairs, and I heard Harry already on his way up. Then she looked at me again. “I might

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have some souvenirs from the inn days, still, in the attic," she mused.

"Really? Mom, could I have them? It's for a history project Thea and I are doing!"

"I thought you were doing math?"

"Yeah, tonight it's math. But then we're doing a history project on her house, too." Careful to skirt the secret part, I said, "About the old days and the inn, you know?"

"Sure," she repeated. She yawned, long and wide. "Remind me Sunday afternoon. I'll see what I can find. Is that soon enough?"

I stood up and hugged her for an answer, and she rubbed my head, then mumbled, "G'night, sweetie. God bless. See you in the morning. Brush your teeth before you go to bed."

Nearly nine o'clock. I listened to her slow, heavy footsteps on the stairs, then the shuffles and bumps of Mom and Harry upstairs. Good thing my mother didn't explore the inn in the old days. Still, she knew more about the Thea's house than I'd realized. I wondered what else she might know that she'd never told me.

Calling Thea to tell her we'd have stuff from my mother would be cool. Not until morning, though. It was too late, and besides, Mom might overhear something about our discovery. I didn't want to share it. I stacked my pages carefully, just as Midnight, our mostly black cat, jumped onto the table and purred against my shoulder. He sniffed at the cake crumbs left in the bowl, took one delicately on his paw, and licked it off. I'd better wash my dish. Mom didn't like coming down to dirty dishes at breakfast time.

From my bookbag I pulled out the reading assignment: *Johnny Tremain*. You could tell the teachers had all gotten together on the assignments—this one, even though it was for English class, was set during the Revolutionary War, just as we were covering the same thing in History class. I didn't like the book much, but at least it was easy to read. I settled back at the kitchen table, with another glass of milk, and resolved to get through the next three chapters before going to take my bath.

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What would we read in English to go with the Civil War? The book list better include the Underground Railroad, I decided. Of course, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was on the list; that was the adventure book Miss Calkins had said we could pick if we wanted credit for a Civil War novel. Maybe I should ask Miss Calkins for the whole list in advance.

Even though I was alone in the kitchen, I didn't feel lonely. I had a new friend—maybe even a best friend. Mom and Harry made a few more bumps upstairs, then settled down.

And from the cluttered front of the refrigerator, photos of my older brothers Emerson, twenty-six, and Carl, twenty-five, grinned across at me. Just past the refrigerator, over the sideboard, in a dusty frame, my sister Alice looked serious in her graduation cap and gown, the only college graduate in our family. I did the math: She'd be thirty in less than two years. Too old to really share things like sisters should, I thought. Still, I wondered what it would be like if she ever came home again to visit.

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SATURDAY MORNING WAS cold. I woke up just before eight and knew I was being lazy—Mom and Harry always did the barn chores themselves on Saturday mornings to give Emerson a break. I didn't have to get up at five to do chores with them, but still, it wasn't fair if I just stayed in bed, not even doing homework or cooking or something.

So reluctantly, and already guilty about oversleeping, I shoved the blanket and quilt off me and pulled on yesterday's clothes from where I'd dropped them on the floor. Brr, they were cold. Jeans, t-shirt, sweatshirt. Bright sun above the curtain on the window lit some dusty spiderwebs caught on the jeans, and I brushed them off. Thinking of Thea's cellar and the hidden room made me smile.

In front of the wall mirror, I stopped for a moment to pull my brush through my hair. I leaned close to the mirror. "Shaw-nah," I purred at my image. Dark brown eyes fluttered back at me. I imagined some boy, not from the North Upton school but someone older, tall and moody and romantic, bending over to look into my eyes and saying he could look into them forever.

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“Shawww–nahh,” I stretched it out even further. At least I had a modern name, not like Alice or Emerson or Carl.

I sucked my cheeks in, as if I’d gone on a diet or been to some spa where they remade me. Cheekbones. I pushed against them to make the bones show more, and let my jaw drop just a bit, making my face longer. “That mysterious beauty with her dark deep eyes,” went the scene as I let it flow over a page in a magazine.

“Shaww–NAH!” came from the kitchen instead. Mom’s voice. “Are you up yet?”

“Coming,” I yelled, grabbing a pair of socks and hurtling into the hallway. “Just have to go to the bathroom first!”

“Plug the coffee in! And bring another roll of paper towels out to the barn, would you?” she called as the door slammed shut again, leaving a wave of chilly air that hissed down the hall at toes level.

In the bathroom with the brighter light, I could see two zits starting to swell in the crease between my nose and my cheek, red and hard. Ick. In another day or so, they’d look disgusting. I scrubbed hard at them to convince them to disappear, brushed my teeth, and pulled on the socks.

In the kitchen I plugged in the coffeemaker—Mom had already filled it—and stretched to grab a roll of paper towels from the top shelf of the pantry cupboard. My stomach growled as I stuffed my feet into my barn boots, better than my sneakers, which were crumpled and stiff from getting wet the night before. “Don’t go to work hungry,” I could hear Mom’s voice in my head, “always eat something before you go to the barn,” so I grabbed the first thing I saw available, a big blueberry muffin with a crunchy sugared top, stripping the muffin paper off it with a quick twist and chewing as I hurried down the slippery porch steps. Yumm.

Yesterday’s rain had left all the ground wet but the storm had vanished. A sharp wind and the blaze of blue sky with small clouds scudding across made this clearly a new weather day. Sun sparkled on the metal barn roof. I headed directly for

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the gray milkhouse door, partway open the way I knew it wasn't supposed to be. So I shoved it all the way shut behind me once I was inside.

I don't like the smell of the milkhouse: humid and thick with detergent smells and too much chlorine. And the rumbling refrigerator lines for the milk tank keep the little room itself hot and airless. But I love the smell of the barn. So I crossed the cement floor quickly to the inner door and moved with relief into the sawdust-and-cows aromas of the main barn.

Our barn is old, made so that every cow has a place to stand, with her head and neck caught in the dangling metal stanchions but her legs stamping and shuffling, tail swishing. You have to walk behind them and leave enough space so they won't kick, and so what comes out the back end into the gutter—cows poop and pee all the time—isn't going to splash you. That sounds gross, but it's under control: Our barn gets cleaned every day, morning and night, and the gutter-scraping chains carry the waste out into the manure pit. You've got to keep it clean if you want clean milk.

The stomping and complaining of forty cows filled the air. At the far end of the row the thump-pump of a milking machine clued me in on where Harry or Mom must be. I found them at side-by-side cows, each with a milking machine linked by one hose onto the steel vacuum pipe up above and its other hose connected to a low-hanging udder. The cows liked the feeling, the relief of having the milk pulled out of their swollen bags. Mom was just releasing the tit cups from her cow, a big black and white Holstein named Dora.

"Hand me the paper towels, honey," she called to me. "I'm out of them." I passed the roll to her, and she tore off a bunch that she stuffed in a back pocket, giving the rest of the roll to Harry. His cow was a coffee-colored Jersey, smaller and moving around a lot; he dodged her heavy hoof and slapped her backside, grunting at her to move back toward center.

"Thanks," Mom said as she slid the disinfectant dip onto and off each teat of her cow's udder and moved along to the

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last cow on the row. “And Shawna, you’ve got time to spread sawdust, haven’t you? Harry had to give a couple of injections, so we’re behind.” She nodded toward the sawdust cart. The thick handle of a scoop shovel stuck out of the mound of grainy cedar sawdust.

Shoot. I didn’t want to spend much time in the barn, really. But what could I say? Mom added, “There’s a pair of gloves on the other side.”

I shoved the cart along the walkway and around the end of the row. Sure enough, the other side of the row didn’t have fresh sawdust yet, although most of the space behind the cows was scraped clean of the night’s muck. So I dug the scoop into the cart and shoveled out a mound of sawdust, using a long steady swing to hurl it under the first cow’s stomach and udder, and more under her rear end. Her tail swished toward me but I ducked and moved to the next animal.

Harry spoke to Mom from the other side of the row. “Aren’t you going to tell her?”

“Tell me what?” I asked.

Mom laughed. “I’ll tell you, but you can’t go see until you finish the row, okay?”

“Okay—what?”

“Kittens! Four,” and she bent under the cow and pulled on each teat to get the last bit of milk into the milking cups before detaching them. “They’re over by the calves. In the old grain box.”

That was enough to speed me down the aisle with my sawdust, dipping and throwing as fast as I could. It didn’t really take long. I shoved the cart to one side of the big double doors, hung the scoop on the wall next to it, and bolted to the side part of the barn where half a dozen calves lay tethered. They all began to scramble to their feet and push at me as I came close—they wanted their bottles. I pushed them gently away from my legs, to get past them, and there, sure enough, was our biggest mama cat, the tortoiseshell one, curled inside the hay-filled box, with four tiny blind kittens nestled against her.

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Carefully, so the mama cat wouldn't jump out, I touched the hot little head of one baby. Then I pulled back and just watched. Each one of them was a miracle, a breathing, sleepy ball of fur with perfect tiny legs and the stump of a tail. The mama cat glared at me, then licked the kitten that I'd touched.

Thea. Wouldn't she want to see the new kittens? This was better than showing her just a barn full of cows, for sure! I went back to where Harry and Mom were still milking.

"Can I do homework across at Thea's after lunch? And then bring her over later on to see the kittens?"

"Sure, honey," Mom said right away. "You can bring her here for lunch first if you want, there's plenty. And you can make some brownies for a snack for later, too. But you'll have to help me clean the house first, Shawna. Why don't you head into the kitchen and mix up some pancake batter, so we can all have breakfast together in half an hour or so. There's time for a break before the milk truck comes."



After breakfast, Harry went back to the barn to clean out the milking lines and do the paperwork for the milk truck. Meanwhile, my mother and I swept and vacuumed and threw laundry into the laundry room. It went quickly like that, teamwork. Emerson phoned from town to say he was dropping off groceries, so we cleared out the fridge some, too. Using a mix and an extra pack of chocolate chips, I put together the brownies and started them baking, while Mom folded clean clothes.

"Tell me again what you want to know about the inn," Mom suggested. "What's your project about?"

"History. Like, who owned it and what happened there."

She nodded. "You mean who owned it before the Warwicks?"

I shook my head. "Further back than that, because we need to know about it in the really old days, the Civil War and before." I tried to remember what years that would be. "I guess eighteen

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hundred, maybe, until, well, close to nineteen hundred.” I knew that wasn’t exactly right but it ought to cover the time.

My mother looked doubtful. “I think it was always the Dearborn place until recently. I don’t know a lot about those days.” She picked up an armful of jeans and shirts. “Couldn’t you try the Historical Society? Down at the library?”

“Yes!” I jumped up and helped her with the rest of the pile of clothes. “That would be perfect! Can I go there now?”

The library was open Saturday mornings, but it closed at lunchtime. I needed to hurry. Luckily, Mom said she’d take the brownies out of the oven for me, if I’d just finish carrying the clean clothes to the bedrooms. I did, and tore out of the house.

Across the road, I knocked hard on the Warwicks’ door, and soon Thea and I were racing down the road to the library end of the village school building. The librarian, Mrs. Toussaint, let us in, handed us her bulky green cloth-bound copy of the town history, and then, from a folder marked “1800s,” pulled out a stack of old photographs. The fierce creases of her face softened as she spread the photos carefully on her desk and pushed her glasses up her nose.

“There!” Thea pointed to one of her house, with a sign attached that said “North Upton Inn.” In the lower corner someone had inked the year: 1852.

Four people stood stiffly on the porch in the photo, and the three of us, Thea and Mrs. Toussaint and I, stared at the faces, wondering who they all were. Suddenly I noticed something even more important, so important I could hardly speak. I pointed, not quite touching the photo, which Mrs. Toussaint protected with a quick gesture of her hand. But we all saw the same thing there.

From an upstairs window, a face, blurred by movement, looked down toward the front lawn of the inn. Even though it was blurred, the short curly hair and the darkness of the face were unmistakably a black person. I took a long breath, and Thea grabbed my hand.

“They were there!” she choked out in a hoarse whisper.

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Mrs. Toussaint clicked her tongue and pulled the photo back toward her. “Very observant of you both. I must say, I don’t think I ever noticed that face,” she mused, looking from Thea to me and back at the picture. “Of course, Barnet, over across the valley, had African-American people staying there in the Underground Railroad days. There’s even an Underground Railroad hiding place there, or so people claim. But North Upton? We should seek out confirming details from the town records before we attempt any conclusions, of course. But now that I think about it more ... ”

I stood completely still, waiting for Thea to let go of my hand, and waiting for Mrs. Toussaint’s next words. She finally said them:

“I suppose you’ll want to see the diary next, won’t you?”

Thea’s eyes were wide as she asked, “A girl’s diary? A girl who lived there?”

“No-o,” the librarian replied, smiling. “Not a girl’s diary. It’s the journal of Henry Dearborn. You know, the Dearborns who owned your house all those years. Sit down, both of you, and I’ll take the journal out of the case. Are your hands clean?”

We held up our hands to show her, as she stepped across the room to a glass case on a long table. I wanted to crowd up next to her, but instead I perched on the edge of a chair next to the big library desk, and Thea sat next to me. In a moment, a leather-wrapped book about six inches across, with a big tag, tied on with string, lay in front of us on the desk.

“Journal of Henry E. Dearborn, North Upton, January 1850 to November 1873,” I read aloud from the tag. “That’s a lot of years to put into one book.”

Mrs. Toussaint nodded. “Some years he hardly wrote in the book at all. And what he did write is small, so you’ll want a magnifying glass.” She handed one to Thea. “Don’t get your fingers on the glass, use the handle, please. The pages in the second half are the records of his finances at the inn, you’ll see—and I’ll get you my copy of the town tax records, too, showing his property and the furnishings each year.”

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While the librarian pulled out more bound books, Thea and I paged carefully through Henry Dearborn's journal. There were no "Dear Diary" parts at all, nothing about how he felt or who he met. Instead, I saw short descriptions of how many guests stayed in a week, and stagecoach arrivals. The thin scraggly handwriting, bunched up to crowd a lot onto each page, looked like a secret code all by itself. And abbreviations in all the sentences made it even harder to read.

Thea read out loud, guessing at some of the words: "Monday, February 15, four inches snow, ten degrees, four a.m. Fourteen for lunch, two roller teams. Twenty-seven in shared rooms, one private room of three ladies." She looked up at Mrs. Toussaint. "Roller teams? What's that?"

"Snow rollers."

"Oh, I know about them," I said, while Mrs. Toussaint pulled out more pictures to show Thea. "Instead of plowing the roads, they rolled the snow flat, right?"

"For the sleighs to travel on, that's correct," the librarian agreed.

Thea looked quickly at the pictures, nodded, and said, "But how old was this Henry Dearborn when he was writing in this book?"

"He was born in eighteen-twenty," came Mrs. Toussaint's answer. "So he was—"

"Thirty when he started this one," Thea calculated quickly. "Then I bet there's an earlier one, too."

"But not with his writing in it. His father kept the earlier one. Samuel Dearborn."

The desk grew crowded with books and pictures, as each time Thea asked a question, Mrs. Toussaint pulled out something more to show. I didn't ask questions. I took notes instead, as fast as I could.

"We need the part before the Civil War," I reminded Thea.

Mrs. Toussaint overheard. "The Civil War began in eighteen sixty-one," she pointed out.

I borrowed the journal book from Thea and turned to the

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pages in the back, the lists of numbers and abbreviations that told the business of the inn. And a moment later, I nudged Thea's elbow and, with a finger brushed across my lips to hint to her not to say anything out loud, I pointed to one list in particular: a list that looked an awful lot like what we'd copied down from the secret room in the basement of the Warwicks' house, that is, the Dearborn family's inn.

We looked at each other and just knew it together: This was it. This would let us solve the code from the secret room, for sure.

"Can we borrow this book?" Thea asked Mrs. Toussaint.

"No, dear—everything stays here at the Historical Society." Mrs. Toussaint nodded to emphasize her words, and her steel-rimmed glasses bounced where they hung from a ribbon against her chest. "Everything. So residents can all have access to it. But of course you can copy it down, just like Shawna is doing in her notebook, dear."

"She's Thea Warwick," I reminded Mrs. Toussaint. "It's about her house. Doesn't that make a difference?"

"Not from my point of view, dear. No matter whose house it is, we keep everything here, where we take proper care of it," the librarian announced firmly.

So that was that. I took notes like crazy, while Thea read lists and journal bits out loud to me for at least an hour more. My fingers started to cramp, and my stomach grumbled.

A big clock on Mrs. Toussaint's desk began to count out the time with a bell: Twelve rings. Noon. Mrs. Toussaint said, "Now girls, I'm afraid that's the end of today's open hours. You may come again next Saturday, and I'll keep these books and pictures set aside for you, so you can look at them right away when you come in. Will you both come back next Saturday?"

"Yes ma'am," I said right away, and we pulled our papers together, helped to stack the books, and stepped out of the back door of the schoolhouse, while the librarian finished locking up behind us.

"Come on," I told Thea, "it's time for lunch. We'd better go

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eat something. Hey, can we sort of change plans, can you come to my house for lunch?”

Right away, Thea said, “Yeah, sure. Just let me stop a moment to tell my mother, and I know she’ll say yes.”

“It’s because I have something to show you,” I said, thinking about the new kittens. “In the barn.” I didn’t say what, just grinned.

“Cool!”

We walked down the road together, talking about the journal and guessing about the coded lists, and I watched our feet scuff the yellow leaves together. Four shoes, two sets of feet, one friendship. No wonder the sunshine glowed so brightly in the red crowns of the autumn maples along our way.

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