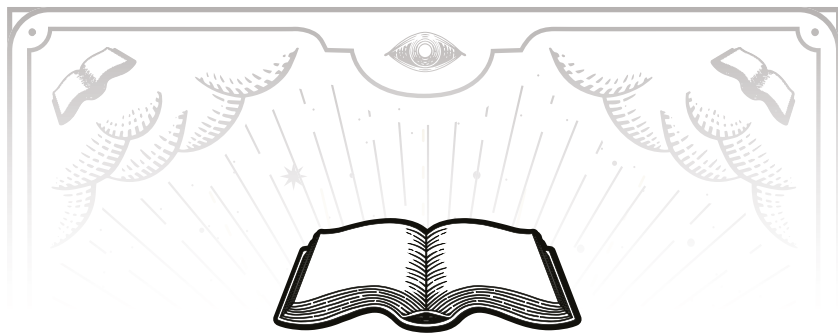




JACK'S ROOM

JENNIFER LISS



Chapter 1

LAUNDRY DUNGEON

Something chased Kai Parker into a dark room. He stumbled forward. His legs did not move nearly as quickly as he wanted them to. Just as the towering figure was about to reach him, the sound of his mom's voice ripped him from sleep.

"Time to get up," she said. "My goodness, it's stuffy in here." She opened a window in Kai's bedroom. Fresh air blew in. The sounds of the city street rose from eleven stories below.

Kai rubbed his face as the dream he had been having faded away. “Mom, it’s the first day of summer! Let me sleep.”

Mrs. Parker yanked the sheet off him. “You can sleep. Just not all day. I’m leaving for work. Will you switch the clothes from the washing machine to the dryer? Quarters are on the kitchen counter. After that, the summer day is all yours. Just be home by dinner.”

Kai dragged himself out of bed. Chores were not the first thing he wanted to do on summer break. Hopefully, that was not a sign of a boring summer ahead.

The laundry room was in the basement of the apartment building. Kai thought of the space as a dungeon. It was windowless and musty. One wall had a rusty old door. He didn’t know what was inside, and he didn’t want to. Kai always tried to avoid the basement. Once, he was sure he had heard rats scratching inside the walls.

Today he didn’t have a choice. Kai took the

elevator down to the empty laundry room. His mom had used the machine in the corner. It was by the creepy door.

Kai moved fast. He shoved the wet clothes into the dryer. When he pulled the quarters out of his pocket, one dropped onto the floor. It quickly rolled under the door.

“Of course this would happen,” Kai mumbled. He opened the door and found a deep closet. The dim light from the laundry room shined in. A few mops and old buckets lined the wall. Dusty cobwebs covered them. These supplies must have been abandoned years ago.

The building’s cleaning crew brought their own supplies. Kai had seen them unloading their stuff from a truck.

Kai ran his hand along the wall by the door. He couldn’t find a light switch. Dropping to his hands and knees, he searched for the quarter. Then he pushed aside a dusty mop and bucket. Hopefully, there weren’t any rats.

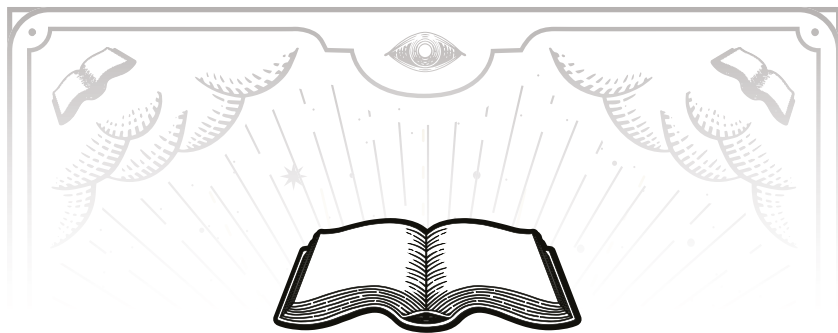
He was just about to give up when his fingers slid across the quarter. “Finally,” he said.

As Kai stood up, his toe nudged something hard on the floor. He crouched back down to investigate. Beneath where the mop had stood, there was a rusty trapdoor handle.

That didn't make any sense. The basement was the lowest room in the building. There shouldn't be anything below it.

Unsure but curious, Kai forgot about the rats. The laundry was a distant memory.

He gripped the handle to the trapdoor and pulled.



Chapter 2

TRAPDOOR

Hinges creaked. The door opened to a set of stairs. Kai couldn't see a thing in the darkness. Curiosity burned through any hesitation he felt. He had to know what was down there.

Then he remembered his chores. Leaving the trapdoor open, Kai ran back into the laundry room. He slid quarters into the coin slot next to the dryer.

Now he was ready to check out the trapdoor. But he needed a flashlight. For a moment, he thought about racing back to his apartment. Then a red case

on a shelf caught his eye. Sure enough, it was an emergency kit containing a pocket light.

“Perfect!” Kai said.

Back in the closet, he flicked on the flashlight and shined it into the trapdoor. The beam illuminated a light switch at the top of the staircase. Kai flipped on the switch. He could see that the stairs led into some sort of room.

Pausing, Kai wondered if he should go down there. The closet door hadn't been locked. There wasn't a lock on the trapdoor either. No one was trying to keep people out.

Kai slowly made his way down the stairs. Suddenly, there was a loud slam from above. It was the closet door shutting. Kai let out a little yelp and jumped down the remaining stairs. Then he landed on the floor of the hidden room. He wondered if the closet door had shut on its own. But what he saw in the room quickly grabbed his attention. His jaw dropped as he looked around.

The room was furnished and clean. Against one wall was a neatly made bed with a striped green bedspread and one pillow. An orange lamp sat on a nightstand next to the bed. In a corner was a small wooden table with one place mat and a chair.

A big television sat on the floor. It had two knobs and an antenna. Kai's grandma had one just like it. He was always telling her that she needed a new one. Next to the TV was a bookshelf. It contained books and a couple of decks of cards.

Tacked on the wall was a poster of a musician. Kai recognized him but couldn't remember his name. On top of a small dresser was a record player, some records, and an old radio. Whoever lived there must have shopped at the same place as his grandparents.

All the items in the room were perfectly arranged. It felt like a museum, but it wasn't musty. This place smelled like lemons. It reminded him of the cleaner his mom used. The objects were old, but familiar. Kai had to fight the urge to touch everything.

Stronger than that desire was a fear about the closet door upstairs. Why had it slammed shut? Kai didn't know how he would get out if it was locked.

He ran up the stairs. The room would have to wait. Kai told himself that he could return at any time. He flipped off the lights, emerged from the trapdoor, and closed it behind him. Shining the flashlight on the closet door, he reached for the doorknob.

Hopefully, it would open.

JACK'S ROOM

Just when Kai thinks he will have to endure a boring summer, he stumbles upon a mysterious room. Kai and his unlikely friend Tiana go on a quest to figure out the story behind it. Their hunt for the truth will lead them down a winding path. What secrets hide at the end?



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