



ONE

“You’re killing me!” I screamed.

My shouts made the grip grow tighter. I struggled to breathe, but my ribs had no room to expand. “Let go.”

“But I’ll miss you so much, Alex,” Mom said.

I glanced past her at Dad, who offered me nothing more helpful than a shrug. If shrugs could talk, this one would have said, *You’re on your own.*

And right past Dad, my cousin Sarah, who had just gotten out of the car, also shrugged. But the message from her shoulders, as they brushed against the ends of

her brown hair, was more like, *I'm glad your parents brought us here and not mine.*

I could understand how she felt. Both our moms loved hugs and hated good-byes.

“It’s just for one week,” I said, using the last air in my lungs.

That didn’t help. As Mom clamped down, I could feel my belly button pressing against my backbone.

“For goodness’ sakes,” Grandma said, coming down the front-porch steps of her house. “Stop



trying to squeeze him in half. He's already enough of a handful to keep an eye on. There's no way I'll watch two of him—even if each one is just half the size.”

Mom loosened her grip enough so I could escape.

“Hi, Grandma,” I said. I spun a safe distance from Mom's arms. “We're here.”

Grandma shot me a sharp look. If looks could talk, this one would have said, *Don't waste my time stating the obvious. Of course you're here.* But then the glare softened, and she said, “Glad you kids came for a visit. I can't wait for you to see the new place. Take your bags upstairs. There's a guest room at each end of the hall.”

I inhaled a deep breath of the fresh country air, then walked over to the car.

“What a great house,” Sarah said. “I'll bet it's haunted.” She flashed me a grin.