

Vanished!

By PapaV

Chapter 1

The Hole in the Floor

"Where's Bear? I can't find Bear!" yelled Kristen from the top of the stairs.

"Look under your bed!" yelled her father from the bottom of the stairs. "And stop yelling!"

Kristen frowned. Her father was always telling her to look under her bed when she couldn't find something. That was because under her bed was where she put everything—especially when she cleaned her room. She stomped back into her room, jumped up on her bed, and closed her eyes to think. She did her best thinking that way. She couldn't remember the last time she had seen Bear . . . Brookfield Zoo? The Field Museum? The Adler Planetarium? Maybe he was under her bed.

Hanging over the side of her bed like a bat, she shined her mini-flashlight underneath, but she couldn't see far. Clothes and toys blocked her view. Well, she had cleaned her room that morning.

She wiggled under the bed, and began feeling around with her hands on the wood floor. First her fingers touched what felt like a doll's hair. Then they brushed what was definitely a sneaker. She reached a little farther, and suddenly, her hands weren't touching anything at all. Instead, they hovered over a large, round hole in the floor.

Kristen gasped. Then she groaned. Her parents weren't going to like this, not one bit.

She could see light coming from the hole, so she scooted forward on her stomach and peeked over the edge, expecting to see her dad sitting in his armchair in the family room downstairs. That was what should have been under her bedroom floor.

But that wasn't what Kristen saw.

Instead she saw what looked like a glowing golden path, surrounded by darkness. That seemed strange, and definitely something she should tell her parents about. But when she tried to back away from the hole, something tugged on Kristen's shirt and held her in place. She couldn't see what it was, but the more Kristen pulled against it, the stronger the tug grew. Before she knew it, she was sliding over the edge of the hole. She flung her hand out, trying to grab hold of anything she could.

But all she grabbed was a fistful of clothes. And then she was falling!

Kristen landed on the path with a soft bounce. The cloud of clothes that had fallen with her whirled away into the darkness, as did her flashlight. Then, with a soft hum, the path beneath her began to move, slowly at first, then faster, like a train speeding away from a railroad station.

Scrambling to her feet, Kristen yelled, "Mom! Dad! Help!" Only echoes replied. She ran back along the path toward the hole, but the faster she ran, the faster the path carried her away. It was like trying to run up a down escalator while wearing lead boots. She couldn't run fast enough. The hole became smaller and smaller, and then disappeared.

Kristen sat down and cried with frustration. She tried to calm herself by breathing slowly and deeply, the way her mom had taught her to do whenever Kristen was angry or upset.

She crawled to one edge of the path to see what lay beyond it. Looking over the edge, she gasped. The path was only as thick as a tabletop, and there was nothing underneath supporting it! Nothing existed but the glowing path... and the darkness!

Suddenly the path began to twist and turn violently, and a high-pitched whine filled the air. Looking for something—anything—to hang onto, Kristen flipped over on her stomach, stretched out her arms, and grabbed the edges of the path. The path dove and climbed through the air like a roller coaster that had come alive but couldn't make up its mind where it wanted to go, or how fast it wanted to get there. Finally it straightened out and settled into a quiet, smooth pace, and Kristen relaxed her grip. Although she still worried that the path might suddenly buckle and spill her into the darkness, its soft, steady hum offered her a little comfort. Nevertheless, she would have felt much safer with Bear by her side.

Moments later, other paths appeared. They glowed like neon signs: bright reds, deep blues, and brilliant greens. When several paths joined Kristen's path like merging highways, she discovered that she was no longer alone. In front of her rode toys of all kinds: dolls, stuffed animals, toy soldiers, and in the distance, she thought she saw teddy bears.

Kristen wobbled to her feet to see if Bear was among them, but froze open-mouthed as a stuffed tiger scrambled to its feet and stretched as if waking from a long nap. It began pacing up and down, sniffing the air, and flicking its tail from side to side. No way, thought Kristen, this isn't possible . . . stuffed toys aren't alive!

Then the tiger walked right up to her. It was missing its right eye, and stuffing peeked out of several split seams. Carefully, Kristen reached out and patted its nose. In response, the tiger curled up, closed its one eye, and purred back to sleep.

Kristen looked curiously at the other toys near her. All were damaged in some

way: torn ears, missing buttons, or split seams.

Soon twilight replaced the darkness, and revealed a sky filled with stars, gray moons, and ringed planets. Kristen felt like she was sailing through a gigantic planetarium show. She was excited, but also afraid. Everything around her was so immense, and she was so small.

After hours, or maybe only minutes, the path plunged into a bank of cotton-white clouds. Kristen smiled as she felt a warm, gentle breeze on her face, carrying smells that reminded her of the ocean, of the times she had hunted for seashells with her grandma.