

UNLOCK THE MAGIC OF THE THORNE ROOMS. . . .

# THE SIXTY-EIGHT ROOMS



..MARIANNE..  
MALONE

A CHAPTER SAMPLE

UNLOCK THE MAGIC OF THE THORNE ROOMS....



EVERYONE IN CHICAGO knows about the Thorne Rooms—sixty-eight miniature rooms housed deep within the Art Institute of Chicago. But no one knows just how magical the rooms are—no one, that is, until Ruthie discovers an enchanted key that allows her to explore the rooms' secrets. Ruthie never imagined a field trip could end up like this!

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KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK . . .

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## A BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE FIELD TRIP

**G**ETTING UP IN THE MORNING was always a challenge for Ruthie. It wasn't waking up that was difficult—it was getting out of bed. She had to scrunch down to the end of her bed and climb out through the narrow opening between her desk and her sister's dresser. Then she had to be careful where she placed her feet on the floor because the under-the-bed storage bin for her summer clothes didn't quite fit under her twin bed. It stuck out just enough to trip her or stub a toe. The other difficult part was to avoid waking up her sister so Ruthie could claim the bathroom first. Claire was older and seemed to need much more time in the bathroom before school—or before going anywhere—than Ruthie did. Ruthie didn't understand why that was but it was an observation she had made many, many times.

Claire was nice enough—not horrible like some siblings

Ruthie had heard of. But she took up so much time and space. Mostly space. In their little room, Claire's stuff dominated by far. She had a computer and a big printer on her already larger desk, all her sports equipment, lots of clothes piled everywhere and a growing mountain of college brochures, SAT study guides and application information. Claire was a junior in high school and starting the process of applying to college. Ruthie counted the days till her sister went away to school. Then she would have her own room.

This morning Ruthie woke up first and made her way through the small path in their bedroom to the doorway without waking Claire. She looked down the hall—great luck! The bathroom was empty and all hers. Among the kids at her school she was the only one whose family shared one bathroom.

Ruthie turned on the shower first to let the water warm up, took her one bottle of shampoo off the wire rack and tried to find a space for it on the shower ledge next to Claire's and their mom's gazillion hair care products. It wasn't easy.

As the warm water ran over her back she stood there for a moment, mulling the fact that the shower was just about the only place in her apartment where she could be alone and think privately. She envisioned the day ahead of her, the field trip and what the chances were of something cool happening today. *Why not today?* After a really exciting or unusual thing happens, do people look back and say, "I thought something would happen today"? Probably not.

*But why not?* Ruthie wondered. *Don't people ever have a feeling, a sign that something great will happen?* Her time alone was interrupted when the door to the bathroom opened, not once but three times.

From behind the map-of-the-world shower curtain she heard her dad say, "Sorry, Ruthie, I'm just looking for a book I thought I left in here last night."

"Dad, please!" Ruthie said.

"Don't worry, I can't see anything! Now, where did I put it?" He closed the door. *Sheesh!*

A minute later it was her mom. "Ruthie, have you seen your father's book on American history?"

"Mom, do you mind? No, I haven't. He already asked me."

"Well, don't take too long in the shower. Your sister needs to get going."

Right on cue, Claire came in and started brushing her teeth.

"Claire, can't I have any privacy?"

"Oh, Ruthie. Don't be a prude. Hurry up, okay?"

*Six hundred and thirty-five days till she goes to college,* Ruthie groaned to herself. *An eternity!*

"Hey, Ruthie! Wait up!" Jack Tucker yelled as he slid down a patch of ice on the sidewalk outside their school.

"Do you have your permission slip?" Ruthie asked.

"Yup. Right here," he said, patting his pocket. "I almost forgot it, though! Again!" Jack laughed.

Jack had been Ruthie's best friend for two years in a row. Sometimes she wondered why. Most of the boys in her class had other boys for best friends and most of the girls had other girls. Maybe it was because they were such opposites. Jack's mother said the two of them were like complementary colors on the color wheel—colors like red and green that naturally go together. Jack had the kind of personality that could make interesting and unusual things happen and that fascinated Ruthie. Unlike him, she felt as if she was always watching and waiting for things to happen. Her mother said it was a birth-order trait. All Ruthie knew was that she hoped something interesting would happen to her *sometime* in her life and that she wouldn't have to wait forever.

Ruthie and Jack were in the sixth grade at Oakton, a private school in Chicago. Ruthie had been going there since second grade, when her mom got a job teaching French and Spanish in the upper grades. It was a big deal to get to go there. Her mom used to teach in the public schools like her dad, but her current job at Oakton enabled Ruthie and her sister to go for free. Her mom often described Oakton as a mini United Nations. Ruthie's class makeup represented every continent (except Antarctica, as Jack always pointed out). Even their teacher, Ms. Biddle, had an interesting background; she told lots of stories about her mother, who was from Nigeria, and her father, who came from England. Compared to Ms. Biddle and so

many of her classmates, Ruthie thought her own family background pretty drab.

As far as Ruthie knew, she and Jack were the only scholarship students in their class. His mom was an artist and they definitely weren't rich. He had won a brainiac scholarship two years ago but Ruthie didn't think he was all that smart—he could never remember things like permission slips and homework assignments.

“If you hadn't called me this morning to remind me, I'd be spending the day in the library—again!”

“Isn't your mom coming to chaperone?”

“Yeah, but she's gonna meet us at the museum. What'd you bring for lunch?”

“Tuna. Boring,” Ruthie said flatly.

“Look what I have.” Jack pulled out a beautiful, shiny black box from his backpack. Inside were little compartments filled with cool stuff to eat: Chinese party mix, sushi rolls, M&M's, miniature chocolate chip cookies and a couple of handfuls of tortilla chips. “It's called a bento box. One of my mom's friends just came back from a trip to Japan and brought it for us. It's how Japanese kids carry their lunch, I think.” He handed her some M&M's.

Jack closed the bento box and reached into his pocket. “And I found all this change under some parking meters on the way to school this morning. Two dollars and fifty cents!” Jack said, demonstrating his knack for finding money and useful junk. Once again, Ruthie thought, Jack had turned lunch into an interesting event. The thing

about Jack was that everyone else thought he was interesting too. Ruthie imagined that if some other kid brought a bento box to school, people would think he was weird. Certainly she herself couldn't get away with doing anything too different. But somehow Jack could. He was just that kind of guy. Lucky.

Today would be a pretty good day, Ruthie thought as the class rode on the bus to the Art Institute. No tests. No boring assemblies. No educational films. It was cold out but sunny. And Ruthie liked going to the Art Institute. There were always lots of people walking around, but it hardly ever felt crowded. Each room seemed to feed into the next and she could never quite remember if she'd been in one room before or not. Every corner felt different—like an endless maze.

When they arrived at the museum it was just opening, and Jack's mother, Lydia, was there waiting for the group. Ruthie thought she was very pretty and young-looking. She dressed young: jeans, tall boots, a cool sweater, long earrings. Ruthie's mom didn't dress like that. Her mom wore "serious" clothes.

Ms. Biddle introduced them to the museum guide who would be leading the tour. They were studying Africa, so the tour was of the African art collection. There were a lot of scary and weird masks, sculpted pots and oddly shaped headdresses. Some of it was funny to Ruthie. She especially liked the animal sculptures.

“What do you think, Ruthie?” Ms. Biddle asked her when the tour was over and they were instructed to (a) answer some questions on a worksheet and (b) make a sketch of one of the objects in the cases.

“It’s okay, Ms. Biddle. I like this one,” Ruthie said as she drew the outline of a large animal head with five-foot antlers and shells for eyes.

“Me too.” Ms. Biddle smiled at her.

At lunchtime the class was herded downstairs to the children’s galleries and education center, where there was a room for eating lunch. Ruthie sat next to Jack and watched as everyone came over and oohed and aahed about Jack’s bento box.

“Tight!” said Ben Romero, the coolest kid in the class.

“Where did you buy that?” asked Kendra Connor, the girl in their class who had everything.

Jack’s mother sat with the other two parents and Ms. Biddle, paying only partial attention to the kids. Jack was nice enough to trade some Chinese party mix for half of Ruthie’s tuna sandwich. She had a health-food granola bar for dessert, so he gave her a few more M&M’s. When Jack’s mother saw him putting money in the vending machine to buy a soft drink, she rushed over to him. Ruthie couldn’t hear what they were saying, but for a minute it seemed pretty intense.

“Your mom didn’t want you drinking soda?” Ruthie asked when he came back to the table.

“Nah, she just thought I’d borrowed money from

someone and she didn't want me to do that," he answered with a shrug.

"What's wrong with borrowing drink money?"

Jack paused before he answered. "I guess she's really worried about money right now. Our rent is due and her paintings aren't selling very well."

Ruthie thought about that for a minute. "Oh," was her first reply. She knew Jack and his mom didn't have much money, but she hadn't realized that it was serious.

"My parents always worry about money too," she offered. As she chewed her granola bar she thought about Jack's apartment and how much she liked it. It wasn't really an apartment; it was a big, open L-shaped space, with living areas built in one leg of the L and his mom's studio around the corner in the other leg. They called it a loft. The building had been an old furniture factory and now all the tenants were artists. A large industrial elevator took visitors to their floor—Jack worked the controls himself. Some of his mom's artist friends had helped build the rooms: a big kitchen area, two bedrooms and two bathrooms. The sinks and bathtubs and kitchen cabinets were all salvaged from other buildings that had been torn down. The windows were extra tall, and every room had views of the city. The floors were beat-up and scarred and the radiators banged. It was glorious. Whenever Ruthie entered the space through the heavy metal factory door, she felt a sense of endless possibilities. After all, Jack's mom had created a home out of something completely

un-homelike. Ruthie's own family's apartment was predictable. There were probably thousands just like it in the city. But Jack's was one of a kind!

"Okay, class. May I have your attention?" Ms. Biddle called out to everyone when lunch was over. "I was very pleased with your behavior this morning, so as a special reward—after you've all cleared your tables and made sure we won't be leaving anything behind—we will visit the Thorne Rooms—"

Before she could finish her sentence the class applauded and cheered, saying, "Yes!" and "Thank God, no more boring stuff!"

"I've always wanted to see them," Ruthie said to Jack as she threw away her lunch bag.

"You mean you've never been to the Thorne Rooms?" he asked, astonished. "I thought everyone had!"

"Well, not me. My parents say, 'Why would you go to see some dollhouse rooms when you could see Monet or Picasso?'"

"Because they're cool," Jack responded. This view seemed to be held by her entire class as they hurried to gather their things and clean up. Ms. Biddle reminded them to stay together in groups of at least two and not to stray from the class. It was understood that Jack and Ruthie would be partners.

Ruthie was not prepared for what she was about to see—or

for how she would react. She entered the exhibition space, Gallery 11. Unlike all the other galleries in the museum, it was completely carpeted, so the sound of the crowds was muffled. Three of her classmates were already running around and calling out to one another. She was curious as to why these girls, who usually acted very cool, seemed so openly enthusiastic about this exhibit. In an instant she knew why.

In front of her, set into the walls at eye level, she saw the most amazing rooms she had ever seen in her life—better than any crummy old dollhouse by far. Looking through the glass fronts at these rooms (they were each about the size of two or three shoe boxes), Ruthie couldn't get over how realistic they were—like enchanted little worlds. Some had high ceilings and elaborate woodwork, with finely carved furniture. Some looked like medieval castles; others looked cozy and inviting. There were miniature paintings, carpets, toys, books and musical instruments. Many of the rooms had doors through which you could peer into small side rooms and hallways. She could even see out the windows to street scenes and gardens complete with trees and flowers, or to painted landscapes beyond.

She looked at twenty or so rooms, thoroughly awestruck. Then she came to a portrait of the woman who had created these rooms. Her name was Mrs. Narcissa Thorne and she looked very posed and formal, like some of the women whose portraits hung in other parts of the museum. The wall label explained that Mrs. Thorne had loved collecting

miniatures as a child and had decided to create replicas of historic rooms after she had grown up and married. Ruthie read that everything in the rooms was made on a scale of one inch to one foot and that Mrs. Thorne had wanted every detail to be perfect, from the knobs on the doors to the candles in the candlesticks. She had hired skilled craftsmen to help her.

Ruthie continued along, looking at all the European Rooms, which were numbered E1 to E31, and then starting the American section, which was numbered A1 to A37. All together, there were sixty-eight rooms. She saw rooms that looked like simple houses from colonial times, and lavish rooms from plantations like those she'd seen in her school-books. The perfection of each tiny object made her feel as if she could actually live in these rooms. Ruthie had become so absorbed that she was unaware of everyone else around her—until she vaguely realized that Jack was talking to her.

“When I’m rich, I think I’ll build a castle! But with an electronic game room and pool tables! What’s your favorite, Ruthie? . . . Ruthie?”

She simply couldn’t talk.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you?” Jack asked. But he wasn’t too concerned about her and ran ahead, saying, “I wonder how they’ve got these installed.” Ruthie was relieved. She wanted to enjoy this moment all by herself.

What she would give to be able to live in any one of these rooms! And these were copies of real rooms of real people long ago. As she looked into a room with a tall

canopy bed, she wondered what kind of girl had slept in it. If she had a room like that—*all to myself*, Ruthie thought—how different her life would be. She would have all the comfort and privacy she needed to make extraordinary plans that matched such wonderful surroundings. Room after room filled Ruthie’s head with similar feelings.

One room had a fancy stone bathtub sunk right in the middle of the floor; who lived like that? Another room was devoted solely to a grand, curving staircase. Next she saw a music room with a perfect miniature piano and a delicately made harp. How had they made the strings so fine? Doors with tiny hinges opened up to the most beautiful garden, complete with a fountain and birds in the trees. After that was a library filled with leather-covered books—her father would love that one.

By now Jack had made his way out of the exhibition and was looking to see if there was anything else he might be interested in. As Ruthie had often noticed, he never let grass grow under his feet. She stepped around the corner, near the last few rooms, where she could see Jack’s mom at the entrance to the Thorne Rooms. She had struck up a conversation with a guard, and Ruthie could hear them talking and laughing.

“Jack, this is Mr. Bell,” she said, introducing him to the museum guard. Mr. Bell was fairly tall and very lean, with close-cut black hair flecked with lots of gray at his temples. It was difficult to tell his age; he appeared older than Lydia but not *old* old, as Ruthie and Jack often described people. They both found it hard to guess grown-ups’ ages

precisely. Mr. Bell had a kind face, and the lines around his eyes showed that he smiled a lot, but there was also a kind of unhappy look in them.

“Hi,” Jack replied, holding out his hand to shake. Sometimes he had really good manners. “Do you know how they made the lighting work in those rooms? Are they all connected in the back? Are you the guy who takes care of them?” Jack rattled off questions.

“Well, I’m not the curator in charge but I am the senior staff member down here and oversee the maintenance of the rooms. They’re one of our most popular exhibits,” Mr. Bell said. “In answer to your question, they are all connected—there’s a small corridor behind them for access. You passed by doors in there and probably didn’t notice.”

“Could you show me?” Jack was never shy about asking for something.

“Sure, I can show you,” Mr. Bell answered. “Follow me.” He led Jack and his mom back into the exhibition; to the left there was a small alcove with a door, much closer to where Ruthie stood looking at a Japanese room.

“So that’s how you get back there?” Jack asked.

“That’s right. But we don’t have reason to go back there very often. The rooms don’t require very much maintenance, just an occasional dusting or a new lightbulb.”

“Can I look?” Jack asked eagerly.

“Jack, I’m sure Mr. Bell can’t open that door for museum visitors!” Lydia exclaimed.

“I don’t believe I’ve been asked before.” Mr. Bell seemed

to be having fun as he looked around to make sure there wasn't a large crowd of kids nearby. The other guard was around the corner, out of eyeshot. Mr. Bell pulled his key ring out of his pocket. It held a mixture of keys: home, car and about three or four clearly labeled *AIC*, with a different number on each. The door itself had no knob and could be opened only with a key. "C'mere," Mr. Bell said somewhat slyly as he put the key in the lock and opened the door a crack. He had a twinkle in his eye. "Take a peek."

As Jack peered in, Mr. Bell turned his attention back to Lydia and explained that the doors were always kept locked even though the museum wasn't really worried about theft. "Nobody has ever tried to steal anything from these rooms. Unlike the artwork upstairs, these rooms are only valuable all together. No one would steal just a single item. Besides, someone would have a hard time getting their hands through the small openings in the back. We have another set of keys to open the glass windows from the front when repairs have to be made."

While Mr. Bell continued to talk to Jack's mom, Ruthie watched as Jack took the opportunity to slip just inside the door to the corridor. If Jack was expecting to see something spectacular he was disappointed. There were only some cleaning supplies, a chair, some stacked boxes and beyond those a narrow corridor dimly lit by the light coming from the back of the room displays. It looked like the backstage area of a theater. He came out again. His mom and Mr. Bell hadn't stopped their conversation and

didn't even seem to notice that Jack had gone in and out of the corridor.

"That was neat. Thanks," he said.

"Lucky!" was Ruthie's somewhat frustrated reply when Jack came over to her and told her what he'd seen.

"C'mon. Maybe you can look too," he said, pulling at her sleeve. By now most of their class was nearly finished viewing all sixty-eight rooms and was congregating out in the hall near the entrance.

Jack led her back over to the alcove where the two grown-ups still stood chatting.

"This is my friend Ruthie. Can she look too?" Jack asked without a second's hesitation.

"I can't be showing your whole class, now can I?" Mr. Bell replied at first. Then he observed Ruthie's disappointed face. Glancing around to see that most everyone in the exhibit had moved on, he added, "Well . . . Ruthie, is it? I suppose one more look won't hurt. But just a real quick one." He had not yet relocked the door, so as he stood facing out into the gallery, he reached behind him. With a subtle movement he opened the door.

Ruthie couldn't help feeling a little let down by what she saw—kind of like how she'd felt the first time she saw *The Wizard of Oz* and Toto pulled back the curtain so that everyone saw the mechanism that controlled the wizard. It spoiled the experience in a way, even though she knew that this corridor had to exist and that ordinary lightbulbs must create the "sunlight" for the tiny rooms. She liked the front view so much more.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Mr. Bell said as he walked a few feet away to gently stop a young child with very sticky fingers from leaving fingerprints all over the glass windows of the rooms.

Ruthie’s eyes had barely adjusted to the dim light of the corridor, but Jack, in that same minute and a half, had found something on the floor in the darkened corner behind a stack of boxes and stashed it in his pocket.

“Jack!” Lydia said in a loud whisper. “Come out of there. You were only supposed to look!” Jack dutifully obeyed her.

Ruthie opened her mouth to form the question “What did you find?” but Jack shot her a quick look that said, *Don’t ask me now!* The two of them stepped out of the alcove and into the main space in front of Mr. Bell and Lydia. Jack closed the door behind them.

“You know, my little girl used to come back here and do her homework after school when she was young—younger than the two of you. She used a box as a desk. She’s all grown up now. I’ve been working here for that long!”

“Thank you very much for letting us take a look,” Ruthie said.

“Yeah—that was great!” Jack added enthusiastically.

Mr. Bell smiled and winked at the two of them. He reached out to shake their hands and then Jack’s mother’s hand as well.

“I really enjoyed our conversation. I hope we’ll bump into each other again soon,” she said to him.

“The pleasure was mine,” he answered.

“Okay, you two, back to the group,” Lydia declared. The rest of the class had already assembled at the entrance to the exhibit.

“Wait till you see what I found,” Jack said under his breath to Ruthie.

“What? More money?”

“Better!”

“There you two stragglers are!” Ms. Biddle scolded, coming around the corner toward them. “Next time keep with the group, okay?”

“Sorry!” Jack said with a smile.

“Well, all’s well that ends well,” Ms. Biddle answered, smiling back. No one ever stayed mad at Jack when he smiled at them. Ruthie thought that Jack was really smiling about the fact that he had some newfound treasure in his pocket—and it was something he didn’t seem to want anyone else to see. That was how she knew it must be something fantastic.

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Mrs. James Ward Thorne, American, 1882–1966, E-24: French Salon of the Louis XVI Period, c. 1780, c. 1937, Miniature room, mixed media, Interior: 15 x 20 1/2 x 17 in., Gift of Mrs. James Ward Thorne, 1941.1209, The Art Institute of Chicago.

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Summary: Ruthie thinks nothing exciting will ever happen to her until her sixth-grade class visits the Art Institute of Chicago, where she and her best friend Jack discover a magic key that shrinks them to the size of gerbils and allows them to explore the Thorne Rooms—the collection of sixty-eight miniature rooms from various time periods and places—and discover their secrets.

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