



YOU **SOLVE** THE MYSTERY

The background of the cover is a dark, moody illustration. It shows the silhouette of a two-story cabin with a chimney, set against a dark, textured background. Bare, leafless trees are silhouetted against the sky, and a single bright star is visible. A window on the right side of the cabin is illuminated from within, showing a warm yellow light. The title 'THE EMPTY CABIN' is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the center of the image.

# THE EMPTY CABIN

*A CHOOSE YOUR PATH MYSTERY*

**DEB MERCIER**

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# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As you read this book, you'll sometimes be asked to jump to a distant page. Please follow these instructions. Sometimes you'll be asked to choose between two or more options. Decide which you feel is best, and go to the corresponding page. (Be careful: Some options will lead to disaster.) Finally, if a page offers no instructions or choices, simply go to the next page.

Along the way, look for suspects (people who might have committed a crime) and clues. You'll know when you've found an important clue *because it will look like this*. And you'll know when you're on a page that eliminates a suspect because you will see a magnifying glass in the bottom corner, just like the one below.

There are six suspects to find. One of them is behind the evil scheme. So keep track of all the suspects and all the clues because you'll need them to solve this mystery! A good way to do that is by creating a grid (like the one shown on page 7) on a blank piece of paper.

List every suspect, and write down any clues about them. Then cross out their names when you find proof they didn't do it.

**GO TO THE NEXT PAGE.**





# **SATURDAY**

## **8:03 A.M.**

You'll never admit it to your parents, but you actually like delivering fresh towels to the cabins. You've taken on more responsibility at your family's summer resort, and it means you have more freedom—and more money.

Your family owns the rustic resort. You, your mom, and your dad live and work here every summer. Your seasonal home is attached to a massive garage. Inside the garage is a storage room that's filled with pretty much everything you need to keep the resort running.

The storage room door creaks as you open it. The floor-to-ceiling shelves in this room are piled high with cleaning supplies, tools, linens, and plenty of toilet paper. The nearest town is 30 miles away—and 20 of those miles are on a winding gravel road. So running out of anything is a big deal.

You grab a large stack of towels and head back out to the garage. Parked next to the supply closet is Stanley, the resort's trusty electric golf cart. (You're not sure where the name came from—probably some book your dad read.) You fill two laundry baskets in Stanley's small trailer with fresh-smelling towels.

The cart's tires crunch over pebbles on the cement driveway. You hit the smooth, hard-packed trail leading into the forest. If you go straight, you'll end up at the Big Cabin, a massive building meant to house multiple families who wish to stay together. No one is staying there this week, which is no surprise. This far north, summer's opening weeks are still chilly.

You take a left on the trail, toward the lake. The trail slopes downward, so you ease your foot off the pedal to coast.

Sunlight dapples the trail while birds chatter and flit above. A sound like ocean waves washes over the trees as a breeze pushes through the leaves. And then there's a deer, right on the trail, staring at you—and not moving. You slam your foot on the brake, and Stanley shudders to an abrupt stop. The trailer thumps against the back of the cart, but that's nothing compared to how hard your heart is pounding. You let out a shaky breath and look

up. The deer is gone. You don't even hear its footsteps on the forest floor. That's one way to start the morning.

You glance back at the trailer; the laundry baskets are still intact. The towels are rumpled, maybe, but nothing a bit of refolding won't fix.

Thankfully, the rest of the short drive is uneventful. The trail leaves the trees behind, opening into a wide, grassy clearing where the rest of the cabins are found. You stop beside Cabin #3, a two-bedroom unit attached to its mirror image: Cabin #2. The two units share one long porch out front.

You pause on the porch and gaze down toward the lake. The water looks perfect today. A little off to your left is the beach (which needs raking) and the rack of kayaks and canoes (which need wiping). The two docks are maintenance-free, thanks to the fake owls sitting at the ends of them—although you've noticed a particularly bold seagull sitting on the owls' heads now and then. You make a mental note to check the docks.

Your parents have drilled it into your brain that first impressions matter with a resort like yours. With guests arriving later today, everything needs to be ready. You unclip the bundle of keys attached to your belt loop and unlock *Cabin #3*.

Your mom has already been here. A vase of fresh wildflowers sits on the small kitchen table, and a sign (written by your dad because your mom's writing is atrocious) reads, "Welcome *Anabelle Larson* and *Henry Larson*. Enjoy your stay!"

You pull out a notebook and jot down their names and cabin number. This helps you to keep the guests straight.

A quick trip out to the golf cart and back, and the towels are delivered. You've been watching videos on how to fold the towels into cool animal shapes, but yours so far have ended up looking like lumpy mutants.

You lock up Cabin #3 and quickly deliver the next round to *Cabin #2*. Mom's signature wildflowers in this unit are accompanied by a card that reads, "Welcome *Edward Archer* and *Betty Archer*."

Cabin #1 is a quick trip across the lawn. The land here is level, making it perfect for yard games. Stanley bumps past the community fire pit, and you see there's a tall stack of wood in the nearby bin. Good, that's one less thing to do today. You might even have time to take out a kayak later.

You pull to a stop in front of *Cabin #1*. This cabin is bigger: a three-bedroom unit with a screened-in front

porch. It needs a lot of towels, so you haul a laundry basket inside with you. Your arms protest as you lift it out of the trailer. They're still sore from trying the discus and shot put during track-and-field season, which ended just before summer break. You tried several different events. You're not sure about the throwing stuff, and the running wasn't great either. You were always somewhere in the middle of the pack. Well, that's not exactly true. You were kind of always at the end of the pack. Oh, well, you'll figure it out. You like being on the team with your friends, and the coach is fun.

The screen door squeals as you open it. You mentally add "squirt WD-40 on the hinges" to your to-do list.

Once you're inside, the kitchen is to your left, and the bedrooms and bathroom are to the right. You can't resist. You set your basket down and sneak a peek at the card on the kitchen table. "Welcome *Harkness Family—Mark, Ellen*, Asher, and Andy!" A family with kids. You hope they know how to swim, so you don't have to play lifeguard. Or maybe they're older. You never know what you'll get with new people coming in each week or two.

Cabin #4, however, is totally predictable. From Cabin #1, it's a straight shot down the hill. Tiny Cabin #4 is tucked into the edge of the woods, right near the lake.



Its small front deck seats two (if you're super close), and the inside has just enough room for a couch/Murphy bed, a table for two, and a bathroom made for Hobbits. You don't need to add this guest to your notebook. Each of the last five summers, the same lady—Loretta Stone—has rented Cabin #4 for the opening two weeks.

You pull in front of Cabin #4. Loretta is standing on the deck with her hands on her hips, her silver hair pulled back in a long braid. You grab the last stack of towels from the trailer and hand them to her.

"It's about time," she says with a scowl. "I've been here for two hours waiting on these, Sam. What? You sleep till noon now? Is that it?"

"Hi, Loretta," you say with a grin. "It's 8:30 a.m."

"Kids these days. Slackers. Every one of 'em."

"I missed you, too, Loretta."

Loretta breaks into a huge smile, emphasizing the deep laugh lines around her eyes. "Ah, come here and give me a hug, you lazy sack of bones!"

She invites you to sit on the deck.

"You know check-in isn't until 2:00, right?" you tease.

Loretta waves a hand dismissively. "Whatever. I was up early. Besides, I've got things to do."

"What things?" you ask.

“Secret things, Squirt.”

You spend a few minutes chatting with Loretta, but no matter how you ask, you can't get her to reveal the “secret things” she has to do—which she does every summer. You give up and focus on her new hiking boots. The two of you have taken a lot of hikes over the past five years, and she's always given you a hard time about what she calls your “mall boots.”

“That reminds me,” says Loretta. “I made a puzzle.” She pulls a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and hands it to you.

Loretta loves puzzles—almost as much as she loves sharing them with you. Over the years, she's made a habit of creating puzzles for you and trying to stump you with them.

“It's a quick one today,” she tells you, “just a word scramble. Unscramble the letters in your mind, and tell me what it says.”

You unfold the paper and study the message:



I AVEH A FIQT ORF OYU

CAN YOU SOLVE THE PUZZLE? GO TO PAGE 31.

She looks at you expectantly. “Well, what’s it say?”

“I have a gift for you?” you reply.

“Are you asking if that’s the answer or telling me it’s the answer?” she says.

“Telling you.”

Loretta nods. “That’s better. Hang on a minute.” She disappears into the cabin and returns to the deck with a pair of boots. “Try these on.”

They’re her old hiking boots—and by old, you figure they’ve maybe hit the trails 10 times, if that. Loretta’s famously picky about her footwear.

You know there’s no use arguing, so you slip them on. Surprisingly, they’re a perfect fit; you’ve grown over the past year. They feel amazing, like walking on clouds.

“These are great!” you say.

Loretta replies, “They’re yours.”

“Really? Thanks, Loretta, you’re the best!”

“I know,” she says. She gives you a signature scowl. “Don’t go telling anyone else. I’ve got an image to keep.”

You laugh. Everyone thinks Loretta’s a cranky old lady. She says it keeps away the riffraff.

“Are you coming to the campfire tonight?” you ask. On opening night each year (if the weather cooperates), your parents get a campfire going in the community

fire pit, which means s'mores and stories. It's a good ice-breaker, so everyone staying at the resort can introduce themselves.

"Nah," says Loretta. "I'll probably be in bed by then. I'm old, remember?"

You roll your eyes. "Whatever."

The two of you agree to meet tomorrow morning at 7:30 for a hike. There's a trailhead just behind Cabin #4 that leads into a great forest hike with lots of twists and turns—and a stream with a rickety old bridge. Hiking with Loretta is one of your favorite things to do; you just have to remember the bug spray. Mosquitoes and black flies in these northern woods can be vicious.

You shove your feet back into your beat-up tennis shoes and put your new hiking boots in the trailer next to the laundry baskets. With a wave to Loretta, you're off to return Stanley to the garage.

\* \* \*

Thanks to that full wood bin, you've got time to kick back and enjoy the fire. This is one of the fun traditions your parents started when they bought the resort. They host other campfires throughout the season, especially

when a new group of guests comes in, but there's always something special about that first fire of the year.

You start to add firewood to the pit, but your mom waves you away. "You've been working all day, Sam. Sit. Eat." She points to the table full of marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers.

For a mom, she's pretty cool sometimes.

You settle into one of the chairs that surround the fire pit and watch the last of the daylight fade away.

Your dad notices you swatting at mosquitoes and tosses you a can of bug spray. "Hose down, Sam-I-Am."

You roll your eyes at the old nickname, but you spray yourself all over just the same.

"Is Loretta joining us?" asks your dad.

"She said she was old and going to bed," you reply.

Your dad laughs. "That sounds like her."

An owl hoot-hoots as if it agrees.

"What's that one?" your mom asks.

"Great horned owl," you say. You've been listening to a podcast that identifies birds by sound.

You hear the slam of a screen door, and Cabin #3's guests make their way to the fire pit.

"Welcome," your dad says as they get closer. "Pull up a chair."

You picture their names in your notebook: *Anabelle and Henry Larson*.

“Hello,” says Anabelle. “Thanks for the campfire.” She settles her *tall, athletic* frame into a chair across from yours. “I’m Anabelle, and this is my husband, Henry.”

*Henry is a foot shorter than Anabelle, with a wide, round build.* He gives a quick nod and a smile to everyone and takes the chair next to Anabelle.

“Please, help yourself,” says your mom, gesturing toward the table of s’mores ingredients.

Anabelle shifts in her chair. “I’m afraid I’ve never actually made a—what do you call these?”

“S’mores,” you supply.

“Right. S’mores.” She smiles apologetically. “I’m a *city girl. Camping was never my thing.*”

“Oh, we can introduce you to *Edward Archer*,” says your dad. “He *used to lead camping expeditions*; he’s quite the pro.”

For now, you demonstrate the art of s’more-making for Anabelle, toasting the marshmallow to perfection. Too much, and it turns into a flaming ball of char. Too little, and it’s just a blob of slightly warm goo.

Anabelle’s eyes go wide with her first bite. “Oh, my, I can see why this is a thing. Henry, you should try one.”

Henry shrugs. "Sure, why not?"

Over a few extra s'mores, you find out more about your Cabin #3 guests. Anabelle says she and Henry were recently married. She *owns an art gallery* in the city, and Henry *works in insurance*. He doesn't seem to be the talkative type. His jacket is open, revealing a Coca-Cola T-shirt that has seen better days. The shirt is torn in a couple of places. He seems distracted, like being at the fire tonight wasn't his idea. You get it. Sometimes you don't want to be around strangers, either.

As the fire dies down, Anabelle talks track with you. She says she was on her college track team, and she asks about the events you've done with your school's team.

"I'm not very good," you admit.

Anabelle offers a warm smile as she and Henry get ready to return to their cabin. "Oh, never underestimate what you're capable of, Sam."

"It looks like no one else is going to make it," says your dad. "What do you say we try this again tomorrow night? That way we can meet the other guests."

Anabelle says, "That sounds great. Right, Henry?"

Henry gives a quick nod, looking less than thrilled.

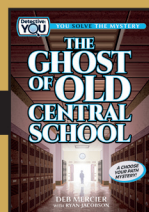
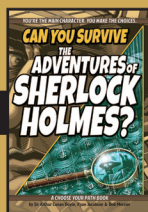
GO TO THE NEXT PAGE.



The cabin resort your parents own is a perfect place to spend the summer. There's swimming, fishing, birding—and your favorite visitor, Loretta. A regular guest, Loretta is a stand-in grandmother to you. So when you find her cabin empty one morning, you know that something's wrong.

You're the detective in this mystery. Identify suspects. Gather clues. Make choices that affect what happens next. Navigate puzzles, from riddles to word scrambles. Then use deductive reasoning to determine who committed the crime! You're the main character. You make the choices. Will you solve the case?

## SURVIVE & SOLVE!



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