

### Chapter 3

#### The Hidden Passage

By the time Cassie got home, she wasn't sure whether she was happy that Magdalena and Liz were coming over, or worried. What would they think? Would she like them? Would they like *her*? Magdalena was nice enough, but it was so hard to say anything when she was around, and she seemed like she might be a bit bossy.

Cassie sighed. They were coming, whether she liked it or not.

After dinner, she helped Dad with the dishes—the house didn't have a dishwasher (yet, Dad said, though it wasn't clear whether that meant they'd get one in a week or two years) so they had to do them by hand—and then went off to her room to read. At least Julie was being quiet.

She flipped through the pages of *Arthur and His Knights*. The pictures *were* beautiful, but the story was, sadly, not very good—they didn't go into any detail at all, and it wasn't written well. No wonder it was so hard to find. At least she couldn't blame Inez for that; the author was someone named Gina DeTalis, whose picture was not on the sleeve.

Cassie sighed, and after a while put the book down, bored.

What to do? She didn't feel like reading anymore and Mama had the tablet—it was one of the few things she could do while holding Julie other than watch TV, and Julie often fussed enough that watching TV wasn't much fun. She'd asked Dad if she could have a tablet of her own, but he'd explained that they wouldn't have even gotten the first one if Grandma hadn't bought it for

Mama and that she should be happy they let her use it sometimes. So no games.

She opened up the third drawer under her bed. It was stuffed with plush animals, most of which she hadn't played with in ages, though she still kept them and liked to look at them from time to time. There was George, the old monkey she'd named after the character from the book, and Pinky, the bear Grandma had gotten her on the day she was born, among many, many others.

She smiled and took out a few, arranging them on her bed. At the old house she'd had them on a shelf, but now there was no space but under the bed. She wondered if she'd play with them nearly as much, now.

Eventually, it was time to put them back. She stuffed them back in—the drawer was awfully full when they were all in there—and then shoved the door shut.

Thud.

Uh oh. She knew what *that* noise meant, unlike those weird thumps from a couple days ago. Quickly, she opened the drawer and looked in.

As she'd expected, George wasn't there. She'd stuffed the door too full and he'd fallen behind. Better get him now, before she forgot where he was.

She pulled a bunch of the animals out, throwing them around the floor so that she had enough space, and then pulled on the drawer, jiggling it up and down to get it off the runners. It was old, and didn't have wheels, just grooves, so it was a pain in the neck to get the thing out the last little bit. But finally the drawer was on the floor next to the other toys.

But she still couldn't see George. It was dark in there, and the light from her lamp did little to make it better. Plus it went back a lot farther than she had expected.

She felt around with her hand, but found nothing. Sighing, she ran downstairs.

Mama was on the couch, playing some word game on the tablet while Julie nursed.

“What is it Cass?” she asked.

“Do you know where a flashlight is?”

“Try on the fridge.”

“Thanks.”

“What happened?”

“One of my toys fell underneath the furniture, and I can’t see it.”

“If you need help, your Dad’s in the basement going through boxes.”

“I can get it myself.”

A couple minutes later, she was back in her room, shining the flashlight under her bed. When she still didn’t see George, she got down on her belly and crawled in.

There he was, lying there behind one of the other drawers. Right next to...

Right next to the hole in the floor.

What in the world was that doing here?

She crawled closer so that she could shine her light down into it.

It was a big square, cut out of the floorboards. And it was deep, so deep that she couldn’t see the bottom. The sides were brick, like the walls of the house. And on the near side, she saw what looked like the top rung of a ladder.

She crawled right up to the edge, and looked down, shining the flashlight into the hole.

It was narrow, though wide enough that her father probably could have fit down, and it went down *far*, far enough that it must go deeper than the first floor, deeper even than the basement with its stacks of boxes.

But there was a bottom far below, a dirt floor, and maybe a larger room. And on the wall closest to her she could definitely make out the rungs of the ladder that led into it.

Had the thumps come from down there? And if so, what *were* they?

She crawled back out from under the bed and grabbed her shoes, lacing them on as quickly as she could. In a moment she was under the bed again, backing in feet-first this time and holding the flashlight between her teeth. When she got to the edge, she lowered herself over until her foot found a rung, then gently let herself down. It was tricky going with the wood of the bed frame over her head, but there was enough room to get around. Thank goodness for that.

It took a long time, and once her foot slipped and she was afraid that maybe there was a rung missing, but she found it again. Soon, her foot found the soft dirt of the floor, and she was on the bottom.

Turning, she took the flashlight out of her mouth, wiped it on her shirt, and looked around.

It was a small room, probably no bigger than the upstairs bathroom, and completely lined with bricks. Someone had left a few pieces of chalk on the floor—why, she had no idea—as well as some yellowed, crumpled-up papers and a few empty aluminum cans, but that was all. And the walls were blank, just brick...

Except for the one to her right. The bricks on that wall stopped around what looked like a door, but it was the strangest door she'd ever seen. It was dark green, in the shape of an arch, and made all of wood. On it, someone had carved marvelous, beautiful patterns, twisting shapes and knotted designs like she'd seen in books about Vikings, painted in a lighter green than the

door itself. But there was no knob, and she couldn't see any hinges either.

She reached out and touched it with her hand. The wood was smooth and hard, and strangely comforting. And it was warm, warmer than she expected. And there was something else, something she didn't know quite how to describe, almost a movement, like the rise and fall in someone's chest when they breathed.

But how could it be opened?

And then she saw it, right in the middle. A hole, or more like a slot, somewhere where a key might fit, though she imagined it wouldn't look like any key she was used to seeing. And if there was a keyhole...

She scrambled around on the floor, shaking and upending cans and un-crumpling paper to see if she could find it. But there was nothing. Some drawings, a few hand-sketched maps that looked like they were made by kids, pebbles in one of the cans that were a pretty shade of blue, but no key.

It was all very, very weird. Sighing, she finally gave up. But she took the can with the pebbles back up with her, holding it carefully as she climbed back up to her room.



Later, after she'd brushed her teeth and gotten ready for bed, she dumped the blue pebbles out onto her table. There were fifteen of them, each exactly the same, the color of the sky right after sunset, when it's still a deep blue. But inside were little flecks of white, like stars, which reflected the light of the lamp so that they sparkled and seemed almost to dance inside the blue. She'd never seen anything like them. But they were

awfully pretty. Maybe they could be made into a necklace.

She'd thought about telling her parents about the hole, but then decided not to. It wasn't dangerous, at least not any more than climbing down the slide the wrong way at the playground, and it was fun to have something they didn't know about. She'd tell them eventually, of course, but for now it was nice to have something secret, something that was just hers. And besides, it felt like she wasn't *supposed* to tell them for some reason.

Mama and Dad came in to give her kisses, and then turned off the light. But as she was drifting off to sleep, she thought she saw something, a faint glow from the table where she'd put the stones.

And then she was asleep.