

Chapter 5

The Key

They met at Magdalena's house that Sunday, after church and lunch. Both Magdalena and Cassie went to St. Bartholomew's, an old church on the other side of town full of statues and stained glass windows. It was smaller than the church she was used to and much stranger-feeling, with dark wood and pillars instead of the new, light, gray church in Pennsylvania. But the people were nice, and her Dad started talking to one of the ladies right away about signing her up for religious education.

Liz didn't go to church at all, but she came over to Magdalena's as soon as she saw Cassie walking down the road with her father.

After greeting the Hernandezes—Magdalena lived with her parents, along with her older brother Juan, who was going into the seventh grade and younger sister Isolde, who was starting first grade—they met in the backyard. Magdalena brought them onto the grass in the shade of the oak tree beneath the fence that separated her house from the next one over, which was one of the few spots not taken up by Mrs. Hernandez's garden. Cassie lay down on the grass, feeling its soft blades rub against her bare arms and legs like a thick carpet, and smiled.

"It's in here," Liz said, producing an old-fashioned lunchbox decorated with Star Wars characters from inside her backpack. She took the lunchbox out and placed it gently on the grass, then undid the latch and opened it.

Cassie sat up and looked inside. It was stuffed with all sorts of odd things—small toys, stones, shells, a matchbox advertising the Orange Grove Café, whatever

that was, old tickets to some movie, and lots and lots of other things besides, so many that she couldn't see the bottom.

"What's all that?" Cassie asked.

"I collect things," Liz said quietly. "Things that I find, sometimes, and things that help me remember stuff. This one here," she picked up a seashell, shimmery-white and shaped like a snail's shell, "I found when I was at the Cape, four years ago. It was caught in some seaweed, but I cleaned it off. Most of the other shells were broken, or just clams and mussels, but this one," she held it up and smiled, "was the prettiest of them all. See how it shines almost pink in the sun? Somewhere around here I have a piece of paper that says the scientific name of the species, probably stuffed down at the bottom though."

"That's okay," Magdalena said.

"This button here, that's from my grandmother's favorite dress, the one she was buried in. It fell off, before she died, and I found it weeks later, in with some of her old letters that we were going through. Mom said I could keep it, if I wanted to, so I did." She smiled sadly. "When I get older, I'm going to put it on my wedding dress somewhere, I think. Grandma would like that.

"And this one," she took out the matchbook, "my dad left it with a box of his things, right before..." She swallowed, turning away. "Right before he left." She coughed. "But that's not why we're here, to talk about my collection is it? We're here about the key."

"Yeah," Magdalena said softly, giving Cassie a quick glance.

Liz rummaged through the lunchbox some more, until she found it, a wad of cloth, carefully wrapped in rubber bands, with something inside that was so long

that it took up most of the length of the lunchbox, but as thin as three fingers together. One by one, she took the rubber bands off, then unwrapped the package. When she was done, she took the key out and held it up for them to see.

“It doesn’t look like a key,” Magdalena said.

And she was right. It looked more like some sort of weird comb than a key, with one edge flat and the other covered with all sorts of weird bumps and things coming out of it. But it was green, just like the door, and the pattern on the top was exactly the same.

“It’s beautiful,” Cassie said, her voice hushed.

“I found it over by the stream that runs next to the playground at Cole Park,” Liz said. “It had washed ashore, I guess, because it was just lying there on the ground. I only saw it because I pushed it with my foot from under the leaves while I was walking.”

“I wonder how it got there,” Cassie said.

“But you’re sure it’s the key?” Magdalena asked.

“It has to be,” Liz said. “It’s the same markings as the door, and it’s just the right shape for that slot on the front.”

“But how does it work?” Cassie wondered. “You have to turn a key, don’t you? And there’s nowhere to turn it in that slot.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?” Liz replied, smiling.



“Hi Mom!” Cassie said brightly as she and the other two girls came through the front door.

“Hi girls. Cassie, don’t forget that Steve is coming over for dinner, okay?”

“Right. We’re going to be in my room.”

“Okay.”

The three charged up to Cassie’s room and Liz quickly closed the door behind her while Cassie pulled out one drawer and laid it carefully on the floor, followed by a second one. Magdalena looked at the stones on the table for a few seconds, then quickly grabbed a handful and thrust them into her pocket.

Moments later, they were down in the underground room. Cassie held her flashlight, training the beam on the door, while Magdalena held one of the stones in her hand, the blue glow filling the room so that it was bright enough to read, at least right near her hand.

“Okay Liz,” Cassie said, “give it a try.”

“Right,” Liz said and fished out the key. Carefully, she reached out and put it into the slot on the door. She pushed it in as far as she could, then stepped back.

“Should something be happening now?” Magdalena asked. “Other than that weird moving thing that it always does, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” Cassie replied. “How about we give the door a push?”

She put her shoulder against the door and pushed, a little and then harder, but nothing happened.

“Do you think it’s stuck,” Magdalena asked.

“We could all try,” Cassie suggested.

But that didn’t work either. Even with all of them pushing at once, the door didn’t move, not even an inch.

“There’s got to be something we’re not doing with this key,” Liz said.

“Maybe it broke,” Cassie said with a sigh, moving back. “Maybe one of the knobs broke off and that’s why whoever did it threw it away, because it didn’t work anymore. Maybe there’s no way in.”

“No, it didn’t look broken,” Liz replied.

Magdalena sat down on the floor with a sigh and began absently ruffling through the old papers on the floor. “You didn’t turn it,” she said. “All keys need to be turned in order to work.”

“You can’t turn it,” Liz replied, a little angry now. “I tried.”

“But there has to be some way,” Cassie protested, “there just *has* to be.”

“Hey!” Magdalena said. “Look at this!”

Cassie turned to see Magdalena holding up one of the papers.

“What is it?” Cassie asked.

“It’s a drawing of the key,” Magdalena said, smiling. “But look, there are hands on it, two on each end.”

“Do you think...?” Liz asked.

“The stones only work when you touch them,” Magdalena said.

“We’ll give it a try,” Cassie said, putting the flashlight on the ground. “I’ll hold the left side.”

“I’ll do the right,” Liz said.

“I guess I’ll just hold the light then...” Magdalena said, standing up.

Cassie put her hands on the edge of the key, and Liz did the same. For a second, nothing happened. And then she felt it begin to vibrate, slowly at first, and then faster, until it was humming, a low, weird sound that filled the room.

“What’s happening?” Magdalena asked nervously.

“I don’t know,” Liz answered, sounding scared herself.

And then there was a cracking sound, and the door opened, inward, pushing them back.

“Whoa,” Magdalena whispered.

Cassie let go of the key in surprise and the humming stopped immediately. But the door stayed open.

Liz took a step back.

“Well,” Cassie said, “I guess we’d better pull it all of the way open.”

Together, the three girls pulled it until the opening was large enough for one of them to fit through easily. The door was heavier than she’d expected, either that or the hinges needed to be oiled—not that she’d seen any hinges.

She stepped back and grabbed the flashlight off the floor. It was dark behind the door, far too dark to see anything.

Swallowing, feeling just a little afraid, she stepped inside.