

Chapter 3: The Keys

I send Lizzy a note telling her that Mom doesn't have the keys and that, miraculously, I'm not being punished. Hours later, as the grandfather clock strikes eleven, I finally get a response.

I have a plan. Come over at 10 am. Bring the letter and the box. Sorry it took so long to get back to you, what with the whole Friday Night Is Family Movie Night thing. Field of Dreams again. AGAIN!! Don't be late!

Lizzy

Lizzy's plans always make me nervous, but in this case I have nothing to lose. Between dinnertime and now, I exhausted my own methods for opening the box. To see if extreme temperatures might loosen the locks, I put the box in the freezer for an hour. No change. Then I put it in the microwave. But before I hit start, I took it out, because what if the meaning of life is actually some tiny alien baby that my father rescued from certain persecution? I didn't want to microwave the little guy to death.

My final attempt was to wedge a butter knife under the lid, but instead of sliding inside the box, it only hit another layer of wood and wouldn't budge.

I do not like surprises. I won't watch scary movies. I

won't answer the phone unless I can see who is calling on caller ID. I don't even like it when someone says "Guess what?" and then waits for you to guess. Surprises make me nervous. Once you've had a real surprise, one that knocks the wind out of you and changes your life, all the little surprises remind you of that big one.

This box is a little like that.

It is now sitting on the center of my desk, mocking me. Only the size of a shoe box, it somehow overshadows everything else in my room, including the life-sized cardboard cutouts of the hobbits from *The Lord of the Rings*. And they're not easy to overshadow.

I write Lizzy back and ask for details of her plan, but she doesn't take the note from the wall. After a few minutes I pull it back out and stick my ear to the hole. The poster covering her end of the hole blocks any light from coming through, but I can still hear her cat, Zilla, purring loudly. Actually, he roars rather than purrs. Zilla (short for Godzilla, since he destroys everything in his path) is fiercely protective of Lizzy and will lunge at anyone who goes near her room. I haven't been more than one foot inside her bedroom in two years. I think Zilla believes he's a pit bull. I knock a few times on the wall, but not too loudly.

Mom taps on the door and brings me a peanut butter sandwich on a napkin. She gives the box on my desk a long look and starts closing the door behind her. Then she stops and says, "Oh, wait, I have something for you." A few seconds later she's back.

"In all the excitement, I forgot to give you this." She holds out what looks like an ordinary yellow Starburst

candy. But as I examine it more closely, I realize the bottom half is actually orange. It's a mutant Starburst!

"Thanks, Mom!" I jump up from the bed and deposit the Starburst in the airtight Tupperware dish along with the other candy in my collection. It's been a few months since I've added anything new. Airtight or no, the peanut M&M is starting to look a little green in spots. It was yellow to begin with.

"You've had a big day," Mom says. "Make sure you don't go to sleep too late." She makes a move like she's going to kiss me on the forehead like she used to when I was little. But then she just tousles my hair and gives the box one more glance before closing the door for good. I have named the hour between eleven and midnight the Hour of Jeremy (H.O.J. for short). The city is so quiet and peaceful except for the police and ambulance sirens, the beeping of the car alarms, and the rushing of the water in the pipes. But when you grow up in the city, that stuff feels like background noise, and you don't notice it. I feel like I'm the only person alive on the earth.

Because of all my H.O.J. reading, I know a little about a lot. I always win when I play Trivial Pursuit. I would make an excellent *Jeopardy* contestant. Last night I learned that for everyone alive on earth today, there are thirty ghosts lined up behind them. Not literally lined up, of course, but that's how many dead people there are compared to living people. In all, around a hundred billion people have walked on this planet, which, interestingly enough, is the same number of stars in our Milky Way galaxy. Science is my favorite class in school. I have a

healthy fascination with the Milky Way, and not just because it has the same name as a chocolate bar.

Usually my H.O.J. reading is a mix of any of the books on my shelf (along with at least fifteen minutes on time travel). But tonight's H.O.J. will be spent only learning about keys. This is what the Internet tells me:

1. The first keys were used four thousand years ago by the ancient Egyptians to protect their caves.
2. Locks were initially made of interlocking wooden pegs, with a wooden key that raised one section of pegs out of their grooves so the lock slid open.
3. The Romans later began making keys and locks out of metal, mostly bronze and iron, and began using springs inside the locks. The keys were called *warders*, and most had an oval shape at the top and a long straight middle section, with one or two square portions sticking out near the end.
4. Next came the pin tumbler locks from England and America, followed by time-release locks. These have a clock inside that turns a wheel with a ridge in it, and when that ridge lines up with the keyhole, the box springs open. (As soon as I read this I put the box up next to my ear. No ticking. I knew that was too good to be true.)
5. They now make bendable keys so that no one can pick the lock with a regular hard piece of metal, like a hairpin.
6. I do not know what a hairpin is.

The Hour of Jeremy is almost up. I have time for one more quick search. I type in the words "the meaning of life" and hold my breath.

Two seconds later I receive 2,560,000 hits. TWO MILLION FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY THOUSAND HITS. I click on what seems like the most obvious place to start, a definition of the word *life*.

life: noun 1. a state that is not death

That's it. The definition of life is not death.

I shut down my computer, climb into bed, and throw the covers over my head.



I wish I could say things look clearer in the fresh light of a new day, but so far a new day means only that I have one less day to figure out how to open the box. Lizzy opens her apartment door with one hand while shoving a blueberry Vitamuffin down her throat with the other. Her dad makes her eat all this healthy food, and she actually *eats* it! My theory is that he doesn't want Lizzy to take after him in the girth department. A small man he is not.

I follow her into the kitchen, where she hands me my daily chocolate Vitamuffin, the only flavor I will eat. I put the box and the letter on the counter and try to ignore the high vitamin and mineral content while concentrating on the chocolaty goodness of my muffin. Nothing like chocolate (even healthy, non-fat, good-for-you chocolate) to start the day off right.

"So what's your plan?" I ask, reaching into the fridge for the container of milk. "And will it get us arrested?"

"Have we ever gotten arrested?" Lizzy replies, giving me a dirty look as I guzzle the milk straight from the carton.

"We've come close," I remind her. "There was the time you convinced me to sneak into the pool at the Senior Center, and the guard chased us for seven blocks. Or the time you made me be the lookout while you stole a menu from that outdoor restaurant, and the waiter threw water on us. I'd say those were pretty close calls."

"For the record," Lizzy says, "it was over a hundred degrees when we snuck into that pool. It was totally worth it." Under her breath she mumbles, "And it was iced tea he threw at us, not water."

Lizzy leaves the kitchen to get her chart. Every plan has a chart. Some are even color-coded. I place the box on the table and sit down to wait. Lizzy must have been going through her playing cards collection before I arrived, because they're spread out on the table. I have my mutant candy collection, and Lizzy has her playing cards. But while I'll happily accept a mutant piece of candy from anyone who finds it, she will only add a playing card to her collection if she finds it herself, in a public place. No duplicates either, and she won't look anywhere obvious, like the sidewalk outside the 33rd Street Bridge Club. She prefers to find her cards on subways or park benches, or sticking out of sewer grates. She is only missing three now — the two of clubs, the eight of hearts, and the jack of diamonds.

I remember how proud my dad was when Lizzy started her collection. He thought it was very creative. I mean,

sure, putting together a full deck of cards by finding them one by one is certainly *different*, but it's not like you can eat it afterward, like *my* collection. In fact, some of her cards are so dirty you can barely read the number and suit. As much as he encouraged us to have a collection, Dad could never land on one himself. He collected baseball cards for a while, but only of players who played for just one year. Then he was big on finding foreign stamps from countries that no longer existed. One stamp became his holy grail, and he would look for it everywhere he went. It was printed in Hawaii in 1851, over a hundred years before Hawaii became a state. The stamp came in denominations of two cents, five cents, and thirteen cents. Dad drew pictures of it so Mom and I would recognize it if we were out on our own. I still look for that stamp, but I'm beginning to think he made it up. Before he died, he had moved on to fast food restaurant giveaways, which was great for me because he needed a kid in order to get the toys. Now I can't go into a fast food place without feeling sad.

Lizzy returns with a piece of construction paper rolled up under her arm. Zilla follows behind her and growls up at me. Always one for the dramatics, Lizzy unfurls the paper with a snap of her wrist and lays it out in front of us, right on top of the playing cards. The first things I notice are the two pencil drawings of the box. She didn't get all the keyholes positioned exactly right, but it's a pretty good rendering.

"Sorry for the rough sketch," she says modestly. "As you can see, I have numbered our options. The list goes from easiest to most difficult. Plan A —"

"You can cross that one off," I instruct after reading it ahead of her. "I already tried that."

"You stuck the box in the freezer?" she asks, surprised.

I nod. "And the microwave."

She gives me a long look, and then crosses off Plans A and B.

"You can cross off Plan C while you're at it. I already tried sticking a knife under the lid and it won't budge."

With a loud sigh, she draws a line through the next entry.

"May I continue?" she asks.

"By all means."

"Plan D: We take the box to Larry's Locks and Clocks to see if he can do anything."

I nod in agreement. "That's a good one."

She continues, "And if that doesn't work, Plan E is take the subway to the 26th Street Flea Market this afternoon. We might get lucky there. Some of those vendors have got to have old keys for sale."

I squirm a little at that one. "I've never seen keys there."

"That's because you've never had a reason to look."

"Maybe. But still . . . it's all the way across town."

"You just don't want to take the subway without an adult," she says accusingly.

As my mother says, we all grow at our own pace. Crossing my arms in front of my chest defiantly, I say, "You *know* I don't take the subway alone."

"You wouldn't be alone." Two red blotches appear on

Lizzy's cheeks whenever she gets irritated. I can see them beginning to creep across her face. "Come on," she says. "We're almost thirteen. It's about time we got around the city on our own. Maybe you didn't have a good reason to do it before, but what better reason is there than to get this box open?"

She has a point. Resistance is clearly futile. "Okay," I say flatly. "If the locksmith can't help us, and we have to go to the flea market, I'll go."

"Good!" she says.

"As long as my mother says it's all right," I add. "I have to stay on her good side after yesterday."

Lizzy rolls her eyes. "Fine, whatever, let's just get going." She turns the paper over so I can't read the last item on the list and grabs the box.

"Wait," I say as she heads toward the front door. "Aren't you going to tell me what Plan F is in case the locksmith and the flea market don't work out?"

She pauses for a second, and then shakes her head. "Let's hope you never need to know."

I don't like the sound of that. We stop at my apartment to grab my backpack. While I'm stuffing the box inside, Lizzy grabs a handful of subway tokens from the dish on the kitchen counter.

"You might as well call your mom now, just in case Larry can't help us."

I grumble, but I do it anyway. Mom says it's fine to take the subway as long as we're careful. Is it wrong of me that I had sort of been hoping she would say no?

In all of my nearly thirteen years of living two blocks

away, I have only been inside Larry's Locks and Clocks once. When my dad found our grandfather clock, he was obsessed with making it work. He dragged it straight to this store from its previous home in some stranger's bulk garbage pile. When Dad was alive, Mom always threatened to break the clock again because the chimes drove her crazy. But after he died, she stopped complaining about it.

The sign on the window says the store is open only until noon on Saturdays, so we made it just in time. Lizzy pushes open the door, and a little bell rings above our heads. No one else is in the shop. Shelves of clocks in various states of repair surround us. Other than my dad, I hadn't thought anyone repaired clocks anymore instead of buying new ones. I look closer and see a thick coating of dust on most of them, like people dropped them off a decade ago and couldn't be bothered to come get them. My nose tickles, so I quickly move away from the shelf before I sneeze on everything. When I sneeze, I sneeze big. It runs in the family. Dad once sneezed so hard on the guy in front of us at the movies that the guy turned around and dumped his popcorn on Dad's lap.

Lizzy and I approach the narrow counter that runs along the back of the store. Keys of all kinds hang from hooks behind it. A thin man in overalls wanders in from the back room, wiping his hands on a napkin.

"What can I do for you today?" he asks, flicking a crumpled McDonald's wrapper off the counter. It lands directly in the garbage can to the left of him.

"You Larry?" Lizzy asks.

The man shakes his head. "Larry Junior."

Lizzy looks at me, and I shrug. I can't see that it matters which Larry helps us. She turns me around and unzips my backpack, pulling out the box.

"I could have done that," I whisper.

She plops the box on the counter. "Can you open this?" "What a pretty box!" the man declares, turning it around in his hands.

Aha! I feel vindicated. He thinks it's pretty, too.

"The meaning of life is in this box, eh?" The corners of his mouth twitch upward.

I pretend not to hear him. If my dad says the meaning of life is in that box, then darn it, it's in there. "I've lost the keys," I explain in as patient a tone as I can muster. "Do you have ones that might fit?"

He examines the box closely and furrows his brows. "Hmm. Let me see. No markings on the box indicating where it came from or who made it. That would have been helpful. These keyholes are very specific — made for this box alone. Maybe there's some other way to get in it." He slides the box under a lamp and switches on the light.

"The meaning of life in a box," he mutters as he bends down to scrutinize it. "Who woulda think it."

An older man in identical overalls comes out from the back room. "What's this I hear about the meaning of life in a box?" he asks.

Larry Junior points to us. "These kids brought this box. Don't have the keys."

"No keys, eh?" he asks, looking at us closely. "I'll take over," he says, stepping behind the counter.

"That's okay, Pop," Larry Junior says. "I got it."

The old man — who I assume is Larry himself — shakes his head. "We just got a call that Mrs. Chang locked herself out again. I need you to go help her."

Larry Junior shrugs and grabs a toolbox from the shelf. "Good luck," he says, and heads out. The bells tinkle behind him.

We turn back to Larry Senior. He is resting his hands on the box, eyes closed. Lizzy and I raise our eyebrows and exchange a look.

"Um," I say tentatively, "so do you think you can open it for us?"

Larry's eyes snap open. "Nope."

My shoulders sag a bit.

He continues. "This is no ordinary box. It has an elaborate locking mechanism inside with levers and pulleys and —"

"We know," Lizzy interrupts, and then recites Harold's letter, "and each keyhole needs a different type of key. And an internal latch will prevent the box from being pried open."

"Not just *that*," Larry says, "but under the wood is a layer of metal. That means no one is getting through this without destroying the contents. A saw or an axe would crush the whole thing. You can see the edge of the metal layer if you look closely in the gap."

We lean into the counter and peer under the light. He's right. I hadn't noticed the thin sliver of metal visible along the opening. Why couldn't my dad have bought a normal box like anyone else would have? With only *one* keyhole?

He switches off the lamp and pushes the box across to us. "Sorry to disappoint you, but the only way anyone is getting into this box is with the keys."

Lizzy points to the rows of keys behind the man. "What about those? Will any of those fit?"

Larry doesn't even turn around. "Nope. Those are blank keys that we use to make copies of existing ones. But I do have a box of spares that I've collected over the years. You're welcome to 'em."

He bends down and fishes around under the counter for a minute. Lizzy and I stand on our toes, eagerly peering over. He finally stands up and hands me a cigar box. It doesn't even feel full. I try not to show my disappointment. I had pictured a huge box with hundreds of keys.

"Thanks," Lizzy says gamely. "And if none of these fit, what do you think our chances are of finding keys that will? I mean, somewhere else in the city?"

"I'd say slim to nil, but slim ain't left town yet, if you know what I mean."

We stare at him blankly.

He chuckles. "That means it's doubtful, but anything's possible. After all, you've got a mighty good cause. Trying to find out the meaning of life, and all."

"Thanks," I say with more enthusiasm than I feel. "We'll bring these right back."

"No rush," he says, waving his hand in the air. "How long you got till your thirteenth birthday anyway? I'm assuming you're the Jeremy Fink on the box?"

"A little under a month," I reply as we head toward the door. It's hard to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"A lot can happen in a month," he calls after us. "Keep the faith."

"You bet," Lizzy says. "Amen."

When we make it outside I tell her, "I don't think you're supposed to say 'Amen' when someone says 'Keep the faith.'"

She shrugs. "How am I supposed to know? All I know about religion is that *dog-spelled backwards* is *god*, and I learned that on a Saturday morning cartoon. Let's go sit in the park and try the keys."

We head around the corner to the park where we've played since we were little. It has a different feel to it now that we're on a mission. I wonder if the men reading the newspaper on the benches, or the women watching their kids in the sandbox, can sense that we're up to something important. We settle under a tree near the playground where the grass has been worn smooth. I dump the keys onto the ground in a pile. It's not a very big pile. Thirty keys, at most. We agree to try each key in each keyhole, and then if it doesn't fit, return it to the cigar box. That way we won't try the same key twice by mistake.

Lizzy takes the first one and, before she puts it in a hole, covers it with both hands and whispers something to it.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm saying a little prayer for good luck," she answers.

"I might not know anything about religion, but that doesn't mean we can't pray. You know, to the powers of the universe or something. Come on, do it with me."

"What am I supposed to say?"

She thinks for a minute and says, "How about: O Mas-

ter of All Things Locked, please allow this key to open Jeremy Fink's box." After a short pause she adds, "Amen."

I glance around to make sure no one sitting nearby heard that. "Why don't just *you* say it? We don't want to confuse the Master of All Things Locked with two different voices."

"Suit yourself," she says, and prays to the key louder than I would have liked. She then tries it in all four holes, to no avail. We go through each key that way. None fit. Most of them won't even enter the keyholes at all. About a handful of them actually slide in a notch, but don't go any farther. By the time we're down to our last key, Lizzy's prayer has become a mumble of *MasterkeyboxAmen*. This time I add my own little silent *Amen*, but it does no good. Larry's box is now full again, and I have to go on the sub-way. Ugh.