

Chapter 4: The Flea Market

Lizzy goes in to return the keys while I wait outside, gathering my nerve. I'm not proud of the fact that I've never taken public transportation without an adult, but everything I need is usually within walking distance.

The bells jingle as Lizzy comes back out and begins marching down the street toward the subway. The closest stop is a few blocks away, and I find myself trailing behind. I have a lot on my mind. I can't be expected to walk so quickly. She waits for me at the next corner, tapping her foot impatiently.

"I have an idea," I tell her, trying to sound enthusiastic. "We can go to some garage sales right here in the neighborhood."

"You know our best bet is the flea market," she says firmly, taking off again. "We'd have a much better chance there than at some little garage sale."

I know she's right. The 26th Street Market in Chelsea is the biggest in the city. My parents and I spent many weekends there. After Dad died, Mom and I went on our own, but it wasn't the same. In the last year or two, we haven't gone at all.

"How do you know which train we should take?" I ask as we descend into the muggy darkness of the subway station.

"There's a map right here on the wall." Two older

boys are standing in front of it, arguing about which way to go. One of them bets the other that he can't eat fifteen Nathan's hot dogs in under five minutes when they get to Coney Island.

I whisper to Lizzy, "I once stuffed twenty-seven candy corns in my mouth at once and then ate them all. And I didn't even need anyone to bet me."

"That's gross," she says, tapping her foot at the boys, who ignore her. Finally they move on, and we move closer to the map.

She traces her finger along one of the subway lines. "It looks like this one will take us right to Sixth Avenue, and then we just need to walk two blocks. And it's only five stops, so don't be a baby."

"If it's only five stops, maybe we should walk," I suggest. "You know, save our money."

"We're not using our money," she says, digging into her shorts pocket. "We have your mom's tokens, remember?"

"Tokens are still money," I mutter under my breath as she forces one into my hand.

We approach the turnstile, tokens held at the ready. But when we get there, neither of us can find a place to stick them in. It's been a few months since Mom took me on the subway, and I guess I didn't pay enough attention because I can't remember what to do. I feel a tap on my shoulder. A man wearing a Yankees cap and T-shirt points to a sign that says: NO MORE TOKENS. METRO CARDS ONLY. I tap Lizzy, who is frantically trying to stick the token in anything that remotely looks like an opening. She whirls around, and I point to the sign. We sheepishly step out of

line and watch the Yankees fan swipe his card through a groove. He pushes through the turnstile and turns around to face us when he gets to the other side. "Come on," he says, holding his card out. "I can use the good karma. The Yanks are playing the Red Sox today."

"Thanks!" I say, taking the card from his outstretched hand. I swipe it, walk through, and pass it back to Lizzy. After she comes through, she returns it to the man and mumbles an embarrassed thank you. Lizzy doesn't like to admit there's something she can't do. I don't have that problem. I know I can't do most things.

As we carefully dodge the used gum and unidentifiable puddles, I say to Lizzy, "I wonder why my mother kept those tokens in the kitchen if they can't be used anymore?"

"Half the things in your house don't have a purpose," she points out.

Actually, I'd say more than half.

We wait for the train a good distance behind the yellow line and listen to a short, wide man with a crewcut play a guitar and sing about lost love. He looks like he should be on the football field, not singing in a subway station. I don't turn away until the high-pitched squeal of the arriving train drowns out his singing. Lizzy takes hold of my arm, and we push our way through the doors.

Grasping onto a pole with a tighter grip than is probably necessary, I try to keep my brain occupied by staring at the nearest advertisement. GET RID OF ADULT ACNE. Adults have acne? I glance at Lizzy and wonder if she's thinking about the same thing I am — the appearance last

Christmas of Lizzy's first pimple, better known as The Pimple That Ate Manhattan. She looks at me, looks at the poster, then scowls. But when she thinks I'm not looking, I see her reach up and rub her cheek. In the right light one can still see a faint red mark from where she savagely attacked the pimple with a pair of nose-hair tweezers. After that, Mom made Lizzy promise to come to her with any beauty emergencies. Lizzy's dad is useless when it comes to girl stuff. He's the one who gave her the tweezers!

"Are we there yet?" I ask her as the train slows to a halt.

"This is only the second stop," she says.

"It feels like the fourth."

"Well it isn't."

"Are you —"

"Yes! I'm sure! Stop being such a baby!"

"I'm not being a baby," I mumble.

Lizzy digs into her pocket. "Here," she says, thrusting a Milk Dud into my palm. "This should make you feel better." The half-melted Milk Dud is covered in a light film of pocket lint. I pop it in my mouth anyway. The chocolate-caramel goodness does indeed make me feel better.

A tall, middle-aged man standing nearby chuckles, and I turn to look at him. He nods his head toward Lizzy and says, "You and your sister remind me of the way my sister and I used to be. Oh, the fights we would have! But there's nothing we wouldn't do for each other."

"She's not my sister," I quickly reply. My eyes dart over to Lizzy, but she seems oblivious to the conversation. She's staring at the adult acne poster with a pained expression.

The man raises his brow in surprise, then nudges me with his elbow and says knowingly, "Ohh, she's your girlfriend!"

"No, she's not!" I exclaim, this time getting not only Lizzy's attention, but the attention of everyone nearby. I feel my cheeks begin to burn. It's not like it's the first time I've heard that. Kids make fun of us at school all the time. But still! From a stranger! On the subway!

"Now we're here," Lizzy says, grabbing my arm and pushing me toward the door. I glance back at the man, and he gives me a little wink.

ARGH!

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Lizzy asks as we climb the long stairs back into the bright sunshine.

"I guess not," I mumble. I swing my backpack around to the front to make sure no one unzipped a zipper when I wasn't looking. That guy might have been trying to distract me while his accomplice went into my bag. I check all the pockets, but everything is safe and sound (including the pack of Razzles I forgot was in there, which is always a nice surprise).

The flea market is basically two big parking lots that get taken over every weekend by all types of vendors. It's very crowded and smells like a combination of boiled hot dogs and sweat. And not the good, peanut butter kind of sweat. Even though this used to be a home away from home for me, I stick close to Lizzy.

It takes a while for us to wind our way past the section of artists selling their crafts so we can get to the second-hand section. It's so strange being here without either of

my parents or Aunt Judi. Mom and Aunt Judi are equal-opportunity flea market shoppers. Not Dad. He always went straight for the second-hand stuff, also known as the junk. The junk section is where I feel at home, since after all, most of my home started out on these sidewalks. One of Dad's favorite quotes was, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Every time he said that, Lizzy used to whisper, "One man's trash is another man's *trash*," but never loud enough for Dad to hear. Whenever Dad found something he considered a treasure, he'd do a little dance right there on the sidewalk. People would laugh, and I would be embarrassed. I don't see anyone dancing today.

We walk past vendors selling used clothing, children's toys, old *Life* and *National Geographic* magazines, and rare comics in slipcovers. My legs slow of their own accord when we pass the comics, and Lizzy has to push me forward. I don't see anyone with stamps, but there's a table of old postcards that my mom would love. There aren't any of dogs in tutus, so we choose one with a lady sitting in a museum staring at a painting, except it's not a painting, it's a mirror. It's just strange enough that Mom will love it and will hopefully forgive my recent transgressions. Plus, it costs only a dime.

As the woman slips the card into a small bag for me, I turn to Lizzy and ask, "Did you know when you look in the mirror, you're actually seeing a slightly younger version of yourself?"

"Is that so?" she mumbles, her eyes darting to the next table, which is piled high with cheap makeup that looks half-used.

"Yes. It has to do with the time it takes light to travel between the mirror and the person standing in front of it."

"Uh huh," she says.

I don't bother continuing my explanation about the speed of light, and ask her if she wants to stop at the makeup table. She pretends to be horrified that I'd even mention it and harumphs. Lizzy is very attached to her tomboy reputation.

We make our way up and down the rows, scanning the wares for keys. Halfway through the third row, we find a woman with blankets of stuff spread out on the ground. She also has a table with a tray full of mismatched jewelry and a bowl filled with brass doorknobs. I feel like we're getting warm. The table is crowded, and we have to wait for a rather large woman to finish haggling before we can see the rest. The haggler is trying to get the similarly large woman on the other side of the table to take a dollar for the whole tray in front of her. She's holding up the tray, and we can hear its contents clashing and jingling, but can't tell what it is. What if we're a minute too late and this woman goes home with *my* keys?

Lizzy stands on her tiptoes and tries to peer over the lady's shoulder but almost falls right on top of her instead. Patience never being her strong point, Lizzy finally has enough and pushes her way in.

"Oh," I hear her say. "It's just a bunch of broken buttons. Why would someone want a tray of broken buttons?"

The shopper in question turns to glare at her, then shoves a dollar in the seller's hand and storms away.

"Sheesh," Lizzy says as we step up to the table. "Some people are so sensitive."

"Don't worry about it," the vendor says, tucking the dollar bill into a small canvas bag at her waist. "She's here every week and never wants to pay more than a buck for anything."

"I know the type," Lizzy says, gesturing to me with her thumb.

"Hey," I say, offended. "There's a difference between thrifty and cheap."

Lizzy is already busy rummaging through the other trays. "No offense," she says to the woman, "but why *would* someone buy buttons or old doorknobs, or any of this stuff?"

The woman shrugs. "All different reasons. Sometimes people are looking to fix up something they already got, and are searching for a particular thing. Some folks are looking to add to a collection. You wouldn't believe the things folks collect."

"Like mutant candy?" Lizzy asks innocently.

The lady looks puzzled. "Can't say I've heard of that."

I elbow Lizzy in the ribs and say to the woman, "We're looking for some old keys. Do you have any?"

"Sure," she says, snapping her fingers. "I got some around here somewhere." She goes off to search through her stuff on the ground, and Lizzy and I high-five. The woman unearths a faded metal trashcan from behind a pile of mismatched shoes, and waves us over. We hurry around the table and kneel down onto the old threadbare

blanket. Greedily, we dig our hands into the can and pull out handfuls of what we expect will be keys. We look at each other and frown.

The lady is busy giving change to a young man who just bought a pair of old tap shoes for \$1.50, so we have to wait until she is free again. I tip the trashcan forward so she can see inside and say, "Um, these aren't exactly what we had in mind."

"Huh? Why not?" she asks.

"Well, for one thing," Lizzy says, "they aren't keys. They're locks."

"Is that right?" the lady asks, peering into the can. "Oops, sorry 'bout that. Keys, locks, all part of the same thing, right?" She laughs a little, and then turns away to assure a young mother that the Sing and Snore Ernie doll will still work if she puts fresh batteries in it and sews the ear back on. With a sigh we drop the locks back into the can.

After a quick detour for a slice of pizza, we find a bearded man who has a small dish of assorted keys amidst a selection of marbles and plastic combs. Even Mom wouldn't buy used combs. I can't help wondering if the man brushed his scraggly beard with those combs. Lizzy quickly reaches for the keys, but the man puts out his hand to stop her. "You break it, you bought it," he says gruffly.

"How could we break a key?" Lizzy asks, hands moving naturally to hips.

"Kids have a way of breakin' things," he replies. "You'd be surprised."

"We're not really kids," I feel compelled to announce. "We're almost teenagers, actually."

"That's even worse," he says.

"Look," says Lizzy, "we just want to see if your keys open a box that we have."

"Yeah? What box is that?"

"Show 'im, Jeremy," Lizzy says.

I'm about to unzip my bag when I realize I don't want this guy's big dirty hands all over my dad's box. I shake my head. Lizzy opens her mouth to argue, but then stops when she sees my expression.

"You want the keys?" the man asks. "You'll have to buy 'em like everyone else."

"Fine," I say, reaching into my pocket. The first rule of flea markets is that you only put a few dollars and some change into your pocket so the vendor will think that's all you have. If they see more money, they'll ask for a higher price. I pull out fifty cents. "Is this enough?"

The man shakes his head. "Two dollars," he says.

"Two dollars!" Lizzy exclaims. "There's only, like, eight keys!"

The two of them have a standoff. Lizzy glares, and the man looks bored. Then all of a sudden Lizzy darts her hand out and grabs the dish with all the keys. Before the man can register what she's doing, she takes off running down the aisle. My mouth falls open. The man starts to go after her, but soon realizes he can't leave his stand. He stands directly in front of me and holds out his hand. Hands shaking, I hurriedly place two dollars into his waiting palm.

"You can add the extra fifty cents, too," he says. "For the dish." I have no choice but to hand over the quarters.

"Your girlfriend's quite a firecracker," he says with a hint of admiration in his voice.

"She's not my girlfriend!" I tell him, already hurrying to put as much distance between him and me as possible. I move as quickly through the crowd as one can with a backpack on his back, and find Lizzy waiting on a bench near the front of the market. She is already halfway through a snow cone.

I sit down next to her and watch as the blue ice drips down her chin. "Words fail me," I say, pulling the Razzles out of my backpack. Candy never fails me. I rip open the packet and hold it up to my mouth. I shake it until all the Razzles empty into my mouth. Now I couldn't talk even if I wanted to.

"I know you don't approve," Lizzy says, tossing the empty cone into the garbage next to her. "But come on, that guy was totally obnoxious."

I continue to chew furiously and don't respond.

"Okay," she says. "You don't have to say anything. Let's just try the keys."

She pulls the box out from the bag on my lap and tries each key in each hole, just like we did before. One of them slides halfway into one of the holes, and we both give a little jump. But then it won't go any farther no matter how hard we push. When she's done, Lizzy tosses the whole bunch into the garbage bin.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask, almost choking on the huge chunk of gum. "We should have kept them."

"What for?" she asks.

"I don't know, but they cost me two-fifty!"

She laughs. "You paid the guy?"

"Of course I paid him! He was gonna beat me up!"

"He wasn't gonna beat you up," she says.

"I thought you only stole things that had no monetary value," I point out as we head back into the market.

"We were just going to borrow them," Lizzy insists.

"He was the one who was so rude about it."

"No excuses," I demand. "No rationalizations."

"Fine!" she says. "Let's just keep going."

I pause to spit out my gum into a garbage can. Razzles lose their flavor pathetically quickly. We don't speak to each other as we scour the booths. We continue to find people who have small jars or dishes of keys, and if they don't let us try the keys for free, no one charges us more than a quarter. A girl with an NYU tank top and a hoop earring in her nose keeps turning up at the same booths and buying keys each time. At one point she and I reach for the same key, and I pull back my hand. I turn to Lizzy and whisper, "Are you gonna ask her, or should I?"

"I'll ask her," Lizzy says, and taps the girl on the shoulder.

The girl turns around and raises an eyebrow at us.

"What?" she asks.

Lizzy points to the girl's nose ring and asks, "Does that hurt when you sneeze?"

Ugh! That wasn't the question! She was supposed to ask why the girl was buying so many keys!

The girl stares at Lizzy, and then shakes her head.

"Why? You thinking of getting one?" she asks. "It would look good on you."

"Really?" Lizzy says, clearly flattered, although I can't imagine why. Before she can get directions to the nearest piercing place, I step forward and ask, "Why are you buying so many keys?"

The girl laughs. "What are you guys, the flea market police? I'm doing an art project. I have about a hundred keys so far," she boasts. "Sometimes I make jewelry out of them, too. See?" She moves her long black hair away from one ear. A tiny silver key dangles from a hook. "It's from my diary in fifth grade!"

"Cool," Lizzy and I say, because really, what else could we say?

"Any more questions?" she asks, letting her hair fall back down over her ear.

We shake our heads, and she turns back to the table and scoops up another dishful of keys. What if the keys to my dad's box are already a part of some art project? Or hanging from some girl's ears? Whatever happened to the good old days when all people wanted keys for was to open locks? We reached the last block of the market when Lizzy stops short and grabs my arm. "Look!"

I follow her gaze to an entire table with what looks like all different types of keys and locks in clear plastic bins. We hurry over, jostling a customer or two out of the way. This is key heaven! Small keys, long keys, fat keys, short keys. Old rusted keys, shiny new keys. My eyes can't absorb all the bounty before us.

"Where do we start?" I ask Lizzy in a daze.

She just shakes her head, equally overwhelmed.

An elderly couple sits behind the table on matching rocking chairs. They look like they'd be more at home on a rustic porch than in lower Manhattan. The man chomps on a pipe and seems unmoved by all the hustle and bustle going on around him. The woman waves a paper fan to try to cool off as she rocks ever so slowly back and forth.

"You know," I can't help but tell her, "studies have shown that using a hand fan actually takes more energy than the resulting breeze generates. So really, you're just making yourself hotter."

"What's that?" she says, cocking her ear toward me.

Lizzy pushes me aside. "Never mind him," she says loudly. Turning to me, she says, "Can we show them the box? Otherwise we could be here for hours, and I *know* you don't want to take the subway home in the dark."

I scramble to slip my arms out of the straps and unzip the bag. Lizzy takes the box from me and lays it gently on the table. The couple lean forward in their chairs and peer at the box with interest.

The old man takes his pipe out of his mouth and taps it on the edge of the table so the burnt tobacco falls onto the asphalt below. "That's a might pretty box you got there," he says in a gentle voice.

"Do you think any of your keys will open it?" I ask eagerly.

"Hmmm," he says thoughtfully. "Mind if I take a closer look?"

I push the box closer to him, and he lifts it up and turns it around a few times. He doesn't ask me about the

words engraved on it. He mumbles to himself something about not having seen a box like this in years, and about true craftsmanship being a dying art.

"You've seen boxes like this before?" I ask. Then I turn to Lizzy and say, "If we could find the manufacturer, I bet we could get keys from them!"

"But Larry Junior said there's no name on the box," she replies.

The old man nods in agreement. "This here's handmade. Used to know a guy and his wife who sold stuff like this. But they retired from the flea market circuit a few years ago."

"Any way to contact them?" Lizzy asks. "Maybe they'd know where it came from."

The man shakes his head. "Sorry. Haven't a clue."

Lizzy and I share a disappointed look.

"But you're welcome to go through my collection and see what you can find," he says, handing me back the box. "As you can see, we got all kinds." He points to each bin in turn. "Over here you got your railroad keys, then your jailhouse keys, keys to open luggage, wind pocket watches, then there are the Ford Model T and Edsel car keys, and these here opened the rooms at the fine Seaview Motel before they went to those plastic cards." He gives a little shudder when he mentions the plastic cards.

"And here," he says proudly, pointing to a tall board attached to the end of the table, "we got our pride and joy." The board is covered with rows of hooks with very old-looking keys hanging from them. Most are rusted, and some on the bottom row are over six inches long.

They look like big skeleton keys. The man tells us how he got them from all over the world and that some are hundreds of years old. They are actually very cool, and I can see why they are his pride and joy. Lizzy has been shifting her weight from one foot to the other impatiently. Finally she blurts out, "Don't you have any *regular* keys?"

I cringe. Lizzy really has to work on her manners. The old woman pushes herself out of her rocker and says, "Come on, George. Show the kids what they want."

"Yes, dear," the man says, winking at me. He picks up a small bin from between the watch winders and the luggage keys and hands it to Lizzy. "Give these a shot," he says. "These are the ones that don't fall neatly into any other category."

"We'll bring them right back," Lizzy promises, hugging the box close to her chest.

"You look like trustworthy kids," the woman says. "We'll be here all day."

Lizzy beams at being called trustworthy. She thanks them and quickly hurries toward the closest bench. I grab my box off the table and have to jog to keep up with her.

When I join her on the bench I notice her brow is crinkled, like she's thinking hard about something. "Something wrong?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says, gesturing to the table we just came from. "All those keys."

"What about them?"

"They were all made to open something specific, right? Like one particular lock or door or briefcase or something?"

"I guess so."

"So what if there are people all over the world — people like *us* — who have a lock but can't find the key? Don't you think that's kind of sad?"

Every once in a while, Lizzy says something that really makes me think. I can see her point. Two parts of a whole, separated and lost from each other. "Like swans," I say.

"Huh?"

"You know, how swans mate for life, and then if one of them dies, the other just swims around alone for the rest of its life. Keys are like that. My dad's box is like that. Only one key will fit. Well, in our case, four keys."

Lizzy considers this for a minute, then says, "Can we forget about the swans and just try these keys?"

"You're the one who brought it up," I point out.

"I did *not* bring up the swans!"

"You just don't like learning anything new," I argue.

"I just don't see the point of knowing a lot of useless facts."

I am *not* going to get sucked into this argument again. "Let's just try the keys," I say through clenched teeth.

We get about halfway down the bin when something happens. A key fits all the way into a hole! All the ridges line up. I keep slipping it in and out to make sure it's really happening. Lizzy grabs my arm and squeezes. "Does it turn?" she asks breathlessly.

I try to turn it in both directions, but it won't move. I shake my head and hand Lizzy the box. She tries a few times too, before giving up and slipping the key into her

pocket. "Let's keep going," she says, grabbing the next key from the bin.

We don't have any more luck, but there is a new lift in our step as we walk back to the table.

"How did it go?" the man asks when we return the bin to its rightful place.

Lizzy pulls the key out of her pocket and says, "This one fit in one of the holes, but it won't turn."

The man nods. "You can keep that one, but I suspect your box was made exclusively for one set of keys. You may find a few more to fit the holes, but I doubt you'll get 'em to turn."

I look down at the box in my hand. My dad's words stare back at me and then swim a little as my eyes get watery.

"Here," the old man says, reaching up and pulling one of the big keys off the board. He hands it across to me along with a padded bag. "Take this as my gift. Anyone looking for keys as hard as you is a kindred spirit."

Surprised, I gingerly take the key from him. Some of the rust rubs off on my hand. "Thank you," I say sincerely. "What did it open?"

He shrugs. "Probably an old barn or storehouse."

"Great," Lizzy mutters. "Now we've got four locks with no keys and two keys with no locks. We're worse off than before!"

I carefully slip the key into the padded bag and put it and the box into my backpack.

"Thank you for the gift and for all your help," I say to the couple. "We really appreciate it."

"It's a shame you lost those original keys," the man says as he and his wife head back to their rockers.

I'm about to tell him that it wasn't us who lost them, but before I get a chance Lizzy says, "Don't worry, we know where they are and we're gonna find them."

I'm about to ask Lizzy what the heck she's talking about, when the old man relights his pipe and says, "Good, good. Be sure to come back and tell me what the meaning of life is once you find out."

"We will," Lizzy says, already turning away. She puts one hand on my back and starts pushing me down the aisle.

When we get far enough away I ask, "Why did you tell him we know where the original keys are?"

"Because we do," Lizzy replies. "And that brings us to the next item on my chart. The one I hoped we wouldn't have to get to."

A chill literally runs down my spine. Not a good sign in eighty-degree weather. Hoping I don't sound as worried as I feel, I ask, "You wouldn't happen to have another Milk Dud in your pocket, would you?"