

"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?"

Chapter 5: Plan F

"You're kidding, right?"

Lizzy has just read the final item on her chart. My outburst causes Zilla to growl at me and position himself between the two of us. Lizzy lays the chart back down on the kitchen table.

"Our keys are hidden in Harold's office somewhere," she insists. "He said so himself. Maybe they're under the carpet in a forgotten corner of the supply closet. Or stuck in the back of a desk drawer. Or glued to the ceiling. We're gonna get into that office, and we're gonna find them."

"Breaking and entering? That's your big plan? That's illegal!" I slip carefully past Zilla and into the living room, where I begin to pace and think. The law office is all the way uptown. I'm sure Mom wouldn't approve of us going there, so I'd have to lie. Can this be the only answer? What if other people are already using that office? Maybe if we kept looking at flea markets and tag sales, we'd eventually find keys that would work? But would we find them in time?

I'm getting a bit dizzy from circling, so I sit down on the couch that, unlike ours, has no holes and no name. I practice my deep breathing. Architecturally our two apartments are identical, just flipped around. But they couldn't be more different inside. Practically everything in Lizzy's house is beige. Her dad says that it makes it easier to decorate. I have to admit, it's more calming than all the crazy colors of my place.

Lizzy comes in and sits next to me on the arm of the couch. She picks at a stray thread and doesn't look at me. "Sorry," she says. "The box is yours, and I've been acting like it's mine, too. Making all these plans, dragging you all over the city. I'll stop, and you can do whatever you're comfortable doing."

I'm so surprised by her words that at first I wonder if I misheard her. It *sounded* like she was apologizing for being bossy. Yes, I'm pretty sure she was! But to be honest, she doesn't have anything to apologize for.

"Um, thank you for that," I say haltingly. "But we're in this together. I asked you for help, and you've had really great ideas."

"Aw, shucks," she says, punching me lightly on the arm.

Always one to try the easiest way first, I say, "Before we go to Harold's office, let's at least call him. Maybe he's still there and will look a little harder."

"That's the spirit," Lizzy says. She jumps off the couch and puts up her hand for a high-five. I give her a weak one. She takes the letter out of my backpack and reaches for the phone. As she dials, I remind her that it's Saturday and maybe we need to wait till Monday. She shushes me and moves the phone between us so we can both hear.

It's a recording. "You have reached the law offices of Folgard and Levine. We have closed our Manhattan branch and will be reopening in Long Island in September, following a safari in Africa. Peace out."

"Peace out?" Lizzy repeats, hanging up the phone. "What a strange guy."

"Maybe Levine is the strange one," I offer.

"Who's Levine?"

"The other guy in the office. Harold might be perfectly normal."

Lizzy shakes her head. "If he was friends with your parents, he's probably not normal."

She has a point.

"We need to make a list," she says, suddenly all business. She grabs a pencil off the coffee table and looks around for something to write on. "To recap what we've learned: It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find keys that will fit the box. The box cannot otherwise be broken into, at least not without destroying it and, most likely, its contents. We know Harold is no longer in his office, and might even be in the jungle." She finds a copy of an old issue of *Post Office Weekly* and rips off the back, which is blank. She begins to scribble. "We'll need gloves, a flashlight, a screwdriver, a briefcase, candy, a map of the city, and some nice clothes." She taps her forehead a few times with the pencil. "Now what am I forgetting?"

"The kitchen sink?" I volunteer.

"Why do we need the kitchen sink?"

"Why do we need a briefcase or a flashlight?" I ask. "We're not going in the middle of the night. And candy? You know I'm in favor of bringing candy anywhere we go, but why for this mission?"

"Duh," she says. "To bribe the security guard, of course."

I laugh. "You think a security guard is going to let us snoop around someone's office because you give him a Twizzler?"

"I was thinking more like a bag of Skittles," she says. "And then if he still won't let us in, a king-sized Snickers oughta do it."

She may have something there. He'd have to be a man of strong resolve to turn down a king-sized Snickers.

"And if that doesn't work," she says, pulling her hair out of its ponytail, "I'll just use my feminine wiles."

"What feminine wiles would those be?"

She shakes her hair out and does this pouty thing with her lips.

I burst out laughing. "You look like one of my fish!"

She chases me around the room, swinging her hair and hips, and puckering her lips.

"Speaking of my fish," I say, running to the door. "I have to go feed them. Cat and Dog were ganging up on Ferret last night. I better make sure they haven't eaten him."

Lizzy says, "You're just afraid of my feminine power." She closes the door behind me. I give a little shiver. I don't usually think of Lizzy as a girl at all. It's just too disturbing.



I awake on Sunday morning to the sound of one of those big trucks backing up. *Beep, beep, beep.* The brakes hiss as the truck comes to a stop. Why would a big truck park in front of my building? Unless . . .

I jump out of bed and peek through the blinds. It is a moving truck! Our new neighbors have arrived! A small

red car pulls up behind the truck, and the four doors open. The first thing I see are four blond heads. Mother, father, boy, girl. At the same time, all four crane their necks and look up at the building. The father points first to the roof, where people sit on July fourth to watch the fireworks, and then down to the window of the apartment that will be theirs. He doesn't look like a minor league baseball player or an acrobat, or any of the other things I had been hoping for. He's actually wearing a suit, which I think is weird for a Sunday and even weirder for moving day.

Since my window is only about ten feet above their heads, I can see them very well. The boy is scowling, and the girl's face is sort of crumpled. Streaks of brown makeup run off from the sides of her eyes. She must have been crying. I want to call down that this is a nice place to live, but never having moved in my life I can't really identify with what they must be feeling. I plan on living here forever.

The parents start directing the moving men, and the kids lean against the car. The boy crosses his arms and kicks at the ground while the girl twists a strand of hair around her finger. I'm about to go get Mom to tell her the new neighbors are here when I see our upstairs neighbor, five-year-old Bobby Sanchez, run down the porch steps and up to the car. His mom hurries to catch up.

"Hi!" Bobby says to the new kids, sticking out his hand.

I can hear him clearly through my window screen, but the new boy pretends not to. The girl forces a smile and shakes his hand. "I'm Samantha," she says. "This rude kid is my brother, Rick. We're moving in today."

"Cool!" Bobby says, scratching his head with one hand and shuffling his feet. That boy is never still.

"I'm five," Bobby adds. "How old are you?"

"We're fourteen," Samantha replies. "We're twins, but I'm older by six minutes."

Rick kicks her in the shin, and she jumps. "Well it's true!" she says. A roll of thunder passes by, and everyone checks the sky. I hope it doesn't rain on them.

With both of my parents being identical twins, I would have expected to come across more twins in my lifetime, but this is the first boy-girl set I've ever seen. They don't look very much alike. She has an oval-shaped face, and his is squarer. I am starting to feel a little creepy spying on them, so I scribble a note to Lizzy and stick it through the hole. By the time I use the bathroom and throw on shorts and a T-shirt, there's a response waiting for me.

J-

Not leaving my apartment today = not meeting new neighbors. You can come over if you want. Your grandmother e-mailed me about the state fair. I'll wait till you get here to open it.

L

I write back:

L-

Why aren't you leaving your apartment?

J

She responds:

J-

N.O.Y.B.

L

N.O.Y.B.? Why isn't it my business that she won't come downstairs? And Grandma was very sneaky to e-mail Lizzy instead of me. She knows I delete anything with "state fair" in the subject heading.

I go back to the window, but the new family is no longer outside. They must have gone up to their apartment. It has started to drizzle, and the movers are carrying bundled furniture up the stairs along with a seemingly endless number of boxes. I debate going to their apartment, but figure I should wait for Mom to do that. She'd want to bake something probably. I think that's what you do when someone new moves in. If these were just new kids at school I wouldn't even think of trying to meet them. But I feel it is my neighborly duty to be, you know, neighborly.

Since I'm dressed now, I might as well go to Lizzy's. I leave a note for Mom on the kitchen table. I am very responsible that way.

Grandma knows I'm dreading keeping my end of the bargain that we made last summer. Each summer Lizzy, Mom, and I visit her at the bed-and-breakfast she runs in New Jersey. It's basically the only time I leave the state. Last summer, as she does each year, Grandma took us to the state fair nearby. I basically ate my way through the whole thing — caramel apple, candy apple, funnel cake, cotton candy, and a root beer float. Mom said I would pay for it later, but I was fine. I have an iron stomach.

Grandma bet Lizzy and me that the woman at the Guess Your Weight booth would guess both our weights exactly right. She said if she won the bet, then Lizzy and I would agree to participate in the Young Talent Competition next summer. She'd been trying to convince us to participate for years. Apparently competition is good for the soul and builds character. She herself enters the Table-Setting Competition every year and also the Make Your Own Jam. If the woman was wrong, Grandma promised never to mention the competition again.

Lizzy may be short, but she has muscle. She weighs more than she looks. We exchanged knowing glances and agreed to take Grandma's bet. The guess-your-weight woman narrowed her eyes at us, then scribbled some numbers on her pad. She put the pad on the table and gestured for us to step on the scales. When she showed us the pad, she was exactly right.

Clearly there was some kind of scam involved, but Grandma dragged us away before we could do a thorough investigation. I bet the woman had scales buried under the ground that she could see somehow.

So now we have to be in the stupid talent show. At least we can choose our own act. We need to come up with one today that won't be too humiliating.

Lizzy's dad opens their door. He's still in his pajamas. They have ducks on them, and little clouds. As I've mentioned, Mr. Muldoun is a hefty man, so there are a lot of ducks and a lot of clouds.

"Before you say anything," he says groggily as he steps

aside to let me in, "they were left over from the last auction, and all my other pajamas are in the laundry."

At the post office they're always auctioning off packages that have been deemed undeliverable, like they don't have addresses or return addresses. Usually it's stuff like clothes, CDs, and books, but they've found snakes, a hamster, and even some poor guy's ashes in an urn! Mr. Muldoun gives my mom the heads-up on what will be available. That's how I got my computer. Mom once got a whole box of mixed beads. Just what we needed in our apartment — more beads. The law says they couldn't auction off the urn, so it sits on a top shelf in the post office, and every once and a while someone will put a flower next to it.

"Not every man can wear ducks," I say, following Mr. Muldoun into the kitchen, where he offers me a blueberry muffin. I politely decline. He gives a dramatic sigh, and hands me the chocolate one.

While I munch on it, he says, "Lizzy told me about the box from your father. I hope that's okay."

I nod.

"You must be pretty curious about what's in it," he says.

"Very," I reply, trying not to spray little pieces of muffin.

"Hey, I bet I know where you'll find those keys," he says, peeling a banana.

I look up from my muffin in surprise. Is he saying he has a set? "Where? Where will I find them?"

He grins widely. "In the last place you look."

"Huh? Where's that?"

"Don't you get it?" he asks. "You always find something the last place you look. Because once you find it, you stop looking!"

"Ah, a joke," I reply, rolling my eyes. "I should have known."

"Should have known what?" Lizzy asks, entering the room.

I'm about to tell her when I am caught off guard by the round Band-Aid in the center of her chin. "Cut yourself shaving?"

"Very funny," she says. "I don't want to talk about it." She storms into the living room. I follow with a glance back at her dad. He mouths the word *pimple*. So *that's* why she doesn't want to meet the new neighbors!

Lizzy and her dad share a computer that they keep on a desk in the living room. I plop down on the couch as she reads the e-mail from my grandma out loud:

Dear Lizzy,

Hello, darling. As you know, the fair is coming up in only a few weeks. I've tried to get in touch with Jeremy, but his e-mail must be broken. So I have taken the liberty of choosing your routine for the talent competition. Remember that lovely skit with the hula hoop? That is what you will be doing. The act must be between three and five minutes, so do time your music accordingly.

Much love, Grandma Annie

Lizzy whirls around, her hand over her mouth, eyes wide with horror.

This is exactly why I don't like surprises. Once I get over the initial shock, I jump up from the couch. "This is a nightmare. We can't perform that routine in front of hundreds of strangers!"

Lizzy's face is getting redder by the second. "She isn't talking about that thing we used to do where you throw me a football while I'm hula hooping and I throw it back? And then I eat that banana?"

I nod miserably. "That's the one. Remember we made that up the summer we went out there and it rained the whole time?"

"We were SIX!" Lizzy shouts.

Lizzy's father hurries into the room. "Everything okay?"

Lizzy fills him in on our dire situation.

Mr. Muldoun shrugs. "Doesn't sound so bad. Could be a growth experience."

We glare at him.

"Is there a prize?" he asks.

"I think it's fifty dollars if you win," I reply.

With a wink, Mr. Muldoun says, "That'd buy some kid a lot of Snickers bars."

Hmmm. He has a point.

"Fine," Lizzy says, throwing up her arms. "But if we lose out to that kid who plays the harmonica with his nose, someone's gonna pay."

"That kid won't win," I assure her. "He won last year, and you can't do the same act twice."

"It's a good thing I like your grandmother," Lizzy says. "I wouldn't hula hoop for just anyone."

"I know you wouldn't." I refrain from reminding her that when we were younger, she used to want everyone to watch her. "Are you sure you don't want to meet the neighbors now? I don't think they're too happy to be here."

She gestures wildly at the Band-Aid on her chin. The subject is closed.



Monday morning comes all too quickly. Lizzy shows up at my bedroom door dressed in a long skirt and a clean white top. Her hair is out of its ponytail and has actually been brushed. The Band-Aid is gone. I rub my eyes to make sure it's her.

"Why aren't you dressed yet?" she demands. Yup, it's her all right.

"It's only eight-thirty!" I reply, letting my head fall back on the pillow.

She walks over and tugs the pillow out from under me. "You know we have to get an early start. We have a lot to do before we go."

I groan. "Like what?"

She ticks off the list on her fingers. "First, you have to get dressed. *Nicely*. Second, you have to gather your items from the list. Third, we have to go to the store to get the candy. Luckily for you, the best way to the office is by bus so you're spared the subway for today."

I sleepily sit up and move to the edge of the bed. "You

forgot the part where I have to lie to my mom on the way out. She's off from work on Mondays so she's home now."

"Already taken care of," Lizzy says with a dismissive wave of her arm. "She saw me coming in and asked why I was dressed up. I said we're meeting my dad at the post office and he's going to give us a tour."

"But what'll happen if she sees your dad later and he doesn't know about any tour?"

"Don't worry so much." Lizzy pulls my closet door open and reaches inside. "We'll ask my dad for a real tour tomorrow just in case. Here," she says, tossing a blue button-down shirt on my bed. "Wear this with your tan pants."

I make a face. "The only time I wore that shirt was to my aunt's gallery opening. You want me to wear it on a regular day?"

"It's for a worthy cause," she says, grabbing a pair of brown dress shoes from the floor of the closet. "We have to look respectable. And didn't everyone tell you how handsome you looked in it?"

"One old lady," I grumble. "But I think she was legally blind. All right, give me ten minutes."

I drag myself to the bathroom and throw on the outfit Lizzy laid out for me. It takes a while to do up all the buttons on the shirt. Why would anyone wear this when they could pull on a T-shirt? I grab the items on Lizzy's list that are my responsibility — the flashlight, gloves, and screwdriver — and stuff them in my backpack. Lizzy has the map and one of her dad's old briefcases. We'll have to stop at the comic store for the candy.

Mom and Lizzy are in the living room when I come

out. Mom is on her knees patching up one of Mongo's legs. It's been peeling ever since Zilla the monster cat had to stay here for a night last month while Lizzy's apartment was being exterminated. Zilla spent half the night using the leg of the couch as a scratching post. Neither of us was brave enough to try to stop her.

"Don't you look nice, Jeremy," Mom says when she sees me.

"Er, thanks," I mumble, unable to look her in the eye.

"Well, we better go," Lizzy says, hurrying past Mom toward the door. "The mail stops for no man. Or something like that."

"Just a second," Mom says, scrambling to stand up without dropping her spool of thread. My heart quickens as she comes toward me. She must see it in my face. I am the *worst* liar. To my surprise, Mom passes right by me and peers at Lizzy's chin. "I just wanted to make sure the concealer is working," she says. "Looks good to me. Can't see a thing."

Lizzy blushes furiously and doesn't look at me. I want to laugh, but she'd kill me. "It's fine, thanks for your help," she mumbles and practically throws herself out the front door. I think it's nice that my mom wants to help Lizzy with girl stuff.

Mom closes the door behind us, and I see that Lizzy left the briefcase a few feet away outside our door. She picks it up, and we're about to turn down the stairs when the new kids come out of their apartment. The four of us stand there awkwardly until the girl, Samantha, says hi,

and we all introduce ourselves. Rick doesn't look quite as angry today. Perhaps he is resolved to his fate.

"So where did you move from?" Lizzy asks. She unconsciously reaches up to touch the spot where her covered-up pimple is, and then quickly lowers her hand.

"From New Jersey," Samantha answers. "Our dad works in the city and was tired of the commute."

"Did you ever go to the state fair?" Lizzy asks, in an unfamiliar high-pitched voice. "We're going to be in it next month."

I've never heard her so talkative to strangers. Why would she mention the state fair of all things?

"The state fair?" Rick repeats with a laugh. "Only hicks go there. What are you going to do? Pull a tractor with your teeth? No, wait, you're going to race pigs!"

"Shut up, Rick!" Samantha says, pushing him hard into the wall. "Ignore him," she says, rolling her eyes. "He can be so obnoxious."

"No problem," I mumble, even though I don't mean it. Rick is still laughing, and Lizzy has turned mute. It looks like it's up to me. "Well, we hope you'll like it here," I tell Samantha, ignoring Rick. Then, as Mom trained me to do, I add, "Let us know if you need anything." I point out which apartments are ours, and seeing as Lizzy is still mute, I pull her down the stairs with me.

"What was that all about?" I ask once we get outside and a few yards away.

The usual spring is missing from her step, and she's walking very slowly. Could she have been nervous because

of Rick? Does she think he's cute or something? Finally she says, "I feel so stupid. Samantha's gonna think I look like this every day, with this dorky skirt. And then I go on about the stupid state fair. Why did I say that? And this stupid briefcase. Did you see her earrings? And her toenails were red!"

"I won't ask why you were looking at her feet. But why do you care if some girl you don't even know thinks you look like this every day? What's wrong with the way you look?"

"Oh, never mind," she says. "You don't understand girls at all." She walks faster, almost jogging, and I have to hurry to keep up. Well, at least the spring is back in her step.

Chapter 6: The Office

Mitch is just opening the locks on the front door of Fink's Comics and Magic when we arrive. I can't help noticing the large ring of keys in his hands.

"Hey, dude and dudette," he says in a kind of drawl. He's always trying to sound like he's from California, when I know he's never even been there. It is my secret hope that he'll move there for real after he graduates. Then maybe Uncle Arthur will retire, and I'll take over the store. A kid can dream, can't he?

Mitch gives Lizzy's outfit an approving glance, but she doesn't notice. She's too busy eyeing the key ring, too.

As we follow him inside, I whisper to Lizzy, "We should check his keys in case my mom is wrong and my dad *did* leave an extra set in the store. Then we wouldn't have to go uptown."

She nods in agreement. "I was thinking the same thing."

"I'll go ask Mitch for them."

"Wait," Lizzy says, pulling me back. "He's gonna want to know why you want them. Do you really want him to tell him about the box?"

She's right. I don't want him to know about it. He might try to lay claim to it somehow, or at the very least make fun of me. I know they store the keys under the counter, so all we have to do is wait until an opportune