

# MAGIC'S KEY

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## 1: Jack's Reef

*Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York  
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Maybe later it would make a funny story; at that moment Alexandra's hand was still caught under the floor, and she wasn't amused. She opened her fingers, let the shiny thing which had caught her eye fall back into the dark space where the faded honey-colored wooden floorboards didn't quite reach the wall, and withdrew her hand. A credenza had covered the gap until earlier that morning, and when she'd noticed something glinting in the newly exposed space, she'd knelt and reached for it.

That April day Alexandra didn't believe in magic, although she wanted it to be real. Her favorite books were about children who happened on magic, and she hoped that someday she would find it, too.

It didn't matter that whatever the shiny thing was, it couldn't be magical—Alexandra had set her mind on getting it. When she'd held it, she'd felt a hole through it, so after a moment of consideration she fished a paperclip from the pocket of her jeans and bent it into a hook. It occurred to her that situations like this might be the reason Charles regularly carried all manner of odds and ends in his own pockets, although she was still fairly sure that the habit was mainly a result of the many books they'd read in which boys collected bits and bobs, not some great forethought on his part. Either way, the makeshift hook slipped through the hole of the shiny thing with beautiful ease, and Alexandra pulled it out, only once catching it on the edge of the floor.

It turned out to be a key: rather ornate, old-fashioned, and made of a shiny pinkish copper mottled with a patina of pastel blue-greens and duller browns. The hook had caught it through the bow, the round part which could be held while turning it in a lock, or could be threaded through a keyring, or even—Alexandra thought fancifully—could let it hang from a peg over a door in a castle. It was not as long as her hand, but about twice the size of an ordinary house-key, and it tugged at some long-forgotten memory, although she couldn't place where she might have seen anything similar before. She thought it an interesting find, albeit ultimately as worthless as the rest. She slid it into her pocket with the paperclip and the few odd buttons and coins she'd found walking around the newly-bare house earlier, and returned to her task.

She was actually there to close the windows, because just as her family was about to drive after the moving vans, she'd recalled that it was supposed to rain later that day, before the new tenants were to arrive. Sometimes, her good memory for random details earned her extra obligations, as in this case, but for the most part it wasn't a half bad strength to have. She'd hurried up the stairs to the third floor and let herself in, but before she got to any of the windows, she saw the copper key.

Alexandra had promised she'd be quick, though, so she made short work of pulling the windows shut, feeling a little thrill every time she walked right through the space some table or sofa or bed had occupied. After a last quick look around to reassure herself that she hadn't forgotten anything else, she ran back down the four half-flights of white-painted stairs. She liked running on stairs: it was uncharacteristically daring, which was nice, because children in books were careless, and they got adventures because of it. Still, she slowed before she got to the bottom, in case one of her siblings was looking in the door—she couldn't bear the thought of setting a bad example, and being the reason one of them fell and got hurt.

The sunlight was bright, glittering between the new leaves of the trees that lined the sidewalk, and Alexandra's eyes watered as she came out from the dimness of the entryway. She climbed into the last seat in the SUV and closed the car door, nudging Sylvia over a bit to buckle her seatbelt. As soon as she was secure, Papa pulled away from the curb, and the brownstone row houses of Park Slope began to gather speed as they rolled past.

"What took you so long?" Roger, in the seat behind her, asked. She twisted around to take in his reaction as she nonchalantly replied, "Oh, I just got my hand stuck under the floor."

"You *what*?" Charles asked from the other side of Sylvia, and Alexandra only shrugged and said, "It happened." She was quietly thrilled: odd things didn't happen to her often, and she relished the incredulous looks on her siblings' faces. She decided that she was beginning to get the hang of being interesting, and that it was all tied up with being mysterious.

"Well, something happened to *me* the other day," Charles began, mirroring Alexandra as he turned around in his seat in front of Peter to better address the occupants of the car, and Sylvia turned around in the middle seat, in front of James, so as not to be the only person on the middle bench who was facing forward, and then Mama had to tell all three of them to sit straight before they hurt themselves.

Getting into a car always made everyone ravenous, and, sitting behind the passenger's seat and therefore directly behind Mama, it fell to Alexandra to pass out the food as Mama handed it back. There was a whole cooler wedged at Mama's feet, and sandwich after sandwich came out of it, seemingly without an end. Dutifully, she distributed them to her five younger siblings, waiting to make sure each of them had one before she kept one for herself.

Just as Alexandra took her first bite of her own sandwich, James cried, "Mine has no mustard!" He was the littlest brother, and therefore by necessity the loudest. Sylvia, the only sibling even younger than he was, was the only one louder.

"Well you can't have mine!" Charles said in alarm, trying to shove his whole sandwich into his mouth.

"Charles," Mama admonished, passing a bottle of mustard back via Alexandra.

“Sorry, James,” Charles said, through his extremely large mouthful of sandwich, “if you really need it, you can have some of my sandwich, I guess.”

“It’s okay,” James said, graciously. “May I have a spoon?”

“You can’t eat a sandwich with a spoon,” Roger objected.

“No, but Mama said I can’t drink mustard out of the bottle,” James said, reasonably.

“No, James, you may not have a spoon to eat the mustard,” Mama said. She sounded tired. “Mustard is a condiment. We’ve talked about this. You can’t eat condiments by themselves.”

“Well, technically, you *can*—” Roger began, but Papa cut him off, saying, “Even if you can, you *mayn’t*. You know what your mother meant.”

“Yeah, but she *said*—”

“Roger.” It was Peter who stopped him this time, reaching behind James to put a hand on his twin’s shoulder. “Let it go.”

Alexandra managed to finish her sandwich in relative peace. There was more conversation—in a family of eight, silences were rarer than gold—and she didn’t notice when, exactly, the trees hemmed by concrete turned to trees surrounded by other trees, and the houses disappeared altogether. Feeling full and crowded and bored and curious to see their new home, she snuggled a little closer to Sylvia and ended up dozing off for long enough that she got a crick in her neck.

Somewhere along the way I-80 turned into I-81, as they drove through Scranton and Binghamton and finally Syracuse, although mostly through tiny towns and forested countryside, and somehow nearly five hours passed, and then they were driving over a bridge that was hardly a bridge at all except for the flat shiny river that ran under it, and Papa was saying with relief, “This is Jack’s Reef,” and they were at the house.

Four hours later, the sun would be setting behind the house, painting the skies with ribbons of fire. As it was, the sky was only blue, and there happened to be a cloud over the sun. Nevertheless, Alexandra thought the house—all three stories of its tidy, brown-shingled self—looked enchantingly rustic sitting at the end of a lawn that was at least three times as long as it was wide, and made to look even longer by the single row of blossoming dogwood trees which stood and sat along either side. Alexandra decided then and there that it was the perfect setting for her long-awaited adventure. The children piled out of the car and for a moment it could have been a dream straight out of *Five Children and It*—until the first moving van pulled into the driveway behind the family’s SUV, and the movers began carting about brown cardboard boxes and furniture covered in old blankets.

Long, whirlwind hours passed before the movers finished emptying their cavernous trucks and departed, leaving an echoing silence in their wake. Mama and Papa set to work finding the cookware among the boxes and parcels in the kitchen so they could put together dinner, and the children dispersed to their new rooms.

As Alexandra climbed the unpainted stairs, her steps falling softly into the dips the passage of many feet had worn, she hummed a song Mama had learned from the radio when she was in high school. The stairwell was wallpapered a cheerful pale yellow, fresh and crisp against the dark wood of the banisters. She passed the landing on the second floor with its three bedrooms, as many as had been in the whole apartment back in Brooklyn: the big one Mama and Papa were to share, and one each for

Roger and Peter. The third floor was right under the eaves, the hallway at the top of the stairs running down the tall middle of the attic, two rooms off either side.

Hers was the further on the left, and even with the ceiling sloping down to a pair of white-curtained dormer windows, her bed and dresser and the boxes which still held all her possessions looked small and unobtrusive. This room was twice as big as the one she'd shared with Sylvia since Sylvia grew out of the crib in their parents' room five years earlier, and—

"It's all—every *single* last square inch of it—mine," she proclaimed, spreading her arms and spinning in a little circle in the center of the room, and wasn't *that* a luxury, having enough space to spin with outstretched arms? She'd just seated herself on the cushioned ledge which ran along the whole low wall under the windows when Charles came thundering up the stairs, and instead of going to his own room across the hall from hers, poked his head around her doorframe and asked, "Did you say something?"

"No," Alexandra lied, unthinkingly. She immediately felt guilty, and corrected herself, "I mean, I did, but I was talking to myself."

"Okay," Charles said. "Anyway, I was downstairs and Mama told me to remind everyone to make sure to unpack their school stuff by Monday."

Alexandra jumped to her feet, narrowly missing hitting her head on the low part of the ceiling. "I know where mine is! I'll get it out right now."

Charles eyed her dubiously. "This is *Saturday* still, remember?"

"Well, I don't want to end up being late to our first day at a new school," Alexandra said, the "*obviously*," unspoken but nonetheless audible in her tone.

"New school," Charles echoed. He leaned against the doorway, a frown overtaking his mouth.

Alexandra imagined that, come Monday, her former classmates would return from spring break and begin forgetting that their sixth grade had ever been a class of twenty-eight, not twenty-seven. This, while she and her siblings would be walking into a new school filled with people they didn't know and trying to play catch-up.

"It's always hard for the new kids," he said, uncannily echoing her thoughts.

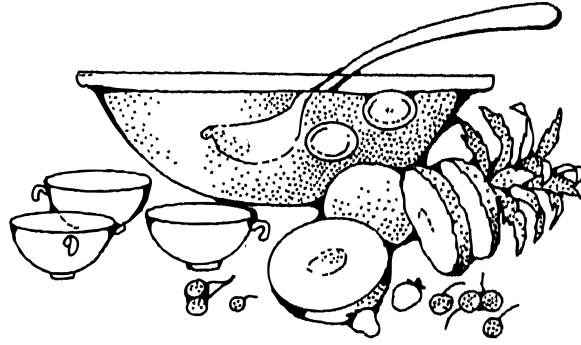
"I don't care," Alexandra said, lifting her chin, "it's beautiful and amazing here, and I'll make new friends. We all will."

"Sure," Charles said. He straightened, sliding his hands into his pockets, and Alexandra mirrored his posture unconsciously. Her hand brushed metal warmed from resting against her leg, the strange key she'd gone out of her way to retrieve earlier.

"Charles," she asked, "do you believe in magic?"

"Magic somewhere out there? Yeah, probably. Magic in our lives? Not likely. Why do you ask?" Alexandra shrugged. "Just wondering."

After Charles left, Alexandra put the key into the drawer of her bedside table, and tried to put it out of her mind. She didn't believe in magic, but she hoped she'd find it.



## 2: Party Trick

*Jack's Reef, Memphis, New York  
Saturday, May 26, 2012*

By the time Charles's birthday rolled around, they had settled into their new home like they'd always lived there. The day was warm but not hot, and the blue of the sky was visible between the drifting cotton-ball clouds, a color so very bright and pure that it hurt to look at for too long. Almost all the cousins were there for the party, Veronica included.

Alexandra didn't dislike Veronica, but the fact was that they had only attended the same school for the six weeks since Alexandra's family had moved, and in different sixth grade classes at that, and that was the most they had in common. Because they were less than four months apart in age, their respective parents always seemed to think that the pair ought to be great friends, so they'd spent lunch in opposite seats at the long table on the lawn, sharing the occasional awkward smile when their eyes accidentally met. Alexandra excused herself as soon as she was done eating.

Near the other end of the table, the younger cousins sat near Alexandra's younger siblings. She was about to sit down on Peter's vacated chair when Harriet came up to her. Harriet—five and a whole half now—looked solemn in her party dress, only slightly mussed from the morning's car ride all the way from her house down the block from Alexandra's old one. It had only been six weeks, but she could tell Harriet was already taller when she hugged her.

"So, what do you think of the house?" Alexandra asked, after surreptitiously making sure that Harriet hadn't left cake crumbs on Alexandra's dress. "Apart from, you know, not being near yours?"

Harriet considered the question with her typical gravity. "I think you should live further from the water," she said. "If there's a hurricane, you might get washed away."

Alexandra was pretty sure that Central New York didn't get hurricanes, but it was a disturbing prospect. The soft spring day was blotted out in her mind by a frightening image of dark, cold wind and pouring rain battering her home into the merciless depths of the Seneca River. She shivered.

"... a pool float for each of you," Harriet was saying, pensively, "or maybe just put the whole house on a pool float. Do they make pool floats that big? Maybe you could tape a lot of them together..."

“I’m sure my parents know what to do,” Alexandra said, because that was the Right Answer, but she didn’t forget what she’d imagined. “There’s fruit punch over there,” she added, to change the topic, “and the bowl is really pretty. Do you want to see it?”

“Okay,” Harriet said. It truly was an extremely elegant punch bowl, sun-sparkling crystal with the fancy kind of little cups with hooked handles that hung from the bowl’s edge, and Alexandra let it distract her for a little while.

The rest of the children, too, had been quick to leave the table, and soon enough Alexandra heard her siblings bickering.

“... chairs aren’t fun,” Charles was saying.

“What about musical chairs?” Roger asked.

“That’s for little-kid parties,” Charles, who was now all of eleven years old, said with great disdain.

“What do big kids do at parties?” James asked.

Before Charles could come up with an answer, Alexandra’s attention drifted to a different conversation.

“... how I found it,” Uncle Jack, Harriet’s father, was saying. “Can you believe it? If I’d never gotten a flat tire, I never would have gotten that genuine Roman padlock, either.” Uncle Jack collected keys and locks. The last time, it had been a set of bronze Viking marriage keys he’d managed to acquire. Alexandra hadn’t heard this story before, she didn’t think, but the end of his newest tale jogged a memory. She left Harriet by the punch bowl with a hasty excuse and edged her way into her uncle’s peripheral vision.

“Uncle Jack?” she said.

“Yes, Alee?” Uncle Jack twisted around in his seat to give his niece a wide smile.

“I found a key when we were moving,” she said, “and it looks old. It looks really old. Do you want to see it?”

“Oh, sure!” Uncle Jack seemed sincerely, thrillingly enthusiastic about the prospect. “Why don’t you go get it, and I’ll see what I can tell you about it?”

“Okay,” Alexandra said, and dashed off into the house.

It was cooler there than outside in the sun, and dimmer, and the voices from the party on the lawn came through the open windows only a little. Alexandra rummaged through the drawer of her bedside table, spilling odds and ends onto her coverlet until she located the heavy copper key.

She brought it out to Uncle Jack, and he took it from her and turned it over in his hands and contemplative silence for a few long moments.

“The dragon motif on the bit recalls the later part of the Early Middle Ages,” he finally said, “somewhere between the eighth century and the tenth, I’d say. But as you can probably see, it’s copper, and if the dragon were meant to ward off evil spirits, it would have been—or ought to have been—iron. Also, you see how it has no scratch marks, no nicks? Now, copper is a relatively soft metal; I would say this key has never been used. I’d guess that it was made not so long ago, custom-designed for some kind of medieval enthusiast, hand-made by a talented artisan.” He shrugged. “It’s a pretty thing, but I’ll bet you this: it was never meant to open a lock.”

Uncle Jack must have seen that Alexandra was rather crestfallen at the assessment, because he said, "Here, before I give it back, watch this."

Holding the key out flat on his palm, fingers together, he closed his eyes. For a moment, nothing happened, except perhaps his fingers pressing more tightly against each other. Then, to Alexandra's surprise and amazement, the key floated up about an inch from his hand, apparently suspended in midair. Alexandra shot a quick look at his face, and his eyes were open again, watching the key with almost as much incredulity as she was as it rotated in a slow circle before falling back to his hand.

"You can do magic," Alexandra said, her voice hushed. Uncle Jack laughed. "It's a good party trick, I'll give you that."

Alexandra could hardly believe it was merely some sleight of hand, but then, she supposed, that was the point of illusions. If you couldn't have the real thing, the counterfeit was a beguiling consolation prize. She smiled at Uncle Jack, still impressed, as she took the key.

"Thank you," she said, "I'll go put this back in my room, now, if you'll excuse me?"

Veronica and her mother had come up to the group just as Uncle Jack was handing back the key. Now the woman gave her daughter a pointed look as she said, "Alexandra, dear, why don't you take Veronica with you? After all, you find so little time to spend together!"

"Oh, sure," Alexandra said, because she didn't want to be rude. "I mean, if you want to come, Veronica?"

"Sure," Veronica said, drawing out the word. Alexandra couldn't tell if the other girl was mocking her or not.

Veronica fell into step beside her, and a few beats later Alexandra said, "I'm going around to the back door, because it's closer to the stairs. If you don't want to come in with me, you can wait in the backyard, where your mother won't see." It was uncomfortably clear to Alexandra that Veronica didn't care for her company.

Veronica turned her head to the side, and her eyes met Alexandra's for a moment before returning to the path in front of them. "I'll come all the way, if it's the same to you." She stretched her arms above her head with a sigh. "Mom's always on my case, and I don't like it, but that doesn't mean I don't like *you*."

Alexandra didn't know how to respond to that. As they rounded the corner to the back of the house, she settled on, "Well, I don't dislike you, either. I hope you didn't think that."

"Not at all," Veronica said, matter-of-factly. "You're such a nice person; I can't imagine you disliking *anyone*."

Alexandra tried to think of a counterexample, because children in books disliked people all the time, but she couldn't, so she said nothing.

"So this is a key you found when you were moving out of your old house?" Veronica asked, after several paces of awkward silence.

"It is. I sort of thought it might be something special, but Uncle Jack says it doesn't even open anything."

"Your Uncle Jack was completely wrong," said a muffled voice. It was patinated with the hue of some round, warm accent, the legacy of a Romance language. "I am the key that opens *every* thing."