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LATCHKEYS SEASON ONE

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First edition

FOR ALL THE AUTHORS WHOSE FANTASIES FUELED A CHILDHOOD
AND ADOLESCENCE AND THE TEACHERS WHO HELPED GUIDE ME
TO FIND DEEPER MEANING





Tanglewood creaked a lot, causing Matt Fisher to lose his concentration with maddening frequency. The old, ramshackle house had become his new hangout and even after five days he had trouble finding his way around. A house filled with countless doors of every shape and size was disorienting enough, but he could swear each remaining one whispered as he passed by, sometimes inviting him in, sometimes warning him away. The sounds were so soft he thought he could be imagining them. That the House added doorways, lengthening and shortening hallways, certainly didn't help. He sort of understood why, though. After all, the house surrounded the World Tree, a living thing he had actually seen, which sprouted new Doors like so many new leaves. Each Door was unique, too, opening to a fixed point in not only space and time but the real and the almost real. They were different except for the tree-shaped plates around each handle. The first two days Matt had tried to find his way around without his newfound friends, but he finally gave up when a trip to the bathroom wound up giving him nightmares instead of relief.

Earlier in the week, he had asked Kaitlyn to show him specific Doors because they resembled some of the pictures on his bedroom wall—and now they stepped out onto the sandy deserts of ancient Egypt as the slaves hauled huge stones

destined for the Great Pyramid of Giza, onto the embankment of the Seine in France to watch workmen sinking steel rivets into the huge framework of Monsieur Eiffel's masterwork, and along a stretch of the Great Wall between the mile houses.

In turn, the fiery little Irish redhead peppered him with questions. She started with the amazing way he'd prevented a slab of masonry from crushing her into paste.

"I dunno, I just thought before I could act and somehow the debris flew to the side," he admitted, equally confused.

"You must be telepathic," she said. "Or telekinetic—I get them confused."

"Excuse me?"

She looked up at him with huge, innocent blue eyes and then let out a tinkling, musical laugh. "Guess Jerm didn't fill you in on everything yet. Apparently, being a Warden comes with a special prize, some sort of power."

"You mean like an X-Man?"

"Maybe, I don't read the comics. We all have some psychic ability, which can come in handy, trust me. But we each get something else, too. I can control—well, access—the electromagnetic spectrum." She shrugged like it was no big deal.

Matt stared at her, his jaw dropping in disbelief. Super powers were a very big deal in his book. It made his fantastic new world that much more amazing. And here he thought by now he'd learned everything about this place!

"So, does that come with cable?" he asked, trying to cover his awe with a joke.

Kaitlyn swatted him, wrinkling her pert little freckled nose. “Ha ha. No, but I can manipulate different portions of the spectrum—you know, light, heat, electricity, stuff like that.”

“Wow.” Matt gulped. “Can you . . . would you show me?”

Before she could answer they heard a noise. Not one of the usual whisperings, either, but more like a scatching or a skittering. The distraction was enough to derail the conversation, and Kaitlyn said “Come on!” before sprinting away in search of the source. Matt gamely followed after her, trying to absorb all this new information he’d just been handed.

After being welcomed by Jeremy and given the big gold key that now hung heavily around his neck, Matt had delighted in being part of something new. He finally felt like he was no longer a burden to Mrs. T. but was actually part of something greater. But there were still so many questions he desperately wanted answers to, starting with how Jerm knew Mrs. T and why she’d been so calm about the other kids appearing in her house in the middle of the night like that.

Some questions, though, were more important than others. The biggest being, what had happened to Tanglewood, exactly? There was no denying the fact that many of the doors had vanished, leaving gaps in the hallways, and those gaps seemed eerie and unnatural. Where had the missing doors gone? And why?

Marguerite, ever the studious one, theorized that Tanglewood had splintered somehow, and that the missing doors were still out there but as Splinters themselves now—when she said it, he could hear the capital letter—and could

perhaps be retrieved and restored. Mentioning splinters made Matt think of the terrifying Mister Twig, who'd claimed Matt had something of his, and he wondered if they were connected.

Jeremy and Mercy had already mounted one expedition to find a Splinter, with resounding success. Apparently it had been disguised as a teapot, because it seemed the Splinters took on different forms to blend into their surroundings, but they had sensed it anyway. When Jeremy had touched the teapot it had returned to its original form as a Door's strikeplate, and had then disappeared, to reappear back in Tanglewood as a fully restored Door. There were many more out there, though, and it was going to take a long time and a lot of work to try finding and reclaiming them all.

Right now, though, it was the noises that were concerning Matt.

He had heard enough skittering sounds to know when a living creature was making the noise. No one had mentioned if rodents or worse shared Tanglewood with them, and judging by Kaitlyn's reaction none of the other Latchkey kids had expected such a thing, either. There was a soft pattern to the noise, though, as Kaitlyn slowed ahead of him. They were getting close.

They continued on, walking practically on tiptoe, nearing the source but once more confounded by the strange old house. Matt continued to scan the plush old carpet, seeking evidence of animal tracks, but the treads all seemed human-shaped if not human-sized. Matt felt an unfamiliar responsibility to figure out what was causing the noise, and whether it was a threat.

After all, he and Kaitlyn were two of the five Wardens chosen by the House, or fate, or both, to protect it. He'd never had a job of any sort before, and he meant to take this one seriously.

"It came from over there, I think," Kaitlyn told him in a whisper. She pointed and then took off, quickly striding towards the end of the hallway but pausing long enough for Matt to catch up before rounding the corner.

"Oh!" The youngest of the Wardens exclaimed. "A pixie!"

As Matt came beside her he saw a male figure, unattractive and sloppily dressed in a tattered vest, ripped work shirt and blackened pants that might have once been a different color entirely. He had stubble on his ugly face and wore a dark blue felt cap.

He was also eight inches tall.

"*That's* a Pixie?" Matt asked.

"What is *with* you people?" The little man replied indignantly. "For the last time, I'm not a pixie! I'm a Korrigan!"

"Well, excuse me," Kaitlyn replied, seeming not at all startled to see the tiny figure in the house.

Matt had no clue what a Korrigan was but he knew pixies were supposed to be cute little flying people like Tinkerbelle and this guy looked more like your classic troll. Still, trolls were cool, in a creepy sort of way. Matt loved reading about magical worlds and once he'd learned Tanglewood could access them, he'd hoped for a chance to visit one. Now might be that time.

"What's the ruckus?" a calm, slightly arrogant-sounding British voice asked from nearby.

Oh great, Matt thought, Jeremy heard the noise and came

to investigate. Matt was ready to bet His Tallness would freak out the troll/pixie/korrigan/whateveritis all over again.

Jeremy came striding up from the other end of the hallway, took one look at the diminutive figure before him, and stopped dead in his tracks. He and Kaitlyn exchanged glances, then focused on the stranger.

“What an ugly little bloke,” Jeremy declared.

“Are you quite done staring at me? I got things to do,” the little man replied.

Matt was confused. “I thought only Wardens could open the doors.”

Kaitlyn shook her head. “On this side that’s mostly true. I guess it’s different on the other side of each Door.”

“You came here on purpose?” Matt asked the small figure.

“No,” he snapped back, “I started looking for my perfect mate and wound up in this dump!”

Matt stared at the creature and blinked. He had nothing to say. But Kaitlyn plopped herself on the hardwood floor, bringing her closer to the visitor’s size.

“Did you have any luck finding your perfect mate?” she asked, sounding completely serious.

“Huh? Nah, I already got one at home,” he said, looking around him. “Besides, you’re all too damned tall.”

“And you’re scared,” Jeremy commented, leaning against the nearest wall. He looked purposefully at Matt and tapped his temple. Matt wasn’t sure what he meant at first, then remembered what Kaitlyn had said about “psychic powers.” Sure enough, when he shut his eyes and concentrated he could

feel raw emotions emanating from the little man. He thought there was concern and curiosity tingeing the air, but overriding all was the sour taste of fear.

“Maybe, but not you!” the little man put his hands on his hips and glared menacingly.

“Yeah, you are,” Matt replied. The tiny bloke harrumphed.

“Where are you from?” Kaitlyn asked.

“The other side of the door,” he answered, jerking his head back toward Jeremy, who was coming closer.

“So, you came here on purpose,” Jeremy said.

“Wow, aren’t you good at stating the obvious? I might not have, though, if I knew you’d all be so big!” The little man paused his diatribe and stared at the three of them. “You are the Wardens, right?”

“You know of us?” Jeremy sounded amazed.

“My people know of the Great Power and the Wardens who protect it,” the small bloke answered. “So tell me—are you them?”

“Some of them,” Kaitlyn said with a smile. “I’m Kaitlyn. This one’s Matt and the tall guy is our leader Jerm—er, Jeremy.”

“Call me Grinder,” the little man told them.

“What brought you here?” Matt asked.

“My people need help,” Grinder said, his gruff voice finally softening.

“We try not to get involved in other peoples’ issues,” Jeremy announced, earning him a cross look from Kaitlyn. Matt was still figuring out what Wardens could or couldn’t do so he stayed quiet, ready to hear Grinder out.

“My people are miners, we supply the raw ores to the smithies outside the valley,” Grinder explained. “We’ve got no issue with anyone. We dig in the dirt, separate the ores and sell ’em. We raise our kids, we tend our crops, and we just want to be left alone.”

“Something is threatening you?” Jeremy asked.

“Sort of,” Grinder answered. “An old dispute’s flared up again, guess ’cause the calendar said it was time, and there’s gonna be another war. There’ve already been skirmishes so we sent out some scouts to see which trade routes were safe. The reports coming back’re grim. Both sides’re on the march and our wee little village is right in between them.”

Kaitlyn’s eyes were big with sympathy. “Are you being asked to fight?”

“No, lass,” Grinder said. “But the fight’s coming to our doorstep anyway, and we want no part of it. We knew of the Great Power and when the two doors appeared, we picked the white one and here I am.”

White one? Matt wondered. Two doors? What did that mean, exactly?

“The fight is sure to be a big one,” said a new voice, causing everyone to glance around. The speaker was Amina, flanked by Mercy and Marguerite on one side and Will and Emmaline on the other. All but Amina gaped at Grinder as the older woman approached. Matt had met Amina for the first time on his second day here, and he still wasn’t sure what to make of her. She was the silent type but she clearly knew a scary amount of information. He didn’t really understand how she fit in, though.

She wasn't a Warden, not exactly, but he got the impression she was always in the House and looked after it somehow, as well.

Kaitlyn stood up and made a round of introductions but all Grinder did was grunt.

"Do you know the Korrigan, Amina?" Jeremy asked. He was always unfailingly polite to her, Matt had noticed, but his tone could border on condescending with the rest of them. He was the oldest Warden, and never let them forget it.

"I learned of them during my time as a Warden," she replied, which explained some things to Matt, at least. "They are the stuff of Breton folklore, much as their cousins, the Pixies, came from Celtic tales." Grinder growled low in his throat at the mention of Pixies. Amina shook her head and added, "I have never interacted with them. Their dispute dates back centuries but this is the first time someone has crossed the threshold to seek our involvement."

"Should we help Grinder and his people?" Kaitlyn asked.

"That is not for me to say, Kaitlyn," Amina replied. "You will have to decide if this is Warden business or not."

"Our job," Jeremy began, "is to be of assistance."

"I thought our job was to protect the House and the Doors?" Matt asked. "It doesn't sound like this involves them at all."

"That's true," one of the De La Fuentes twins replied—Matt still mixed them up but he thought it was Mercedes, nicknamed Mercy, "but he did come through a Door to ask for help."

"But is it right for us to interfere with another culture?" Jeremy wondered out loud.

“Are we prohibited from doing so?” The other twin—Marguerite?—asked in return.

“Somehow,” Will put in, “I doubt the Register has exact rules on the subject.” Matt had yet to see the Register, but Jeremy had explained that the book was composed of leaves made from each and every Door, and contained almost limitless wisdom and knowledge. When some of the Doors had vanished, though, pages had disappeared from the Register as well.

“I’m not sure how we can help an entire village,” Marguerite commented, her voice filled with doubt.

Kaitlyn was on her knees, studying Grinder, who looked defiantly back at her. He was keeping his mouth shut during the debate, which Matt thought was a good call.

“I think we’ve just about beaten this one to death,” Will decided finally. “We need to decide right now, since I’m betting the armies haven’t stopped moving while we argue.”

Matt took a step, bringing him closer to Will’s side. “Will’s right,” he said. “I say we help Grinder and his village.”

Mercy agreed, joined a moment later by her sister.

Jeremy glanced back at Amina, who remained enigmatically silent, and finally nodded.

“All right then, we help Grinder,” he declared. “I’ll remain here with Amina, in case you lot need rescuing from this side.” Matt knew he wasn’t chickening out. They’d already told him that it was incredibly rare for all five Wardens to leave the House at once. There was usually at least one Warden here, just in case—which made it even more extraordinary that they had all come for him that night at Mrs. T’s.

A shrill whistle cut off any further conversation, and all heads turned toward Griner. "Great, can we get a move on it, please?" he all but pleaded.

"Point the way and we're yours," Kaitlyn told him.

"About time—let's get on with it." Grinder clapped his hands together. He turned around and stared up at the solid, polished oak door beside him and shook his head. Then he walked across the hall to the faded, dark oak door with a diagonal crack that nearly bisected it, but shook his head again. He peered this way and that, but seemed confused.

"Lost?" Will asked.

The little man snorted but didn't deny it. "This place has me all turned around," he grumbled. "Too big, and nothing to help me mark my way."

Emmaline Crest, Jeremy's older sister, stepped in front of Amina. Matt knew the tall, pretty blonde girl was autistic to the point of immobility away from the house but somehow Tanglewood let her mind function with surprising clarity. They had yet to be introduced, however, and he decided to remedy that. "Hey, Emmaline," he said.

She glared down at him. "I hate that name," she declared, much to his surprise. The others looked surprised as well, even Jeremy, and Matt suddenly remembered them telling him that, although being in the House gave Lena control of herself again, she still didn't talk. Until now, apparently. "Call me Lena."

"Sure . . . Lena," Matt told her.

"Now, good sir Grinder, if you would follow me." Lena spun on her heel, walking away from the stunned Wardens.

Matt caught Amina hiding a small smirk, however. Clearly she knew something she wasn't sharing.

After two turns down corridors Matt could not recall, Emmaline—no, Lena—stopped in front of a blonde wooden Door with grain like brown veins coursing through it. She gestured toward the ornate brass knob. "When you're ready."

"Will you be coming, lass?" Grinder asked her, his tone surprisingly deferential.

She shook her head. "I prefer to remain here. The Wardens will be sufficient." Interesting that she didn't count herself among them, Matt thought. What was she, then?

Kaitlyn, Matt, Will, Mercy, and Marguerite looked at one another, then at Jeremy, who nodded affirmatively.

"Good luck," he said before stepping back beside Amina.

"Here we go," Will announced, pushing the door open.

