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LATCHKEYS SEASON ONE

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First edition



“I don’t believe it,” said Mercy in a hushed whisper.

Behind her, Marguerite said, “What? Where are we?”

“We’re. . .we’re home,” Mercy said.

“Don’t be silly,” Marguerite said. “The newspaper we found says it’s 1921. We won’t even be *born* for almost seventy-five years yet.”

Mercy De La Fuentes stepped out of the narrow, dark corridor that they had followed from the restroom in which they had emerged after stepping through the Door. Her twin sister and the two boys followed her into the gloomy, stale smelling space.

“You live in a bar?” said Matt Fisher.

“I thought you guys had a house in Brooklyn,” said Jeremy Crest.

Marguerite gasped and reached for her sister’s hand.

“It . . . it is. I’d know it anywhere,” the short, dark haired girl said, her rich brown eyes going wide with surprise. “It’s the Mexicali Rose.”

“Look,” Mercy said, pointing at the back wall in which were inset three small decorative stained glass windows, each in the shape of a shamrock. “Those were still there when mom and dad bought this place. Remember? They took all those pictures before they renovated everything.”

The long, narrow room was dark, the single plate glass window next to the entrance painted black. A lamp with an exposed light bulb behind the bar was the only source of light.

Marguerite hurried over to the bar that stretched the length of the saloon. It was made of deep, dark mahogany and varnished to a silky sheen, with a brass rail footrest running along its face a foot off the tile floor and a padded red leather armrest ringing the marble top. Behind the bar, with its three sets of tall, elegant brass and porcelain tap levers spaced along its twenty-five foot run, was the mirror, a single piece of glass more than two dozen feet long and framed in matching mahogany. On the shelf under the mirror sat an array of liquor bottles and, dead center, a massive old cash register, also of brass, the metal stamped with elaborate decorations and scroll work, its twin rows of ten keys each marked with amounts ranging for one cent to ten dollars.

Mercy joined her sister at the bar and they exchanged looks of delight.

“The National TA332B!” they exclaimed in unison and erupted in peals of similar sounding giggles.

Matt and Jeremy also exchanged looks, but theirs were of confusion.

“Either of you care to let *us* in on what’s going on?”

Jeremy Crest, at seventeen the oldest member of the group, was tall and blond, with broad shoulders and an infectious grin and British accent.

“This is our parents’ restaurant,” said Marguerite. “At least the bar part of it. Sometime in the next few decades, somebody’s

going to break through into the place next store and add the dining room and kitchen, but eventually our folks are going to buy it and turn it into the Mexicali Rose.”

“Of course, they’ve got to be born first,” said Mercy. “But the bar hasn’t changed a bit. We’ve even got the same old cash register behind the bar, although here it’s still practically brand new and isn’t just for decoration, I’m sure.”

“Jus a moment,” said Jeremy. The young Brit frowned in thought. “This is New York City, in 1921, correct? I thought it was illegal to sell alcohol and beer in the United States by then.”

“It was . . . it *is*,” said Marguerite. “The 18th Amendment banning it went into effect in 1920, I think. But a lot of bars stayed open in defiance of the law. I remember my father telling us that the Rose had been a speakeasy called the Shamrock during Prohibition.”

“A . . . what? Speakeasy?” said Jeremy.

Matt said, “It’s what these illegal bars were called. I think it came from some owner who used to tell her customers to ‘speak easy’ when they got too drunk and loud so they wouldn’t attract the attention of the police.”

Jeremy grinned and said, “So it could have been full of gangsters and bootleggers, just like in the old movies?”

“Well, probably not so much,” said Matt. “I think the customers were mostly regular people who didn’t agree with the law and just wanted to go out and have a few drinks.”

“Hey, as cool as being here is, we should really look for the Splinter and get back home,” Mercy said. “From the looks of

things, we just happened to pop in while the place is closed, but there's no telling when somebody could show up."

"Good point," said Jeremy. "Anybody picking up any vibes?"

The others exchanged glances and shook their heads, muttering negatives.

"Odd, don't you think? The Door wouldn't have opened into this time and place if it weren't somehow linked to the missing piece."

"That's usually the way it works," said Mercy. "Unless whoever's got the Splinter in some other form has something to do with this location."

"Well, we don't want to be caught by them if and when they show up, so I suggest we find our way out of here and come back later," said Jeremy.

"No problem," said Mercy with a grin. "Marguerite and I know our way pretty well around this old joint. The front door opens on West 44th Street, and there's a delivery entrance on the alleyway around the side. We should probably go out that way. There's less chance of anyone seeing us."

With a courtly bow from his waist and a sweep of his hand, Jeremy said, "Lead the way, ladies."

And that was when they heard the voices and the sound of a key in the lock at the front door.



On a quiet, residential dead end street in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Omaha, Nebraska sits an old house

called Tanglewood. The paint on its weathered clapboards is peeling and its roof sags under decades of neglect. In its front yard looms a large old ash tree that casts its shadow across overgrown shrubs and flowerbeds and a lawn that have all long ago surrendered all pretense of life.

Inside the house were the Doors. Doors too numerous and impermanent to be counted. The Doors were made of the wood from Yggdrasil, the great Norse World Tree that stood at the center of the universe and they lead to every time and every place that ever was. Anyone could step through any of the doors only to find themselves on the other side, into the next room or out in the yard . . . unless, like the four teens, they possessed the special psychic powers that enabled them to be Wardens, the protectors of Tanglewood and the doorways to everywhere. A Warden crossing one of these thresholds steps into different times and other places, to wherever that Door is linked.

Then Tanglewood's connection to the World Tree was, somehow, broken. The disaster shattered the Doors and sent them spinning out across time/space with no rhyme or reason, leaving behind only the flimsiest of shadows to fill the doorways in the house.

Splinters of the shattered Doors went everywhen and it was the task of the young Wardens to find and return them to their rightful place in Tanglewood, to make the Doors whole again and reconnect Yggdrasil to the physical world. But Splinters could be anywhere and might assume any form as protective coloration in whatever time and place they may have landed.

And, more often than not, it was sheer luck that a splinter was detected at all by one of the Wardens.

In the case of the Door to the Shamrock saloon in 1921, it was Jeremy who had first sensed it, on his way to the gents during intermission of a musical performance he was attending with his family at London's Royal Albert Hall.

The next day, after stepping through the fire escape door on the fourth floor of Harrods on Brompton Road in London's Kensington district that opened, for Wardens, into Tanglewood, he had reported his find to Amina Fadill, the adult Keeper of the house. Amina, a former Warden herself, had been in this reality for twenty years, ever since passing through a Door in the Library of Alexandria on the eve of its destruction in 48 BC.

With Mercy, Marguerite, and Matt in tow, Jeremy had returned to Harrods and led them to the famous old music hall, located nearby in South Kensington. After purchasing tickets to a choral recital that none of them had any interest in listening to, they headed straight to where Jeremy had sensed the splinter.

"The ladies room?" Matt said.

Jeremy could only shrug and grin. "It's not like I've got any control over where the splinters land, mate."

"Relax, boys," Mercy said. "Marguerite and I will take the lead and make sure the coast is clear."

The twins pushed their way inside and, a moment later, Mercy stuck her head out the door. "Let's go, you guys. It's the last stall on the right."

With a sweep of his hand, Jeremy said, "After you, my friend."

“But . . . it’s the *ladies* room, man,” Matt said again, hesitating.

“You’re blushing,” Jeremy said with a laugh.

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

Matt smiled, embarrassed. “Yeah, well, I thought nobody would be able to tell ’cause I’m black.”

“I’m psychic, remember?” Jeremy pushed his friend towards the door. “Now let’s go, before any ladies who need to use it do come along.”

Matt took a deep breath and pushed the door open. At the far end of the tiled restroom, past a row of sinks and towel dispensers, Mercy stood holding open the metal door to one of the stalls. She gestured to her teammate and said, “Pick up the pace, Fisher, and stop looking like so guilty. You’re not peeping, just passing through.”

“I know, I know,” Matt said. “It just feels so wrong.”

“Then the faster you go, the sooner you’ll be out of here,” Jeremy said, and gently shoved Matt into the stall. He stumbled past the much-amused Mercy . . .



. . . and out into . . . *another* public restroom!

The stalls in this one had wooden doors and partitions, and the wall opposite them was lined with a long porcelain trough through which ran a steady trickle of water. When he glanced back at the stall from which he had just emerged, he saw it

contained a toilet, with a wood box mounted to the wall over it from which dangled a pull chain. He had seen fixtures like these before, in movies set in the olden days.

At least, Matt thought looking at the trough, this was a *men's* lavatory.

"It's 1921," Marguerite said. She was standing by the restroom door, peering at a newspaper laying on top of a trash barrel between the door and two sinks with cracked mirrors over them. On the other side of the sinks was another door, this one with a simple push latch securing it. She looked up as Jeremy and Mercy followed Matt out of the stall. "May 23, 1921, to be exact. New York City. At least, it's a copy of a New York newspaper. *The Herald*."

Jeremy stepped quickly to the door and put his ear to it. "I don't hear anybody out there," he said.

"Whatever this is attached to is probably closed at the moment," Mercy said. "The lights aren't on."

She was correct. The room was lit only by the daylight that came in through two windows with pebbled, translucent glass that stood high on the back wall.

"Just to be on the safe side, maybe I'd better go out first," Matt said. "We don't want anybody asking what a couple teenage girls were doing in the men's room."

Matt reached for the knob but Jeremy got there first.

"No offense, mate," said the blond boy, "but there's no telling what's on the other side of this door, and even in New York City in 1921, an African-American using the loo in certain locations might be just as hard to explain as twin Latina girls.

Best I go first, don't you think?"

"Excuse me," Matt snapped. He took a step towards Jeremy, his eyes blazing and his fists clenching.

Jeremy held up his hands and made a placating gesture. "Chill out, Matt," he said. "You know I'm not talking for myself, mate. I could care less about the color of your skin, but we've got to keep in mind where and when we are, don't we?"

Marguerite put her hand on Matt's arm and said gently, "He's right, Matt. New York may not have been officially segregated like some of the south in the first half of the twentieth century, but there were still plenty of places that wouldn't let blacks through the front door, much less use the same restrooms as whites."

Matt took a deep breath and let his clenched fists drop to his sides and relax.

"Yeah. Right." He looked at Jeremy. "Sorry, man," he said and pointed with his chin at the door. "Go ahead. I'll stay here, in the back of the bus." But the last was said with the whisper of a grin on his lips.

Jeremy returned the smile and cracked open the door.

"Don't go anywhere without me," he said and, with a cautious peek outside, slipped out.

He was back in a moment, giving his companions a smile and a thumbs up.

"No worries," he said. "It's a pub, but it appears to be closed."

He held the door for Mercy, Marguerite, and Matt, whose shoulder he gave a friendly slap as he passed.

“We’re cool?” Jeremy said.

“We’re cool,” Matt agreed, and followed the sisters into the Shamrock, which they were about to recognize as the future Mexicali Rose.

