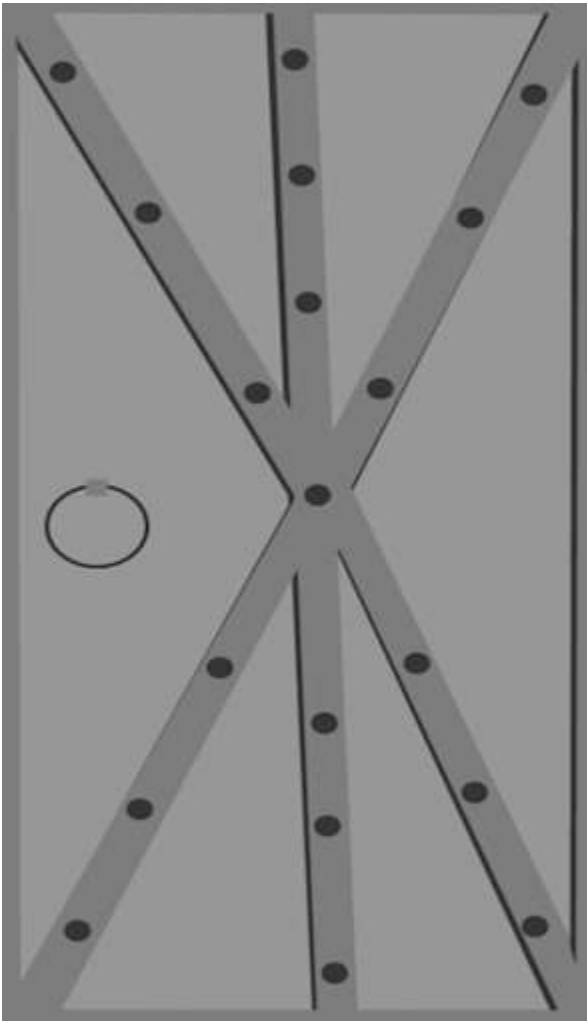


Chapter 3. Behind the secret door



Once the secret door closed, Max and Luz found themselves in a place of the darkest darkness. The air was hot and heavy. Luz felt as if she were suffocating.

“Max?” she whispered.

Six steps away, six long steps through a midnight cave, Max heard Luz clearly. Moments ago, he wouldn't have thought to answer. Moments ago, he would have stayed silent. But now that he was behind the secret door, he sensed that he could talk again.

Max hadn't spoken in a long time, but deep in his chest a surge of air was bubbling up. It rushed up his windpipe and

burst out of his mouth in the explosion of one word.

“Dwight!”

He screamed it, but the sound was muffled by the darkness of the room.

“Max?” Luz sounded confused.

“Yes,” he answered slowly, as if his mouth hadn't moved in years.

“You can talk?”

“Yes,” he said. “I can. I can talk now.”

“But how come?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know what happened.” The words raced from his mouth. “As soon as the door closed, I felt different. I felt really different. I can’t explain it, but I feel like I’m in a balloon or something. Do you know what I mean? Like I’m in a balloon.”

“Slow down, Max,” Luz said. “If you’re in a balloon, it’s a hot air balloon. Aren’t you burning up?”

“Yes, a hot air balloon. A *dark* hot air balloon. Don’t you feel different, too?”

“I guess,” she said, reflecting on the last few minutes of time. “The funny thing is I should be afraid. I mean, here we are trapped in a dark room and we’re talking like everything’s normal. No one knows where we are or what we’re doing. But I’m not afraid. I don’t like being in dark places. I don’t like it at night in my house. But I don’t feel afraid here. I feel safe. Isn’t that weird?” It was so weird that Luz found herself smiling.

“I feel safe, too,” Max said. “But I’m wondering about Dwight.”

“Are you worried about him?”

“Not really,” he said. “Not when I think about it, but I’m wondering what happened to him. He didn’t make it to the door, so he’s probably waiting for us.”

“Just open the door and let him in,” Luz suggested.

“I’ll try,” he said.

He reached out his hand, hoping that he would touch the door. His hand waved in the darkness. He took one small step forward, then another. In a moment, he felt a smooth metal panel.

“Here,” he said. “It’s over here. I think.”

“I’m coming over there with you,” Luz told him. “Keep talking.”

He heard her feet shuffle, then he felt her shoes bump into his.

Suddenly, a metal gear clanged far below them, then a whirr fluttered overhead. Their dark prison began to jerk. Their knees shook, and they almost fell. The floor was moving.

“We’re in an elevator,” Luz said.

“Going down,” Max added. “I guess there’s a basement.”

“You don’t think this is a trash compactor?” Luz joked.

Max laughed. “I think you’ve seen too many movies. ”

The whirring became louder, and gradually dim light filtered into the elevator. They could see the dark metal walls that surrounded them. Two small buttons labeled **U** and **D** were positioned on one wall. Next to them was a brass plate with the word **PUSH** etched on it.

What if we had pushed on the door before the elevator moved? Max wondered. Would we have been able to find Dwight? Then he thought, What will we find when the elevator stops?

The elevator thudded, and the whirring ended. Luz noticed that the air was cooler now. They waited. They listened. Surely someone was there, expecting them. But nothing happened.

Max and Luz looked at each other.

“Hey, where’s your hat?” she asked. It was the first time she had seen his head uncovered.

“There it is,” he said, spotting it on the floor. “It must have fallen off.” He picked it up and held it.

“Aren't you going to wear it?”

“No, not now.”

“But you always wear your hat.”

“I don't feel like it here,” he told her.

“I'm really confused,” she said. “You're not wearing your hat and you're talking? It's like you're the opposite of who you were. Are you sure that you're really Max?”

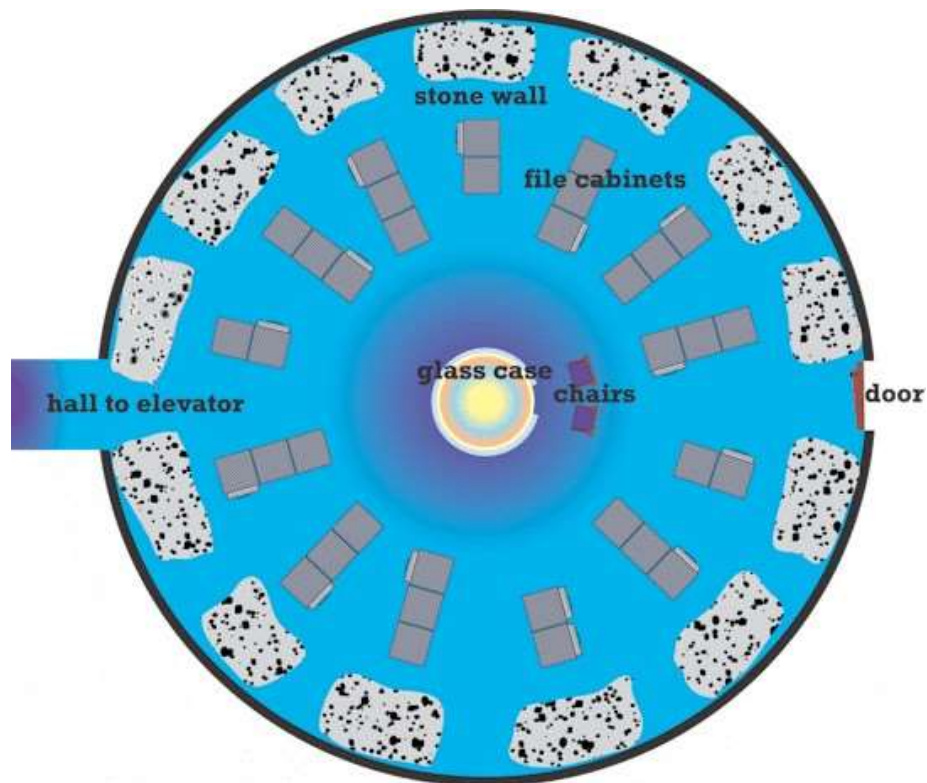
“Yes, if you’re sure that you’re really Luz.” He smiled. “Now let's find out where we are.”

He pushed against the door.

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They stepped into a dark hallway. For a moment, Max thought they had entered the gatehouse of a medieval castle; the walls were lined with large stones, the floor was packed earth. Ahead, Max could see a well-lit room.

Without a word, they glanced at each other and nodded once, then headed for the room at the end of the hall. In a moment, they stood at its entrance. The room was large and round with stone walls and a vaulted ceiling. Around the other edge of the room stood a circle of thirteen huge stones that went from floor to ceiling. Radiating from each stone, toward the middle of the room, was a row of file cabinets.



At the center was a glass chamber on a stone platform, both round. The chamber was over six feet tall, Max imagined, and looked like a display case at a natural history museum—only nothing was inside. Next to it, attached to the end of one row of file cabinets was a brightly-colored sign that read:



Two empty chairs waited beneath the sign.

“Are those for us?” Luz asked.

“Guess so,” Max said, but he had no intention of sitting down. Neither did Luz. They were both too busy examining the strange room.

“It looks like Stonehenge,” Luz said.

“Or CIA headquarters,” Max said. “It looks like a place for spies, doesn't it?”

“Now who's seen too many movies?”

“Yeah, but all these file cabinets and that other door.”

He pointed across the room. On the wall opposite the hallway to the elevator, wedged between two of the large stones, was another door. Painted red, it seemed to be a twin of the secret door upstairs. A sign posted on the door read:



“What do you think is inside?” Luz said.

“A lady named Miss Moon?”

“Maybe.”

“Should we go in there?” he asked.

“I don't think so. The sign says danger. We don't know what kind of danger.”

“Well, it doesn't say danger out here,” Max said. “Let's look around.”

They separated and began to walk down two different rows of file cabinets.

“Did you see what's written on these?” Luz asked.

Max walked to the closest cabinet and read the label on one drawer:



UFO Reports,
California-Connecticut

He pulled open the drawer. Inside, he saw hundreds of folders. He looked in one folder and found a newspaper article about a UFO that had landed on a deserted road in California.

Max pushed the file back into place and shut the drawer. Then he wandered down other rows reading the file labels. Two rows had UFO sighting reports. Another row contained reports of hidden treasure. Others were about missing people and unsolved crimes. But the largest section of file cabinets was reserved for ghost stories.

Luz walked down one of the rows of ghost stories, tapping each of the cabinets as she passed by.

“I've never seen so many ghost stories,” she told Max. “I wonder if they're really true.” She stopped when she reached a series of cabinets labeled **La Llorona**. Luz shivered at the sight of the word.

“Did you see this?” she asked Max. He walked over to her. “Do you know about La Llorona?”

“No, what is it?” he asked.

“La Llorona is a terrible ghost,” she said, opening a file drawer. She pulled out a folder labeled **Maryvale, AZ**. Inside she found a sheet of paper with a typed story. The date in the top right corner read June 24, 1950. “Listen to this,” she said.

My brother and me, we were playing by the canal, and this lady came up and started talking to us. We had never seen her before, and it was getting close to night. She said, "You two, you two boys, you shouldn't be playing out here. This is a dangerous place. Didn't you know that? Somebody ought to have a good talk to your parents. Do you know what could happen?"

My brother and me, we didn't say anything back to the lady because we were scared.

So she said, "You two boys, you're coming with me." And she tried to grab our shirt collars. She almost got my brother, but he pulled away from her. But she ripped his shirt. He got it from our grandma for his birthday.

We took off running down the canal. When we were far enough away from her, I turned around and looked back and I could see her. She had a skeleton face, and she was laughing. And I told my mother about it and she said, "That was La Llorona, and you were lucky. You are not going near the canal ever again, do you promise me?"

And we promised her we never would. But I never forgot it. I never will forget it. It is a big mystery.

It happened near Indian School Road and 59th Avenue.

"That's La Llorona," Luz said.

"I don't understand," Max said. "Why did she want to grab the kids?"

"Because she needs children."

“How come?”

“It's complicated. My Tía Rosa told me all about her when I was little. I wish she was here so she could tell you.”

The words had just left her mouth when the glass case at the center of the room began to vibrate. Then a yellow cloud began to fill the case.

Luzita?

The voice came from inside the glass case. As Luz and Max watched, the outline of a woman began to appear inside the yellow fog.

“Tía?” Luz asked.

Shh, Luzita. I will tell you about La Llorona, only you mustn't tell your mother. She doesn't want you to know any of this. But you need to know if you plan on growing up around here. She is everywhere, especially in Avondale.

As the woman spoke, she became more visible. They could see her hair, her face, and her clothes. But no matter how much she faded into view, she still looked grainy and fuzzy like a TV picture without cable.

“Do you know her?” Max whispered.

“Yes,” Luz said. The woman in the glass case looked like Tía Rosa. But she wasn't looking at Luz. She was looking down--at someone who wasn't visible.

The woman in the glass case kept talking.

La Llorona was an evil lady, like a witch. She had two kids, but no husband, only she didn't want to take care of her kids. All she wanted to do was find a rich husband and move to a fancy house.

Now this was a long, long time ago, and it wasn't easy finding a rich husband. She lived in a little shack near one of the acequias by Tempe when it was just farmland. She was poor. She only had one bed, so she slept in it and made the kids sleep on the floor. She only had one dresser, so that was for all her clothes. The kids just piled their clothes on the floor and picked off the scorpions in the morning. She hardly ever cooked for them, because she was too busy fixing herself up. You know, she would rather buy herself some fancy high heels than buy her kids food. But those kids, they didn't care because she always bought them candy. Oh, they loved candy, but what did they know? They should've paid attention. Their Mom was a no-good lady.

One day she heard that a rich man was having a party that night, but she didn't have a babysitter and she couldn't take her kids. So she put on her best dress and her fanciest shoes, and she took them on a walk. They followed the acequia past the farms into the desert. Do you know what she was going to do, Luz? That evil woman was going to leave them there in the desert and go to the party.

As Max and Luz watched, the strangest thing happened. Suddenly, Luz was in the glass case, too. Only it wasn't her, just her voice. And not her sixth grade voice, but the voice of Luz as a young child.

The little Luz's voice asked:

Did they have bread crumbs?

And her aunt continued:

Ah, Luz, those kids weren't Hansel and Gretel. Those kids would've been better off if they had had some breadcrumbs. But they didn't have any food at all. If they'd only saved their M&Ms. They could have used them like breadcrumbs.

The little Luz's voice asked:

Do birds like M&Ms?

And her aunt replied:

I don't know, Luzita. Now let me finish my story.

So she told the children, "Oh, *mis hijitos*, I forgot something back at home." And she said, "I must go back and get it. Stay here, *mis hijitos*, and I will come right back for you. And I'll bring you a special treat!"

I am telling you, Luz, these kids had no brains. Would you stay there by yourself in the middle of the desert so your mother could bring you candy? Oh, and did I say that it was getting to be night? I know your mother raised you better than that, but these kids weren't using their heads. All they were thinking about was candy. They didn't know that she wasn't going to come back. They didn't know she was going to a big party.

So that awful woman left her children and went to the party and met the rich man. And of course he wanted to marry her, though I cannot tell you why he would be interested in someone like her. She thought her troubles were over, but when she got home that night, her kids were there—in spite of her. My grandmother

said some birds--roadrunners, I think-- helped them find their way home.

“Mommy,” they called when they saw their mother, “where's our candy?”

That was when the woman decided to get rid of her children forever.

“Oh, I have some special candy for you,” she said. “Come with me.”

It was still dark, and she took them to another part of the acequia where the waters swirl. In the light of the full moon, the children could see where the water was making a whirlpool.

She tells each one of them, “The acequia is filled with melted *dulce de chocolate*. You, jump right in! And you, jump in, too. *¡Salte en el chocolate!* Look at the chocolate. It's waiting for you. Eat as much as you want. Drink it! *Coma tanto como tu deseas, todo el dulce de chocolate que tu deseas. ¡Salte, salte en el chocolate! ¡Salte ahora en el chocolate!*”

And those poor little skinny kids believed her. They jumped into the water and sank like two tiny pebbles to the bottom.

Pero los ojos de Díos--well, Luzita, she got what was coming to her. When the lady wasn't looking one day, she tripped in her fancy high heels, hit her head on a rock, and died. Just like that. Some people said it was an accident. But almost everyone else knew the truth. She had gotten just exactly what she deserved. I'm telling you, she was an evil woman.

But that's not the end of the story so pay attention to this. Maybe she thought she would get her rest after she died, but she wasn't allowed to rest, until she found the bones of her children, *los huesos de sus niños*. So the woman began to cry and she became La Llorona, the crying woman. She began to look for her children, but the acequia is very long and the night is very dark. Even today, she goes out on the night of the full moon walking along the irrigation canals, looking for the bones of her children. Her feet are sore and bleeding, but her fancy shoes won't come off. My grandmother, she said to be careful, never go to the acequia at night because La Llorona might find me instead. She could take me and use my bones to trick God.

You know, Luz, that's the only way she's going to get those shoes off.

As she finished her story, Luz and Max watched as Tía Rosa—and the yellow cloud—faded away. In a moment, the case was empty again.

“That was the story my aunt told me when I was little,” Luz said. “That was just the way she told me. That was how she looked. It’s just like I remember it. I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either,” Max said. “But this is better than TV.”

Luz said, “My aunt looked younger there.”

Max walked toward the case.

“I don’t think you should bother that,” Luz said.

“I’m just looking.”

Max stepped closer. The opening was lined with polished wood. He reached out and ran his fingers along the edge.

“Are you crazy?” Luz asked.

“It’s just wood,” he explained. “And glass. At least, I think it is.” He ran his hand over the smooth curve of the glass.

Suddenly, the case began to vibrate again.

Max jumped back as the glass began to glow green like a transparent neon sign. A low humming sound filled the air.

And while Max and Luz watched, another woman began to appear in the glass case. As her body locked itself into place and the soft outlines of her clothing were replaced with darker colors and edges, the green light dissolved. At the moment that the light was gone, the humming stopped.

Unlike Tía Rosa, the woman seemed to be really standing there. She was tall and thin and rather elegant, Luz thought. She wore a long sleeved black blouse with a high collar that fit tightly around her neck and a black skirt so long that Luz couldn't see her shoes. A black hat with a heavy black veil completely covered her face. The only colorful thing she wore was a necklace: a single blue sparkling stone hung from a black velvet cord around her neck.

Before she could speak a word, the woman exhaled as if she had been holding her breath for a long time. Then she said, “Hello, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.” She stepped out of the glass case. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am the librarian of the Luna Drive Library. I am Miss Moon.”

Luz and Max were entranced by the sound of her voice. Her words wrapped around them like a swirl of warm butterscotch. They stood motionless, waiting for her to continue.

Miss Moon stepped down from the platform onto the earthen floor and held out her hand, but they hesitated.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m not a monster.” She leaned forward and whispered, “And I’m not a ghost either!”

She held her hand towards them again. This time they both shook hands with her. Her grip, Luz noticed, was light and cool and gentle, full of kindness.

“I meant to get back sooner. I would have, too, but I see that you accidentally made a memory wish and brought your aunt for a visit.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Luz said. Luz was trying not to stare. She could almost see Miss Moon’s face through the veil, but not quite.

“That’s all right,” Miss Moon said. “You were playing a memory of her from your brain. That’s what the Memory Machine is for. Anything that you ever heard or saw can be replayed in this machine. All you have to do is wish for it. It’s quite useful if you can’t recall something so well on your own.”

“Like how to do a math problem on a test?” Max suggested.

“That would work, if there was a miniature version of the Memory Machine that you could carry to school. Unfortunately, this is the only one. You have to be here to use it.”

“Where are we anyway?” Luz asked.

“In the basement of the library,” Miss Moon said.

“So are you a memory, too?” Luz continued. “Because if you are, I don’t remember you at all.”

“Oh, I’m not a memory...yet,” Miss Moon said.

“But if you’re not a memory why were you in that machine?”

“Good question, Luz. I was coming back from an adventure.”

“I like adventures,” Max said.

“I was having lunch with Teddy at the Ford Hotel.”

“Who?” Luz asked.

“Theodore Roosevelt,” she explained. “Our 26th President.”

“Isn’t he--?” Luz hesitated. “—dead?”

“That depends on your time zone,” Miss Moon said.

“Well, we’re on Arizona time,” Max said. “That’s a lot different from New York time.”

“I know, but Arizona time isn’t the kind of time zone I meant. I meant, the time zone of the past. You see, the memory Machine has two possibilities. You can visit a memory, but you can also travel in it. This glass tube can take you to any past time you want--within reason, of course. When I saw Teddy Roosevelt today, he was quite alive even if he’s been gone for many years. Does that make sense? That’s the time zone I meant.”

“You went back in time to see President Roosevelt,” Luz said, though he wasn’t quite sure if he was stating a fact or asking a question.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“That sounds like fun,” Max said.

Luz looked at him as if he had lost his mind. “It isn’t possible,” she told him.

Miss Moon looked down at them. Even though her face was hidden beneath the black veil, Luz sensed an air of amusement. "Oh, it's very possible, and I'll let you take a little trip yourself, if you'd like."

Luz eyed Miss Moon. She thought she could see the shape of her cheekbones through the veil. They were as white as porcelain, or so it appeared. "Why are you dressed like that? Did somebody die? Is that why you're wearing black clothes?"

"Yes," Miss Moon confirmed. "I am in mourning." Then, without any further explanation, she continued, "Now then, have a seat." She pointed to the chairs. "We have a great deal to discuss. You both like mysteries, and when I saw you yesterday, I knew the two of you would make good members of the Mystery Club."

"How did you see us?" Luz asked, as she sat beside Max. "No one was here. Except us."

"Oh, I was around."

"Do you know what happened to Dwight?" Max asked.

"He's stuck right now," Miss Moon replied.

"He's not stuck in the door, is he?" Max added.

"No, he's not stuck in the door," Miss Moon said. "He's frozen in time, trapped between seconds, like everyone else in the world right now. I call it time freeze."

"This isn't making any sense," Luz said.

"When the secret door closed upstairs, I stopped time," Miss Moon explained.

"Really?" Max asked.

“Maybe you're just imagining it,” Luz said, trying to be diplomatic.

“You will have to trust me,” Miss Moon said. “So let me tell you what the world outside the basement looks like right now. If you were able to walk back outside, you would see that everything and everyone are all frozen right where they were when I stopped time. Of course, you can't go back outside, so you're just going to have to take my word for it.”

“But we didn't stop,” Luz said.

“That's because the basement of the library is a timeless place. Down here we are able to move around between those two frozen seconds that everyone else is trapped between.”

“Yes, but why did you stop time anyway?” Max asked.

“That's simple,” Miss Moon said. “I stopped time, so that we could have a meeting of the Mystery Club. When you're at the Mystery Club, people can miss you and wonder where you are. Time simply ticks away. That's makes Time our most important resource—besides your brainpower. You and I could get into a great deal of trouble if we use your time. Of course, I doubt that anyone would find you down here in the cellar, even if they did come looking. It's not so easy to get here, is it? But it's safer to stop time whenever I have a meeting. That way, we can spend as much time as we need on our business without anyone knowing.”

“What is our business?” Luz asked.

“Why, solving mysteries, of course,” Miss Moon replied.

“Any particular mysteries?” Luz continued.

“Oh, life is so full of mysteries,” Miss Moon said. “There are so many to choose from. It's almost time for a mystery, but first I have to start time for a few minutes.”

She walked to the red door, then turned to face them.

“You see, if we are going to get on with our meeting, we need another member. And we have to start time for that to happen. Once our membership drive is complete, we'll get back down to business and stop time for a bit longer. But there's something I must warn you about. When I start time again, things will go back to the way they were. Back to the way you were upstairs. Back to the baseball cap, Max, and everything that went with it. And back to the sadness and the anger, Luz.”

“But I like how this feels,” Max said.

“I know,” Miss Moon agreed. “Being without time always feels so wonderful. But when I start time again, you'll go back to being your upstairs selves.”

“My upstairs self seems very far away and silent,” Max said.

“I know,” Luz agreed. “I remember that I was mad at my mother, but I don't feel that way now.”

Miss Moon pulled on the handle of the red door.

“How will we know when time starts?” Max asked.

“You'll know,” was all Miss Moon said. Then she opened the red door and quickly stepped inside. The door clicked shut behind her.

“Do you believe any of this?” Max whispered. “I know she believes it.”

“I don't know,” Luz said. “Either this is the weirdest thing I have ever seen or she—”

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At that moment, time started again.

And the air that had exploded into words in Max's mouth was suddenly sucked back down inside him.

"Max?" Luz asked.

Max's eyes darted away. He put on his baseball cap and pulled it down tightly over his forehead. Suddenly Luz remembered her mother and checked her watch. She wouldn't be home for hours. She craved a candy bar.

Miss Moon walked back into the room.

"We should have another member quite soon," she announced. "Just be patient."

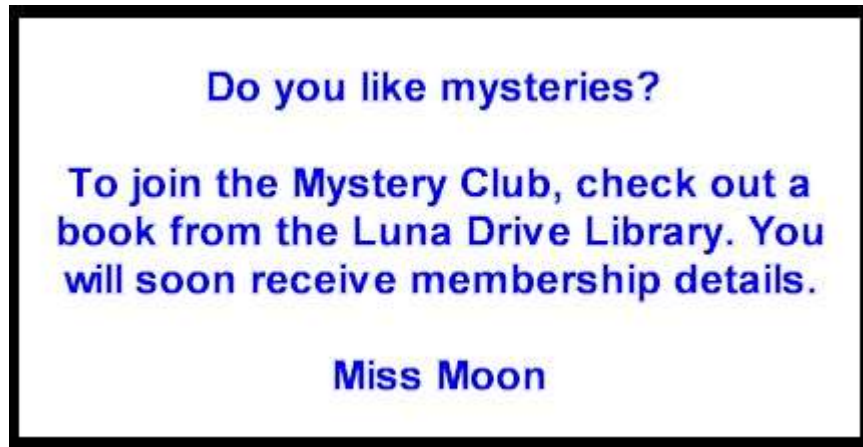
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And upstairs in the library, Dwight's body thawed from its time-freeze.

"I've got to get help," he told himself. He ran to the library door, but it was locked tight. He hurried to a window, but it was shuttered and locked. He looked around for another window, but shutters blocked all of them.

He searched the library for anything that would help, but there were no phones and no computers. He was trapped in the library, with no way out. It was all so strange. He sat down at a table near the portrait of Calvin Coolidge. He couldn't be trapped there forever. Someone would have to unlock the door. Max and Luz would have to come back from wherever they went.

And then he noticed the instructions for joining the Mystery Club of Luna Drive. The card was right in front of him.



Then he realized that the only thing he could do now was to find a book and join the Mystery Club. Maybe that way he would discover a way out of the library. Maybe that way he would find his friends again.

He headed for the bookshelves and started to pick up a book--any book. He didn't really care. But then he stopped. Maybe it should be a book he would actually read.

What kind of book should it be? he wondered. *Not history, or social studies, and nothing fiction either.* Then he decided: *A joke book!*

He stopped at the card catalog and looked up the word joke and quickly found a book title. He wandered through the shelves until he located it. Back at the circulation desk, he signed the card and placed it in the tortoise shell box. Only then did he dare open the book.

Inside was an envelope exactly like the ones that Luz and Max had received. His name was written across the front. Inside, though, the card contained a different note:

**In order to become a full-fledged
member of the Mystery Club of Luna
Drive, you must write a true mystery
from your life.
When you are done, place it in the
Mystery Box.
Then be patient.**

Dwight felt flushed. Other children might have had to struggle to think of a mystery, but not Dwight. It was as if the writer of the note knew the one thing that terrified him most. He did not want to talk about mysteries from his life, especially his most secret mystery of all. He knew what he would do. He would tell another.

He took a sheet of paper from a stack on the table and a small pencil from a nearby tray. Then he began to write his mystery:

My name is Dwight Underwood. And when I got here today, my friends disappeared. Now I don't know where they are. Will you help me solve this mystery? They went inside a door that disappeared. Now it's just a wall. I don't know if it's magic. Please help me find them, whoever you are (Miss Moon?).

P.S. I can't get out of the library either. Could you call the police if you have a phone?

But when he reread his mystery, he became worried. What if it wasn't good enough to become a member? What if nothing happened? And what if Miss Moon, whoever she was, knew what his most secret mystery was?

He decided to add more to his note:

If this isn't a good enough mystery, I have one more.

I live in a haunted house. I'm scared to tell anyone about it. I'm scared to sleep at night. Last week I tried to find the ghost in my house, and I killed it. I don't know how, but I killed it. Now it's in the garage and it won't move. Can you help me figure out how to get rid of it?

Dwight folded the mystery and with trembling hands dropped it into the Mystery Box.

Then he sat down and tried to be patient, but all he could picture was the sight of the dead ghost in his garage.