



KEY HUNTERS

***THE
RISKY RESCUE***

by Eric Luper

Illustrated by Lisa K. Weber

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For Eric K. and Robbie H. for forcing me to be creative, sometimes until four in the morning

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CHAPTER 1

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Cleo asked as she and Evan tiptoed into the school library. The lights were off, and early-morning sunlight streamed in around the edges of the window shades.

Evan shook a long black case he was carrying. “What I *am* sure about is if I lose my trombone when we go into our next adventure, I’m in big trouble.”

“We’re about to sneak into a secret,

magical library, slip into the pages of a dangerous book, and go on an exciting adventure. And you're worried about your trombone?" Cleo couldn't believe it.

"Do you know how much a new trombone costs?" Evan asked.

"No."

"More than you have in your piggy bank, I can tell you that."

"I have a soccer ball bank," Cleo said. "Piggy banks are for babies."

"Hey, *I* have a piggy bank. His name is Mr. Oinks."

Cleo chuckled. "You'll just have to leave your trombone behind."

"I don't have much choice," Evan said. "We have to get the four Jeweled Greats without Locke or he'll share whatever power finding them will give us. That could be dangerous."

To everyone else, George Locke was their mild-mannered school librarian. But Evan and Cleo knew better. The man was a greedy snake, determined to collect four priceless books that were hidden inside the stories in the magical library beneath their school—books that might give their finders mysterious powers.

Cleo scanned the dim library. “No sign of Locke here.”

“Or his evil helpers, Glen and Gary,” Evan added.

“The library sure looks different with the lights off, doesn’t it?” Cleo said. “Almost as creepy as the magical library downstairs. That library seems to have a life of its own, sort of like it’s watching us.”

“Don’t say that right before we have to go down there,” Evan said. “You’re freaking me out.”

They crept through the maze of shelves to the farthest, darkest corner of the library.

Cleo gasped. “The secret bookcase is already open!”

She was right. The book called *Literature: Elements and Genre from Antiquity to Modern-Day* had been pulled out, and the heavy door had been shoved to the side. Cobwebs in the doorway swayed in a warm breeze.

Evan and Cleo glanced at each other in concern. They peered down the stairs. Orange light flickered from below.

“The fireplace is lit,” Evan said. “Someone is down there.”

They raced down the steps. The magical library was just as they had left it the day before. Soaring shelves were filled with books of all sizes and colors. Ledges and walkways

wrapped around the huge room, accessible by ladders, slides, bridges, and spiral staircases. At the far end of the room, a fire crackled in the fireplace. Above that hung a huge tapestry that showed an image of an open book with people swirling into it amid a sea of colorful letters. On the left stood a glass case that held the Rubaiyat, a jeweled book Evan and Cleo had recovered on their last adventure. It was hard to believe it had been less than a day since they had gone on their *Titanic* voyage, but Evan still felt the chill of the North Atlantic waters.

The kids cautiously walked across the library and looked into the case. Next to the sparkling book were three empty pedestals.

“At least Locke didn’t steal the Rubaiyat,” Cleo whispered, running her hands along a

shelf filled with heavy books. Each one was sealed with a small lock.

Evan looked past Cleo to a low desk along the wall. The book that sat on it caught his eye. It lay crookedly, which was strange in this perfectly organized library. But, even stranger, its pages were spread open. Evan knew that every book in this magical library was supposed to be locked.

“It looks like someone forced his way into this book.”

Evan picked up the book and laid it on the table in front of Cleo. The cover was made of rough crocodile skin, and green vines grew around it. A warm breeze seemed to be coming from the book. *Did the pages just rustle a little?* Evan thought.

Cleo spun the book to face her. “What’s the title?”



Evan peeked at the cover. “It’s called *Quest for the Lost Sloth*.”

“Sloths are so cute,” Cleo said. “Maybe this will be a fun adventure!”

Evan doubted it, but it didn’t make sense to disagree. Neither of them had any idea what was inside. It could be anything . . . in any place . . . at any time . . .

Evan smiled, thinking of all the possibilities a book had to offer. “The latch is broken,” he said. “Locke forced it open somehow.”

Cleo reached into her pocket and pulled out the brass key they’d gotten on their last adventure. It dangled from a chain. “Then what good is this?”

“No idea,” Evan said. “But we should probably use it anyhow.”

Cleo nodded and shut the book. “You should probably hide your trombone

somewhere,” she said. “I have a feeling we’ll be zip, zap, zipping out of here soon.”

Evan tucked his instrument under the table and crossed his fingers. If he lost that trombone, his parents would be furious. They’d probably take every penny out of Mr. Oinks to pay for it.

Cleo examined the lock. The brass latch was twisted, and the slot was squashed. She pressed the lock together the best she could. Then she thrust the key into the keyhole and turned.

Letters burst from the pages of the book like a thousand crazy spiders. The letters tumbled in the air around them and began to spell words. The words turned into sentences. The sentences turned into paragraphs. Before long, they could barely see through the letter confetti.

Then everything went black.