

“Wish Keys”

A short story by Toby Stevenson

Issy couldn't eat her lunch because she never had any appetite the day before a choosing. Her stomach was a bundle of nerves which greatly annoyed her. She had been through this many times before and had always been passed up. She didn't know why a choosing day still made her nervous.

Matt, her younger brother on the other hand, had eaten all his lunch and had already taken her dessert. (If you could call a dried up old cookie dessert.) Matt didn't seem to care about being chosen or not. *“He might feel differently tomorrow,”* Issy thought to herself.

For as long as she could remember being at the Stone Briar Home for Young Children, she had vowed to keep Matt and her together as a family. Issy insisted she and Matt be adopted together. She just knew their parents must out there somewhere and would someday come for them. In truth, Issy couldn't remember much about their parents. Mrs. Erwin, the home director, would never tell Issy about them no matter how many times she asked.

Issy would imagine she and Matt were the long lost prince and princess from an exotic kingdom in turmoil, and that their royal parents had secretly placed them in the children's home for their safety. She had, after all, a good lost princess name. Her real name was Isabel. It was Matthew who when he was little couldn't say Isabel and called her Issy. The name had stuck.

Knowing that older kids had less of a chance for adoption, Issy had to consider she was holding Matt back from ever being chosen, as long as she insisted they go together. And the choosing days, where potential parents would come to see the children at the home, were growing farther apart. Parents didn't want to consider the older children when they could find and adopt a younger or newborn child.

That's why yesterday, she told Mrs. Erwin to change their adoption status from bound siblings to unbound siblings.

She hadn't told Matt of her conversation with Mrs. Erwin, which most likely was adding to her loss of appetite today. The thought of eating made her feel sick. Issy pushed her tray over to Matt's side of the table and said, “Here you go, take what you want. I'm not hungry.”

That night when all the kids had changed for bed, Issy could hear other children in the room talking low and hoping with one another tomorrow would be their day for nice new parents to come and take them home. Issy tried not to listen. She wondered if Matt would ever resent her for how long she had been holding him back. She had barely drifted off to sleep when she could feel frantic tugging on her nightgown sleeve.

Issy opened her eyes to find it was Matt tugging on her sleeve. He was obviously upset and urgently whispering to her, “Wake up Issy, please wake up!”

“What's wrong,” Issy asked Matt, groggy and still trying to adjust her eyes to see what she could in the darkness.

“Something is wrong with Seth,” he tells her. “Please come and help me.”

Issy pulled on her robe and set her feet down on the cold floor. She wished she had worn socks to bed but didn't bother to find any.

“What do you mean something is wrong with Seth,” she asked her brother.

“He's standing in front of a closet door,” Matt answers her almost in a panic.

“What's wrong about that?” asked Issy. “Maybe he's just sleepwalking.”

“No Issy, it's not like that, please hurry,” pleads Matt as he tugs relentlessly at her sleeve.

Issy follows Matt down the corridor and to a room where the door is usually locked. Issy can see the door open just enough to allow a low glowing light to spill out into the hallway. This made Issy uncomfortable. As far as she knew no one ever went into this room and certainly it was previously locked for good reason, but Matt pulled her in to the room without hesitation.

From inside the room she can see Seth standing motionless in front of another door that is closed.

Issy looks at Matt and asks curiously, “What's he doing?”

“Listening,” Matt answers her with a concerned look.

Confused, Issy crosses the room cautiously to the door where Seth is standing. She is just a few feet behind Seth when she begins to hear what sounds like muffled carnival music coming from behind the door.

“I hear music,” Issy remarks to Matt.

Seth suddenly turns completely around making direct eye contact with Issy and speaks in a flat trance like tone, “It's locked, and we can't get in.”

Startled by Seth's unexpected comment, Issy quickly covered her mouth to hold back her gasp and wake the others. She watches as Seth methodically turns to again face the mysterious door.

“What do you think that is?” Matt asks.

“I don't know,” replied Issy.

Despite Seth's assessment the door was locked, Issy curiously reaches down to check the door knob and gives it a turn. The knob seems to turn on its own and door swings wide open. Without hesitation or concern, Seth walks right through. Matt frantically jumped forward, reaching out in an effort to try and top Seth but wasn't close enough to catch the sleeve of his friend's nightshirt. Issy had managed to catch her brother by his waist, successfully stopping Matt from following Seth through the door.

“We have to go get him!” Matt exclaims as he struggles to get free and follow Seth.

"No, we don't," she responds quickly.

"Yes, we do!" Matt demands with a pleading look in his eyes.

Issy lets out a frustrated huff but decides to let go of her brother. She follows him in through the open door and out into the music.

LEVEL ONE

"What is this place?" Matt asks in wonder.

"I'm not sure," replies Issy, "but this place can't be real. We must be dreaming!"

"Well, if we are just dreaming then what are we waiting for?" asks Matt as he runs through the arched entry and out into the middle of their shared dream.

The sounds and smells, more real than any dream she can remember, fill Issy with curiosity and draw her in. She looks around the room amazed at how big it seems with a carnival tent right in the middle and other tents and carnival booths positioned all around the main tent. At the edge of the room there was no room that she could see. Everything going on was centered in the middle of a dark expanse that seemed to lead off in all directions to nowhere.

The bright carnival lights glow in the room's darkness and it looks like Christmas at night. There are lots of kids in their pajamas too; running and laughing, and some of the kids are pulling shiny red wagons full of stuff. Carnival music game bells fill the air and oh, the smell of carnival food... popcorn, hot dogs and cotton candy is more than Issy can stand.

"Clearly this is a dream and like Matt said, we should just enjoy it before we wake up," Issy thought to herself.

Just then Matt runs up pulling a red wagon with one hand and holding a fried corn dog dripping with mustard in the other.

"Come on, Issy," Matt encourages her enthusiastically. "Everything is FREE!"

"Free?" she thought didn't make any sense, but her desire for a corn dog like the one Matt was holding had won her over and she followed him into the carnival. Matt pulled his wagon ahead of her and as they walked under the arched gate entry Issy looked up and could just make out a small sign that read "LEVEL ONE".

Once inside the carnival and just through the entry gate, Issy forgot why she was concerned in the first place and like the others she began to laugh and enjoy the fun.

"Where did you get that corn dog?" Issy asks Matt.

“Come this way, I’ll show you,” he answers and leads her to a food booth.

There are kids waiting in a line at the food booth and Issy joins them. From the food line she can see the red wagon booth is right next to where she is waiting. A sign above the wagon booth reads “FREE: Wagons and Backpacks”.

Matt can see she is looking at the wagons and asks, “Do you want me to go get you one?”

“No,” Issy tells him, “I don’t want a wagon, but I might like to have a backpack.”

“Cool,” Matt responds, “I didn’t notice there were backpacks before. I’ll go get us both one.”

Before Issy could say anything Matt hurried off. He promptly returned with two backpacks just when Issy was next in line at the food booth. She took the backpack Matt had brought her and put it on leaving both hands free to manage the corn dog. Issy sat down on a nearby bench to eat.

“Hey,” said Matt impatiently, “let’s go to the carnival tent next. They have clowns and acrobats and a real lion tamer!”

“You go on,” Issy responded. “I’m not that interested in clowns. I’m going to walk around and see what else is here. I will come and find you at the main tent in about an hour.”

Matt nods his head in agreement and runs off.

Issy is fascinated at how many booths there are and how many kids are packed in each one. She passes arcade tents and toy tents and more wagon tents. She sees kids lined up at more food booths, waiting for ice cream, funnel cakes, snow cones and popcorn. At the end of the row of booths she can see there are some tents with less activity, and she heads in that direction curious as to what they might offer.

She notices a big quiet green tent with a sign that reads “Nap Here”. Issy peers inside to see row after row of neatly made beds with soft pillows and blankets, but very few kids were there resting. As she continues on down the rows she stops at a blue and white striped canvas tent with a sign that reads “Books”. Issy goes into the book tent and there are only three other kids in the tent looking at books.

Issy finds herself in the picture book section fascinated by all the books on travel and other countries. She is most interested in one book that depicts famous royal families and the palaces where they live.

After looking through the book for the third time, Issy is approached by a shop lady who asks, “Can I help you?”

“Oh, sorry,” Issy said, quickly putting the book back on the shelf.

“No,” said the book lady, “if you like the book take it. All the books are free.”

“They are?” asked Issy in disbelief.

“Certainly,” replied the book lady. “I only offered to help you because there is another section with story books on foreign lands and magical kingdoms I can show you.”

Issy nods and starts to follow the lady who stops and motions back to the shelf, "Don't forget your book, dear."

Smiling, Issy pulls the book back from the shelf and puts it in her back pack. The book lady leads her to a new section filled with interesting books. Pulling them down from the shelf one by one she becomes entranced by the fanciful stories they tell. It wasn't until she tripped over a big stack of books that had accumulated in the floor as she left after having looked through them, that she snapped back from all the lands of enchantment and realized just how maAnd then she remembered she had promised Matt she would meet him at the main tent in an hour.

"How long have I been here?" Issy wondered. She looked around the book tent for a clock but didn't see one. She didn't see the book lady either. She looked outside the tent to see it was still dark but had no sense of time. She didn't know if she had been there for an hour or a day or longer. She reached down to hoist up her backpack and the weight of it pulled her arm back causing her to sit down hard in the floor. She must have unknowingly put at least thirty books in her pack.

Issy dumped out all the books but thought to just take the first one, the picture book that had initially caught her attention and put it back in her pack. She hoisted the pack easily on her back and quickly left the tent. She was intent on finding Matt but an unexpected flashing yellow light caught her eye. It was a neon sign on the last tent on the last row and at the edge of the darkness where there was nothing beyond. The flashing sign would light up with simple letters just long enough for her to read, "Wish keys".

There were no kids at this last booth so Issy thought to herself, *"Hmm, since there are no other kids here it shouldn't take long to just go and have a quick look."*

Issy pulled back the heavy flap door of the tent and went inside. To her surprise there was an ordinary looking man sitting behind a wooden desk with absolutely nothing on it. She could see a peg board behind him which held just one hook. On the hook, was hanging just one silver key.

"Is that a wish key?" Issy asked the man.

The man smiled a kind smile and answered, "Why, yes it is. Would you like to have it?"

"Yes." She answered. As the man turned to remove the key from the hook, Issy asked, "Why is there only one key?"

The man turned and smiled responding, "Because you only get one wish."

Oddly this made sense to Issy and she took the key. "How does it work?" she asked the man.

"You hold onto your key, close your eyes and make a wish," answers the man with a more serious look. "But be mindful what you wish for because only unselfish wishes can come true."

Issy immediately knew what she wanted to wish for. Holding the key tightly in her hand and closing her eyes as she had been instructed, she made her wish. She didn't feel anything and opened her eyes to look at the man.

“All done then?” the man asks Issy.

Issy nods yes and asks, “Is that it?”

“That’s it,” he answers her again with a smile. The man opens a drawer in his desk and pulls out a silver chain. Handing the chain to Issy he says, “You might want to wear the key close so it doesn’t get lost. It would be a shame to lose a perfectly good wish.”

Issy puts the key on the chain and then the chain around her neck. “*Curious,*” she thinks as she leaves the tent.

Doing her best to hurry, Issy makes her way back to the main tent to find Matt. As she made her way to the main carnival area, the food and game tents grew closer together and the crowds of kids became more difficult to navigate through, slowing her down. Issy began to notice as she bumped into children that many of them looked tired from pulling their wagon loads of toys. Some of them looked dirty with tangled hair and ketchup or cotton candy stuck to their faces. “*How long had these kids been here?*” Issy wondered. “*How long had she and Matt been here?*”

Alarmed by the thought of having lost any sense for time, Issy began to run. She made her way through the moving throngs of children, dodging kids as best she could until finally reaching the main tent to find Matt outside sitting in his wagon filled with stuff.

“Where have you been, Issy?” Matt asks her. “I’m tired.”

“That’s alright,” Issy tells him giving Matt a hug. “There’s a nap tent I will take you to, I think we both could use some rest.”

Matt nods and takes Issy’s hand and they start to head out to the nap tent. Matt notices the silver chain around Issy’s neck and asks as they walk, “What is that?”

“Oh, I found this in the last tent on the last row,” she tells him. “It’s supposed to be a ‘Wish Key’ but all I did was hold it in my hand and make a wish. Nothing happened. I’m not sure if it even works.”

“Neat,” remarked Matt followed by a big yawn.

Issy smiles as they walk hand in hand to the nap tent, find two nice beds on which to rest and both instantly fall asleep.

LEVEL TWO

Issy wakes up with clearer thinking. Realizing she definitely had no desire to become like the kids with tangled hair and dirty clothes, she hurries to wake Matt.

“Come on,” she shakes him firmly. “We’ve got to get up and get out of here.”

“OK, OK,” Matt responds sleepily while stretching out his arms. “I’m coming.”

Issy hurries Matt back to the gate where they had entered only to find it has somehow been locked. There is no inside handle and they can't get it open. Posted on the inside of the gate is a big sign that reads "NO EXIT" and underneath in smaller letters it reads "Proceed to LEVEL TWO".

"Level Two?" asks Issy out loud.

"Oh, I know where that is," chirps Matt proudly. "I saw a sign on a small booth behind the big carnival tent. I didn't know what it meant. There weren't any kids there so I didn't go look."

Matt pulls his wagon in the direction he had seen the booth, and Issy follows. Before they can reach the booth Matt notices Seth standing in line near them at a food tent for cotton candy.

"Issy, wait," says Matt pointing toward the concession line. "Look! There is Seth."

"Go tell him we are leaving and to come with us," Issy responds.

Matt leaves his wagon with Issy and hurries over to Seth standing in the line. "Hey Seth," says Matt tapping him on the arm to get his attention. "We should leave, come go with Issy and me."

"No way," snaps Seth shortly. "I'm next in line, I'm not leaving."

"No," Matt attempts to explain, "not leaving the line. I mean to leave this place and go back to Stone Briar."

"No!" Seth responds even more defiantly. "You go if you want to. I don't want to go back to Stone Briar and I'm not ever leaving this place."

Seth moves up as the next in line and places his order for a large rainbow cotton candy. Matt just waits but Seth doesn't even look back his direction. Matt isn't sure what to do so he leaves Seth standing there.

"Where is Seth?" Issy asks Matt when he returns alone.

"He doesn't want to come," said Matt sadly.

"It's just a dream, Matt," Issy tries to reassure her brother, "He'll be alright here until we all wake up."

Matt nods his head and they continue on to the booth at the back of the main tent. Sure enough there is a small booth with a plain sign that reads "LEVEL TWO". The only thing in the booth is a single open entryway to a very steep and narrow staircase.

"This can't be right," says Matt in frustration, "how am I supposed to pull a wagon up there?"

"Look," says Issy pointing to another sign above the door. "See, it says 'NO WAGONS past this point'. I think you need to leave the wagon here."

"Aww," says Matt sadly as he looks down at all of his stuff.

“Hey,” Issy offers to encourage Matt to leave his wagon there, “the sign doesn’t say no backpacks. I only have one book in my backpack and can help you carry some of the things you want most.”

Matt grins happily and dumps out his backpack which is mostly candy and packages of pastries. Issy just shakes her head and watches as Matt chooses two boxes of Cracker Jacks and two packages of chocolate cupcakes.

From the wagon, Matt chooses three boxed puzzles, a pile of superman comics and a bright red metal fire truck with a telescoping ladder. He just makes room for the puzzles and the comics in his pack but the fire truck is too much. Issy picks up the truck and puts it in her pack with her book.

“Thank you,” Matt responds. “Oh, and I want this,” he adds picking up a big floppy stuffed beagle.”

Issy gives Matt a look.

“I’ll just carry it,” he offers defensively.

Issy peers up from the bottom of the steep set of stairs and can just see light coming in from a door at the top. She heads up cautiously and Matt follows.

Once they make their way through the door at the top of the stairs they could see kids having fun but not nearly as many as there had been down in level one. There were no tents or booths but cobble stone streets lined with small quaint shops of all kinds. Issy and Matt looked at each other in amazement and walked down the sidewalk on the first street of shops. They had already forgotten about level one.

“Look,” exclaimed Matt, “I see a skateboard shop!”

Issy nodded which Matt interpreted as her approval and headed off. Issy was distracted by the shops on the other side of the street which seemed to be more for girls. She didn’t know where to go first. There was a jewelry shop, a girls clothing shop, and a pet shop. At the end of the street was a big chrome diner with a sign advertising hamburgers and milk shakes. There were also signs pointing the way to other places like a skateboard park on the boy’s side and to a dog park on the girl’s side.

Issy knew she would find Matt at the skate park when she was ready to go. “*But go where,*” she wondered to herself. “*Oh yes, the clothing shop first,*” she just realized she had decided and headed across the street.

The clerks in the clothing shop were very attentive and insisted she try on every outfit. It took ages and after trying on everything she decided on a pair of cute denim Capri pants, a red striped cotton blouse with white eyelet trim and cute red canvas sneakers. They even helped her brush out her hair which she pulled back into a pony tail and tied off with a red bow.

Next she went to the jewelry shop where a nice man approached and asked how he could assist her. Issy thought briefly and then told the shop keeper she had always wanted a charm bracelet.

“Gold or silver?” he asked her.

“Silver,” she answered, thinking it should match with her silver chain and key.

The shop keeper led the way to a counter as long as the wall of the shop which is filled with shiny silver linked bracelets and hundreds of silver charms to choose from. The shop keeper hands a velvet tray to Issy and says, “You pick out the bracelet and charms you want and I will put the bracelet together for you.”

Issy nods to the shop keeper and begins to look at the bracelets. She counted and determined that each bracelet had eighteen links. She could select any bracelet and could then be able to choose eighteen charms to fill the bracelet with one charm per link. With so many choices Issy imagined the task of deciding on a single bracelet and eighteen charms would take some time. But Issy just smiled, the idea seemed like fun.

When finally deciding on her bracelet and charms she returned the tray to the shop keeper. She watched and waited as he fashioned each charm to a separate link on the bracelet until it was complete. The weight of the bracelet felt good on her arm which made her happy. Issy left the jewelry shop and headed down the street to the pet shop.

Just as the other shops had been filled with so many choices, she found the pet shop filled with row after row of animals waiting to be chosen by a child as a pet. There were kittens and puppies, rabbits and hamsters, snakes and lizards, and beautifully colored songbirds. The pet shop was alive with the sounds of kids laughing, puppies barking and singing songbirds. With so many choices it would take forever to choose just one pet. Issy smiled, she didn’t mind. Choosing a pet would be fun.

A lady in a blue tunic sees Issy and smiles asking, “What animal would you like to see as your pet?”

“A puppy I think,” Issy replies.

“Good choice,” offers the lady who turns to lead the way to the puppy section.

There are so many puppies and Issy decides she must hold and play with each one before making a decision. Then equally as important would be the selection of the perfect collar and matching leash. Issy was about half way through holding all the puppies when she comes to a cage with one single beagle puppy. It didn’t seem as energetic and must have been passed over many times. *“But he is so cute,”* Issy thought, *“why would he have been passed over by other children?”*

Issy paused and collected her thoughts. She looks down at the lonely puppy in the cage and it hits her, *“Beagle...Matt...wait! How long have I been here and where is Matt??”* she wonders in a panic.

Issy pushes past the woman in the blue smock and hurries her way out of the pet shop. The lady calls out after her, “But you forgot your puppy.”

“No I didn’t,” Issy calls back as she is leaving, “I forgot my brother.”

Issy purposefully avoids looking at any other shops as she runs past them following the signs marking the way to the skate park. She is relieved to find Matt there sitting on a bench in new skateboard clothes and kicking at a skateboard under his feet.

“Issy, where have you been?” asks Matt sadly. “I’m really hungry and am tired of skateboarding.”

“I’m so sorry Matt,” Issy answers apologetically. “I don’t know what this place is but we need to find our way out.” Issy collects Matt by the hand and pulls him up from the bench and adds with more encouragement, “Let’s go get something to eat first.”

Matt smiles and they make their way hand in hand to the Diner.

LEVEL THREE

At the diner and all the while eating their hamburgers and sharing a whip cream topped chocolate milkshake, Issy is mindful not to let the distractions inside interfere with her focus on leaving. She wondered as they ate where to look for the way out. Issy hadn’t seen any signs in any shops or on the street since being there that would indicate the way.

“Look,” said Matt, “there are old fashion pin ball machines in the room behind you. Can I go play?”

Before Issy can respond or grab him, Matt jumps down and runs off. Immediately she follows Matt into the loud gaming room but loses sight of him with all the noise and commotion. She anxiously goes from game to game looking for her brother. Matt makes his way more adeptly through the crowd of kids playing looking for an open game to play. It isn’t until finding his way to the very back of the room that Matt finds an open game.

“This is lame,” Matt tells Issy when she finally catches up to him. “This is the only game no one is playing and it doesn’t even look like it works.”

Issy looked at the pinball game that didn’t have any lights on and it did look turned off. But up at the top of the machine was a small metal sign that read in plain block letters, “LEVEL THREE”.

“Oh Matt,” Issy exclaims excitedly, “you found it!”

“Found what,” Matt asks her.

“The way out,” Issy answers.

Issy approaches the game and pushes a big red power on button on the side. The game lights up with a digital flashing screen and a message scrolls across the center of the game. “DO YOU WANT TO PROCEED TO LEVEL THREE?” Issy presses the green yes button again and a new message scrolls across, “NO BACKPACKS ALLOWED PAST THIS POINT. DO YOU WANT TO PROCEED?” Issy again pressed the green yes button which triggers a small kid sized door next to the game to pop open.

“But I don’t want to leave,” says Matt sadly. “We can’t take anything through that small door.”

Before Issy can answer him, the game screen begins to beep and big red numbers appear on the screen. The first number is 10, and they hear what sounds like a vacuum with suction of some sort come on from inside the small door.

“Beep,” the screen changes to 09. Issy and Matt look back at the game screen and then at each other.

“Beep,” the screen now changes to 08.

“It’s a timer,” Issy comments in a panic. “Hurry Matt. The game didn’t say you couldn’t carry anything at all, just pick one thing you can carry.”

“Beep,” the screen changes to 07.

Issy puts her pack down and pulls out the picture book. Matt puts his pack down but comes over to Issy and pulls out his firetruck.

“Beep,” the screen changes to 06.

“Hurry,” Issy says to Matt again.

Matt puts his head through the door and wriggles around pulling himself mostly through when Issy hears the game again.

“Beep,” the screen changes to 05.

Issy pushes Matt the remaining way through the small door and hands him in the truck.

“Beep,” the screen changes to 04.

Issy pushes her book through the door and puts her head in. She reaches into the space which is like a round canvas tube with firm ribbed sides and she can feel the suction helping to pull her in. While reaching up to pull herself in higher, one of the charms on her bracelet gets hung up in the coarse weave of the fabric.

“Beep,” Issy assumes the screen has changed to 03 as she tries not to panic as she fumbles with the bracelet’s clasp. It finally releases and she can hear the game continue to count.

“Beep,” Issy has just two seconds left to get through the door. She clutches at the side of the tube and pulls her knees up as high as she can. She is still not quite all the way in.

“Beep,” one second left. Issy can feel the bottom edge of the open door under her left foot. She uses this leverage to kick herself up just high enough that her feet finally make it into the tube.

“Beep.” and the door just below her closes and locks.

The canvas tube is angled slightly up and not too difficult at first with the suction pulling them in. As they go the angle seems to begin to increase upward and the tube begins to narrow.

“Issy,” Matt calls down to her, “I can’t go any higher and carry my truck.”

Issy had just come to the same realization with the book. “Just let go of it,” Issy called back. “We have to keep going.”

Reluctantly, Matt abandons his truck and Issy lets go of her book. They continue up and up until finally the tube levels back out and they pull themselves through an opening, tumbling out and landing on a padded mat. Once through the opening, the suction cuts off.

Issy and Matt find themselves in a small room with only a small wooden bench on one side and a heavy wooden door on the other. The door was fitted with a huge brass handle and an old fashioned key hole opening. Next to the door was a small brass sign that read. "Only a selfless Wish Key will unlock the door".

Issy excitedly pulls her wish key from out under her blouse and smiles at Matt.

"So this is what the key is for," she remarks happily and she tries her key to unlock the door.

Alarmingly the key doesn't work. Issy pulls back on the key thinking she has just inserted it wrong but it won't pull out. She pushes in and it doesn't seem to move. Issy tries to turn her key to the left and to the right but it won't budge. She feels an odd vibration in the key and let go just as the door swallows her key and it's gone!

"How can this be?" she cries putting her head in her hands to cover her tears. "I only wished for Mom and Dad back. How can that be selfish?" She continues crying and looks at Matt. "I messed up somehow and now we can't get out, I'm so sorry."

Matt smiles and tells Issy, "Don't cry. Look!"

Reaching down into his shirt Matt pulls out his own silver key on a chain and holds it up for Issy to see.

"When did you get a wish key" she asks in amazement.

"While you were sleeping," he answered her. "I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want to get in trouble."

Issy, throwing her arms around her brother giving him a big hug exclaims, "You are the best brother ever!"

Matt walks over to the door, puts his key in and gives it a turn. He pulls on the brass handle and the door opens.

Behind the door is a room filled with a warm glowing light. Issy feels a great sense of relief when they enter the room as everything seems right and happy. Across the room from the door Matt had opened is another door and they can hear someone turning a key from the other side. As the door begins to open Issy could feel Matt anxiously take her hand.

To their amazement it wasn't more kids coming up to this level as they had done. Coming in from behind the door is a nice looking couple, a young woman and man who look just as surprised to see them.

"Hello," says the woman with a warm smile, "My name is Mary and this is my husband, Robert."

“We are having the strangest dream,” says Robert. “My wife and I have been through these weird levels to get here and each time we had to give up possessions to make it through.”

Matt and Issy both nod their heads to confirm they had done the same.

“What did you give up?” asks Mary.

“A cool red firetruck with a real extending ladder,” Matt offers. “I’m Matt and this is my sister, Issy.”

Mary looks at Issy who smiles again warmly and asks, “What did you give up?”

“A picture book of royal families and their castles and palaces,” said Issy a bit embarrassed.

“I think I know that book,” replies Mary. “Did it have a picture of a castle in the clouds on the front?”

Issy nods yes, a little less embarrassed.

“My grandmother would read me that book when I was little,” offered Mary with her continued warm smile that put Issy at ease.

“And did you have a wish key to get in?” asked Robert.

“Yes,” replied Matt, “mine worked.”

“Mine worked too,” Robert commented while looking at his wife. “I wished that my wife and I would find the right boy to adopt.”

“We can’t have children of our own,” Mary added sadly. “We have tried for years and have decided to adopt a child.” Mary looks down at the floor and continues, “I wished for a miracle to get pregnant so we could have a baby even though I know it wasn’t possible.”

“When my key worked,” Robert went on to explain, “I thought maybe we would find a boy on the other side. But there are two of you and we only have room for one child.”

“I can’t go without my sister,” Matt said firmly.

“Matt,” Issy got down on her knees to look at Matt more directly. “I’m getting too old to be adopted and if I study hard it won’t be long until I can get a scholarship and go to college. It would be better for you to be adopted by nice parents so you aren’t alone at Stone Briar when I am gone.”

“Issy,” Matt looks at her as tears began to well up in his eyes. “My wish was only for you to be happy.”

“Matt, this *would* make me happy,” Issy tells her brother. She closes her eyes as they embrace and hold one another tightly.

THE CHOOSING

When she opens her eyes, Issy finds Matt is not in her arms at all and that she had been holding her bed pillow in her sleep.

"I was just dreaming," Issy thought to herself relieved.

Issy hurried to get dressed so she could find and tell Matt about her weird dream.

Mrs. Erwin unexpectedly pops her head in the room and scolds Issy, "Hurry child, you will be late for the choosing again. Your brother is already there!"

Issy sighs and hurries so she can find Matt in the great hall. She realizes she is too late to tell him about her dream as the potential adoptive parents are already walking in.

"Look, Issy, look!!" exclaims Matt as he rushes across the great room. Matt waves to a nice couple as if he knows them, and they smile and go over to him. Issy can see the man and the lady each carry a wrapped package as they enter the room. Matt takes the lady's hand and they make their way over to Issy. The man hands his box to Matt who drops to the floor and begins to rip through the wrappings.

"Hello, Issy," says the nice lady with a warm smile as she hands her the second package.

Issy tears back the paper and she can see it is the picture book of royal families with the castle in the clouds on the front from her dream.

"Look!" exclaims Matt, holding up a bright red metal fire truck with a telescoping ladder.

In shock, Issy looks at her brother and says, "But this can't be real, it was all just a dream!"

Matt puts his truck down and reaches into the neck of his shirt to pull out a silver chain which holds a large silver key. Matt just grins a wide grin briefly showing the key to Issy and quickly puts it away back into his shirt.

Issy smiled and thought to herself, *"The man at the wish key booth had been right, only selfless wishes can come true."*