

*The Search for the
Crystal Key*

Ellyn Dye



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THE SEARCH FOR THE CRYSTAL KEY.

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Prologue

The Dream

There was nothing Frankie Maxwell could do but sit on the old split-rail fence, spellbound, and watch the two women fight in the clearing in front of her. Actually, she didn't *want* to do anything else—she just wanted to stay well out of the way. But she couldn't tear her eyes away and she didn't want to miss anything.

The woman on the huge white unicorn lunged forward, standing up in her stirrups. She heaved what looked like a long ice spear at the other woman, who jerked back the reins of her giant black stallion to avoid being hit.

As the spear flew toward its rider, the stallion snorted, bared its teeth, reared back on its hind legs, and spun around to the right. He landed with such force that the earth shuddered, sending Frankie flying backwards off the fence. She scrambled back up as fast as she could and wrapped her arms around a tree to hold herself steady.

Bolts of orange and purple lightning punctuated the cold gray fog, which swirled into the clearing and hung like spider

webs in the branches of the ancient trees. The trees huddled in around the edges of the clearing as if they, too, were afraid to miss something. The warriors' muttered oaths, their heated breath, and the wheezing snorts of their steeds hung frozen in the cold foggy air.

Frankie's hair stood up on end and she shivered all over. Her mother used to say that a spine-tingling shiver meant that someone was walking on your grave. This time, Frankie believed it. She moved her arms for a tighter grip on the tree.

The black stallion and the white unicorn circled each other. The horse neighed and snorted, rolling its wide eyes in terror. The unicorn nudged its pointed silver horn closer and closer to the horse's neck. The two beasts lunged, retreated, and circled around in a kind of dance, as their riders jockeyed for position and tried to find a vulnerable spot to hit with dagger or spear.

The women looked like ancient Amazon warriors with their sturdy and worn leather garments, heavy shields, and spears. Bows and quivers of arrows hung strapped across their chests. Too close to use the bows, they fought for their lives in hand-to-hand combat, gripping their steeds with their knees. They stabbed and gouged with long knives, and pushed against each other with their shields. They grabbed and twisted handfuls of hair escaping from under leather helmets in the heat of battle, as each desperately tried to pull the other off her mount, to get the upper hand.

The women were well matched, and each time one gained a hold or landed a blow, the other balanced it with one of her own. The battle had raged for hours and the warriors and their steeds were wounded and weary.

There was a final crack of steel-upon-steel, and the horse and unicorn leaped away from each other and stopped suddenly, snorting and pawing the ground.

"You think you've won, Cassandra, but you haven't," shouted the warrior on the black stallion in a mean, grating voice.

Her hair was as black and thick as her horse's mane. It hung down in loose strands that clung in clumps to the sweat on her face and neck. She watched the other woman so intently that she didn't seem to notice the long bleeding gash down her left side or the purple bruises swelling on her face. "I'm not finished with you yet!" she shouted. "I'll see to it that you'll wish you'd never been born—in my world *or* yours!"

"Ha!" yelled the other woman, who wheezed and gasped as raggedly as the unicorn she rode, "you don't believe that! You have to defeat me and many others in order to win. As long as the Light penetrates the Darkness even a little bit, you haven't won. And you won't win, because I will keep coming back for you, and others will join me. We will defeat you, Belzar! You have made the wrong choice. You have used your skills for evil, and you and your kind will pay the price!"

The unicorn pranced backward as the copper-haired Cassandra lowered her sword and pointed it toward Belzar and her black horse. But before they could lunge forward and strike, Belzar summoned up her remaining strength and stood up in her stirrups. She flung her hand out toward her enemy with a final burst of energy. Orange sparks flew like lightning from her fingertips, sizzling and sputtering through the air. They hit Cassandra's sword arm before she could bring up her shield to deflect them, and the unicorn and rider were momentarily wrapped in an orange neon glow.

Cassandra threw the sword with her wounded arm before collapsing across her unicorn's neck. It flew in a wide arc, almost in slow motion. Frankie watched it finally find its target, piercing Belzar's leg and pinning it to the black stallion's side. Horse and rider went down with screams of pain and the earth shuddered again.

Cassandra and the unicorn turned slowly away from the other wounded warrior and hobbled toward the edge of the clearing. Frankie could see their open wounds as they came

closer to her seat on the fence. The unicorn's silvery white mane was tinged crimson with blood, and the woman's right arm gaped open in a long, jagged cut.

"You won't be able to sit on the fence much longer, Frankie Maxwell," the warrior said as she drew up next to her. "You are part of this, you know, and soon you will have to take a stand." She closed her eyes and was so still that Frankie was afraid that the woman had passed out. But she opened her eyes again and continued.

"I'm wounded badly and it will be a long time before I will be able to come back and finish this fight. But there is too much to lose and we must continue. It may be your turn sooner than you think."

Frankie knew this woman, and the crest on the front of her leather vest looked familiar. But Frankie couldn't bring to mind who she was. As she craned her neck to watch the warrior and the unicorn move slowly out of the clearing and into the deep ancient forest, Frankie lost her balance again, fell backwards off the fence, and landed on the ground with a thump.



Frankie woke up with a start, still feeling that awful falling sensation, as if the world had been jerked out from under her. She grabbed frantically at the covers to steady herself. She was sweaty and chilled all over, and she had the terrible feeling that those warriors and angry beasts had been fighting their battle in the middle of her very own bedroom. She could still see wisps of that soupy gray fog in the corners of the room, and smell whiffs of ozone from purple lightning lingering in the air.

Who were those women? And why did they seem so familiar? As she stared across the room, the family pictures on her bureau caught her eye, and Frankie suddenly knew. She recognized one of them, at least. And it terrified her: Cassandra.

Aunt Cassie. Her Dad's sister. She'd been really sick lately. Was she all right? It was Frankie's favorite aunt on that beautiful unicorn, and those deep bleeding wounds had certainly looked real. What if they were?

Frankie rubbed her knuckles into her eyes, trying to wake up enough to focus on the hint of an idea floating just outside her awareness. Aunt Cassie had told Frankie once about an adventure she'd had. . . something about finding her way into another world, fighting the forces of evil, being wounded badly, but escaping home to rest and recover. Frankie hadn't paid much attention to it. She'd thought it was just another of her aunt's entertaining stories, a story told to explain away her lingering illness and keep Frankie from worrying.

Now Frankie wasn't so sure. She had an unsettling feeling that her dream and Aunt Cassie's strange story and illness were linked somehow. Could the story possibly be true? Had Aunt Cassie really gone to another world? Had she really been fighting that terrifying woman warrior in that clearing? And had Frankie somehow managed to see in her dream a fight that had actually happened – *somewhere*?

Frankie pulled on a pair of heavy green socks to guard against the chill of the hardwood floors and jumped out of bed. She ran downstairs into the kitchen, shrugging her navy velour robe on over her flannel nightgown as she went. She passed her younger brother, Sam, in the living room, as he headed outside, dribbling most of an egg-and-sausage sandwich down the front of his denim overalls.

Her father looked up from washing the breakfast dishes as she skidded into the kitchen.

"Frankie, do you always have to come rocketing into a room like the house is on fire? Running around the house is not acceptable for young ladies."

Frankie wondered briefly who cared about what young ladies did or did not do. She slid on her stocking'd feet to a halt next to

the phone on the kitchen counter and perched up on a handy stool in one smooth, practiced motion.

“What’s Aunt Cassie’s phone number? I have to call her.” She grabbed up the family phone directory and thumbed through it, but the pages were coming loose and she couldn’t find the entry.

Her father dried his hands, put the dish towel down on the counter and advanced across the room toward her. “What’s the matter with you? Give it here before you tear it apart.” He grabbed the directory out of her hands and brandished it at her. “You’re 13 now. You have to stop acting like a child.”

Frankie watched him warily as she reached for one of the jelly donuts in a box on the counter. She wondered what bug had bitten *him* this morning. Maybe he’d had nightmares, too? Whatever it was, she hated it when he was like this: He acted like she was totally defective, like nothing she did was good enough, and everything she wanted to do was stupid or bad.

“Look at you. You sleep through breakfast and then gobble down donuts,” her father said, slamming the phone directory down on the counter. He leaned back with his arms folded across his chest like he was really about to get into it. “Those donuts are going to go right to your hips. Maybe if you didn’t eat so much junk food, you’d do better in gym class.”

So *that* was it, Frankie thought. She’d gotten a *D* in gym. Gym was never one of her best classes, and she absolutely hated jogging, which had been the focus of the classes for the past six weeks. She admitted it. She was good at other things, so she didn’t particularly care. But her father cared. A lot.

He apparently *didn’t* care about her *A*’s in English and history. But he sure seemed to care about that *D* in gym. He’d been a star athlete in college, and he thought everyone should excel at sports. Every sport! And he’d been bringing it up for a week and hounding her about it, as if that was the only thing in the world to talk about. Knowing it would annoy him even more—but unable to stop herself, Frankie looked him straight in

the eye and took a bite out of the donut in her hand. White confectioner's sugar sprinkled down the front of her navy robe.

"I know, Dad," Frankie said, swallowing a mouthful. "I'm just hungry."

"If you'd get up at a reasonable hour and eat a sensible breakfast, you wouldn't be hungry," he said, not quite making his point. He handed her a paper napkin. He leaned in toward her and she could see that he was just warming up.

"And leave your Aunt Cassie alone. You know she's been sick, and she doesn't need you bothering her. You can talk to her at your grandfather's tonight. Just go upstairs and do your chores. The last time I saw it, your room looked like a tornado hit it, and the bathroom is a disgrace. . . "

Frankie just sat on the stool and sighed, waiting for the tirade to end. What could she do? He was obviously in one of those moods again: Nothing she did was good enough. It seemed lately that in his eyes she was either totally perfect or totally useless, all or nothing, with no middle ground.

And since her mother had died of cancer last year, her father seemed to get these moods more and more often. He either ignored her or made her crazy.

Frankie tried to help around the house, to take care of Sam, to fill the terrible void and emptiness in all their lives. But nothing worked, nothing she did could make it right again. And he seemed to blame *her*. He didn't seem to understand that she missed her mom terribly, too. And when he acted like this, she felt like she was losing him, as well. Sometimes, when she just couldn't stand it anymore, she would dig her heels in and challenge him. At least she got his attention that way. But it really only made it worse.

So she did what she usually ended up doing when he was like this: She sat and held her tongue and waited until her father wandered out the door, still muttering at her under his breath.

And then she flipped through the phone directory for the number, picked up the phone, and started dialing.

About the Author

Ellyn Dye has had many incarnations. She has been an actress, a folksinger, a photographer, a writer, an editor, a director of communications, an energy worker, and “staff” for a succession of cats. She has worked for a theater, a labor union, several trade associations, a medical association, the YMCA, and federal and local government. Over thirty years of metaphysical studies and mystical experiences – and a full-fledged Near Death Experience – inform and enrich her world view and her writing.

Ellyn travels widely, favoring places with mystical/spiritual associations, and she has a particular interest in the so-called Indigo children (also called the *new* or *psychic* children). This is Ellyn’s first novel, and it was written for Indigo children of all ages. You know who you are!