

# THE KEY

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# Prologue

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I've been half walking, half running since I crept out of the house; my chest heaves and my breath escapes in ragged gasps. The streets are deserted and I'm grateful for that small mercy. I won't be forced to explain myself to our inquisitive neighbours. Behind closed doors, someone is frying onions, and the sweet smell wafts in front of me, the tantalising aroma reminding me that I've not eaten. Ahead of me a ginger tom strolls out from behind a hedge and sits down on the pavement, the glow from the gas lamp illuminating his orange fur. As I draw closer, he stands up and moves towards me, his tail erect except for the tip, which curls over. He tilts his chin upwards and mews a greeting to me. Normally I might have bent down and given him a little tickle, but not tonight. There's nothing normal about tonight.

I round the corner, and as the park gates come into view, I'm momentarily surprised by how quickly I've arrived here. With a glance behind me, I push open the rusty iron gate, the ancient hinges squeaking in protest.

The sound cuts through the still night air, sabotaging what was supposed to be a stealthy entrance, but I do feel safer now that I'm in the sanctuary of the park and begin to slow my pace a little. Not too much, though; it's important to keep moving. There's no room for complacency. The pungent smell of the stagnant, weed-filled water tells me the lake is just around the corner, and I lengthen my stride until it comes into view. The water laps on the shingle beach and a couple of swans doze beside an upturned rowing boat.

The cold almost chokes me as I take my first tentative step into the icy water. The stones beneath my bare feet are sharp, and a piece of slimy pondweed wraps itself around my ankles. I turn around and look at the shoes I kicked off only moments before. They are lying on the shingle about a foot apart, and one is upside down. I inwardly chastise myself for my uncharacteristic sloppiness. They should be placed neatly side by side just as my mother always taught me. She will be disappointed, for in a few moments, those shoes will be all that's left of me. It's the only reason I took them off.

My feet ache with the cold, but I take another couple of steps. Now the water is up to my knees. My skirt billows around my legs, the only movement in the dark, tranquil lake. I've been here many times before, but never at this time, never like this. The sky is clear and black; very black. There's only a crescent moon, and the lack of light allows the stars to pepper the night sky. From

somewhere in the trees an owl takes flight, screeching as it glides just above the surface of the lake. It startles me, and I stumble backwards but manage to remain upright. I take a few calming breaths. I can still see my feet through the murky water; tiny feet, size three and bone-white.

Another few steps and the water is up to my waist. I feel like I'm suffocating already. There's blackness all around, not just in the sky but in the water, in my heart and in my head. There's sadness too. There's always been sadness. I wear it like a cloak. A great big heavy cloak that swamps me, a cloak I am unable to shrug off. I'm in a rush to get it over with now. Just another couple of strides and peace will be mine. I gaze down at the sleeping baby in my arms but I don't feel anything. I didn't expect to. The screeching starts again, shrill and desperate, but I don't need to turn round to know it's not the owl this time. It's something else.



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She watched him as he stood in front of the hall mirror, brushing imaginary flecks of dandruff from the shoulders of his beige camel coat. His sandalwood cologne floated around on the breeze from the open window. He was still a handsome man. Age had not withered him, and although his hair was now white, it was enviably thick, while his dark eyes held a sparkle that had not been dimmed in spite of his grief.

‘Morning, Dad. You off to the cemetery, then?’

He gave her a thin smile. ‘Yes, Sarah. Where else would I be going?’

She adjusted the knot in his tie and gave him a peck on the cheek. ‘It’s been six months, Dad. You don’t need to go every day.’

‘I know I don’t *need* to, Sarah. I want to.’ He bent down to give his already-polished shoes one last buff with the soft brush he kept on the hall table. He straightened up and looked her directly in the eye, his tone gentle, almost pleading. ‘It would be nice if you came with me once in a while.’

She suppressed an impatient groan. She couldn't bear having the same conversation over and over again. 'I don't need to keep going to Mum's grave in order to remember her.' She thumped her chest. 'I carry her in here every moment of every day.'

He sighed, picked up her hand and kissed it. 'As you wish, but we need to think about planting some bulbs soon. I want there to be lots of colour during the drab winter months. I'll get some snowdrops, I think. They come out early, don't they? And then some crocuses and daffodils. At least the bloody rabbits won't chew their way through those.' He gave a small chuckle. 'Eh? What do you think?'

Sarah unhooked her bag from the newel post and slung the strap over her shoulder. 'All right then, I'll pick some up from the garden centre on my way back.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'On your way back from where?'

'Dad,' she said, dragging the word out. 'You know very well where I'm going.'

'Oh please tell me you're not still snooping round that place.'

'I'm not snooping. It's called research.' She regretted her sharp tone when she saw the hurt look in his eyes and softened her voice. 'And you're a primary source, Dad. Have you any idea how valuable that is to a historian? You want my book to be a success, don't you?'

'An historian now, are you? I thought you worked at the local library.'

‘Yes, Dad, that’s my job. We all have bills to pay, but this book’s my passion and your input could mean the difference between it being a good book and an absolutely brilliant one.’

‘I’ve told you before,’ he said, his voice weary, ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ He jabbed his finger towards her. ‘And don’t come running to me when you’re done for trespassing.’

‘It’s not trespassing, it’s urban exploration.’ She noticed his tight jaw and the change in his breathing. She tugged gently on the sleeve of his coat. ‘Please, just tell me what it was like in there,’ she whispered. ‘I promise if it gets too uncomfortable we’ll stop. Just tell me as much as you want to.’

He opened the front door and sighed irritably at the rain bouncing off the driveway. Picking up his umbrella from the hall stand, he brandished it at her like a sword. She took a startled step backwards.

‘I’ve already told you as much as I want to.’

‘Yeah, which amounts to precisely nothing.’

He opened the umbrella and held it over his head. ‘Some things are best just left in the past, Sarah. And that’s my final word on the matter.’

She watched as he strode off down the path, willing him to turn round and give her an apologetic wave. Without her mother around to dilute his moods, he could be unbearably cantankerous. Mum had been good for him. She’d never allowed him to sulk and could lift him

out of a black mood with just a well-timed quip, usually at his expense, her infectious laugh making it impossible for him to be down for long. Sarah was certain that he had loved her mother. She'd witnessed his devastation at losing her, his pit of grief so deep that she feared he would never find the strength to crawl out of it. His daily visits to her grave had become an obsession rather than routine. And yet she felt there was something missing. Not enough to negate their marriage or diminish their love for each other; just something that wasn't quite right. She likened it to completing a thousand-piece jigsaw but then finding that you've only got nine hundred and ninety-nine pieces. That one missing piece spoils the whole effect. It's still clear what the picture is, but your eye will always be drawn to the little space where that missing piece should be. And Sarah didn't know why, but she had the uneasy feeling that the missing piece had something to do with Ambergate Lunatic Asylum.

She'd been coming to Ambergate for months now, but every time she rounded the corner and the stunning building came into view, the sheer grandeur of it made her gasp. She'd seen stately homes less well-appointed. Constructed from the finest limestone, the facade appeared lavish, pretentious even, the octagonal cupola of the clock tower rising majestically over the arched doorway. No expense had been spared in the construction of the asylum, and although many of its more valuable

features had long since been pilfered, some sections of the fine glazed wall tiles remained along with the stained-glass windows that adorned the ballroom. It was derelict now, of course, most of its windows smashed and the stonework crumbling beneath the invasive tendrils of ivy.

Sarah pulled a book from her bag and stared at the black-and-white photograph taken around the turn of the last century. *Ambergate County Lunatic Asylum c.1898*. She read the paragraph below the photo.

Constructed between 1870 and 1872 to a design by renowned architect Sir Leonard Groves, Ambergate County Lunatic Asylum was originally built to care for 1,000 patients from the Manchester, Liverpool and Chester areas. By the 1950s it housed over 1,500 patients, resulting in severe overcrowding. In line with a national effort to reduce the stigma associated with the words 'lunatic asylum', the name was changed to Ambergate Mental Hospital in 1925. A further name change was effected after the passing of the 1959 Mental Health Act, which decreed that the word 'mental' be omitted from hospital names. Ambergate Hospital closed its doors in 1997, and the building has been derelict ever since, some of it falling prey to arsonists and vandals.

Spots of rain fell on the pages and she thrust the book back into her bag before picking her way along the

sweeping driveway. She arrived at the metal security hoardings and stared at the warning sign advising people not to venture any further. It stated that the site was monitored twenty-four hours a day, and depicted a particularly aggressive-looking Alsatian, its long fangs dripping with saliva. There were no dogs here, though, it was only a deterrent, and the monitoring was carried out sporadically by an old guy, rumoured to be a former patient, who wandered the grounds occasionally shouting profanities and shaking his fist in the direction of anybody who dared to ignore the signs.

Sarah lifted the hoarding out of its concrete base, creating a small gap she could squeeze through. She waited for a second, scanning the grounds, holding her breath to make it easier to hear any unfamiliar noises. The breeze rustled the leaves on the trees and a pigeon cooed softly to its mate, but otherwise there was nothing. The security really was a joke.

She crossed the weed-ridden front lawn, the long wet grass reaching the top of her thighs, and arrived at the foot of the stone steps leading up to the main entrance. She gripped the once-ornate handrail, now merely a rusting eyesore, and climbed to the partially boarded-up front door, on which someone had hilariously daubed a pentagram in bright red paint. She pushed on the rotten wood and it yielded without much force, allowing her to step over the threshold and into the hallway.

The overwhelming atmosphere inside was one of decay.

Mildew covered the walls, and pigeon droppings speckled the floor. The stench of urine permeated the air, and Sarah covered her nose with her hand. Broken bottles, cigarette butts and the remains of a disposable barbecue indicated that some sort of gathering had taken place. It might be somewhere for bored teenagers to gather now, but Sarah could only imagine the horrors that had gone on within these walls. Her father, however, had valuable first-hand knowledge and it infuriated Sarah that he was unwilling to share it.

She scratched at the flaky varnish on the banister and surveyed the staircase. The floorboards were rotten, though, and she knew it would be madness to attempt to climb them. Double swing doors lay ahead, the hinges squeaking as she pushed her way through. A seemingly endless corridor stretched out in front of her, plaster hanging off the walls, the floor strewn with splinters of wood. She crouched down and pulled the floor plan out of her bag, smoothing it out on the ground. There was over four miles of corridors, so she'd adopted a methodical approach to exploring the building and had carefully highlighted the areas she had already covered.

Once she'd got her bearings, she replaced the floor plan and retrieved her notebook. Rain trickled in through the gaps in the rafters, accentuating the mouldy stench and general rotting ambience of the derelict building. There was silence, apart from the rhythmical plip-plop of the raindrops. She shuddered and took a furtive three-

sixty survey of her surroundings. She would never get used to the eerie walls with their unsettling graffiti, the creepy corridors and the long-buried secrets that her father seemed determined would remain that way.

She froze at the sound of a scuffle coming from a side room. Rats. She'd encountered them before, and no matter how many times she'd told herself that they were more scared of her than she was of them, it made no difference. She still hated the scurrying blighters with their long hairless tails and beady black eyes. She stamped her feet and, feeling slightly stupid, shouted at them to bugger off. Silence descended once more and she laughed quietly to herself. *That showed them.* But as she stared at the opening to the side room, its door hanging off its hinges, the darkness inside pointing to a lack of windows, she heard it again. A shuffling of feet, far too heavy to be a rat. She swallowed hard. 'Hello. Is . . . is there anybody there?'

A hooded figure emerged from the gloom, arms outstretched and moving towards her in a zombie-like fashion. She expelled a breath of relief. 'Nathan, you bloody idiot. What're you trying to do to me?'

He pulled down his hood and grinned at her. 'Sorry, I couldn't resist.'

'What are you doing here at this time anyway?'

'Too wet to be on the streets today. I chose to give it a swerve.'

'I thought beggars couldn't be choosers?'

He shrugged. ‘Got any fags?’

She ferreted around in her shoulder bag. ‘No, I haven’t got any bloody fags.’ She thrust a package towards him. ‘Here, have these and be grateful.’

He unwrapped the silver foil and crammed a cheese and ham sandwich into his mouth. ‘Fanks,’ he mumbled. ‘I am grateful, honest.’ He pulled the sandwich apart and peered inside. ‘Could’ve done with some pickle, though.’

They sat down side by side on the hard floor as Nathan munched his way through her sandwiches. Their paths had crossed a few weeks earlier, when Sarah had stumbled upon him asleep in one of the wards. At first she’d thought it was just a bundle of old clothes, until she had prodded him with her foot. He’d been sleeping rough following a series of blazing rows with his parents, after which he’d stormed out vowing never to return. Since then they had become friends of sorts, although at twenty years his senior, she did have the instinct to mother him, in spite of the fact – or maybe because of it – that she had no children of her own. Her thoughts turned to Dan and the familiar bitterness washed over her. She shook her head to clear away the memories. It didn’t do to dwell; what’s done is done.

She watched Nathan wolf down the last of the sandwiches, crumbs settling along the fine blond hair on his top lip. ‘Nathan?’

‘Mmm?’ He continued to chew noisily.

‘Why won’t you let me help you?’

He pointed to his cheeks, puffed out like a hamster's. 'You are helping me,' he mumbled.

'No, Nathan, that's just a sticking plaster. I mean really help you. Get you back on your feet again.'

'I'm all right.'

'Winter's coming. What're you going to do then?'

'Dunno, stay here, I suppose?' He looked up at the ceiling as a large raindrop landed on his head. 'Maybe go to London.'

'You're only eighteen. You've got your whole life ahead of you.'

He scoffed. 'That's what worries me.'

She glared at him. He was a stubborn so-and-so all right. Considering he'd been living rough for a couple of months, he could've looked a lot worse, though. His body odour had the distinctive tang of an overripe Stilton, but his blue eyes were bright and his skin was surprisingly smooth for one who did not have regular access to a razor. His blond fringe was too long and he had a habit of shaking his head in order to flick it out of his eyes.

She delved into her bag again and brought out a bottle of water. He looked at the label. 'I don't suppose there's any chance you've filled this with vodka, is there?'

'Spoken like a true down-and-out.' She shook her head. 'What do you think?'

He unscrewed the cap and took a long drink. 'What're we exploring today then?' he said, changing the subject.

She knew when she was beaten, but it wouldn't stop her trying again another day.

She placed the floor plan between them and pointed to a long corridor with numerous rooms off each side. 'This one is it today.'

He struggled to his feet, unfurling himself to his six-foot height, his jeans barely clinging onto his bony hips, and held out his hand. She took it and he heaved her into a standing position. She brushed herself down, flicking off bits of grit and dust. 'Thanks.'

They walked side by side along the corridor, passing wards still full of metal-framed beds, complete with stained mattresses, the horsehair stuffing spilling out onto the cracked tiled floors. In one side room stood an old dentist's chair in its reclined position, rusty instruments still on a tray beside it. They came to a corridor of tiny rooms, each barricaded with a thick steel door. Sarah closed one eye and squinted through a peephole. 'Looks like a padded cell.'

'Bloody hell, I wonder what they were used for. 'Ere, I wonder if your old man was ever shoved in one of those. He was a nutter, wasn't he?'

'Nathan!' she admonished. 'My father was not mentally ill. Why would you jump to such a conclusion? People were sent to asylums for all sorts of spurious reasons back then; not everyone was mad, and in any case my—'

He grabbed hold of her arm. 'This one's open. Will you lock me in?'

‘What on earth for?’

‘I just want to see what it’s like. Go on, it’ll be fun.’

‘Fun? You need to get out more, Nathan.’

He heaved the door open and entered the tiny room. The floor was spongy and the walls were lined with canvas and padded with horsehair.

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ asked Sarah, closing the door behind him.

His reply was muffled. Sarah looked through the peep-hole, but the blackness had swallowed him. She counted to ten before opening the door again.

He stepped out, grinning. ‘That was awesome.’

She cringed at the use of the adjective. Clearly Nathan had led a sheltered life if he thought ten seconds standing in the darkness of a padded cell was awesome. Poor bugger.

‘Come on, you.’ She pulled him out but couldn’t help smiling at his beaming face. ‘We’ve got work to do.’

They’d reached the end of the corridor, the atmosphere now cool and clammy. There were only two tiny windows, high up on the wall ahead, which did not let in nearly enough light.

‘What now?’ asked Nathan.

‘I’m sure there should be a door round here somewhere.’ Sarah studied the floor plan again. ‘Yep, there should definitely be a door along this wall.’

She stood, hands on hips, surveying the corridor. Her

gaze settled on a large wardrobe, one of its doors completely missing, the other one clinging on by a single hinge. She moved towards it.

‘Hang on a minute. Look at this, Nathan.’

The back of the wardrobe was also missing. They both stared at the door behind, the blue paint peeling off in large curls. ‘There it is,’ declared Sarah. ‘I knew there should be a door here.’

Nathan stuck his head inside the wardrobe and twisted the knob on the door. ‘Blimey, all we need now is a lion and a witch.’

He heaved the wardrobe out of the way and Sarah charged at the door with her shoulder, then, when it failed to give, kicked at it with her boots.

Nathan intervened. ‘You’ll hurt yourself, Sarah. Here, let me.’ He turned the handle patiently, listening for a click, and after a few jiggles the door opened. ‘It just needed a little coaxing, that’s all. There’s no need to go at everything like a bull in a china shop.’

As their eyes adjusted to the gloom, they both stared up at the narrow wooden staircase behind the door.

Nathan grimaced at Sarah and gestured with his arm. ‘After you.’

‘You’re such a gentleman, not to mention a coward.’

‘Well it does look a bit creepy.’

‘Says the man who sleeps in a derelict lunatic asylum every night.’

She tentatively tested the strength of the first stair, then, satisfied that it would take her weight, crept up to the top.

‘What can you see?’ called Nathan from below.

‘There’s another, smaller door, really low. I’ll have to bend down to get in.’

‘Wait for me, then, you can’t go in on your own.’

They both crouched at the top of the stairs as Sarah turned the handle. The key was still in the lock and without much effort she was able to push the door open into a small windowless attic space. She reached into her bag, pulled out her pen torch and moved the dim light around the room, its beam lighting up layers of dust and cobwebs. A single bulb hung from the ceiling, covered in an opaque layer of grime.

Nathan pointed to the far side of the room. ‘There’s something over there.’

Sarah made her way across to where stacks of suitcases were piled up under the eaves. ‘Nathan,’ she breathed. ‘Come over here. I’ve found something.’

He shuffled over to join her, his lanky frame making it awkward for him to move. He spoke in hushed tones. ‘Why are we whispering?’

‘Look at all these cases.’ She pulled down the top one and blew off a cloud of dust. A brown luggage label was tied to the handle with a piece of frayed string.

He peered over her shoulder. ‘Is there a name?’

She squinted at the label. ‘No, just a number, 43/7.’

Here, hold this.’ She passed him the torch and with her thumbs tried to flip up the catches either side of the handle, but they were rusted and stiff. ‘Damn, I think it might be locked.’

Nathan intervened. ‘Here, let me have a go.’

Seconds later, he had managed to pop the catches and he slid the case over to Sarah. ‘I’ll let you open it.’

‘Thanks.’ She wiped her clammy hands on the bottom of her sweatshirt, knelt down and gently eased the lid of the case open. ‘God, this hasn’t been touched for years.’

She had almost lifted the lid clear when it suddenly exploded like an airbag from a dashboard. She scuttled back in alarm as Nathan jumped and banged his head on the wooden rafters.

‘What the hell is that?’ she exclaimed.

Nathan slung his arm across her body and shone the torch on the case. ‘I’ve got this.’ He edged forward and poked at the mound of white material with his toe.

Sarah pushed him out of the way and bent down to touch the fabric. ‘Feels like silk.’ She picked it up and shook it free, the folds of the material creased with age. ‘It’s a wedding dress.’ She ran her fingers over the row of tiny pearls on the neckline. ‘It’s beautiful, but I wonder what on earth it’s doing in here. It’s been worn, too, judging by the yellow stains under the armpits.’

‘She was a big lass,’ Nathan observed. ‘A family of four could go camping under that thing.’

He picked up a black-and-white photograph from the case. ‘And look at this.’

They both studied the picture of the young man in uniform. He had his back to the camera but was looking over his shoulder, grinning into the lens, a cigarette hanging from his lips. He had the rugged good looks of a forties film star. At least he would have done if someone hadn’t gouged his eyes out. Sarah held the photograph up and shone the torch behind it, the beam piercing the holes where his eyes should have been. ‘Blimey, he must have *really* upset someone. This is absolutely fascinating. Let’s have a look in some of the others.’

The attic space was long but low, the piles of cases wedged under the woodworm-infested eaves varying colours and sizes but all with a brown luggage label hanging off the handle. Sarah dragged down another case and flicked it open. She thumbed through the musty clothes, wrinkling her nose at the stale smell. Nathan pulled out a moth-eaten old jumper. ‘Hey, looks like I’ve found myself a new wardrobe.’

Sarah glared at him. ‘Don’t you touch any of this stuff, do you hear me?’

He held his palms aloft. ‘All right, I was only joking.’

Sarah rubbed her chin, frowning in concentration. ‘We need to be methodical with this lot.’ She scanned the room. ‘There must be twenty-odd cases here, each with a story to tell.’ She grabbed Nathan by the arm, her voice

an excited whisper. ‘This is a gold mine, Nathan. You mustn’t tell anybody about it.’

He shrugged. ‘Who’m I gonna tell?’

She took her camera out of the bag and flicked up the flash, snapping furiously at the stacks of suitcases. ‘This is going to make a great cover for the book.’ She knelt down and rocked back on her heels, scrolling through the photographs she had just taken.

Nathan hovered over her shoulder. ‘I’ll help you if you like.’

She studied him in the half-light, his pupils dilated, his mouth pulled into a wide smile. She’d never seen him look so animated. ‘Thanks. I’d like that.’ She hesitated. ‘I’ll pay you, of course.’

‘That’s not why I offered. I *want* to help you, that’s all. I don’t expect anything in return.’

She patted his knee. ‘You’re a good lad, Nathan.’

She stood up as straight as the low roof would allow and massaged her neck. ‘We can’t do much in this gloom. I’ll come back tomorrow with a couple of lanterns and we’ll start properly then. She packed away her camera. ‘Why don’t you come home with me, at least for a bath and a hot meal?’

He shook his head. ‘I can’t, I’ve told you before. Please just leave it.’