THE BOOK OF STOLEN DREAMS

THE SECRET KEY

"You must use your key wisely, Rachel Klein."

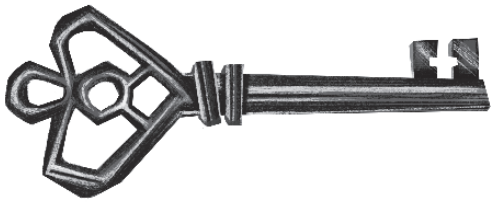
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The boy stood.

"Tell no one about this. This knowledge is not for everyone."



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THE SECRET KEY

DAVID FARR

Illustrated by Kristina Kister

USBORNE



Introduction

Let me take you on an airship.

By airship I don't mean the terrifying kind that a twelve-year-old girl once took, fleeing for her life, desperate to find her brother and save her beloved country from misery and terror.

No. This airship is called *Liberty*. It is bright orange with streamers falling from it like wonderful hair. It rises in the clear blue sky and floats happily over Brava, the great capital city of Krasnia.

Look down from it now. What do you see? Once empty streets are filled with life. Once boarded-up cinemas are open again, cafes are full to bursting. What has happened here?

Cast your eye west. Yes, that's the city park, with flower beds newly planted. And just beyond, can you see

the ornamental lake with its paddle boats, and its funny old stone swan? For years that swan was silent and sad. But now it's been fixed and joyfully hurls liquid diamonds from its beak like it's singing for freedom.

Now strain your ears. What is that sound floating across the grass to your left? It's coming from the brand-new playground, installed only two weeks ago by order of the freshly elected government.

It sounds like bells. But it isn't.

Could it be? Yes, it is.

It is the sound of laughing.

Why is that so strange? you might ask. I'll tell you.

Just a few weeks ago, to be in this park was highly dangerous. To be a child playing in this park was to be a criminal. Charles Malstain, the dreadful dictator of Krasnia, hated children so much that he banned them from playing outside. They were not to be seen on beaches, or in parks, or anywhere. To Charles Malstain, a child was like a rat – dirty, smelly and best kept in a sewer.

But now Charles Malstain is dead! Now a new joy has swept over the country of Krasnia and its elegant old capital city of Brava. And children are free once more!

Look at them. Dozens of small figures swinging on swings, laddering up ladders, hurtling down slides. How did it happen? Charles Malstain wanted to rule Krasnia for ever. How was he defeated?

Well, it so happens that the main engineer of the dictator's demise is right now entering the park, a schoolbag slung over her shoulder. She has dark hair, a small nose and brown eyes. She is not growing as quickly as she would like. She is on her way home, in a hurry to make tea and cake for her father. But that won't stop the dozens of children rushing to Rachel Klein, to embrace their national heroine.

"Here she is!" the children cry. "The saviour of Krasnia!" Rachel blushes. They're all around her now, smiling and jostling. They're a bit younger than her and full of questions.

"Hi there!" Rachel says brightly. She knows what's coming.

"Rachel, tell us one more time! What was it like? What was it *really* like? To be in there, in the Presidential Palace, surrounded by soldiers, all with guns; and with Charles Malstain sitting on his huge throne, staring at you with his snaky eyes. Was it terrifying? Was it the most frightening thing *ever* in the history of *all* time?"

Rachel agrees it was.

"And when Malstain said he was going to imprison you for all eternity – was that the scariest thing of all? And when you escaped! From under the soldiers' noses! With your brother! In the back of a meat van! From the palace that everyone said no one could ever escape from *ever*!"

A girl with simply enormous eyes takes up the story like a sprinter in a relay:

"And then you and Robert broke into the library and Malstain chased you with his soldiers and they were going to kill you, but then Malstain collapsed and died! In the Rare Books Room! And his regime was toppled and all the prisoners were released from the dungeons under the palace and Constanza Glimpf took over as President and life in Brava became normal again, which is why we are free to play in this park for the first time in years, and all because of you, Rachel Klein! All because of you!"

The girl gasps for breath. Her eyeballs are popping out of her face as if on springs. Her friends applaud. Rachel smiles with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment.

"That's so kind of you," she says. "But I didn't do it alone. Everyone played their part. We all saved Krasnia!"

There's a huge cheer now. Rachel laughs and hugs about fifteen children at once.

"And now I really have to get home. I have such a lot of homework and my father is waiting…"

"Of course! Let her go! She has important work to do! Hurrah! Hurrah for Rachel Klein! Heroine of Krasnia!"

And with another roar they let her go.

Rachel can't help grinning as she walks on through

the park to the echo of the children's cheers. She gives them a wave and turns past the herb garden. Watch her now as she crosses the bridge over the lake, strolling past the funny spouting swan, towards the gate that will lead her home.

When suddenly a figure steps out of the shadows towards her.



1
The Boy on the Bench

The figure was alone. He was a boy, dressed strangely in a smart brown mackintosh coat and polished black shoes. He was about her brother's age, Rachel thought, perhaps slightly older. He had short, very dark brown hair. And he was not here for the playground.

The boy looked at her seriously and nodded. What could such a look mean? Rachel was about to take a different path when the boy made a strange movement with his right hand. She looked down.

He was holding something.

It was a blood-red key.

Rachel stared in astonishment. The key was identical to the one Rachel had been magically left after she destroyed The Book of Stolen Dreams. But Rachel had

hidden her blood-red key in the bedroom she shared with Robert ever since.

So how did this boy have one?

The boy signalled and walked on. Rachel followed him into an area of the park surrounded by rose bushes. He sat on a bench in such a way that left space beside him. Rachel stood by the bench but did not sit.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What do you want?"

"I have something to tell you," he said quietly. "Sit down." Rachel sat but kept distance between them.

"How did you get that key?" she asked firmly, looking ahead so no one would know they were talking.

"The same way you did," said the boy. "I closed a rip in the fabric."

Rachel felt her breath stick in her chest. How did he know about that? Everyone in Brava was aware Rachel and Robert Klein had defeated Charles Malstain, but they had no idea that Rachel had destroyed The Book of Stolen Dreams and closed the gate to the Hinterland for ever. Constanza Glimpf had made it very clear: ordinary people must have no idea that the Hinterland existed at all.

People cannot be trusted with such knowledge.

"What fabric?" Rachel asked the boy cagily. She was keeping as much distance on the bench as possible.

"Anyone who closes the fabric between life and

death, between our world and the Hinterland, joins our select group and receives a blood-red key," the boy said, glancing at her. "We are the Keepers of the Key. We know the truth of the Hinterland – the land where dead souls roam. We know its dark magic."

There was such intensity in his honey-brown eyes.

"There are those like Malstain who wish to exploit the magic to bring the dead back to life. We must use the keys to stop them. *You* must use your key wisely, Rachel Klein."

"But how will I know when to use it?" Rachel stammered. She couldn't believe her ears.

"The key will tell you," the boy said gravely. "Swear to me that when it does, you will not refuse it."

Rachel wanted to ask *how* the key would tell her but instead she found herself swearing that she would do exactly as he said.

The boy stood.

"Tell no one about this. This knowledge is not for everyone."

For a moment they watched as ordinary Bravans passed through the park, going about their daily lives in the new free Krasnia, utterly unaware of the strange conversation taking place among the winter roses.

Then very quietly the boy fished something out of his trouser pocket.

It was a small card with a red key imprinted on one

side. On the other side was a six-digit number and an image of a telephone.



634234
Call only in Absolute Emergency

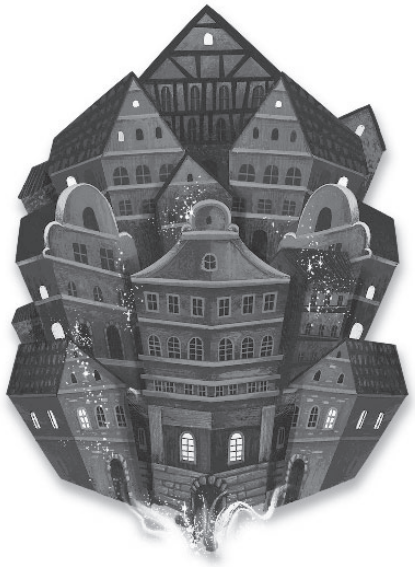
He placed the card in her hand. He kept hold of it for a brief moment.

"You are not alone."

Then he walked away across the grass.

"Wait," Rachel wanted to say, but by the time she'd opened her mouth, it was too late. The boy in the mackintosh coat was gone.

And she didn't even know his name.



2

The Trouble with Felix Klein

When Rachel returned home to the Klein apartment in North Brava, she immediately told her brother about the boy on the bench. *Robert helped me save Krasnia*, she reasoned. *He has a right to know.* But Robert, tucking into a meringue he'd bought from an old-city cafe and reading a book on politics, did not take the news as she expected.

"Oh, come on, Rach," he said. "A boy in a mackintosh coat? Seriously?"

"But he knew about the Hinterland!" she whispered so as not to wake her father. "He had a key! And he gave me this card!"

Robert stared at the card, but shook his head.

"He must have overheard us talking about the

Hinterland on the tram. We need to be more careful when we speak about these things. He must have painted an ordinary key red, and bought a special spy costume at Matusheks on Main Street."

"But why would he do that?"

"To impress you of course! You're famous, Rachel. Everyone wants to know you! I hope you didn't tell him anything about what happened in the Library? About destroying The Book of Stolen Dreams?"

Rachel shook her head. She was feeling very confused.

Robert puffed his cheeks in relief. "That's good. And as for that ridiculous card – well, anyone could make that…"

Rachel looked at the rectangular card the boy had given her. It didn't look ridiculous to her. Or did it? She was beginning to doubt the boy, herself, everything that had happened.

"Look!" Robert said firmly but quietly. "You did something truly remarkable. You saved Krasnia and I'm so proud of you. But now we must put that behind us, ensure that what happened in the Rare Books Room stays absolutely secret, and get back to normal life. That's what matters now."

He looked at her steadily. And Rachel knew exactly what Robert meant by "normal life". He meant the man sleeping in the next-door room in the middle of the day.

Their father. Felix Klein.

After Rachel and Robert had picked their father up at Brava Central train station that cold October morning, they had returned home with Rachel full of dreams and hopes. They would help her father recover from his terrible time in Malstain's prison camp in the East. They would make life normal again.

But life wasn't normal. Their mother was dead and their father had not been there to say goodbye. Rachel so wanted to reassure him that her mother was in the Hinterland, that Rachel had seen her, that Judith Klein knew the truth, knew why it was not possible to return to life, however much her family missed her, and had even urged Rachel to close the gate for ever. But whenever Rachel brought this up, her father seemed somehow unable to hear.

So Rachel had given up. Instead, she did everything to make the apartment friendly and warm, filling it with pastries, fruit and all her father's favourite things. Felix tried his best. He smiled at the cakes they made him and sat in the *Sofa So-good* listening to his children tell him of all their adventures. He murmured how proud he was of them both. He hugged them, tight. Too tight, Rachel thought.

She remembered that afternoon when they were invited to the Presidential Palace for tea and medals. Felix dressed in his best suit (now far too big for him)

and was given a special award for "defying the Malstain regime at great personal cost". Constanza Glimpf spoke with tears in her eyes, and gently reached up to hang a bright silver chain around the tall librarian's neck. It was at that moment that Rachel saw her father for what he was – rake-thin, his neck barely more than a broomstick, his skin like paper from one of the old books he loved so much. And she knew how hard the journey back to normal life would be without his wife by his side.

"You're right," Rachel said quietly to her brother, putting the strange little card back in her pocket. "The boy must have overheard us. I'll forget all about it."

"That's it!" said Robert. "We must focus on the future now. The future for the Kleins and all Krasnia!" And he brandished his political book like a torch.

"I'm going to make Father some tea." Rachel smiled. "Just like Mother would have done."

And so she did. Then, later that evening, Rachel slipped the card into the secret alcove in her bedroom, next to her very own blood-red key. The key sat lifeless in the shadows. It was all that remained of The Book of Stolen Dreams. As Rachel slid the board back across the hiding place, she determined to forget all about the boy on the bench, the Keepers of the Key, and the promise she had made. She would do what Robert had said. She would look forward to the future and help her father back to a full recovery.

For weeks it seemed Robert was right. Rachel's key stayed quietly hidden in the alcove along with the card the boy had given her. The key did nothing. The card looked increasingly home-made with every day that passed. The boy never reappeared. And Rachel gradually forgot. It was as if the meeting in the winter roses had never happened.

Then one day everything changed.