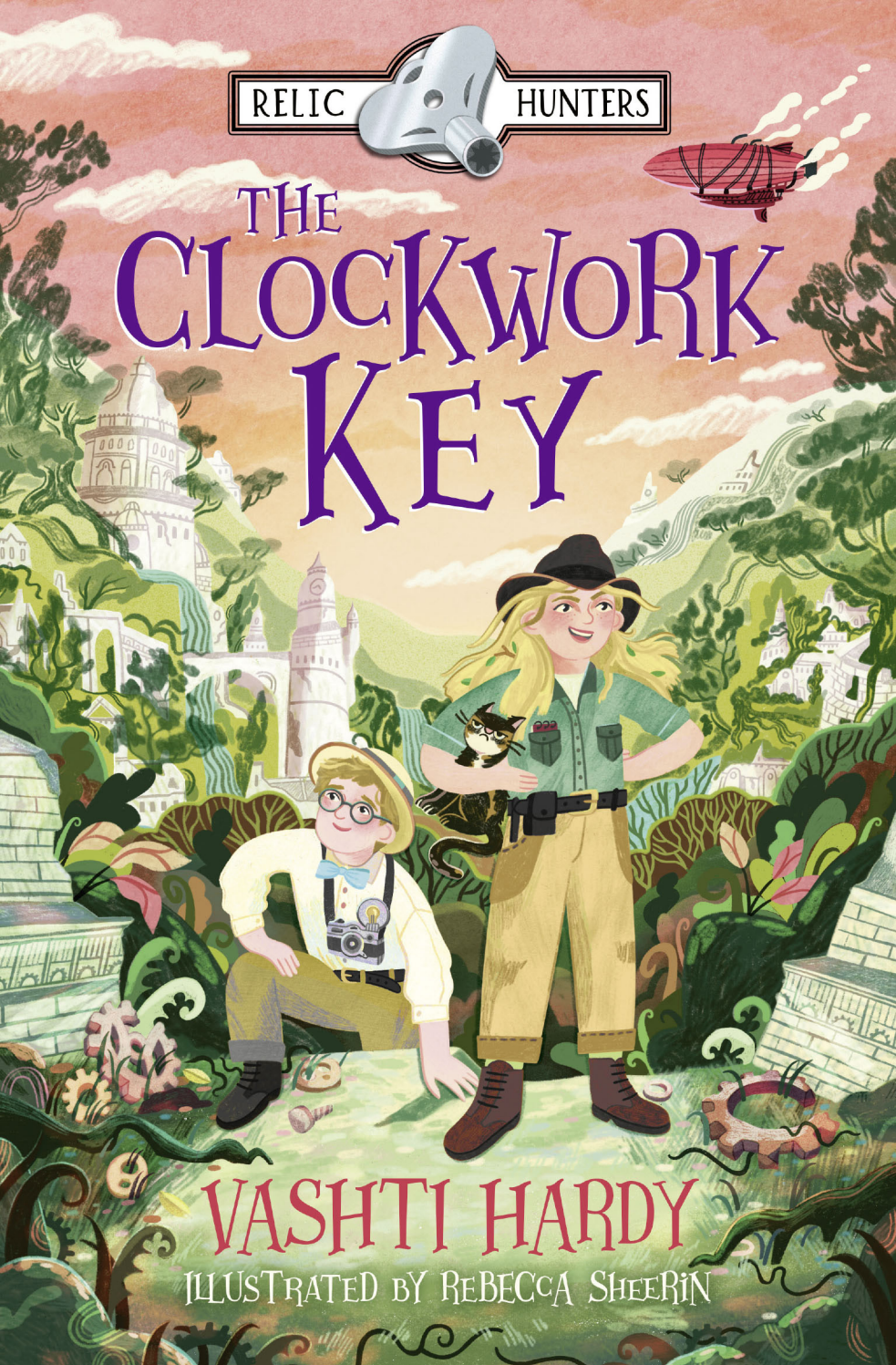


The background of the cover is a vibrant, stylized illustration. It depicts a lush, green landscape with rolling hills and dense foliage. In the distance, a city with clockwork-inspired architecture, including a large dome and spires, is visible. A red blimp with a propeller and smoke trails is flying in the upper right sky. In the foreground, two characters are present: a woman with blonde hair wearing a green shirt, tan pants, and a black hat, holding a small black cat; and a boy with glasses and a bow tie, wearing a white shirt and tan pants, kneeling on the ground. The title 'THE CLOCKWORK KEY' is written in large, purple, serif letters across the center. At the top, a banner with a bell icon contains the words 'RELIC' and 'HUNTERS'. The author's name 'VASHTI HARDY' is at the bottom in red, and the illustrator's name 'ILLUSTRATED BY REBECCA SHEERIN' is below it in white.

RELIC

HUNTERS

THE CLOCKWORK KEY

VASHTI HARDY

ILLUSTRATED BY REBECCA SHEERIN



THE CLOCKWORK KEY

VASHTI HARDY

ILLUSTRATED BY
REBECCA SHEERIN

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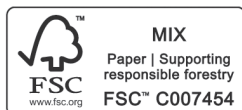
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To Dotty, with love

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CHAPTER 1

THE MAP

Mabel and Will Greystone leaned out of the train window, waving goodbye to their parents.

“Have fun on your trip, darlings!” called Mum.

“We will!” said Will.

“I wish we could come!” Dad smiled.

“Me too!” called Mabel as her wild blonde hair whipped around in the breeze.

Mabel and Will’s parents were history professors at Ravenlock University in the country of Greenhaven. They couldn’t come on the trip as they had important work to finish during the holidays.

“I’ll look after them – don’t worry,” said Aunt Lucy from the open train window. She was Mum’s younger sister and a relic hunter, which meant she searched the world for special ancient objects. Mabel and Will always had fun with Aunt Lucy.

The Steam Flyer train whistle blew.

“Remember to stop and think, Mabel!” Mum said, her brow creased.

“Me?” Mabel said with pretend shock. She had a reputation for being a bit impulsive.

“And remember to seize the day, Will!” Dad said as he scrunched a fist in the air.

Will turned red. He tended to be shy and a bit more fearful than Mabel.

The whistle blew again, and the carriage jolted. Mum and Dad were swallowed in a chug of grey smoke as the great train set off.

“Goodbye!” called Mabel. She giggled as she spun and dropped into her seat. It didn’t take much for Mabel to get excited, but she’d never felt as fired up as she did today. She would miss Mum and Dad, of course, but this was her and Will’s first ever expedition to hunt relics across the seas.

Will shut the window and sat beside Mabel, brushing his trousers smooth with his palms. He straightened his sky-blue bow tie. Mabel admired her new baggy beige trousers and stiff green shirt, which matched Aunt Lucy’s outfit, although Aunt Lucy also wore a red silk bandana tied at her neck and a fedora hat.

Aunt Lucy sat opposite them, her usual light grin on her face. Her pale green eyes always had a sparkle about them, and her expression was confident, which Mabel loved. Aunt Lucy took off her fedora hat and tucked a stray wisp of light brown hair behind her ear. “What do you think of the train, children?”

Mabel looked around at the red-velvet sofas and the matching curtains with gold tie-backs. Bronze picture rails and a crystal chandelier glinted. From the outside, Mabel had thought the Steam Flyer looked like a huge metal centipede, with its black carriages, and bronze wheels that were taller than her. But inside, the train was soft and plush.

“I feel like the president of Greenhaven!” said Mabel.

“A president would need more than two brain cells,” said the brown rucksack beside Aunt Lucy’s feet.

Mabel jumped up and looked at Aunt Lucy. “You brought Grimm!” she said.

Aunt Lucy gave a nod and reached for the rucksack. “I thought an adventure might stop Grimm moaning for a while!”

“I’d rather have stayed at home,” said the voice.

Mabel opened the bag. “Come here, you lovable grump,” she said, and swooped up Grimm – a stuffed cat.



“Urgh,” Grimm said as Mabel cuddled him in her arms.

“Stop pretending you don’t love it!” Mabel told Grimm, hugging him tighter.

“I really don’t. Your hair’s in my mouth.”

Aunt Lucy had found Grimm on a relic dig in the north of the Bygone Lands a few years ago. She brought him back as an unusual pet for Mabel and Will to play with when they visited. No one knew how he was able to talk.

“Your fur needs a good brush, Grimm,” said Will, who always had neat hair and white shirts without creases. “And where’s the blue silk collar I made you?”

“Don’t you dare brush my fur,” Grimm replied. “I like it how it is.”

“Matted, dirty and smelling like old socks?” asked Will.

“It’s black, not dirty,” Grimm said. “And I don’t need a collar. I’m a stuffed cat. I’m hardly going to get lost.”

Mabel buried her head in his fur. Cats were her second favourite thing in the world, after mechanical relics, and Grimm was a bit of both. He was her number-one sourpuss. “Grimm doesn’t smell,” Mabel said.

Grimm growled. “But you do. Put. Me. Down.”

Mabel hugged him closer as the Steam Flyer sped up and she was pinned back in her seat. The pistons roared as Ravenlock whizzed past, with its spiralling towers, iron-roofed houses and crowded streets bustling with steam carriages.

“We’ll be on the upper canals soon,” said Aunt Lucy. “If this train is as fast as they promise, we’ll be at the coast by sunset.”

Ravenlock was the capital of Greenhaven and stretched over five hills. It was famous for its steam inventions and modern canal system. The Steam Flyer was the first train in the land to travel on both rail and water, and was the pride of the city.

The train began climbing steeply. The chandeliers rattled as they rose, then the train levelled again. There was a whoosh as they hit water and began gliding along a canal bridge.

“Cool!” Mabel said. She looked out of the window at the sprawling city growing smaller below.

“Right, we need to do an equipment check,” Aunt Lucy said, leaning forward. Will polished his wire-framed glasses as Mabel whipped a notebook from her shirt pocket. “Ready?”

They nodded, and Aunt Lucy began pulling items from her bag and placing them on the seat beside her. “Magnifier, compass,



binoculars, tool roll, brush set, trowels, spare set of clothes.” She paused and looked up at Will. “Camera?”

Will tapped the camera around his neck. It was beautiful – gold with many fancy cogs and dials. “Mum let me bring her antique 565. She said it’s never let her down.”

Will might have been wary of adventure, but he was a keen photographer, so Aunt Lucy had tasked him to take pictures of their expedition.

Aunt Lucy continued her list. “Sleeping sacks, water bottles and food rations – we’ll pick up some more when we get to Marvolia. Extra map paper, pens, notebooks, money and emergency confetti.”

“Emergency confetti?” Will said, frowning.

Mabel had come across it when she’d once been playing games with Aunt Lucy. Mabel had

cracked her first secret code puzzle, and Aunt Lucy had released a pocketful of confetti on her.

“To celebrate good news, of course,” Aunt Lucy said matter-of-factly. “And that just leaves the two most important items.” She grinned.

Mabel and Will glanced at each other with a smile. Aunt Lucy and their parents had been secretive about the actual mission of their trip. They said the less they knew beforehand, the better, because there were rival relic hunters in Ravenlock who would do anything to get their hands on what Aunt Lucy had discovered.

“Are you ready?” Aunt Lucy asked.

The children nodded.

Aunt Lucy took a map from a large tube and unfurled it. “I found this on a dig in south Marvolia last summer, in a small town called Alva. It was hidden in a tomb.”

The map was brown and mottled with age.

Mabel and Will leaned in.

“Does this map show the location of the relic we’ll be looking for?” asked Mabel.

“It’s not actually a relic,” Aunt Lucy replied. “It’s a place.”

Mabel’s eyes grew wide. A place sprang into her mind. Her parents had told her a Marvolian legend as a small child. It was her favourite story. “The lost town of Umber?” Mabel whispered.

Will frowned. “The what?”

“Don’t you remember the story?” Mabel said. “Umber was the first town in Marvolia – it’s said that’s where clockwork was invented.”

Will shrugged.

“It was a thriving town,” Mabel went on. “But legend has it that all the residents left suddenly, and over the years the town was lost to the forest. No one knows why the residents left. Something strange must have happened because there’s nothing written about it anywhere, only ancient rumours.”

“Mabel’s right,” said Aunt Lucy. “The last resident died hundreds of years ago, in exile in Alva. They took the secret of Umber’s location with them. People believe it’s in the western corner of Marvolia somewhere, but no one has managed to find it yet, despite many expeditions.”

Mabel gazed across the map. Marvolia was a large continent shaped a bit like a club from a deck of cards.

This map was vastly different to the modern ones of Marvolia, which had far more towns and cities on them. This old map only showed

a handful of small towns, and the land features seemed rather muddled.

“Do you notice anything odd about the map?” Aunt Lucy asked.

“Well, much of it doesn’t make sense,” Mabel replied. “Like this gorge in the west doesn’t exist on modern maps. But maybe it disappeared over many years. I guess much of this great forest has gone, and I don’t remember a crater in the centre. And what does this part say?”

The writing had been smudged over time, but Mabel managed to read a sentence at the bottom. “The key is in the turn.”

She shrugged but then suddenly saw something else, tucked into the shadow of a mountain range in the north-west. There was a small cluster of buildings without a town name. Mabel’s gaze shot to Aunt Lucy.

Aunt Lucy's bright eyes glinted. She nodded encouragingly.

"Whoever made this map wanted to conceal Umber but wanted to remember the location for themselves, so they left the name off!" Mabel guessed.

Aunt Lucy's grin broadened. "Indeed," she said. "That's what I thought."

Then Mabel had another thought. "Wait, you said that you had two other important things. What's the second?"

Aunt Lucy grinned and passed Mabel a package the size of her hand, wrapped in leather.

Mabel was about to open it when Aunt Lucy suddenly twisted in her seat. She was looking at the red-velvet curtain that covered the door to their compartment. She put a finger to her lips.

A shadow moved behind the curtain.

Someone had been listening at the door.