

He stuttered, went silent; the room seemed to freeze in embarrassment. Todd smirked. Robert couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't remember a word.

He wanted the earth to open up and swallow him whole.

Suddenly there was a stirring in the audience. Robert heard a door slam open and a voice he recognised came yelling from the back of the room.

"Robert! Robert?" Robert looked up in horror.

It was his father.

Felix Klein was unshaven, his laces were undone, his hair unbrushed. He was dressed in a suit but the buttons were done wrong, his tie was tied with one end twice the length of the other. He was sweating like he'd been running. His eyes were wild.

The hall let out an involuntary laugh that made Robert burn with rage and shame.

"Father!" he cried out. "What's wrong?"

His father stumbled down the aisle and stopped in front of his son. "Where's Rachel? She never came to meet me! Where is she? WHERE IS YOUR SISTER?"



## The Lock

The first thing Rachel noticed was her head hurting. A gentle throb around the temples. A white light, shapes, nothing distinct.

Then the whiteness cleared, like a mist, and she seemed to be looking at the colour blue. The bluest blue she had ever seen.

"The sky," she said to herself and realised she was lying on the ground and looking up. The sky looked painted, by a master-painter, a Meyer maybe.

In front of the blue were tendrils or dark brown fingers reaching across her vision.

"Branches," she said to herself. Leaves flickering. A tree. On one branch, a bird; small, with a red crest and a

golden tail. Singing its song of welcome.

Rachel stretched her aching body. Grass under her. She could feel it in her fingers. She moved her head to the left. She could see a wall. Stones neatly laid. Thin vines crawling up. To her right, another wall. She turned behind. More wall. Wall all around her.

Her plan had worked. She was in the walled garden – just outside the Hinterland. *And she had the key to the gate.*

Now smells came to her. Lavender and rose. She looked and saw the flowers. Bees were busying themselves like curious tourists around the stone bench where she had spoken to her mother.

*Her mother.*

The thought struck Rachel like a lightning bolt. Her mother was in the Hinterland! So intent had Rachel been on saving Elsa Spiegel that it had not occurred to her until now. Her heart yearned suddenly. But then she remembered what the boy on the bench had said.

*Use the key wisely.*

No, Rachel thought. *I am here to get Elsa Spiegel. Elsa has been tricked by Daniel Meyer into being here. I must find her and discover why she was sent here.*

Rachel looked towards the gate. It was wooden, old, grey, with a simple latch. It was locked. Just as she expected.

*But she could unlock it.*

Rachel dug deep in the pocket of her coat and withdrew what she was looking for. The blood-red key.

Suddenly an anxiety filled her. Did she really know what she was doing? This was the land beyond life, where only the dead roam. What business did she, a twelve-year-old girl, and small for her age, have meddling with such grave matters? What did she really know of the land beyond the gate? What if she could never get back? Rachel's blood froze. Oh, she wished she'd never followed Rosica this morning! She could have met her father, and gone to Robert's speech and eaten ice cream at the party afterwards and told her brother how marvellous he was! Surely that's what a good sister did!

But then Elsa Spiegel would be here all alone with no hope of salvation. The innocent victim of a ghost's folly. Didn't Elsa have the right to be a good sister too? Didn't she also deserve to live and grow, with her family, in her beautiful village?

Rachel took a deep, brave breath and tiptoed towards the gate. The birds seemed to follow her with their necks. Rachel took the key in her hand and moved it slowly towards the lock on the gate.

It fitted perfectly.

She pictured her father for a moment. Was he waiting for her by the church tower? Was he wondering where she was?

She plunged the key in the lock and turned it.

And the gate opened.

