

Use the key wisely...



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DAVID FARR

THE
SECRET
OF THE
BLOOD-RED
KEY

Illustrated by Kristina Kister



USBORNE

ReadingZone



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.