

Keys

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"Hey, Dad." Hazel tucked the phone between her head and shoulder as she rifled through the junk drawer. "I guess you already left for bowling. I just wanted to let you know that I stopped by Grandfather's house. Mario called and said they need access to the third floor bedroom and the keys he has won't open the door for some reason. I'm checking in all the usual places—junk drawer," she punctuated this by shoving the yellowed wooden drawer closed and leaning against the ceramic counter, "tool shed, laundry room, ashtray in the old Granada. I know you haven't been here in, like, twenty-five years, but I'm at a loss. Do you have any ideas?" She paused as if for an answer, and then continued. "Anyway, I'm gonna keep looking. Call me if you think of anything."

She slipped her phone into her back pocket and surveyed the large once-white and blue kitchen, now faded to an etiolated cream and sickly grayish. It had also been nearly twenty years since *she'd* set foot in this house, but almost nothing had changed. The small laminate table that had been there her whole life was covered by a lace doily tablecloth that had been there just as long. The tablecloth was worn and sepia with age, a large brown splotch marring the center filigree where she had spilled an entire pitcher of sweet tea when she was nine.

Her mouth twisted bitterly at the memory. She had managed to mop up the liquid when she'd noticed the spreading amber stain crawling across the mesh fabric. Panicked, she'd had the bright idea to flip the lace cloth over to the other side.

That had earned her the whole afternoon locked in the Atonement Closet. For being careless and "attempting deceit."

Hazel shook off the memory and pushed away from the counter. *Time to get down to business.* The sooner she found those keys, the sooner she could leave this house and the terrible memories that haunted it.

If I were a pious old coot, where would I hide keys to doors I didn't want opened?

There were only two places she hadn't yet looked.

She didn't know if she could even bring herself to open the door to the closet under the stairs, that hot, narrow space she'd spent countless hours begging to be released from, curled up and crying on the floor, fingers shoved into the gap under the door, reaching desperately toward the only source of light. She swallowed the cold lump of fear in her throat. It didn't seem to matter that she'd not set foot in that closet since she was thirteen, her whole body locked up at the thought.

Maybe, if it came to it, Dad would help her search there.

That left one other place.

Hazel took a deep breath and steeled herself as she turned the doorknob. She'd never been allowed in Grandfather's room as a child and she did not want to go in there now. Getting caught would have meant a sure trip to that dreaded closet. *Or worse*, her brain supplied unhelpfully. Fear skittered up her arms, raising goosebumps in its wake.

She was in her thirties now and her grandfather had been dead for over a year. Still, his presence, remembered and heavy, barred her way. She could practically hear his voice, calm and conciliatory, almost kindly.

Hazel Grace, what a shameful sinner you are, just like your mama.

She tightened her jaw and forced herself to push open the white-painted door. *Get it together, Hazel; it's either here or the Closet.* Still, she couldn't stop the tremors in her hands as she crossed the forbidden threshold.

The room was a perfect embodiment of her deceased grandfather. Sparse, stark, stern. On one side, a king-sized bed wrapped in an old quilt, two nearly flat once-white pillows, now ecru with age. A heavy wooden writing desk occupied the other side,

flanked by two tall file cabinets. No decor, no pictures on the walls, save for an eight-by-twelve framed print of a very Caucasian Jesus as the Good Shepherd surrounded by his flock, positioned so the bed's occupant could see it as soon as he opened his eyes in the morning.

Hazel turned away from the bed and the picture with a grimace. Grandfather had seen himself in that image, she was certain. He'd often referred to his family as his flock and he'd never been one to "spare to rod" were he to feel any of his sheep might wander astray.

Giving herself a mental shake, she moved to the desk. Grandfather's old bible was there, the leather cover soft and worn to a shine at the spine, dozens of colored tabs marking his favorite verses poking out in every direction. An old tin can containing highlighters and pens. Several brown accordion folders, standing upright against the wall at the back of the desk. A spiral notebook folded open with his tight, rigid handwriting filling the page.

The notebook was what almost did her in, almost sent her hurrying out of the room—a remnant of him, his oppressive beliefs, still alive somehow in that room with her. She quickly flipped the book over, hiding his words without reading them.

Hazel took a steadying breath. The man was dead. He could not hurt anyone or shame anyone or threaten them with eternal flames.

Hazel's father had rescued her all those years ago, after that last Atonement, the worst one. He'd come and picked her up, bundled her into his old Chevy and peeled off down the dirt drive, Grandfather yelling fire and brimstone at them from the porch. And Mama...Mama had been watching silently from the second floor window, her large brown eyes dull, her face lifeless, and her fingertips pressed against the glass as if she could have clawed her way out if she'd only had the will. Hazel had watched her mother's gaunt silhouette shrink and finally disappear as the truck rounded a bend, her father all the while reassuring her that she was safe, that she never had to return to that hateful, haunted house.

Yet here she was. Grandfather's next of kin, his last of kin. But she was no longer mousy little Hazel Grace trying to stay out from under his boot. She could tear down this

wretched place, built by Grandfather's grandfather and held together for generations by condemnation and shame and terror.

Squaring her shoulders, she resumed her search. She tried the desk drawers. Locked, of course. *So many locks in this stupid house.* Now she needed to find a *desk* key to find the *door* key to unlock the upstairs room that the contractor needed to access. Then they could start renovations and tear out the memories of her hateful grandfather and her sorrowful ghost of a mother that infested the very walls like scurrying rats.

The desk was dusty but neat. She quickly flipped through the notebook and bible, and dumped out the pencil holder can. There weren't many places to hide a set of keys. She tried to relax and sit back in the chair, tried to see the desk from the former occupant's perspective. She narrowed her eyes and pictured him sitting here, judging, disapproving, *angering*.

She stifled a shudder. There was no denying her apprehension anymore, the shallowness of her breath, not quite filling her lungs. When she was a child, she'd made it a point to escape his notice, to make herself small and quiet, to avoid his wrath and his eschatological preachings. And now here she was seeking out his secrets, in a room that felt so rife with his convictions, filled with the fear that he could still reach her from beyond the grave.

Just find the keys and get the hell out.

Her forehead sticky with sweat, she pulled one of the accordion folders to her. It was labeled ECOL. Energy Company of Louisiana. She pulled out the stack of papers inside—electricity bills with the handwritten words "PAID" along with the date and mode of payment. *PAID August 8 In person cash. PAID July 10 2 days late cashier's check.* She shook out the empty folder—nothing—before putting the old invoices back and returning it to its place.

She repeated the process for folders labeled with the names of various services—water, car maintenance, miscellaneous home repairs—until she reached for the last folder. The label on the tab read T.B.I.C.F. Curious about the unfamiliar abbreviation, she removed the stack of bills from inside. The emblem was a stylized cypress tree with the words Tranquil Bayou In-Patient Care Facility.

What in the world?

Matilde Rose Richard was the name on the invoice. Hazel's grandmother's name. A grandmother she had never met, who had died before she'd been born, when Hazel's mother was still a child.

So why then was the last invoice, marked "PAID Check #5708 In person," dated just three years ago?

The logos and fonts morphed as Hazel flipped through the thick pile until she got to the last invoice in the stack, dated April 1974. Mama would have been almost five years old then. That's how old she'd been when Hazel's grandmother had died.

Or...not died, apparently?

Committed?

The invoices didn't reveal much beyond the address of the facility, in the neighboring parish, and the steadily increasing cost of Matilde's care over the almost five decades.

Hazel thought back to what she knew of her grandmother, what she'd been told.

Grandfather had rarely mentioned her, only when complaining about the bramble of roses in the backyard and having to mow around them. "Those miserable weeds of your grandmother's, God save her soul."

And Mama had just said that her mother had been sick for as long as she could remember and that they'd "lost her" when Mama had been a child.

She searched her memories. Had anyone ever actually said she'd *died*?

Hazel had lived in this house with her grandfather and mother for thirteen traumatic years. She knew the creak of her grandfather's boots on every single floorboard in every room, knew the *shrrk* sound his belt made as it whipped from its loops and the clank the ornate buckle made when he gathered it folded in his hand, knew the sound of the old skeleton key turning in the lock of *that* closet. She could *still* hear them in her nightmares.

Mama had lasted nearly forty years, her whole life spent under this roof, save for a six-month long whirlwind rebellion when she was seventeen that had resulted in Hazel's

conception, an unforgivable sin in Grandfather's opinion. Mama spent the rest of her life atoning, silent and submissive, the way Grandfather said women were meant to be. Until the neighbors down river had found her one morning. A tragic accident, everyone had said. But Hazel had always wondered if it had been her mother's final act of rebellion, escaping that house and Grandfather for good.

How long had Matilde lasted?

Hazel reached for Grandfather's bible. She'd never paid attention to the names and dates written in the back of it. Her lineage, going back generations, was recorded on those pages. "Even yours, Hazel Grace," Grandfather had told her, "For He loves all His children, even those born out of lust and sin."

She flipped to the back and started at the bottom of the page, the last entry. Her name, written in her grandfather's austere hand, her birthday, and to her surprise, the day she'd fled this house recorded as her date of death. She rolled her eyes and moved on to the name she was searching for. Matilde Rose Richard, Date of death . . . three years ago!

She stared down at the two death dates—both hers and her grandmother's—and narrowed her eyes.

I will find out what happened to you, she vowed to her grandmother's name. He can't hide you away anymore.

But first, she had to find that damn key.