

Chapter One: The Keys Arrive

The key came to Priya Nandakumar on a Tuesday, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a length of waxed string, the kind locksmiths use to bundle spare blanks. She almost threw it away with the takeaway menus. It was the weight that stopped her — too heavy for a novelty, too old for a prank — and when she peeled back the paper on the counter of Nandakumar & Sons, between the till and a tray of unclaimed keys nobody had come back for, she found a brass key the length of her palm, engraved along the bow with a small warded shield, and a single card.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

She turned it over twice, testing the milling with her thumbnail out of habit, the way her father used to test a blank before he cut it. It was old work, hand-filed, the kind of key nobody made any more because nobody needed to. She did not know an E.C. She did not know Ashcombe Manor. She put the key in the till drawer and did not think about it again until she found herself, three days later, taking it out to look at it while the shop stood empty and the second reminder letter from the bank sat unopened beside the register.

❧

The key came to Julian Voss backstage, of all places, handed to him by a stage manager who swore it had been left at the door by a courier who hadn't waited for a signature. Julian was three encores into a concert he had not wanted to give, in a hall two-thirds empty, and he had just spent forty minutes proving to himself, badly, that his hands still worked. He nearly didn't open it. He had learned, in the two years since Vienna, not to open things that arrived without warning.

But the key was beautiful — a treble clef worked into the bow, the loops of it so fine he could have mistaken it for jewellery — and the card inside was addressed to him by name, his real name, not the stage one.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

He laughed, once, a short unhappy sound, and put it in his coat pocket. He told himself he would not go. He told himself that for eleven days.

•

The key came to Tamsin Reid by post to the marine station where she worked, addressed care of a job she'd left two years before, forwarded twice, the paper soft at the corners from handling. She was elbow-deep in a bucket of shore samples when the office junior brought it out to her, and she nearly dropped a jar of sea lettuce getting her gloves off.

An anchor, worked into the bow of the key, small enough that she had to hold it up to the light to be sure. She was sure.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

She did not know anyone with the initials E.C. She knew the coast the letter was postmarked from, though — she had grown up forty minutes from it, had crewed boats past Merrow Rock a hundred times as a girl, had watched the causeway come and go with the tide the way other children watched clocks. She put the key in her coat and did not tell anyone at the station where she was going, because she was not sure yet that she was going anywhere.

•

The key came to Elias Okafor at the school where he taught, in an envelope his form tutor colleague handed him with a raised eyebrow,

because it had been left at reception by someone in an old-fashioned driving coat who did not give a name. Elias, who had spent thirty years learning not to be surprised by anything that arrived on a board with sixty-four squares, was surprised by this.

A knight, cut into the bow — not stamped, cut, the way you'd carve a real chess piece, each notch of the horse's mane a separate careful stroke.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

He thought of his daughter Ada first — a reflex now, three years divorced, everything routed automatically through the question of what it meant for her — and then he thought, with the same reflex a chess player uses on an opening he half recognises, that a message like this was not sent by someone who expected to be refused.

❧

The key came to Margot Fenwick in the second post, which in her experience meant either a bill or something someone hoped she'd overlook. She did not overlook things. Forty years of forensic accountancy had cured her of that particular human weakness.

A pair of scales, balanced, engraved into the bow so finely that she needed her reading glasses to see it properly. She put the glasses on. She read the card twice.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

She was sixty-seven years old, a widow, retired eleven months and already bored enough to have alphabetised the spice rack twice. She looked at the key for a long time. Then she looked at her diary, which was empty from the twenty-third onward in the particular way that

widowhood empties a diary, and she wrote *Merrow Rock* in it, in pencil, as if she might still rub it out.



The key came to Desmond Clarke in a manner he found, professionally, almost insulting — hand-delivered to his flat by someone who left before he reached the door, no note beyond the card, nothing a journalist of twelve years' standing could turn into so much as a paragraph. He had spent those twelve years chasing stories that mostly turned out to be smaller than they'd promised. He recognised, immediately and with a small unwelcome lift of hope, the shape of a story that might not be.

A cipher wheel, engraved into the bow, the letters round its rim too tiny to read without a loupe. He found a loupe. He read them anyway; they meant nothing on their own, a wheel with no message set against it yet.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

He photographed the key, the card, the envelope, the postmark, before he did anything else. Then, because old habits serve a person even when hope is involved, he began to search for Ashcombe Manor, and found almost nothing, which told him more than a great deal would have done.



The key came to Nora Bellweather at the nursery, tucked into a delivery of bare-root roses she hadn't ordered, which was how she knew, before she'd even opened the little parcel taped to the twine, that someone had gone to some trouble. She ran Bellweather & Daughter alone now — her mother's name still on the sign, her mother two years gone — and she had grown used to the small ambushes grief left lying about, a

handwriting on an old seed packet, a rose that still came up in April though nobody had asked it to.

This was not that kind of ambush. A foxglove, engraved into the bow of the key, each bell of it no bigger than a pinhead.

You are invited to Ashcombe Manor, Merrow Rock, Cornwall, on the night of the twenty-third. Bring the key. Bring nothing else you cannot lose. — E.C.

She looked at the failing accounts spread across her kitchen table, at the bank's letter she had not yet found the courage to answer, and thought — with the specific, tired clarity of someone who has run out of other plans — that she had, in point of fact, very little left that she could not stand to lose.



Seven keys. Seven strangers. None of them knew the others existed. All of them, in the days that followed, found some version of the same reason to go: curiosity, or debt, or grief, or the particular itch of a puzzle a trained mind cannot leave alone. All of them arrived, independently, at the same small and faintly embarrassing conclusion — that whatever else the letter was, it was addressed to them by name, by a stranger who seemed to know exactly which door to knock on.

None of them yet knew that the man who had sent the keys was dead, and had been dead for six weeks, and had spent the last two years of his life making sure that his dying would not be the end of the story.