

Secrets of time

The ancient grandfather clock standing outside the hall chimed five times. Imogen yawned, glancing down at the little progress on the thick embroidered fabric draped across her lap and placing her needle down. Although it was her fault that the headmistress' once immaculate carpet had a large hole burnt through it, a month of double detention seemed like a bit too much. Especially as at Moonstone Boarding Academy for Girls, detention meant housework. Despite the fact that Ms Mordone had instructed her to stay until seven o'clock each night, her eyes were already closing and every time she stuck the needle into the carpet, it drew a little speck of blood from her fingers. After a minute contemplating her circumstances, Imogen decided she'd had enough. She stood up and checked the corridor before stepping out. It was deserted. Imogen packed up her sewing things, rolled up the carpet and crept down the hall. Opening the door to her cramped, plain bedroom, she stowed the thick tapestry in a corner and leant against the door, sinking to the ground.

Later that night, after devouring the cold dinner that the kitchen maids had left out for her, Imogen slid between her sheets and tried to sleep. Then the grandfather clock tolled twelve times, and that was when she heard the click of the headmistress' heels. A curious girl by nature, Imogen slipped out of bed and peered through the keyhole. Ms Mordone was walking down the hall. The teacher stopped at the grandfather clock, opened the face and fiddled with the mechanics. There was a faint click, and satisfied, she took a small, black key dangling on a chain from her belt. She fitted this into the door. When the headmistress placed her hand on it, it sprang open and she stepped inside. However, as she did so, the chain snapped and the key fell to the floor, leaving Imogen confused and bewildered. As far as she knew, there was nothing other than clockwork and the pendulum inside the front cabinet of the device. So why had Ms Mordone just disappeared into its depths, and left nothing but an old black key? Determined to find out more, Imogen pushed open the door and stepped out into the corridor, illuminated only by the fading light of her lamp.

Glinting in the light, the miniature key dug into Imogen's hand as she retrieved it from the floor and clutched it tight in her palm. She glanced up at the year. It read 1759. Trembling, she slotted the tool into the keyhole. It fitted perfectly. Still holding her lamp, the girl reached out and placed her hand to the door. With a creak, it opened. Imogen took a deep breath and stepped inside. With an unpleasant spinning sensation, she was thrown out of the clock and transported into a place that seemed very similar to the school she had just left. However, this corridor of Moonstone Boarding Academy for girls was filled with students in elegant pale white uniforms, and all their attention was drawn to her. Brushing off her nightgown, Imogen backed away. After deflecting most of the prying questions from the girls in the corridor, she finally managed to escape into an unoccupied classroom as loud ringings pierced the awkward atmosphere. She heard all the other students start moving away into the classrooms. Relieved and confused, Imogen ventured back outside. Making a quick decision, she turned and made her way to the bathrooms, where she could ponder her odd situation in peace.

Due to an event that happened shortly after she set off, Imogen never made it to the bathrooms. As she passed the headmistress' study, Ms Mordone opened the door and walked out. The girl barely had

time to duck out of sight. However, as she started to resume her journey to the bathrooms, there was a faint wail from the office. Imogen tried to ignore it, but her heart told her otherwise and soon she was closing the door behind her. As she moved forward, the sound became more pronounced and seemed to be coming from the large tapestry on the back wall behind the desk. Cautiously, she stepped over the pristine, thick carpet that, in her time, would have a hole and an inkstain. Heart beating hard, Imogen pushed the embroidery aside and was faced with a dingy passageway. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a box of matches, which she used to re-light her lamp. It illuminated the space to show a dusty, barred cell at the end, with a bedraggled woman cowering inside. Underneath the bars was a plaque that bore the words, *Anastasia Mordone, headmistress of Moonstone Boarding Academy for Girls from 1758 to ____*, in elegant writing. There was clearly a space where another date was supposed to go but hadn't been engraved. Imogen looked up at the woman. Her sallow face was tearstained, but she nodded. As understanding passed between them, she began to tell her tale.

Tears sliding down her cheeks, Anastasia told Imogen the whole story. About how she was the true owner of the school, had uncovered the clock's secret but her sister had somehow found out and how Ingrid Mordone, her twin sister, had been so jealous and greedy that she trapped her in the office and used her appearance to fool the rest of the school into believing that nothing had changed. Ingrid had used the clock to stay young, and was planning to keep up the scheme for as long as possible. Words tumbled out of Anastasia's mouth, and when she had finished speaking, Imogen was dumbstruck in horror. She knew she had to do something. So, together, they built a plan. It was simple. Imogen pretended to be a student and would find out more about Ingrid's schedule. Using this, she discovered that there was very little time when the teacher wasn't in her office. After a week of observation and investigation, they were ready to put their plan into action. When they had half an hour where Ingrid was supposed to be in a staff meeting, the girl slipped into the office and lifted the tapestry. Anastasia's desperate but hopeful face was revealed. Imogen smiled and held up a ring with an excessive amount of keys dangling from it.

She tried all but one, the ancient key from the grandfather clock. Holding her breath, Imogen slotted the key from the clock into the cell door and, holding her breath, twisted it. For a single, terrible moment, she thought it was stuck, but then the frame groaned as Anastasia forced it forward. And smiling, the headmistress opened the study window and felt sun on her face for the first time in a month. Everything was going perfectly until Ingrid burst into the study. They had lost track of time. Upon spotting them in shock, she seized a bottle of ink and threw it at Imogen, splattering her with black liquid but filling her with a new determination. A sneer on her face, the twin saw her chance and used Imogen's brief confusion to grab a typewriter. The girl realised what she was about to do at the last minute and it almost collided with her head. She looked up. The evil woman was laughing, as she picked up another object and prepared to hurl it again, this time not at Imogen but at her screaming sister.

In a fleeting moment of desperation, Imogen groped around and threw the first thing she picked up, which happened to be a carriage clock, at Ingrid Mordone, who collapsed with a shriek as the miniature window smashed against the side of her head. The hour after that passed slowly and without incident. In the end, Anastasia decided that she didn't want to deal with the woman who had imprisoned her for months, and she sent her off to the local prison for a few years. Imogen knew that she didn't belong to this time. After accepting a tearful goodbye from the restored headmistress, she looked back at the clock in the now empty corridor. Would she be able to return to her own era? Apprehensively, she crossed the hallway, fitted the key in the lock once again, turned and stepped into the device. There was the same revolving sensation that provoked discomfort, and a few moments later, she stepped out of the clock to find herself back in the same hallway, but a different century, and with the knowledge that the true headmistress was back in her rightful position.