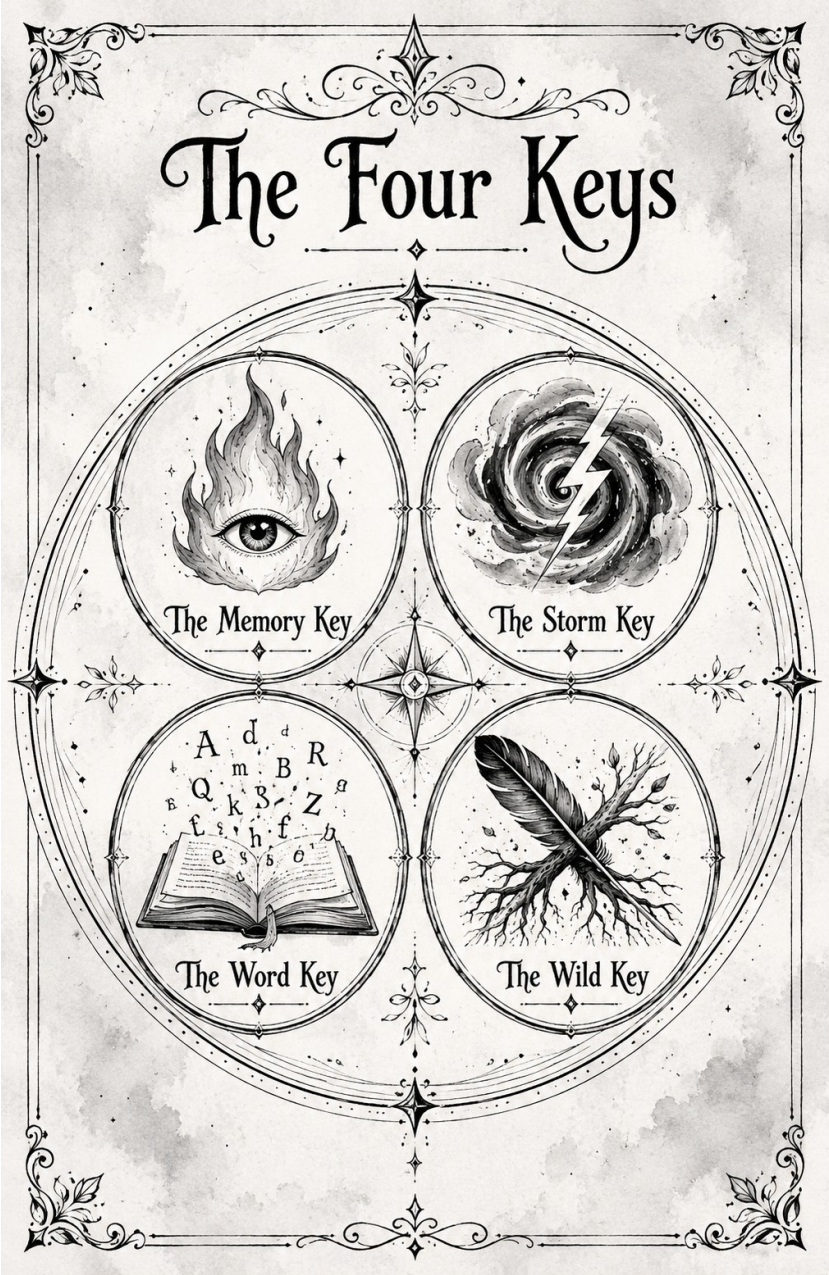


Map of Ashwood



The Four Keys



A Note Before the Story

Ashwood looks like an ordinary town. It has a middle school, a public library, a soccer field, a clock tower, a creek, a lake, and a park where nothing especially impossible is supposed to happen. But some towns are built over old promises. Some clocks are not only clocks. And some stories wait a hundred years for the right children to find them.

This is the story of Ava Rao, Max Morales, Zara Bennett, and Eli Carter. This is the story of the Four Keys. This is the story of the clock that counted backward.

CHAPTER ONE

The Wrong Way Around



The clock above the classroom door was wrong.

Ava Rao noticed because she always noticed things like that.

Crooked posters. Missing pencils. The tiny crack in the window that everyone else said looked like a lightning bolt, even though Ava thought it looked more like a river splitting in two. She noticed when teachers skipped a question on a worksheet. She noticed when someone said they were fine in a voice that meant they were absolutely not fine.

And now she noticed the clock.

The second hand jerked once, then moved backward.

Ava sat up straighter in her chair.

Around her, Room 214 continued being exactly what Room 214 always was at the end of the school day: half bored, half restless, and completely unwilling to care about ancient civilizations.

Mr. Henson stood at the front of the room, tapping a marker against the whiteboard.

“Remember,” he said, “your group project is not just a poster. It is a presentation. That means research, organization, speaking roles, and evidence.”

A few students groaned.

Ava did not groan. Ava had already written research, organization, speaking roles, evidence in her planner. She had also underlined presentation twice because group projects had a way of becoming Ava-does-everything projects if she did not start early.

The second hand moved backward again.

The clock read 3:14.

It had read 3:15 a minute ago.

That was impossible.

Unless the battery was dying. Or the clock was broken. Or someone had messed with it as a prank. Ashwood Middle School had plenty of people who would consider clock sabotage a perfectly reasonable use of their afternoon.

Ava glanced across the room.

Max Morales was folding his worksheet into something that was definitely not part of the assignment. It had wings, a crooked tail, and what looked like two horns.

“Max,” Mr. Henson said without turning around.

Max froze with the paper creature halfway between his hands.

"I'm listening."

"Then you can tell us one reason myths were important to ancient cultures."

Max looked down at his worksheet. Then at the ceiling. Then at the window, as if the answer might be perched on the glass.

"Because," he said slowly, "ancient people also needed entertainment before streaming existed?"

A few kids laughed.

Mr. Henson sighed, but not angrily. Teachers sighed at Max the way people sighed at puppies chewing shoes.

"Not wrong," Mr. Henson said. "But not complete."

Zara Bennett's hand shot up.

It always did that. Fast. Straight. Like it was trying to win a race.

"Myths explained natural events," Zara said before Mr. Henson fully called on her. "They also preserved cultural values, warned people about danger, and gave societies shared stories."

"Excellent," Mr. Henson said.

Max leaned back in his chair. "So basically what I said, but with more words."

Zara turned halfway around. "No. What you said was vague and historically useless."

"Still had the word entertainment."

"That was the least useful part."

Ava would have smiled if the clock had not ticked backward again.
3:13.

Her stomach tightened.

She looked around to see if anyone else had noticed.

No one had.

Not Mr. Henson. Not Max. Not Zara. Not the students whispering near the pencil sharpener. Not even the kid in the front row who had been staring at the clock for the last ten minutes like he could force the final bell to ring through eye contact alone.

Only Eli Carter seemed distracted by something other than the lesson.

He sat near the windows, one row over from Ava, his sketchbook open beside his notes. Eli was not drawing exactly. He was tracing the same shape over and over: a circle with four lines crossing through it.

His gaze kept drifting outside.

Ava followed it.

Beyond the classroom windows, the soccer field stretched bright and empty under a pale afternoon sky. At first, Ava saw nothing unusual. Just grass, the far fence, and the old clock tower rising beyond the school roof.

Then the birds came.

Not one or two. Dozens.

Blackbirds swept down from the oak trees at the edge of campus and landed across the soccer field. They did not hop around pecking at crumbs. They did not scatter or squabble.

They stood facing the school.

Every single one of them.

Ava's pencil rolled off her desk and hit the floor.

Max looked over. "You good?"

Ava reached down for the pencil without taking her eyes off the window.

"Do you see the birds?"

Max glanced outside.

His eyebrows lifted. "Okay. That's not creepy at all."

Zara turned around again. "What birds?"

"The ones having a meeting on the soccer field," Max said.

Zara looked past him. Her expression shifted from irritated to interested, which for Zara was almost the same thing as alarmed.

"That is unusual flocking behavior," she said.

"Thank you, bird scientist."

"I said unusual, not impossible."

Ava looked at Eli.

He was still staring outside.

Not surprised.

Worried.

The clock ticked backward again.

3:12.

Ava stood.

Her chair scraped against the floor, louder than she meant it to.

Everyone looked at her.

Mr. Henson lowered his marker. "Ava?"

Ava hated being looked at when she did not already have the perfect explanation.

"The clock," she said.

Mr. Henson glanced up. "What about it?"

"It's going backward."

A silence fell over Room 214.

Then someone snorted.

Max looked at the clock and sat forward. "Wait. She's right."

"No, she's not," Zara said automatically.

Then she looked.

The second hand trembled at the top of the clock face.

It twitched backward.

Zara's mouth opened slightly.

That was how Ava knew things were serious. Zara Bennett always had an answer. Even if it was not the right answer, she had one ready.

Now she had nothing.

Mr. Henson frowned and stepped closer to the door.

The clock ticked backward again.

3:11.

“That’s odd,” he said.

Max gave a small laugh. “That is one word for it.”

A low sound rolled through the classroom.

At first, Ava thought it was thunder. But the sky outside was clear. Then she thought it might be the air conditioner rumbling through the vents.

Except the sound was too deep.

Too slow.

It came from the walls, the floor, and the bones of the building.

Eli closed his sketchbook.

“We should leave,” he said.

He did not say it loudly. Eli almost never said anything loudly.

But something in his voice made Ava’s skin prickle.

Mr. Henson looked at him. “Eli?”

The fluorescent lights flickered.

Every clock in the room made a sound.

Not a tick.

A crack.

The clock above the door split from twelve to six, a thin black line slicing down its face.

Ava’s breath caught.

Several students screamed.

The classroom lights went out.

For one impossible second, the room was dark except for the clock. Its numbers glowed a faint blue-white. The hands spun backward, faster and faster, until the second hand whipped around so quickly it became a silver circle.

Ava grabbed the edge of her desk.

The room tilted.

Not physically. The desks did not slide. The floor did not move. But something inside Ava lurched, as if the whole world had missed a step.

A whisper filled the air.

At first, it sounded like twenty people speaking at once from very far away. Then the voices stretched thin, weaving together until Ava could almost understand them.

Almost.

Beside her, Max sucked in a sharp breath.

“Does anyone else hear that?”

Zara’s voice was tight. “Hear what?”

“The whispering.”

Ava turned toward him. “You hear it too?”

Max looked at her. His joking expression was gone.

Before he could answer, the clock stopped.

The hands froze at exactly 3:17.

That did not make sense. It had been moving backward. It had gone from 3:15 to 3:14 to 3:13.

It should not have landed on 3:17.

Ava stared at the glowing numbers.

The whispering sharpened into one voice.

A child’s voice.

Run.

The classroom door slammed open.

Everyone screamed again.

But no one stood in the doorway.

The hall beyond Room 214 was dark. Not dim. Dark, as if the hallway had been erased.

Ava could not see the lockers. She could not see the classroom across the hall. She could not see the exit sign that was supposed to glow red above the stairwell.

She saw only darkness, thick and waiting.

Then, from somewhere deep inside it, a bell began to ring.

Ava counted because counting helped when nothing else made sense.

Four chimes. Five. Six.

The sound was not the school bell.

It was heavier. Older.

The town clock tower.

By the seventh chime, Mr. Henson had moved toward the door, one hand raised as if he could calm a hallway.

“Everyone stay seated.”

The blackbirds outside rose all at once. Their wings beat against the windows as the bell continued.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

Eli stood so quickly his chair tipped backward.

“They’re scared,” he said.

Eleven.

Zara grabbed her notebook and shoved it into her backpack. “That clock tower does not ring during school hours.”

Twelve.

The final chime shook the room.

Thirteen.

Ava blinked.

The lights were on.

The door was closed.

The clock above it was whole.

The second hand moved forward with a perfectly ordinary tick.

3:17.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then the final bell rang.

The normal school bell.

Students exploded into motion. Chairs scraped. Backpacks zipped. Voices rose. Someone complained about homework. Someone else asked if there was soccer practice. Mr. Henson called out reminders about the group project, but half the class was already pushing toward the door.

Ava stayed frozen.

That was wrong.

All of it was wrong.

People should have been talking about the lights going out. The clock cracking. The hallway disappearing. The thirteen chimes. The voice.

But no one looked scared.

No one looked confused.

No one looked like they remembered anything at all.

Max stood slowly, his backpack hanging from one shoulder.

He looked at Ava. Then at Zara. Then at Eli.

"You saw that, right?" he asked.

Zara's face had gone pale, though she would probably deny it if anyone mentioned it.

"I saw a malfunctioning clock," she said.

Max stared at her.

She swallowed.

"And possibly a temporary electrical issue."

"Zara."

"And maybe birds behaving in a coordinated but explainable way."

"Zara."

She tightened her grip on her notebook. "Fine. I saw it."

Eli picked up his fallen chair and set it carefully back in place.

"I heard something," he said.

Ava's throat felt dry. "The whispering?"

Eli shook his head.

"The birds."

Max looked toward the window. "The birds said something?"

Eli hesitated, like he already regretted speaking.

"They were warning us."

Zara closed her eyes for half a second. "Birds do not issue warnings."

"Apparently these birds skipped that memo," Max said.

Ava looked at the clock again.

It ticked forward.

Normal.

Perfectly normal.

That made it worse.

Mr. Henson walked over to them, holding a stack of assignment sheets.

"You four are still here. Good. I was going to assign groups, but since you're already gathered, this works."

Ava blinked. "What?"

"For the mythology project," Mr. Henson said. "You'll be Group Three."

Max pointed at himself, then Ava, then Zara, then Eli. "Us?"

"Yes."

Zara straightened. "Mr. Henson, with respect, I usually prefer to choose my own group."

"With respect," Mr. Henson said, "that is exactly why I am assigning them."

Max grinned. "Welcome to the team, Bennett."

"This is not a team. It is a temporary academic arrangement."

"Team name needs work."

Ava barely heard them.

Mr. Henson handed her the assignment sheet.

At the top, in bold letters, it read:

MYTHS, MEMORY, AND THE STORIES THAT SURVIVE

Ava stared at the words.

For a second, the ink seemed to ripple. Not much. Just enough that the letters blurred, shifted, and rearranged themselves into something else.

THE FIRST KEY REMEMBERS.

Ava's fingers went cold.

She blinked.

The words were normal again.

Mr. Henson smiled, completely unaware that the paper in his hand had just threatened to become impossible.

"Presentation due next Friday," he said. "Use your time wisely."

Then he moved away to stop two students from sword-fighting with rolled-up worksheets.

Ava looked at Max.

Max looked at Zara.

Zara looked at Eli.

Eli looked out the window.

The blackbirds were gone.

All except one.

It perched on the fence at the edge of the soccer field, its head tilted toward Room 214.

Something small and bright hung from its beak.

A key.

Ava knew that was impossible. The bird was too far away. The object was too small. She should not have been able to see it clearly.

But she could.

An old brass key, dark with age.

The bird opened its beak.

The key fell.

And somewhere beneath Ashwood Middle School, something answered with three slow knocks.

Ava felt each one through the soles of her shoes.

Max whispered, "Please tell me that was the pipes."

No one did.

Because this time, all four of them had heard it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bird on the Fence



The knocking stopped.

For three seconds, no one moved. Ava counted silently because counting was easier than screaming: one, two, three.

Then Max Morales said, “Okay. New rule. If the floor knocks back, we leave.”

Zara Bennett adjusted the strap of her backpack, though it had not slipped. “Floors do not knock.”

“Great. Tell the floor that.”

“It was probably building pipes.”

“Pipes knock three times in a dramatic pattern?”

“Old buildings make noises.”

“Old buildings don’t answer birds.”

Zara opened her mouth, closed it, then looked annoyed that Max had made a point she could not immediately destroy.

Ava was still staring out the window.

The blackbird on the soccer field fence had not moved. It sat perfectly still, its feathers glossy and dark in the afternoon light. The brass key lay in the grass below it, half-hidden near the base of the fence.

Ava should not have been able to see it so clearly from Room 214.

But she could.

The key looked old. Not like a house key or a locker key. It had a round handle, a long narrow stem, and a tooth at the end shaped almost like a tiny staircase. A loop of faded red string was tied through the top.

Ava had the strangest feeling that if she looked away, it would disappear.

So she did not look away.

“Ava?” Eli said.

His voice was quiet, but it landed heavier than Max’s jokes or Zara’s arguments.

Ava turned. “You saw the key, right?”

Max leaned toward the window. “I saw something shiny fall out of a bird’s mouth, which is not a sentence I expected to say today.”

Zara stepped closer to the glass. “It could be a pull tab. Or foil. Or someone’s charm bracelet.”

“It is a key,” Ava said.

Zara gave her a look. “You cannot know that from here.”

Ava could not explain how she knew.

That was the problem.

Ava liked explanations. She liked answers with edges. She liked things that could be written down in bullet points and crossed off when finished. But the last ten minutes had handed her a glowing clock, whispering walls, thirteen impossible chimes, a flock of warning birds, and a paper that had briefly told her the first key remembered.

None of that fit in bullet points.

Mr. Henson clapped his hands at the front of the room.

"Everyone out, please. I do not want to start my afternoon duty with a traffic jam in my classroom."

A few remaining students shuffled toward the door.

The normal hallway waited beyond it. Lockers. Posters. A crooked banner advertising the Fall Festival. Nothing dark. Nothing endless. Nothing that looked like it had swallowed the rest of the school.

Ava picked up her backpack, moving slowly.

The assignment sheet crinkled in her hand.

She looked down at it again.

MYTHS, MEMORY, AND THE STORIES THAT SURVIVE

The words stayed normal.

Of course they did.

Impossible things had terrible timing. They never performed when Ava was ready to prove them.

"We should go get it," Max said.

"No," Zara said at once.

Max stared at her. "You don't even know what I meant."

"The key."

"Okay, fine, you did know."

Zara lowered her voice. "We are not running onto the soccer field because a bird dropped something shiny after a shared stress response."

Max frowned. "A shared what?"

"Stress response. Group panic. Suggestibility. There was a weird clock glitch, the lights flickered, people screamed, and now we are making connections between unrelated things."

Eli looked at her. "The birds were scared before the clock cracked."

Zara blinked. "Birds are often scared."

"Not like that."

"How do you know?"

Eli did not answer right away.

Ava noticed his fingers tighten around the edge of his sketchbook. There were pencil smudges across the side of his hand. The circle with four crossing lines peeked from between the pages.

"I just do," he said.

Zara looked like she wanted to argue, but something in Eli's face stopped her.

That was new.

Ava had been in classes with Eli Carter since sixth grade. She knew him in the way you knew quiet people at school: by where they sat, who they talked to, what teachers said about them during group work.

Eli was kind. Eli drew in the margins of worksheets. Eli got good grades but rarely raised his hand. Eli could disappear in a classroom without actually leaving it.

But now he did not look invisible.

He looked like he was listening to something the rest of them could barely hear.

Max zipped his backpack. "I vote we get the key."

"This is not a vote," Zara said.

"Then I call an emergency vote."

"That is not how decisions work."

"Sure it is. Ava?"

Ava looked from Max to Zara to Eli.

This was exactly what she disliked about group projects. People rushing. People arguing. People pretending half-formed ideas were plans.

Normally, Ava would take control. She would list the options, assign roles, and decide the least terrible path forward. But this did not feel like a normal group project.

It felt like the moment before stepping onto thin ice.

"We need to see what it is," Ava said.

Max pointed at her. "Leader has spoken."

"I am not the leader."

"You stood up first."

"That is not how leadership works."

Zara made a small sound. "Actually, that is sometimes exactly how leadership works."

Ava ignored her.

Mr. Henson appeared beside them with his teacher bag slung over one shoulder. "Group Three, this is heartwarming, but you cannot hold your first project meeting in my classroom."

"We were just leaving," Ava said.

"Excellent. Please remember, your topic proposals are due tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Max said. "We got assigned five minutes ago."

"And look how much you have already bonded," Mr. Henson said.

Zara's expression suggested that bonded was a generous word.

They filed into the hallway with the rest of the after-school rush.

Ashwood Middle School was back to being loud, ordinary, and painfully alive. Seventh graders slammed lockers. Someone shouted about a missing gym shoe. Two eighth graders argued over who had stolen whose chips. A teacher near the stairwell told everyone to walk, which did not make anyone walk.

Ava glanced at the wall clock outside the classroom.

3:21.

Forward.

Normal.

She looked away.

Normal was starting to feel suspicious.

The four of them moved together without deciding to. Not quite friends. Not quite a team. More like four people holding the same secret by different corners.

At the end of the hall, Max pushed open the side door that led toward the soccer field.

Cool air washed over them.

Ava stepped outside.

The sky had shifted from pale blue to a thin gray, though she did not remember clouds moving in. The clock tower rose beyond the school, tall and narrow, its stone face dark against the changing light.

Ashwood's old clock tower was not technically part of the school. It stood between the middle school, the town library, and the small brick building that used to be city hall before the city offices moved downtown. Adults called it historic. Students called it creepy. Max had once claimed it looked like a giant stone pencil that had been cursed.

Ava had never paid much attention to it before.

Now she could not stop looking.

The tower clock showed 3:17.

Ava stopped walking.

"That's wrong," she said.

Max followed her gaze. "Did it stop?"

Zara squinted. "It could be broken."

"It rang thirteen times," Eli said.

"That does not make it magical."

Max raised an eyebrow. "You are working very hard to stay on Team Boring Explanation."

"I am working very hard to stay on Team Reality."

"Reality is currently losing."

Ava looked from the tower clock to the school doors behind them. "The classroom clock said 3:17 when everything stopped. The tower says 3:17 now."

"So?" Zara asked.

"The hallway clock said 3:21."

Zara went still.

Max looked back at the school. "Maybe the tower clock is broken too."

"Maybe," Ava said.

But the word felt weak.

They crossed the grass toward the soccer field fence.

The blackbird watched them come.

It did not fly away.

That bothered Ava almost as much as the clocks. Birds were supposed to avoid kids. Especially kids like Max, who seemed physically incapable of walking without snapping twigs, kicking pebbles, or making unnecessary sound effects under his breath.

But the bird stayed.

Its black eyes fixed on them.

Max slowed. "Anyone else feel like we're about to be judged by a bird?"

"Yes," Eli said.

Zara folded her arms. "It is a bird."

The blackbird turned its head and looked directly at her.

Zara took half a step back.

Max grinned. "Team Reality just got stared down."

"Stop talking."

They reached the fence.

The key lay in the grass.

Up close, it looked even older. Its brass surface was scratched and darkened with age. The red string tied to it was fraying, but somehow still bright. A tiny symbol had been carved into the round handle.

A circle.

Four lines crossing through it.

Ava looked at Eli's sketchbook.

Eli had seen it too. His face had gone pale.

"That's what you were drawing," Ava said.

Eli opened his sketchbook with slow fingers.

There it was.

The same circle. The same four lines. Drawn over and over across the page.

Max leaned in. "You drew the creepy key symbol before we saw the creepy key?"

"I didn't know it was on the key," Eli said.

"But you drew it."

"I kept thinking about it."

Zara took the sketchbook carefully, like evidence. "When?"

"During class."

"Before the clock?"