

## Find Me

The boy caressed the rusty key in his palm. Hours had passed, scouring this unknown territory: a waste of time until he found this reward, this trophy. With the eagerness of an archaeologist he rubbed away at the encrusted dirt until his grimy fingers revealed two words, inscribed on the key's shaft - "Find Me".

The instant he stepped foot into the house again, all his senses marvelled at the uniqueness of the Manor. The sinewy fingers of stale pipe tobacco smoke crawled up into his nostrils, and the irritating sound of creaking chafed at his eardrums as he pounded the wooden floorboards searching for hidden curiosities.

His mother had sunk into poverty since her husband had died in *The Great War*. A hardworking and trustworthy woman, she was fortunate to have been given the position of housekeeper by the owners of Pensfort Manor whilst they were travelling. Her son, an exuberant nine year old, short for his age but fearless nonetheless, was delirious to find himself free to roam the many formal gardens, orchards and wildernesses surrounding the Manor and play till his heart's content within the walls of the ambling house.

Nimblely traversing the many corridors, the boy wandered into a room, yet undiscovered, and pondered over its impressive paintings with elaborate gilt frames which looked to him centuries old. Someone tapped him on the back - it was a delicate touch, more that of a child than an adult, but surely not his mother's. There it was again, a gentle prod, undoubtedly real, for he felt fingernails pierce his shirt.

He wove around to face a life sized portrait of a girl - she had flowing golden locks, peaceful blue eyes but a sad pale face full of longing and loneliness. In the background of the painting was a decaying oak door with a rusting lock...

The girl moved! He could swear on it. She seemed to be clawing at his hand - why? He spread out his palm - of course, the key! She smiled but her eyes were bulging with hunger as she beckoned him hypnotically to come forward. The girl pointed eagerly to the lock in the door behind her; as he slid the key into it, a huge wave of light flooded out of the painting, engulfing him and his screams for help.

"Son?" his mother called to him. No response. "Son?" All day she had searched every inch of the house in vain desperation before she remembered the deserted corridor of rooms the owners of the house had told her not to disturb. Her heart pounded as she retraced the boy's boot prints on the dusty floorboards. On entering the room, her eyes followed the footprints leading curiously up to the gloomy picture of the girl. She recoiled in horror as her eyes took in the scene before her: the girl's pale hand rested on the shoulder of a new companion, one that was not meant to be there...her son.