

KATRINA McKEE

# PORTAL

## PROLOGUE

**'HAVE** you decided on how you're going to do it?'

Redmond huffed, not liking the interruption. He lay down his quill and turned to find George standing at the door to his office.

'Yes, as a matter of fact, I have.'

George smiled in greeting and stepped into the room. He still wore his coat, so Redmond knew he had just arrived, his hat tucked under one arm. 'So, how do you intend to do it?'

'I intend on writing journals,' Redmond explained, making a sweeping motion towards his desk. 'I will document the locations on the pages.'

'Is that wise? Anyone could find and read them.'

'Ah, see now,' – Redmond felt a sense of smugness – 'I will hide the location. You will need a code to understand.'

'That is clever,' George said. 'A code that only you will know, I assume.'

'And whoever I shall choose to be my heir,' Redmond said. 'The Keeper will always have access to the code.'

'And I will protect all,' George said. He looked at the desk. 'Is that the first one?'

'Indeed,' Redmond said, turning back to the book in front of

him. 'I had them specially commissioned. They are made of the finest leather and paper. They shall stand the test of time.'

'And you will store them here.'

'I am having a cabinet commissioned. It will protect them until they are needed.'

George shuffled his hat, a faraway look on his face. 'It is sad that it has come to this.'

'We must do what is required of us,' Redmond said. 'We were entrusted with hiding the keys. We were chosen for a reason.'

'Because of our connections and wisdom,' George agreed. 'And your intelligence, good sir.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself, good fellow,' Redmond said. 'You have achieved much in the time we have been here. And you are to assist me in placing the keys in their hiding locations.'

'It will be quite the endeavour,' George said. 'I am rather looking forward to it. Have you chosen any locations yet? I have compiled a list myself.'

'Indeed, I have,' Redmond said. 'This is going to take us quite some time.'

'Time we have,' George said. He retrieved a pocket watch from his coat, looking down at it. 'Although not now. I'm afraid I have a meeting to attend.'

'Then off you go. I shall continue writing in my journal. That way, the locations shall never be lost.'

'Farewell, Redmond.'

'Enjoy your meeting.'

**SYDNEY** Madinah knew that Adelaide, being a city during peak hours, would be busy and congested. Compared to New York, it just didn't feel that way. She welcomed the clearer air and the lack of constant horns and spent a good deal of time taking in the local sights and getting to know what the city offered. Her experience as a hotel worker had taught her that guests always wanted to know what to try to what to visit and that speaking from experience rather than rattling off a tourist brochure seemed to go over better.

Her apartment was within easy walking distance from the Medina Grand Hotel, meaning she didn't have to buy herself a car. She hadn't had one in New York, and it was one less expense for the time being. The hardest thing had been getting used to the change in time zones. Her body clock had been fine-tuned to that of America's East Coast, and it had taken the better part of a week for her to stop feeling sluggish in the days and wide awake at night. It was good to be back in Australia.

It was still a week until her official start date when she set foot inside the hotel for the first time. She'd admired it from outside many times, taking in the heritage and charm of the

old building. Her research had told her it was once the city's treasury building, built between 1839 and 1907. It had served not only as the treasury for the state, but had also been used by the government over the years as offices and cabinet rooms. They had redeveloped it into a hotel after the government had moved into modern premises.

Sydney couldn't help but wonder what quirks the old building had. Even as she stepped inside the modern glass doors, she could feel the history. The building had stories to tell, that was sure, and she made a mental note to learn more about the building so that she could answer questions from tourists and sightseers. She knew there were tours of the building from time to time, including in the building's 'tunnels' situated beneath.

She felt that the elderly man behind the desk talking to the receptionist likely knew every nook and cranny, and as she approached she caught sight of his 'Manager' name tag. This was undoubtedly the man she would replace, and he was probably moving on into retirement. He had a kind, weathered face, but eyes that told her he'd seen some things over the years. Her time spent working in hotels had given her a glimpse at quite a few crazy things and she doubted those would be the last.

He looked up at her, and she caught a look of recognition in his eyes. He'd seen her profile then.

'Miss Madinah,' he said, straightening. 'We weren't expecting you until next week.'

'I just wanted to touch base and get the lay of the land,' she replied, tucking her blonde hair back behind her ear. 'Ease into it slowly rather than jump off the deep end.'

He smiled and nodded in understanding, looking down at the receptionist. 'Better call up.'

'Yes, sir,' the receptionist said. Sydney saw her call an in-house number and announced her arrival to whoever had answered.

The man came around the side of the table, extending a hand towards her. 'Nicholas Keaton.'

‘Sydney Madinah.’ She took his hand in a firm shake. ‘Have you been a manager here long?’

‘Since it opened,’ he replied. ‘I understand this is your first management position.’

‘It is, yes,’ she said.

‘It’s an excellent hotel,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you the tour once Miss Taylor gives the go-ahead.’

Sydney recognised the name of the woman who had conducted her job interview, and hearing footsteps, she looked up to see the red-headed woman from Zoom coming down the stairs. She was as well dressed and clean-cut as she had appeared over the internet, and the way she walked and held herself told Sydney that this woman was confident and not one to take anyone’s BS. The woman, Miss Taylor, extended a hand automatically towards her.

‘Rita Taylor,’ the woman said with a tight smile. ‘I’ve been expecting you.’

Sydney accepted her handshake.

‘Sydney Madinah. I’m not due for another week.’

‘I appreciate the dedication,’ Rita said. ‘I’ve already got the paperwork ready for you, and your security and network profiles are already set up. Nick will give you the tour of the hotel and answer any questions you have regarding clientele. You can find me here if you need me.’ Rita handed her a card with a floor and room number.

With that, she turned and started back up the stairs. Sydney had to admire her directness. She found it lacking in the industry, and having a no-nonsense PR rep was a breath of fresh air.

‘I hope you don’t find Miss Taylor too off-putting,’ Nicholas said, tilting back slightly on his heels in slight apology. ‘She’s a lovely lady; she’s just very ...’

‘Busy,’ Sydney finished.

‘She is that,’ Nicholas said. ‘Shall we begin the tour?’

Sydney nodded her consent. ‘Yes, please.’

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Despite its heritage exterior, the Medina Grand had all the amenities Sydney associated with a modern hotel. Whoever had been in charge of renovating the hotel had done so with care, maintaining the history while incorporating the new. There was an indoor heated pool with a sauna, several function rooms, a courtyard, and a well-equipped gym. Every room had a kitchen, some their own laundry, and guests had access to complimentary Wi-Fi.

It was clear to Sydney that they aimed the hotel more towards long-stay guests, particularly those of the business variety. However, Nicholas also explained the hotel's popularity for weddings and receptions. Sydney imagined the courtyard would be a popular location for wedding photos.

After going over the various guest rooms and the facilities, Nicholas moved them into the hotel staff areas. He introduced Sydney to different members of staff who were more than happy to talk her through their tasks and answer questions she had. Sydney quickly realised that Nicholas would leave her with a well-oiled machine. Everyone knew their role, and everyone seemed open and welcoming.

As they walked back towards reception, Nicholas cleared his throat. 'Just so you are aware, a few places in the hotel are off-limits, even to the manager. We have three permanent residents in the hotel, and we are not to enter their rooms unless we're invited or it is necessary for us to do so. The first is Mr and Mrs Hall. Mr Xavier Hall is a prominent businessman here in Adelaide, and Mrs Katherine Hall is a senior law firm partner. They live out of the hotel during the week and return to their property in the Adelaide Hills on the weekends.

'Our other permanent resident is Mr Kingston. He is a silent partner of the hotel and handles the business side of things. Miss Taylor works directly for him, and their office is within his room. They are very busy people, so we try to stay out of their way as much as possible. Mr Kingston is also the owner of the storage room I pointed out earlier.' Sydney remembered the doorway in the

tunnels below with the ‘Do Not Enter’ sign. ‘Access to that room is strictly forbidden.’

Sydney could understand the need for privacy, especially for the permanent residents. The hotel was their home; while some people enjoyed the room service and having a maid to tidy their room, others did not. ‘They’re aware I will take over as manager next week?’

‘They are. I can tell you now that Mr and Mrs Hall are hard people to catch given their hours, but are a rather pleasant couple. Mr Kingston ...’ Nicholas frowned. ‘I’ve always gotten along well with him, but he can be a bit ... reserved when meeting new people. He is a hard man to win the trust of. Please don’t be offended if he seems distant initially, but he’ll warm once you get to know him.’

Nicholas led the way through a side door into the courtyard, Sydney taking in the tables and chairs. A middle-aged Aboriginal man stood near two older ladies talking, and Sydney could tell from how he was dressed that he worked there. Nicholas moved towards him. ‘Simon, I’d like you to meet the new hotel manager.’

‘So, Rita was right,’ the man extended his hand towards her. ‘Simon Pierce. I’m the manager of the cafe and restaurant here at the Medina.’

‘Sydney Madinah,’ she replied.

One of the old ladies clicked her tongue. ‘With a name like that, you were destined to work here.’

‘Oh, hogwash,’ her companion said. ‘It’s just a coincidence. That’s what that is.’

‘There’s no such thing,’ the first lady countered. ‘Everything happens for a—

‘It does not!’ the second lady interrupted.

‘Careful ladies, or you’ll scare the poor girl off.’ A man from the following table cut in.

Simon sighed, smiling. ‘I’m afraid this is something you’ll get quite used to. Dot and Lizzie are always in philosophical disagreement, with Kian playing the peacemaker.’



‘We’re not in disagreement,’ one lady said. ‘Dorothy and I simply approach things from different angles.’

‘Pretty sure that’s a disagreement, Elizabeth,’ Dorothy countered. She looked up at Sydney. ‘Lizzie’s a bit tizzy.’

‘And Dotty is a bit spotty,’ Elizabeth shot back.

‘And I’m never going to have a coffee in peace,’ Kian said. Sydney couldn’t help but notice a faint accent, but couldn’t quite place it. The man was in a suit minus a tie, his hair cropped close and his goatee well-trimmed. She picked him for a business man.

Dorothy and Elizabeth, on the other hand, were more casually dressed. Their clothing could only be described as neat casual. Both women had grey hair; Dorothy had a tight perm, while Elizabeth’s hair was cut to shoulder length. From their empty bags, they intended to go shopping.

‘Oh, hush you,’ Elizabeth said to Kian. ‘You enjoy it. Otherwise you wouldn’t sit so close.’

‘This is the best seat in the courtyard,’ Kian said, raising his cup to his lips. ‘I will not part with it because of you two.’

‘So you’re all regulars,’ Sydney said.

‘Tuesday through Friday,’ Dorothy confirmed. ‘A drop of tea before we go to the market, and another before we go home.’

‘The Adelaide Central Market,’ Nicholas said before Sydney could ask. ‘It’s not far from here. It’s also open Saturdays, but the ladies here don’t seem to do weekends.’

‘I fail to see why you need to go every day,’ Kian said. ‘It rarely changes.’

‘We have our reasons,’ Elizabeth said. ‘Better than being cooped up at home.’

‘We’ve been going to the market for years,’ Dorothy said. ‘We get to know people and get some exercise while we’re at it.’

‘We’ll probably outlive the market,’ Elizabeth said with a laugh, Dorothy joining her.

‘I live and work not far away,’ Kian said, answering Sydney’s comment. ‘I find it a nice place to sit, have a coffee and catch up on some work. For the most part, it’s rather peaceful.’

‘Dot, I think we’ve just been insulted,’ Elizabeth said with mock horror.

‘I don’t think there’s any thinking necessary, Lizzie,’ Dorothy said with equal false shock, a smile tugging at her lips. ‘Mr MacDowell finds us to be loud.’

‘Not loud,’ Kian said calmly. ‘More a ... consistent buzz.’

‘Well, I never,’ Elizabeth said, one hand on her chest in feigned outrage but unable to keep the grin from her face.

‘Never, ever,’ Dorothy added.

‘Careful, Kian, you’ll have them rioting,’ Simon laughed.

‘That would make for something interesting for once,’ Kian replied.

The two ladies gasped in mock exasperation, throwing their napkins over at him. A tiny smile twitched at the corner of his otherwise impassive face, although his eyes were sparkling with amusement.

‘We better leave before the pitchforks come out,’ Nicholas said with a smile, leading Sydney back inside.

‘I take it that’s a regular thing,’ Sydney said, gesturing back to the courtyard.

‘Kian is usually a lot quieter,’ Nicholas admitted. ‘He’s more a ... people watcher. Dot and Lizzie are the types that want to get into the thick of it.’

‘And gossipers, I’m guessing,’ Sydney said.

Nicholas nodded. ‘They could also tell you about every conspiracy theory known to man. If you spend enough time with them, they’ll have you questioning your existence and believing in aliens.’

‘The universe is pretty big,’ Sydney said thoughtfully.

‘You’ll fit right in,’ Nicholas laughed, stopping at the front desk. ‘And that concludes our tour. I hope you didn’t find it too overwhelming.’

‘The Medina is much smaller than the hotels I’ve previously worked at,’ Sydney said. ‘Not as much to take in.’

‘Oh, you’ll find she has her quirks,’ Nicholas said. ‘Most old buildings do. I sometimes wish the walls could talk.’

Sydney smiled. She had always found that, in some ways, walls did talk. The cleanliness of the hotel told her it was well cared for,

but the floors, stairs and railings were well worn. Some areas were more worn than others telling her which areas saw more traffic. Some walls had slightly different textures, showing they were more recent changes to the original interior, most likely from when the building was converted to a hotel. The building spoke of classical elegance and the state's wealth when they built it.

Sydney was sure that the more time she spent there, the more the building would speak to her, and she looked forward to uncovering all the little secrets that the Treasury Building and hotel offered.

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Before heading home, Sydney did a lap of the hotel's exterior, getting to know the location of all the outside exits. She took in everything, from where the windows looked (and therefore the view from the interior rooms) to the placement of the skip bins. Her former mentor had told her early on that it was as essential to know the outside of the hotel as it was to know the inside, as the hotel existed within a larger city and where and how it was placed within that city meant everything.

As she neared the end of Pilgrim Lane, the sound of hushed voices caught her attention. She knew it was rude to listen in on someone else's conversation, but something about how they talked hooked her in. She slowed, stepping further into the shadows, and strained to hear what was being said.

'-don't even know that I'm right about this,' the first man said.

'It's a lead and the best we've got,' the second man replied, his voice deeper and with the barest of an accent she couldn't quite place. 'I have faith in you—'

'I don't,' the first man cut in.

'You should,' the second said. 'It's certainly worth a look.'

'Have you thought about what happens if we get caught?'

'First, we won't, and second, when do you care about getting caught?'

'Since it's right next door, and we have to show our faces around here,' the first man said. 'I don't see why we can't do it in the daytime.'

‘Because it’s easier at night when nobody’s around, and they’d never let us back in the day.’ There was a pause. ‘We’re doing this. If you want to sit out—’

‘No, you’re not going without me,’ the first man cut him off. ‘If I’m wrong, I want to be the one to wear it when it goes balls up.’

‘It won’t.’ The pause was longer this time. Sydney felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle.

‘What is it?’ The first man asked.

‘I think somebody’s listening,’ the second man said.

Sydney took that as her cue to leave, stepping quickly out of the lane and onto Flinders Street and the foot traffic. Her heart felt like it was racing a mile a minute as she tried to piece together what she had overheard. It had sounded like the plans for a break-in, as if they were going to steal something. Given their proximity to the Town Hall, she could only assume it was there. Could she have overheard government employees planning a Watergate-esque plot?

Sydney didn’t stop until she got to her apartment and locked the door behind her. She wondered if she should call the police, but she knew that simply saying what she had overheard wasn’t enough. It didn’t help that she hadn’t seen who was talking. All that she knew was there were two men, and one of them had a faint accent. For the time being, there was nothing she could do about it, but she was confident that she would be awake all night trying to work out just what she had heard.