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## The Color of Dreams

Claudia N. Smith  
*University of New Orleans*

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The Color of Dreams

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of English  
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts, with University High Honors  
and Honors in English

by

Claudia N. Smith

December 2016

For the dreamers who believed in me,  
you know who you are.

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## Chapter One

The frothy edges of the waves splashed Meg's bare feet as she and her grandmother walked along the beach. The water was cool, a refreshing contrast to the humid summer air pressing in on them. Meg's eyes wandered over the endless sea as it shimmered and sighed beneath a matching cerulean sky.

"What are you thinking?" her grandmother asked.

"I wish I could capture this color blue," Meg said idly as she bent down to pick up a seashell poking out of the sand.

"I'm sure you could if you tried," her grandmother said.

"No," Meg shook her head. "No matter how I mixed the colors I could never recreate this. I'd make it too bright or too deep, and this is both."

"And it sparkles too." She shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun as she looked out over the water.

"Yeah. Maybe in a photograph I could get it, but the light would have to be just right," Meg mused.

"Ever the artist," her grandmother said with a smile.

"I don't know about that."

Meg started as a tiny crab scuttled across her path. Her grandmother laughed, taking her elbow and steering Meg out of the way.

"So, how are classes going?"

"Pretty good. Math's kind of boring."

"That's understandable," she chuckled. "And what about everything else? Are you making friends? Have you seen any cute boys?"

“Gigi!” Meg squealed. She could feel the heat of her embarrassment staining her face crimson.

“You’re blushing, so that’s a yes.”

“There’s no boy. I don’t even have time for boys. I barely have time for friends. I’m busy enough trying to keep up in my classes,” Meg argued.

“There’s more to college than classes.”

“I think my professors would disagree. Besides, what about the family curse?”

Meg’s grandmother made a noise of disapproval. “Don’t start spouting town gossip. It’s all trash, and you know it. Your daddy’s and your grandpa’s deaths were terrible accidents. There is no curse on the Findley women.”

“Hmm,” was all Meg could say. She bent down and spent an excessive amount of time digging a piercingly white shell out of the sand. She knew, of course, that her grandmother was right. The people in town who said those kinds of things were just being spiteful, making sport out of her family’s tragedy for their own amusement. However, there was an ever so small part of Meg that wondered if her family was cursed, what with death marking them so often.

When Meg stood up, she found her grandmother eyeing her suspiciously. She took Meg’s chin in her fingers and turned her face so that she could look Meg directly in the eyes.

“Don’t let death follow you around like a shadow, making you miserable the rest of your life. Your daddy and your grandpa died, and that’s an unspeakably sad thing, but that doesn’t mean you can’t ever feel joy again. Sorrow is only permanent if you let it eat you up inside. Do you understand me, Meg?”

Meg nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good girl,” she said. She planted a kiss on her granddaughter’s forehead. “Now, what do you say we go for a swim?” She ran off into the sea, kicking up water as she went.

“We’re not exactly dressed for it!” Meg called after her.

“Oh, who cares? Maybe we’ll coax some oysters out, and I’ll find a pearl for my pearl!”

The use of her grandmother’s special nickname for her made Meg smile, washing away all the sadness and doubts that had welled up inside of her a moment before. “The time has come,” Meg quoted, “to talk of many things: of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax, of cabbages, and kings!”

“Just out of curiosity, would I be the Walrus or the Carpenter?”

“Whichever one ate more oysters,” Meg retorted.

Her grandmother’s laugh echoed out to her across the sea. Meg dug her toes into the wet sand and made her way after her. It became a process of following sound more than sight. The light reflecting off the surface of the waves was blinding. Meg shielded her eyes and tried to find her grandmother.

“Wait up!” she yelled. Meg saw the shape that was her grandmother turn and kick a spray of water at her. It was too far away to do anything, but Meg laughed all the same.

“Keep up,” her grandmother called back.

Meg dug her feet in harder and pushed against the tide. She attempted a sort of jog to close the gap between them, but the weight of the water held her back. It was like the ocean was rooting her into the sand. Meg looked up and once again squinted in the sunlight for her grandmother.



“Gigi, wait!” There was an edge of fear in her voice; the irrational kind Meg thought she had lost with her Oshkosh and baby teeth. She didn’t know why, but she was afraid of what would happen if she didn’t know where her grandmother was. “Gigi, where are you?”

“Come on, slow poke, the water is fine!”

Meg turned her head towards her grandmother’s voice, and she could just make her out in the distance, smiling. She gave another kick and sent a spray arcing into the air. It was still too far away to touch Meg, but in that moment she blinked.

When Meg’s eyes opened again, her grandmother was gone.

“Gigi?” Meg found her feet could move through the water once more. She hacked through it like a knife, managing to run against the pressure trying to push her back.

“Gigi!” she cried out as she reached the spot where she last saw her grandmother. “Gigi, where are you?” She scanned the water to the horizon, but there was no living creature in sight. Not even a gull was swooping through the sky.

“Gigi, answer me!”

The only sounds that met her demands were the pounding of the surf and her heart. The two overlapped and drummed in her ears, creating a tempo to her rising panic. She had to do something, but she didn’t know what.

Without thinking, she looked down—and there was her grandmother.

It was like Meg was looking at an optical illusion. She was only standing thigh deep in the water, but her grandmother was completely submerged beneath the waves. Her silver hair was floating weightlessly, framing her face. She looked like a painting.

“Gigi,” Meg cried as she reached out to her grandmother.

Her hand hit the top of the water, but somehow it was solid. It hadn't frozen and turned to ice; it was more like a sheet of glass had replaced it. She could see her grandmother below, but she couldn't reach her. Meg's grandmother smiled up at her, apparently unconcerned with her predicament. She looked peaceful and content.

A flash of silver sparked through the water. Meg's eyes sought it out, but whatever it was moved too fast to be distinct. It slipped and glided through the water like it was air.

"Gigi!" she screamed as she beat on the glass. Her fists made a dull thunk against the impenetrable material. "Gigi, swim! Swim away!"

It had to be a shark. Meg was certain it was. She pounded and pounded against the water, but her grandmother remained enveloped in her own sphere of serenity.

"Look," Meg yelled as she jabbed her finger into the glass. She motioned to the body speeding around her grandmother, getting closer every second. Meg's grandmother turned her glassy gaze upon the creature—and to Meg's horror—her smile widened. The old woman made a graceful arc with her pale arm, reaching out to grasp the thing. Meg sucked in a sharp breath. She couldn't watch, but neither could she look away. Her nails dug into the glass, but the motion was futile. It only sent pain stinging through her fingers into her hands.

Then, without warning, everything slowed down. It was like time beneath the water glass was grinding to a halt. The creature that had been a blur of motion was suddenly visible in perfect detail. The breath that Meg had inhaled escaped her lips in a slow, quiet sigh.

It was a mermaid.

Sunlight sparkled off her silver tail, causing it to refract in a rainbow pattern. Her skin was bright, almost glowing, but it was hard to determine if its bluish tint was natural or a mirroring effect of the seawater. Her hair swirled around her like living tendrils, brushing

against her arms and cheeks, and her face—it was so human, except that her eyes appeared to be of the same molten silver as her tail. Meg stared at the mermaid in wonder. Their gazes met, and the creature's face broke into a grin. Meg could feel her mouth twitching at the corners, trying to do the same.

Then Meg noticed that there were more of them. They seemed to come out of nowhere—a dozen mermaids—slipping through the water and encircling her grandmother. Their tails all sparkled like the first's, creating a multicolor haze. It looked as though her grandmother was the epicenter of a prism. Meg watched, motionless, as each one approached her grandmother. They would touch her—her arms, her hands, her face, her hair. It was gentle and kind, and if possible, it seemed to make her grandmother relax even more. Her body was no longer languidly suspended in the water but slowly sinking into the bottomless ocean.

“Gigi?” Meg called out. She was more alert now. Whatever spell the mermaids had woven was seeping out of her mind. “Gigi, wait!”

It was no use. Meg pounded on the glass as before, but her grandmother didn't respond. The mermaids circled closer, taking the old woman's body and carrying it with them as they returned from whence they came. Meg screamed. She pounded even harder, the water and glass slapping against her skin, but her grandmother didn't even look up. She let the mermaids take her to whatever lay fathoms below the surface of the sea. Meg could only watch as they became a blurry tangle of shapes, then a solid mass of deep blues, and then nothing at all.

Meg felt absolutely numb. All the energy that had coursed through her body had evaporated in an instant. Her knees buckled, and she fell onto the glass. Meg couldn't believe her grandmother just let the mermaids carry her away. She didn't put up a fight. She didn't even try to stay.

*She left me*, Meg thought over and over again. *She left me*. And then behind this mantra-like repetition came the realization, *I didn't even get to say goodbye*. This thought stung like a slap in the face.

She pressed her hands back on the solid water and stared down into the sea. She was hoping to catch another glimpse of her grandmother. She thought maybe she would come back, but the water had turned murky. It was hard to see much of anything, especially with the clouds beginning to sweep across the sun. The world around Meg had suddenly become a monochrome. The colors, so bright moments before, were fading. All was now dusk and shadow.

Meg strained her eyes against the gloom, hoping for a glimpse of something. She thought she saw a flicker of movement. She leaned her body forward in an attempt to see more clearly. Her nose was so close to the water she was overwhelmed by the smell of salt. She could just make out a shape gliding sinuously beneath her.

Something was wrong, though. There were too many tangled limbs for it to be her grandmother, or even one of the mermaids. And there was no spark of silver, no glow. Whatever was swimming through the water was pitch black. Meg should have recoiled, but instead she pressed herself more closely into the water that had turned to glass. The brine bit into her face and stung her nose and her eyes. It made breathing difficult, but she didn't want to blink—not this time.

The creature darted into view, stopping just below her. Meg couldn't quite tell what it was supposed to be. It had eight long tentacles, but it wasn't an octopus. It was too big for that. It had large eyes—like a squid—but they were milky white, and there was a prominent beak clicking away where a mouth should have been.

*Kraken*, the thought echoed in her head.

Suddenly, the tentacles broke the solid surface of the water, and the glass became waves once more. Meg didn't even have time to scream as the Kraken pulled her under. The water, which had been pleasant when she entered it, was now freezing cold. It was so cold it burned her skin. Giant bubbles escaped her mouth as the Kraken tightened its hold on her arms and legs. The life was being squeezed out of her. She kicked and fought to get back to the surface, to breathe the air that would stop the sharp pain in her lungs, but it was no use. The creature was stronger than she was, and Meg was pulled down into a deepening dark.

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Meg woke with a start, thrashing beneath her covers. Her breath was coming out in ragged gasps, and her hair was damp. She struggled up and ripped at the sheets that were tangled around her body. When she finally extracted herself, she threw them to the floor and sat panting in the middle of her bed. Her eyes flickered to the clock on her nightstand. It was two o'clock in the morning.

Meg pulled her legs to her chest and rested her head on her knees, waiting for her heart rate to return to normal. She focused her gaze on the glow from her seashell nightlight. Her grandmother had put it in the room when she was a little girl, and she'd never had the heart to get rid of it. She was glad she had kept it now. She had never been so afraid of the dark.

It was all because of the nightmare. It had been haunting her ever since her grandmother's death, and it had become worse since she and her mother had come back to her grandmother's house for the summer. There were variations every night, but it always ended the same way. The Kraken would grab her, and she'd be pulled down into the cold, dark water.

Meg shivered involuntarily. The dream always seemed to find a way back into her mind, to follow her into reality. She had to think about something else. She returned her concentration

to the nightlight. Meg's focus was on the glow of the light itself, but then her eyes traveled over the little details. She loved the light cream color of the shell with its added streaks of pale green. Even though it was soft, it was bright and happy. She thought back to the beach, of collecting seashells...

She squeezed her eyes shut and dug her fingers into her eyelids. Reds, yellows, and greens, burst across a canvas of black. Her body tensed, and she could feel her heart rate rising again. There was no escaping it—the nightmare, the memories. Meg just wanted to forget everything. She just wanted to sleep, but she knew she wouldn't be getting back to sleep any time soon.

With a sigh, Meg rolled out of her bed and went over to her desk. It was small and yet still too large for the space. Her grandmother had managed to maneuver it so that it was tucked snugly into the corner of the room. Meg could remember when she and her grandmother first picked it out at the local flea market uptown. She had been ten years old at the time, and the desk had seemed huge then. Its curved legs and the scrollwork on the drawers had looked so luxurious. Now, nine years later, she could note the age, but she still loved it all the same. She hoped she could convince her mother to take it with them when they left. She didn't want to see it sold with the rest of her grandmother's belongings.

Meg flipped on the desk lamp and squinted in the sudden flare of light. The wall above her desk was plastered with photographs and sketches. Only two photos were framed and held pride of place on the desktop. The first showed her grandmother sitting on the living room sofa holding Meg, just a baby then, in her arms. Her mother and father sat on either side of them, and everyone beamed at the camera. It always seemed so unreal to Meg, that picture. She was too young to remember taking it, and it showed a family she couldn't remember having. Her father

died when she was two years old. She missed him more for what she could have had than for the relationship that she lost. The second picture was a more accurate family portrait. Meg was sandwiched between her mother and her grandmother, and their arms were thrown around her blue polyester clad frame. Her graduation cap sat askew on her head, knocked out of place by the kiss her grandmother was planting on her cheek.

*Gigi*, Meg thought. It was so hard not to think of her grandmother when she was living in her house, going through her things. Meg never realized how much college had acted as a safety net. When she returned to school after the funeral, she was able to push everything to the back of her mind. Classes and exams were a distraction that allowed her to bury everything else she didn't have the time or the desire to think about. It wasn't possible for her to do that anymore. Meg was back in the house where she had spent every summer since she was five years old. She was encased in memories. She couldn't escape things as easily here.

Meg shook her head as if to clear it. She opened the top right drawer and dug out a sketchbook and a selection of pens. Plopping down in the rickety desk chair, she gently inched forward so as not to let the legs screech across the floor. Meg pulled the sketchbook toward her and opened it to a blank page. The white paper glowed against the dark wood of the desk. She selected a pen at random. The cap popped as she took it off and placed it to the side. She didn't know what she would draw. She just let her mind wander, enjoying the splash of ink on the page.

This was how she spent her nights now, sketching and shading, waiting for dawn. Meg leaned her body into her work. Her shoulders hunched around the drawing. Her hands moved in gentle strokes across the crisp paper. Meg's eyes seemed focus, but she was really somewhere else entirely. She was walking along the beach as the waves splashed her bare feet. She didn't

notice the shape her drawing was taking. The black pen swept across the paper, forming a long, curling tentacle.



## Chapter Two

“Meg?”

Meg’s head shot up from where it had laid against her arms. The muscles in her neck ached with the sudden movement. She was sitting at her desk, her sketchbook tucked beneath her arms like a pillow. Her pens were scattered in an arc around her, and she noticed her fingers were stained with ink.

A hand was on her shoulder. She looked up to see her mother staring down at her, her smile fading slightly at the startled expression of Meg’s face.

“Hey,” Meg croaked. She glanced over her shoulder to see light seeping in around the crevices in her blinds. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost eleven,” she replied.

“What? Crap, Mom, I’m sorry.” Meg furiously rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

“It’s okay,” her mother assured her. “I figured you were feeling a little burned out and could use the rest.”

“Mm-hmm,” she mumbled.

Her mother reached out and pushed Meg’s hair out of her eyes. “Meg, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just didn’t sleep very well.”

“Was it the nightmare again?” her mother asked.

A knot tangled itself into being in Meg’s stomach. She hated that her mother knew about the nightmare. It wasn’t something she had wanted to share with anyone, but her mother had discovered her tossing and turning one night, and, in a moment of weakness, she had mentioned the nightmare. Now, her mother was worried. Meg could see it on her face. The concern was etched into the lines at the corners of her mother’s eyes and in the furrow between her eyebrows.

It made Meg sad. She wished she could reach out and smooth the skin with her thumb, smearing away her mother's worry like it was pencil lead on paper, making it a shadow rather than a reality.

"No," she lied. "I think my sleep schedule is just out of whack."

Her mother looked unconvinced.

"Really, it's fine. It'll probably work itself out in a few days." She took her mother's hand. "Besides, we have more important things to worry about."

She scoffed. "Packing is not more important than your well-being."

"I was referring to lunch," Meg quipped. It had just the effect she was looking for. Her mother laughed, and the tension slowly left her face. "What's on the menu?"

"Well, we need to make a grocery run. I was thinking we'd make a trip to Jackson's and then grab some food to go from The Blue Heron."

"The Blue Heron? At lunch time on a Friday? We'll be lucky if we even get through the door. It'll be cram packed with tourists," Meg reminded her mother.

"I forgot today is Friday. I've completely lost track of time," her mother said.

"What about The Greenhouse? You could get that salad that you love," Meg suggested.

"I do love that salad," her mother said. She had that wistful look of the hungry thinking about their favorite food.

"You still with us?" Meg asked after a moment.

"Very funny," she said with a laugh. "Yes, let's do The Greenhouse."

"Okay. Just give me a few minutes to get dressed."

Her mother smiled, and Meg listened to the sound of her flip-flops slapping against the hardwood floors as she disappeared down the hall. When she was certain her mother was gone,

Meg let out a heavy sigh. She hated lying to her mother. It did nothing to ease the knot in her stomach, but what was she supposed to do? Telling the truth would only make things worse.

She rubbed her hands over her face. She felt absolutely exhausted. Her eyes flashed down to the sketchbook in front of her. Meg didn't quite remember finishing any sort of drawing. She had fallen asleep as dawn crept in. On the page before her was the Kraken. It was composed entirely of thick strokes of black ink. Its arms were uncurling outward, as if they would come off the page. Instinctively, she recoiled from the image. She ripped the page out of the sketchbook, crumpling it violently in her hands. She threw it into the trash can, and got up from her desk chair. She dug through her suitcase looking for an outfit. Clothes went in every direction, ending up scattered across the floor. She finally settled on a pair of shorts and an old tee shirt, balling them in her hands as she padded into the bathroom down the hall.

The tile was cold against her feet. She tossed her clothes onto the vanity and stood staring into the mirror. Meg's already fair skin looked deathly pale after a sleepless night. It washed out the freckles on the bridge of her nose and brought out the dark circles under her eyes. She brushed her fingertips over the bruised looking skin. It was soft, delicate to the touch. It was as fragile as she felt.

Meg was so lost in her own thoughts she almost didn't hear her mother's step coming towards her. "I've finished the list. It shouldn't take us too long," she said as she poked her head around the doorframe.

"Mkay." Meg began running a brush through her unruly auburn waves, untangling the knots that had formed in the night. She could see her mother watching her through the reflection in the mirror.

“You look just like your grandmother, you know. You have her hair, and her bright blue eyes.” Her mother sniffed, and Meg could see the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. She should have said something, but she didn’t know what to say. All Meg could do was force a smile and focus on her hair. She put down the brush and started separating it into sections.

“Why don’t you wear it down?” her mother asked.

Meg shook her head.

“It looks so pretty when you wear it down,” she insisted.

“I don’t really feel like wild hair today. Besides, it’ll be too hot,” Meg managed to reply as she tried unsuccessfully to subdue her hair into a braid.

Her mother sighed and then stepped behind her, taking the strands out of Meg’s hands and into her own. The waves were suddenly tame beneath her mother’s fingertips. She deftly wove them into a neat plait that reached down Meg’s back.

“There.” she said as she tucked a stray lock behind Meg’s ear. She regarded her daughter’s reflection in the mirror. “You really are beautiful, Meg.” She kissed the top of her head and then slipped out of the bathroom.

Gazing in the mirror, Meg couldn’t see what her mother did. She didn’t look beautiful, and she certainly didn’t feel beautiful. She felt exhausted, and she looked ill. It was as if the Kraken had succeeded in dragging her into that endless darkness.

She shook her head to dispel the horrid thought, causing her braid to bump against her spine. Using her foot, she closed the bathroom door with a bang. She grabbed her clothes and quickly began to dress for the day.

\*\*\*

Just as Meg had predicted, the summer heat was unbearable. There hadn't been any parking spaces near The Greenhouse, so her mother had parked one street over and was sitting with the groceries while Meg ran to get their food. She had barely closed the car door and already sweat was beading down into the small of her back.

Meg was immediately swept up in the crush of tourists strolling through the downtown area. It was the height of the tourist season. Come late August everyone would be gone, and the town would look deserted again. Meg thought she might like it less crowded as she dodged a hipster college student and a camera happy mother who had stop abruptly in her path to take a picture of the town. She was able to take a few more steps before she almost fell over trying to avoid a collision with a screaming toddler.

Meg veered left across the street and ducked down a side alley. She came out right next to the town green. Kids were playing in the dolphin fountain in the center of the green, splashing each other and squealing in delight. She could hear even more kids at the playground that attached to the green. As she passed by, she could see the castle play set was crawling with children. She was surprised the rope bridges connecting the towers didn't collapse under the weight.

Another flood of tourists brought her back to attention. She weaved through them as they headed toward the beachfront restaurants down the street. She managed to reach the other side of the crowd, and relief flooded through her at the sight of the large glass windows of The Greenhouse Sub Shop. She practically threw herself at the door, silver bells jangling overhead as she entered.

"Welcome to the Greenhouse! Be with you in just a minute!" Ms. Lizzie hollered from the register.

Meg made her way to the pick up counter, inhaling the smell of the fresh herbs that lined all the windows of the restaurant in mini terra cotta pots. It was funny, when she was a little girl the restaurant had been a po'boy shop. She could vaguely remember eating greasy fried shrimp piled high on buttery French bread while her grandmother talked to Ms. Mary Lee, the owner. They had been friends since grade school. Meg could remember her wide smile and her booming voice.

Things changed, though, as Ms. Mary Lee got older. Arthritis warped her hands, and she was no longer able to keep up with the restaurant. That's why her daughter came home from Oregon. Ms. Lizzie took over the shop, but grease wasn't really her thing. She was the eco-friendly, hippie type who had one hell of a green thumb. She turned the old restaurant into the hydroponic veggie haven, The Greenhouse Sub Shop. Meg had been skeptical when she and her family ate there on opening day. Ms. Lizzie was a good cook, and she kept the menu southern with things like the blackened fish sandwich and the Cajun shrimp salad, but Meg had liked the grease and butter Ms. Mary Lee cooked with. Then she tried the seafood pizza. It was like a religious experience, and Ms. Lizzie never let Meg forget it.

"Hey, baby girl," Ms. Lizzie called once her previous customer had left.

"Hey, Ms. Lizzie."

Lizzie leaned on the counter and beamed. "How're you doing? I haven't seen you in ages. And how's your momma?"

"Fine. We're both doing fine. Just hungry."

"Well I can help with that. What can I get for ya?"

"The usual," Meg said.

“Zesty shrimp salad and seafood pizza?” Ms. Lizzie’s smile was mocking. Meg rolled her eyes.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Coming right up,” she laughed.

Ms. Lizzie bounced away into the kitchen. Meg let her eyes wander around the restaurant while she waited. It was busy, but not unbearably crowded. Her gaze slipped over the patrons’ faces and was drawn to the bright light seeping in through the floor to ceiling windows. They provided a picture perfect view of Main Street, and it allowed Meg the opportunity to study the empty building directly across from The Greenhouse.

The storefront had been vacant since last summer. It was just one of those places that never seemed to thrive. Businesses would settle in, but they were always gone a few months later. There had been a jewelry boutique, a thrift store, a Chinese restaurant, and a florist’s shop. Meg’s personal favorite had been the ice cream parlor. She was rather disappointed that that one didn’t stick, but the owner had been an out-of-towner who realized after a month that he hated small town life. He packed up and got the hell out of dodge in record time.

Now, however, a new owner was setting up shop. No one had actually been seen around the place, but work was clearly being done. The bricks had been given a good scrub, and the front door had been painted a dusky blue. A tarp covered a bulky projection hanging over the store, which everyone assumed as a newly installed sign. Newspapers still covered the front windows, but a notice had been placed on the window of the front door quietly advertising the grand opening.

It had become the main source of gossip among the locals. Everyone had been talking about it while she and her mother did their grocery shopping.

“It’s going to open at midnight!” Ms. Polly declared. She had cornered them in the produce aisle where Meg’s mother had been looking at the fresh shipment of Louisiana strawberries. “Ain’t that somethin.’ I don’t know how they’ll manage. No one’s up that late at night. Not around here, anyway.”

Mr. Jackson, the owner of Jackson’s Grocery, had been sitting at his usual table by the deli counter, complaining about it to passersby. “What kind of store is only open at night? This ain’t the city. We don’t have those kinds of places around here. Except the Wal-Mart,” he growled.

Mr. Jackson hated Wal-Mart or any kind of chain store. Besides it being an unwelcome extension of what he viewed as city life, he felt it was a personal attack on his business. Meg and her mother were forced to listen to a five-minute tirade about the evils of the Wal-Mart uptown before her mother tactfully extracted them from the conversation.

Meg felt grateful to the new owner for being so secretive. It made people talk, and if people were talking about the mysterious new store, they weren’t talking about her grandmother. She had begun to dread going into town for anything. Every time someone saw her they felt the need to bring up her grandmother—her death or her funeral or some personal anecdote. Meg would make up excuses and walk away as quickly as possible. She didn’t want to talk about her grandmother. She didn’t want to tear up and hold hands and grieve with these people. She just wanted to be left alone. Now it seemed she would be. They wanted to talk about the new store, and that was a much safer and far more interesting topic of conversation for Meg.

“Here we are,” Ms. Lizzie said as she reemerged from the kitchen. “One zesty shrimp salad and one seafood pizza. Made ‘em myself.”

“I don’t deserve you,” Meg teased.



“That’ll be seventeen dollars and sixty-five cents.”

Meg dug a crumpled twenty and a few ones out of her pocket. “You can keep the change,” she said.

Ms. Lizzie raised her eyebrow. She opened her mouth to say something, but Meg held up her hand to silence her.

“Don’t argue. You don’t want it, take it up with my mom, because she’s the one who insisted on leaving a tip.”

“Fine,” Ms. Lizzie said as she deposited the cash in the register. “But your momma doesn’t have to do that.”

“I know, I know,” she said, holding her hands up in a placating gesture. “So you have a prime view for spying. What’s with the store across the street? Who’s moving in?”

“I know about the same as everybody else, which is nothin,” Ms. Lizzie said as she packed the salad, dressing, and other accouterments into a large paper bag.

“I wonder what they’ll turn it in to,” Meg mused aloud.

“I wonder if they’ll actually stick around,” she countered.

“Well, they’ve caused quite a stir, so they have my vote.”

“They’ve caused a stir, indeed.” She handed Meg her food. “Here you go, sweetheart. Tell your momma I said hey.”

“I will. Say hello to Ms. Mary Lee for me.”

“All right, honey. Have a good day,” Ms. Lizzie said as she slid over to help the next customer.

“You too,” Meg said with a final wave.

She placed the bag on top of her pizza box and balanced it against her hip while she opened the front door. The humidity hit her like a physical force. It made her cool skin feel clammy. She jogged across the street, planning to take the same route back to the car, but she stopped to take a closer look at the new store. It was much cleaner, and the blue door was very inviting. Meg pulled herself up on her tiptoes and tried to find a tear in the newsprint taped to the windows, but it was too fresh to have started crumbling.

She fell back on her heels and let out a sigh. She really was curious about the store. There were so few mysteries in a small town where everyone knew each other and gossip spread like wildfire. It was refreshing, this prospect of a surprise. As she made her way down the sidewalk, she found herself wishing that the store would open quickly. She wanted to see it before she and her mother left for the fall, because she wasn't really sure when they would be coming back, and once her grandmother's house sold, they probably wouldn't be coming back at all.

## Chapter Three

Meg drifted in a haze of blue. She could feel the pulse of the sea beating gently against her body. It was soothing, that languid rhythm. It lulled her into a state of contentment.

Light suddenly erupted around her. Something like streaks of liquid mercury danced across her field of vision and in between the locks of her auburn hair spread out like a fan. Her head swiveled this way and that to catch a glimpse of the creatures surrounding her, but they moved too quickly. Meg slowly kicked her legs to pivot her body. She reached out towards the light, and she felt something tighten around her hand.

A pale white mermaid floated before her. Meg stared into her eyes; they were as deep as the sea itself. They glimmered in the watery sunlight that filtered down over the two of them. Meg smiled, causing little bubbles to escape the corners of her mouth. The mermaid smiled in return, though her grin was more dazzling. She let go of Meg's hand and flitted away with a powerful swish of her silver tail. When the light hit it, the scales sent rainbows flickering out across the waves.

The mermaid rejoined her sisters, and they began to swim around Meg in a wide circle. They moved more slowly than before. She could see them in detail this time. They were beautiful, of course. The stories weren't wrong about that, yet there was something else, too. They were wild and powerful; they could do anything they wanted. She watched their faces, and she noticed that their mouths were moving. Hard as she might try, though, Meg couldn't hear a sound. Their movements and facial expressions became more urgent. Meg was certain they were screaming, but all she heard was the rush of seawater in her ears.

Then, without warning, the mermaids vanished. It all happened so fast, like a lightning strike. Their tails flashed a brilliant silver, almost white, and they were gone. Meg performed a

slow, weighted pirouette in the water. There was nothing in sight, and somehow everything felt empty. The sea had become unnaturally still. She couldn't quite feel the rhythm of the waves anymore. Sound, too, was gone. The rush of water that had filled her head before was silenced.

That silence began to press in on Meg, crushing and constricting her. She wanted to swim to the surface, but her body felt like lead. Lifting her arms, kicking her feet—it all seemed impossible. She could only wait as the water held her suspended in that eerie place.

An unexpected pressure on her ankle broke the spell. Meg looked down, hoping the mermaids had come back. Instead, she met two pale orbs surrounded by inky black. Meg gasped, letting a large gulp of seawater down her throat and into her lungs.

The Kraken yanked at Meg's leg, and the force sent pain rippling through her body. Her limbs were no longer leaden but charged with energy. She twisted and thrashed in the creature's grip. Water slipped between her fingers as she tried to propel herself upward. Meg desperately wished the water would solidify, so she could have some leverage to escape the Kraken. Her fear only incensed the creature. Its purchase on her leg tightened, and more arms appeared out of the gloom to wrap around her. In seconds she was encased in its tentacles, her arms pinned to her sides. She continued to struggle, but it was no use. She could not break out of the monster's grip, and her need for oxygen was slowly weakening her. Meg raised her eyes to the surface, to the sunlight and the air, but a long arm encircled her head and covered her eyes. And Meg was delivered to a world of darkness.

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Meg woke with a start, throwing a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. She was panting and shaking. She scooted back in her bed so she could lean against her wicker

headboard. Her body felt exhausted, like she had just run a marathon. As illogical as it was, she suspected that a closer examination of arms and legs might yield bruises.

Her heart rate eventually settled, but her body was still plagued by a nervous energy. She got out of bed and headed for her desk, but her foot collided with a large box and she nearly fell. Her teeth clamped down on her bottom lip to suppress another scream, this one of frustration rather than fear. Meg's small bedroom was littered with packing boxes, and she abhorred the sight. Her mother had insisted that it was time they start tackling their own bedrooms, packing away what was to be kept and making a list of what was to be sold. Meg had thought nothing would be harder than having to go through her grandmother's personal belongings—her clothes and her jewelry—but she was wrong. Sorting through her own possessions had been infinitely worse. These were things she and her grandmother had shared together, and the idea of sorting it and packing it made her sick. It had been made even more horrible by the fact that her mother cried.

They had started with Meg's closet. Meg had never actually used the closet for her clothes. She was only ever with her grandmother for a few months in the summer, and she found it was easier to live out of her suitcase rather than unpack, so it became storage. There were more plastic bins, boxes, and bags in there than Meg had expected. She and her mother each pulled one out and began going through it. Meg had pulled out a garbage bag full of stuffed animals. She found the little sea turtle her grandmother had given her as a baby, and then there was the seahorse pillow she had made Meg for her sixth birthday. Her favorite find was Margot the manatee. She was still as soft and chubby with fluff as ever. Her grandmother had bought the toy for Meg during their spontaneous weekend trip down to Florida when Meg was about twelve. Meg had been obsessed with manatees ever since she read that sailors had mistaken manatees for

mermaids. So for her birthday Meg's grandmother surprised her with a boat tour where they got to see manatees in the wild. Afterwards, Meg had fallen in love with the plush creature in the gift shop. She ran her fingers over the soft gray material, thinking. She didn't want to sell these things, but neither did she want them out. Looking at them was too hard.

Meg glanced over at her mother and saw tears streaming down her cheeks, which were splotchy and red. The box she was looking through was filled with old photographs. Meg couldn't see which one she was looking at, but it didn't matter. She knew it would make her sad too.

Her mother's open displays of grief always made Meg cringe. She felt guilty for that, but she couldn't help it. Meg couldn't express her sadness like that. She couldn't "let it out" like everyone told her to do after the funeral when she didn't cry. It was like there was a black hole inside of her, sucking up any sort of feeling and warping it into a cold ball of energy that sat heavily in her chest. It was always there, throbbing painfully, but she chose to ignore it. She didn't want to feel anything.

Still, she couldn't completely abandon her mother, even if the crying did make Meg uncomfortable. She slid along the hardwood floor until she was right next to her mother. Her mother looked at her through puffy, bloodshot eyes and smiled. Meg saw she was looking at a photograph from a Halloween long ago. Her grandmother had her arms wrapped around a young Meg who was dressed in a silver and green mermaid costume. Her grandmother had made it by hand. She had driven two hours to deliver it, and then she spent the evening with Meg trick-or-treating at the local mall. Meg's mother had taken the photo just after Meg had won the costume contest.

“You loved that costume,” she said, her voice wobbling through the tears. “It made your Gigi happy to see you so happy.”

Her mother started sobbing then, all tears and wails and snot. Meg wanted to leave the room. This was something her black hole couldn't touch. She couldn't compress her mother and hide her away where she didn't have to think about her, even if she might want to.

That very thought made Meg balk at her insensitivity. Guilt seeped through her, and she felt even more awful than before. Meg reached out and wrapped her arms around her mother. Her sobs reverberated through Meg. Meg had absolutely no idea what to say. What could be of any real comfort? She only hoped her presence was enough to ease some of her mother's pain.

As quickly as the onslaught of tears had come, it subsided. Meg could feel her mother's body relax beneath her touch. She looked up at Meg and planted a wet kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you, sweetheart. I needed that.” She wiped away her tears with the palms of her hands. “Now, let's get back to work.”

Just like that, it was over. Meg marveled at the mechanics of it. How could grief come and go just like that? How could her mother be a puddle on the floor one minute, and then chipper and well the next? It didn't make any sense to her then, nor was it any clearer the next three times it happened.

Meg had finally called an end to the endeavor. She just couldn't handle it anymore, and now—staring at the boxes scattered throughout her limited floor space—she found she still couldn't. She had to get out of there.

Without thinking, Meg threw on a hoodie over her pajamas and slipped out into the hall. She walked past her mother's room on the balls of her feet; she didn't want to risk her waking up. Meg knew she wouldn't approve of her being up this late, let alone sneaking out of the

house. The living room was pitch black, but Meg made her way by instinct to the back door. She shoved her feet into her flip-flops and unlocked the dead bolt. Very carefully, she turned the handle all the way down and opened the door. It groaned a little, and Meg froze. She waited to see if it woke her mother, but all was silent. She said a silent prayer of thanks as she tiptoed out of the house.

It was strange, walking around the neighborhood in the middle of the night. Everything was quiet and peaceful, so much so that the sound of her flip-flops hitting the pavement seemed obnoxiously loud. Meg hoped she didn't wake anyone. More specifically, she hoped that if anyone happened to see her they wouldn't call the police. This was not the type of town where going for a nighttime wander was seen as normal, or even sane.

She had only ever been out like this once before, with her grandmother. Meg could remember opening her eyes at her Gigi's soft, cool hand against her forehead. It was like she had wiped away sleep and given Meg wakefulness with only her touch.

"Shhh," she whispered, placing a finger against her lips. "Time to get up now, Pearl. Quick and quiet all right?"

Meg nodded and hopped out of her bed. Her grandmother helped her dress, and together they snuck past her mother's bedroom and left the house. It hadn't been as dark, then. The sky was just beginning to lighten with the first rays of dawn. Meg had looked up and found herself enamored by the tinge of green just on the edge of the horizon.

"Where are we going, Gigi?" Meg had asked.

"You'll see."

The sea breeze carried the scent of salt water to her, and as they got nearer she could hear the waves gently lapping at the shore. She and her grandmother ran the last stretch, throwing



their shoes off when they reached the sand. They slipped and slid across the shifting surface until they reached the more compact sand at the water's edge. Meg's grandmother pulled her down, and together they sat and watched the sun rise.

Meg had been dazzled by the colors. There were so many shifting hues, from the warmest oranges and pinks, to that unearthly green and the deepest blue. And when the sun's light hit the water...it glittered as if the sea was filled with thousands and thousands of diamonds.

"Look carefully, Meg. Look at the horizon," her grandmother said. "Can you see the mermaids?"

Meg stared out at the sea, straining her little eyes as hard as she could. She saw the blue green of the water rising in small peaks. She saw it touch the sky, which was dappled with sunlight. She saw the morning clouds lined with pink, but she didn't see anything else.

And then there was a flash of silver.

"I can see them, Gigi," she whispered in awe, and she truly did. In that special place—between dreaming and awake, between dusk and dawn—she could see the mermaids. She watched their silver tails splash and leap through the waves, catching the warm hues cast off of the rising sun.

"Hmmm," she smiled, here eyes closed. "Can you hear them?" she asked.

Meg listened as intently as she had looked, but she didn't hear anything out of the ordinary. The only sounds that reached her ears were the surf and the wind.

"I don't hear anything," Meg said, her voice laced with disappointment. Her grandmother wrapped her arms around Meg and gave her a gentle squeeze.

"It's all right, Pearl. You'll hear them one day."

"When?"

“When you’re older.”

“How old?” Meg persisted.

Her grandmother laughed. “I don’t know. Maybe when you’re old like me.”

“That’s a long time,” she said wistfully.

Her grandmother leaned in and kissed the top of her tousled hair.

“Just be patient,” she said. “And never stop believing. That helps.”

Meg nodded. She leaned into her grandmother and together they watched the mermaids playing in the light of a brand new day.

Sitting in the same spot so many years hence, Meg found herself deeply disappointed. Her feet, like the memory, had carried her to the beach, but it was all so different. There was no light or color now, only darkness. As for the mermaids, she still couldn’t hear them. She couldn’t even see them anymore. She hadn’t for quite some time. They only visited her in her nightmares, just before the Kraken pulled her under.

Meg twitched at the thought. She stood up abruptly and stomped through the sand back to the road. Coming to the beach had been a mistake. There was nothing there for her anymore.

Sand stuck to Meg’s flip-flops, rubbing against her soles and the skin between her toes. She kept wiggling her feet, but it was no use. It didn’t alleviate her discomfort. If anything it made it worse. Meg considered taking her shoes off, but it was dark and she didn’t want to step on anything sharp. All she could do was twist her ankles and flex her toes, which caused her to trip and stumble along the pavement. She wriggled so much that her right flip-flop rolled underneath the ball of her foot and sent her tumbling into the asphalt.

Meg groaned as she situated herself into an upright position. Her knee was throbbing and sharp, stinging pains were prickling across both of her palms. It was too dark for her to see

clearly, but she could make out large scrapes covered in pebbles and dirt on each hand. She hissed as she gently wiped the grit off on her pajama bottoms.

Abruptly, the street was illuminated. Meg could see the gashes on her palms in perfect detail, but she was too distracted by the source of the light. She found herself in front of the old storefront, the one everyone kept talking about. Large glass letters filled with tiny strings of LED lights glowed above the shop door.

“The Glass Slipper,” Meg read as she craned her neck upward to take in the view. It was an impressive sight. The letters looked like liquid the glass curled so delicately into script.

Meg forced herself off the ground and made her way closer to the building, like a moth drawn to a flame. More light was seeping out of the windows, which had been uncovered and polished to a high shine. She looked inside, but it was hard to see what exactly was for sale because enormous wooden bookshelves obscured much of the view. Meg thought from a business standpoint that hiding the merchandise was counterintuitive, but it did pique her curiosity. She glanced at the door and saw a small sign that read open in bold letters. *This must be the grand opening*, Meg thought. She reached out and let her fingers rest on the large brass door handle.

It was late. Meg was tired, scraped up, and covered in sand, not to mention she was still in her pajamas. She knew she should just go home and try to get an hour or two of sleep before the nightmare woke her again, but she just couldn't face it. Instead she pulled open the door.

## Chapter Four

A set of bells rung out melodically as the door opened. The sound was so lovely Meg had first thought it was an electronic chime. She glanced up, and her face was reflected back to her in miniature on their polished silver exteriors.

She gently closed the door behind her and peered into the maze of shelves. They were solid wood and reached from the floor to the ceiling. It instantly brought to mind an ancient library, but there were no books on display. She couldn't quite tell what merchandise was being sold. Something was up there, but it was very small in comparison to the display cases. She crept forward—afraid of disturbing the silence—and peered at the shelf closest to her.

A Chinese dragon made of swirls of red and blue glass glared back at her. The detail work was incredibly intricate. Meg wanted to reach out and touch it, but she was too afraid of breaking something. Next to the dragon was a perfume bottle. She also saw more glass figurines, paperweights, and, farther down the row, an enormous Mason jar. From what her mind could work out, the only thing any of these items had in common was that they were all made of glass.

Meg inched farther into the rows of shelves. Her eyes didn't know where to look next. It was almost like being in a museum; she was trying to take in as much as possible. There were more perfume bottles and figurines, snow globes, old light bulbs, wine bottles, Christmas ornaments, bell jars, and as she reached the end of the row she found a collection of marbles on display. The more she looked at the more she realized it wasn't just that the items were made of glass, somehow they glowed too. It was rather like the sign outside. It was if they were filled with tiny lights, but Meg couldn't see any wires or mechanics to produce the effect.

“Hello,” a voice said softly.

Meg jumped and had to stop herself from backing into the bookshelf behind her.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

A woman suddenly appeared at her side. She had crystal clear blue eyes and silver hair cropped short. Her face was lined with wrinkles, particularly around her eyes and mouth. Meg was certain it was from smiling. She had a dazzling smile.

“Dear, what have you done to your hands?” Meg noticed she spoke in a clipped, British accent.

“What?” was all Meg could think to say. The woman reached out and took one of Meg’s hands. She held it palm up so she could examine the gashes to the skin. Meg was suddenly hyper aware of how absurd she must look, with oozing scrapes on her hands and her pajamas covered in sand. “Oh, sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” she said with a gentle smile. “Come to the front and I’ll help you get cleaned up. I’m sure I’ve got a first aid kit around here somewhere.”

She disappeared between the shelves. Meg remained awkwardly where she stood. Should she just leave? This woman was bound to think she was unhinged, wandering around in this state in the middle of the night. The neighbors discovering her like this would be bad enough. They would definitely think Meg was crazy, but they’d find a way to attribute it to her genetics. She was a Findley woman after all, even if she did use her father’s last name. They would simply attribute everything to some streak, some predisposition in her family line. This woman was a total stranger. She had nothing to go on, and the fact that she was so elegant and graceful increased Meg’s mortification.

“Come on, then,” she said, popping her head around the nearest bookshelf.

She beckoned for Meg to follow. Hesitantly, Meg put one foot in front of the other. The elderly woman smiled and marched off into the labyrinth. Meg had to quicken her pace to keep

up. She didn't remember the shop being this big before. They passed rows upon rows of shelves all arranged in an arc like dominos. Meg swiveled her head this way and that, trying to look at all the glass objects while keeping up with the strange shopkeeper.

The shelves gave way to a wide circle edged with sofas, armchairs, and ottomans. In the center was a circular desk with an old fashioned till. Above the desk, a giant chandelier hung from the ceiling. It was composed of hundreds of glass spheres, each lit from within by their own individual bulb. The area reminded Meg of a reading room, except that there was no reading to be done.

"Have a seat anywhere you like. I'll be back in just a moment," the woman called over her shoulder.

Meg glanced at the array of seating, but decided against using any of it. She was still covered in sand and had been trailing it all over the store. She didn't want to get it all over the furniture too.

The woman came back carrying a tin vintage first aid kit. "Please, have a seat."

"Uh..." Meg mumbled. She gestured to her outfit with an apologetic look.

"It's fine. Besides, I think all the sand is rather appropriate, don't you?"

Meg could only stare at her, openmouthed and puzzled.

"Sand is used to make glass," she explained.

"Oh. Right."

She smiled warmly and gestured for Meg to sit. Meg plopped down on the sofa nearest her, an old squishy number covered in faded blue fabric. The moment Meg hit the cushions she felt surprisingly relaxed. All the strain and energy seeped out of her body, and she was left in a

sort of comfortable emptiness. The woman sat down next to her and began cleaning her hands with an alcohol wipe. Meg winced at the sting.

“Sorry. It’ll be over in just a moment. I’m Amelia, by the way,” she said sweetly.

“Meg. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too,” she replied. “Although I’m sorry it isn’t under better circumstances. What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, I tripped. Just outside. I was walking back from the beach, but then your sign lit up...” Meg stumbled to explain. She felt ridiculous.

“And you were curious?”

Meg nodded. Amelia smiled as she opened a large bandage and placed it on Meg’s left hand.

“Well, I’m very glad. What do you think of the place?” she asked as she placed another bandage on Meg’s right hand.

“It looks like a library and a curio cabinet had a baby,” Meg answered honestly. Amelia laughed. Her laugh was as melodic as the bells over the front door. “I like it, though,” Meg added quickly. And she realized she truly did like it. The shop was both whimsical and peaceful.

“I quite like that description. It’s very appropriate,” Amelia said as she gazed fondly around her shop.

“Oh, uh, thank you,” Meg said, indicating her hands.

“Not at all. I’m glad I could help.” Amelia packed everything back into the first aid kit. “I wish I had something to mark the occasion. You’re my first customer. I didn’t expect anyone so soon,” she said.

“Yeah, you’ve kept your operation pretty hush-hush. Rumors and speculation have been running rampant.”

“Oh, excellent. I love a bit of mystery,” Amelia said with relish. She tucked the first aid kit somewhere behind the desk and tossed away the trash. “So are you a local?”

“Not exactly.”

Amelia waited for Meg to continue.

“My grandmother lives here. Lived here,” Meg corrected herself. “I’m just here for the summer.”

Amelia studied Meg with a knowing look. It made Meg blush. She looked around to avoid Amelia’s gaze, and her eyes alighted on a miniature glass ship. Its glow was soft and inviting.

“How do you make them light up?” Meg asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Magic,” was Amelia’s response.

Meg jerked her head back to gauge Amelia’s facial expression. She had to be joking, of course. There was no such thing as magic, but there was something in her tone that implied she wasn’t being facetious.

“Trade secret?” Meg pressed.

“Something like that. As I said, I’m very fond of mystery.” Amelia glided over to the shelf and took the ship down from its perch. She carried it over to where Meg sat on the sofa.

“Do you like it?”

Meg nodded. “It’s beautiful.”

Amelia took one of Meg’s hands and gently placed the ship on her bandaged palm.

“Oh, no. I don’t want to break it,” she said.



“You won’t break it,” Amelia assured her as she let go of the sculpture.

Meg held her breath for fear of toppling the ship. It was so small and delicate, yet despite all that it was very life like. She marveled at how such detail could be obtained on such a minute scale. She could make out every plank and every porthole. There was even a mermaid figurehead.

“This is incredible,” Meg breathed as she held it up for closer inspection. Something brushed against her knuckle. She looked down and noticed a thin piece of string trailing from one of the masts. At the end was a tiny piece of paper with indiscernible scribbles in black ink.

“The artist’s information, so to speak,” Amelia explained.

“How can you read it? It’s so small and…”

“Messy?” she supplied.

Meg nodded.

“Yes, I made the mistake of letting Levi label one day. He’s a good lad, but his handwriting is atrocious. I couldn’t find anything for months.”

“So it’s not just you here?” Meg asked.

“Goodness, no. I’d never be able to manage all by myself. I pick up staff here and there when needed.” She observed Meg thoughtfully. “Why don’t you take the ship with you?”

“Oh, I couldn’t afford it,” Meg said, handing the glass ornament back to Amelia.

“We’re not in the buying and selling business. We loan items out to our patrons, for a fee of course,” Amelia elaborated.

“I still wouldn’t be able to afford it,” Meg insisted. She was still holding the ship out for Amelia, but she didn’t move to take it.

“You’re a first time borrower. It’s on the house. Besides, it may help with your nightmares,” she said.

Meg almost dropped the ship in surprise. She glanced sharply at Amelia.

“How do you know I’m having nightmares?”

“You have dark circles under your eyes, and you were taking a midnight stroll in your pajamas. Something is clearly keeping you awake.” She gestured to the ship in Meg’s hand.

“Would you like me to wrap it up for you?”

Wordlessly, Meg handed her the figurine. She watched as Amelia slipped behind the desk and pulled out a box, a sheet of brown parcel paper, and a spool of twine. She delicately placed the ship inside the box and sealed it shut. She then deftly wrapped the box in the paper and tied it off with the twine. Meg was impressed with how neatly she did it. She would never have been able to tie a bow that perfectly.

“Here you are then,” Amelia sang.

She handed Meg the package. Meg held it carefully. She was still afraid she might break the glass. It was so tiny, and her hands seemed clumsier with the bandages slapped to her palms.

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“I’ll bring it back tomorrow,” Meg promised.

“I look forward to seeing you again,” Amelia replied.

She stood silently at the counter as Meg wound her way back through the labyrinth to the exit. Meg really couldn’t believe Amelia had managed to fit so much stuff into such a limited space. She couldn’t remember the store ever being so big. For a moment, she almost believed it was magic.

## Chapter Five

Meg stood on the deck of the ship, a gentle sea breeze kissing her face and tousling her hair. It was dark out. The sky and the water were both inky black. If not for the stars that burned so brightly, Meg wouldn't have known where the sea ended and the sky began. She craned her neck upward to take in that vast expanse of sky. There was a full moon, whole and shiny, glowing up there. Meg could just make out the Man in the Moon's face smiling back at her. She began to see how many constellations she could make out—Orion and his hunting dogs, the Big Dipper, Cygnus, the Unicorn, Draco, Gemini. She could have gone on and on. It felt like she had the entire universe at her fingertips.

Music echoed up to Meg from the waves below. It was a beautifully haunting sound. It reminded her of whale song, but there was something almost human about it. She thought for a moment she heard words. There was a loud splash to Meg's right. She rushed to the side of the ship and peered over the edge. She expected to see a whale, but instead she found a mermaid staring back at her. Her pale skin was as bright as the stars above and stood out against the darkness of the water. Meg gasped in surprise and gazed at the creature in wonder. The mermaid watched Meg, too, while languidly spinning in a circle. Meg lifted her hand and gave a small wave. The mermaid smiled at that. Her teeth were blindingly white like her skin, like pearls. Meg wondered if she could get the mermaid to speak, but before she could find her voice the creature sinuously dove back into the water. Meg gave a wistful sigh. She had wanted to speak to her.

Beneath the glassy surface of the sea, Meg could see more pale figures darting about. She tried to count them all, but they moved too fast. They were blurs of liquid silver. It took her a moment to see because they were twisting in and out, but Meg realized the mermaids were moving in a large circle around the ship. She was hypnotized by the rhythm. As she watched, she

listened, and that was when it dawned on her that the music was coming not from far off whales, but from the mermaids. She couldn't make out the words, but she was certain that the rhythm of the song matched their dance.

A spark flashed somewhere in the back of Meg's mind. There was something about mermaids and singing that she wanted to remember. She knew mermaids were thought to sing sailors to their deaths, but she didn't think that was relevant. She was sure she wasn't in any danger, and the song was so peaceful. Mermaids could deliver prophecies, but Meg couldn't make out the words to the song, so that didn't matter much either. It was something else she wanted to remember, something old. It was tucked away so deeply in her mind that she just couldn't reach it. Another sigh escaped her lips. It was no use.

The wooden planks beneath her hands were worn smooth by salt, wind, and time. She rested her elbows on the edge of the ship and placed her head on her arms. This—the night, the ships, the mermaids—were all so extraordinary, but somehow familiar. Meg wasn't sure how that was possible, how any of it could be familiar, but she knew it was true. Her eyelids began to droop as the ship rocked in the waves and the mermaids sang on. She felt like Wynken, Blyken, and Nod, except she was on a ship rather than in a shoe.

She finally gave in and closed her eyes completely. Mermaids and stars still swam across her vision. She smiled and snuggled her head deeper into the crook of her arms. Meg felt weightless as sleep crept over her. Everything was so calm and peaceful; it was like all her troubles had vanished and she was lighter than air.

As her mind slowly faded to nothingness, an image flashed before her. Long black tentacles reached out—greedy, grabbing. She flinched, but a gentle wind blew across her face and the picture began to ripple like water. The black tentacles began to dissipate, like ink in

water. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared. The crease between Meg's brow smoothed and her body relaxed. She was safe; nothing could touch her. And that was the last thought she had as she drifted off to sleep.

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Sunlight filtered through the blinds and dappled Meg's pillow. She opened her eyes to brightness, and it took her a moment to remember where she was. Her eyes landed on the glass ship, and everything slowly sunk in.

She had slept. She had actually slept through the night. It was a glorious revelation. Meg stretched and sighed in contentment. She felt good. She felt better, in fact, than she had felt for months. Rolling onto her side, she reached out and gently traced her fingers along the edges of the ship's sails. The dream was still so vivid in her mind that she was a little surprised to meet hard glass rather than soft canvas.

Her eyes wandered to the mermaid figurehead upon the prow. The mermaids of her dream flashed across her mind's eye. They were so incredibly beautiful, her mermaids. Meg wished that she could draw them or paint them, but she felt she could never truly capture them. *Maybe they aren't meant to be captured*, she mused. That was it, she was certain. The mermaids were meant to exist outside of her world, in that place between sleeping and awake, where anything is possible. There they could swim and sing...

The same spark from her dream flared somewhere in Meg's conscious. There was something she wanted to remember. She had felt it in the dream, but it was even stronger now that she was awake. It was important to her, she was sure of that. It had something to do with the singing. Her grandmother's face overlapped Meg's memory of the dream, and it was instantly clear: she had heard the mermaids sing.

Meg smiled ever so slightly as she buried her face into her pillow. She didn't really understand why she was so pleased by the thought. The mermaids weren't real. She hadn't been on a ship. She hadn't seen them swimming. She hadn't actually heard them sing. It was all impossible, and yet somehow, it was real. It was very real to Meg. The mermaids were real in the same way the Kraken was real.

Meg cringed at the thought of the Kraken. She remembered it flickering into life at the very end of her dream, but it hadn't been able to manifest into physical shape. The water or the mermaid's lullaby or something had held it back. Meg was grateful for that. The Kraken truly frightened her.

She had to get the creature out of her mind. It was making her squirm. Absentmindedly, she scratched her hands. Her nails tore into the heavy plastic of a bandage. She glanced down, having completely forgotten about injuring herself the night before. The edge of the bandage was detached from her skin, and no matter how hard she pressed it wouldn't reattach itself. Meg finally decided to rip it off. The flapping plastic annoyed her. The sticky part stung as she tore off the enormous Band-Aid.

Meg was surprised to find that her wound was almost completely healed. She remembered it being scraped and oozing last night, but looking at it in the light of day, it was barely scratched. It was mostly red and irritated. Meg quickly ripped the Band-Aid off her other hand. The skin was equally clean, if not better than the first. She held her palms out, staring at them in complete astonishment. All her ailments had vanished in a single night. How could it be? How was that possible?

The glass ship glinted in the sunlight. Meg turned back to it, thoughtful. *It may help you with your nightmares*, Amelia had said.

Meg shook her head to dispel the thoughts running rampant inside her mind. She was being silly. Amelia was just an old woman, and The Glass Slipper was just another store. There was no otherworldly explanation for any of it. Meg had finally gotten a good night's sleep. It was bound to happen eventually. As for her hands, well, maybe she hadn't been as badly scraped up as she thought. It was dark after all, and she hadn't closely examined her hands after Amelia had cleaned them. Besides, she had probably used those antibiotic Band-Aids that are supposed to help heal cuts. It wasn't magic. It was just coincidence.

She hopped out of bed and padded over to her suitcase. Her clothes were jumbled, and a few were strewn across the floor around her bag. Meg rifled through her belongings trying to find something only partially wrinkled to wear for the day. She sifted and sorted, but she kept thinking about The Glass Slipper. Her hands wandered through fabric, but her mind was losing itself in a labyrinth of heavy wooden shelves. Meg finally settled on a lavender tee shirt and a pair of shorts. As she awkwardly rose from the floor, the glow from the ship once again drew her eyes. Meg's mouth twitched into something like a smile, and she realized that—magic or not—she couldn't wait to go back.

## Chapter Six

Meg sat in bed and tried to read, but she had been on the same page for the last hour. Every time she tried to take in a sentence her eyes would wander to the clock on her nightstand. Time was moving at an agonizingly slow pace, but that was the way of time. When she wanted the world to slow down, it sped up, and when she wanted things to move faster, they all but came to a standstill. By a quarter to twelve she had had enough. Meg jumped out of bed and grabbed a pair of Converse waiting by the side of her bed. She had already rewrapped the ship in the brown paper, though her finished product was less aesthetically pleasing than the original. She opened her bedroom door and listened with bated breath. The house was dark and silent. Carefully balancing her shoes and the ship in her hands, she tiptoed down the hall and into the living room.

Meg hadn't told her mother about her previous visit to the shop. She didn't want to mention it because it would bring up awkward questions. She didn't want her mother to think she was losing it. Meg could have told her about her plans to visit tonight, though, but she didn't. She had kept it a secret.

She couldn't say why she was keeping it a secret, exactly. Her mother knew the shop was open. Everyone was talking about the sign, which stayed alight throughout the day.

“Should be ashamed of themselves, wasting electricity like that,” Mr. Hardy had said. He was roaming aimlessly through Jackson's Grocery, talking to anyone who would stop and listen. He kept her mother so long that Meg had time to eat a few deli samples before she grabbed the trash bags, toilet paper, and light bulbs they had come to the store for.

Her mother had seemed intrigued by The Glass Slipper, despite Mr. Hardy's complaints. On the drive home, she had taken a detour through the center of downtown just to see the new storefront. She and Meg avoided using the main thoroughfare whenever possible. Driving



through Main Street was much like walking down its sidewalks, you constantly had to stop to avoid collision with pedestrians or minivans inching forward to make the view last longer.

“The sign certainly is beautiful,” her mother had said as they crawled by. “I hope they manage to stay afloat.”

“Me too,” Meg replied as they finally passed out of view.

Meg could have told her mother right then that she wanted to visit the shop. She probably would have encouraged Meg to go. She might have even gone with her. There was just something holding Meg back. Meg told herself it was best to keep her mother and the shop separate because she didn't want Amelia divulging any embarrassing or upsetting information, like the fact that her nightmare was still keeping her awake, but Meg knew that wasn't the truth. There was an instinct urging her to keep the secret, to keep the shop and everything about it to herself.

Meg stopped in the bathroom to check her reflection in the mirror. It was a risk, she knew. The light could easily wake her mother, but she decided to take the chance. She had fixed her hair earlier in the day so that it wasn't a bushy mess. It had taken her ages, but with an outrageous amount of mousse she had managed to tame her waves. She had also applied a layer of mascara to her eyelashes. The black of the mascara coupled with the lavender of her shirt brought out Meg's bluish green eyes. She tucked a loose strand of hair into place and nervously smoothed out her clothes. Meg desperately wanted to make a better impression the second time around.

Satisfied with her appearance, Meg turned out the light and snuck out of the bathroom. Moonlight seeped in through the living room blinds, illuminating her way to the front door. She quickly shoved her feet into her shoes before silently unlocking and opening the door. She

managed to make it out without a sound, but there was a gentle thud upon closing it that made Meg wince. She sucked in a sharp breath and waited for any sign of movement from within, but everything was quiet.

Meg crept down the driveway and into the street. Her sneakers made less noise than her flip-flops—made her more invisible. She didn't care if the neighbors saw her this time, though. She had a reason to be out now, even if they thought it was a strange one. There was also a sort of buoyancy about Meg. She felt lighter, less troubled.

In what felt like seconds, Meg was strolling down Main Street towards The Glass Slipper. The sign was a beacon in the dark. Seeing it made Meg light up. Before she knew it she was throwing open the blue door, the silver bells announcing her arrival. Her feet remembered the way through the maze of shelves. She wove this way and that until a large patch of light told her she was near the front desk. Meg turned the corner, and she came face to face with someone who was definitely not Amelia.

“Hello. May I help you?”

“Uh...hi,” Meg muttered, feeling completely idiotic.

The woman behind the desk couldn't have been much older than Meg, but the way she carried herself, Meg could tell they were eons apart in maturity. She held herself with confidence and ease. Her black hair fell in waves around her shoulders, and she had sharp bangs that cut across her forehead and drew attention to her dark eyes. She reminded Meg of Cleopatra, but it wasn't just her exotic looks that drew the connection. There was an air about her that just seemed regal.

“May I help you?” she repeated to Meg.

“Sorry,” Meg said with a shake of her head. “I was expecting Amelia. I just came to return this.”

Meg stepped forward, holding out her poorly wrapped package. The airy feeling she had walked in with was slowly seeping out of her. She felt incredibly awkward and intimidated in the face of someone so cool and together.

“Thank you,” the woman said as she took the package from Meg’s hand.

She pulled an enormously heavy leather bound book out from behind the desk and let it drop with a resounding thud on the desktop. The pages inside were worn, and Meg was pretty sure they were actual parchment. She also produced a fountain pen, but she was a little more delicate with its placement on the desk so as to not splatter ink everywhere. She opened the book where it was marked by a peacock blue bookmark and began to take detailed notes on the right hand page. She was so absorbed in her work Meg thought it best to quietly exit. She had just taken a step back when a familiar voice called her name.

“Meg!” Amelia emerged from the shelves on the other side of the desk.

“Hi,” Meg replied meekly.

“You’re not leaving yet are you?” she asked.

“Oh, I...uh...” Meg could only gesture over her shoulder to where she thought the exit lay. The woman behind the desk was looking at her with a slightly arched eyebrow, and Amelia was smiling patiently. Meg felt a blush creeping into her cheeks, but she was saved from further embarrassment by a large stack of boxes walking towards them.

“For the love of God,” the woman behind the desk sighed. “Please be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” came a voice from behind the tower of cardboard.

“That’s debatable,” she retorted.

“Need I remind everyone that we have a guest?” Amelia chimed in.

“We have a guest?”

There was a struggle as a pair of hands tried to maneuver the boxes to the side, but there were too many. The boxes dropped to the floor, alarmingly hard in Meg’s mind. She could feel everyone around her wince. The boy that had emerged from behind the boxes smiled apologetically. He loped over to Meg and held out a hand.

“Hi. I’m—”

“Levi,” Meg said.

She knew at a glance that it had to be him. His mouse brown hair was sticking up in all different directions, and his clothes, while perfectly normal, hung off of his tall, lanky frame at odd angles. He looked windswept without the effect of actual wind.

“Yeah,” he replied with a quizzical glance. “And you are?”

“Meg. Nice to meet you,” she said as she shook his hand.

“And this,” Amelia stepped in, gesturing to the woman at the front desk, “is Irissa.”

Irissa gave Meg an elegant nod of acknowledgement. Meg returned the gesture with a half-hearted wave.

“So, how did you like the ship?” Amelia asked.

“The ship was beautiful,” she answered earnestly.

“Did it help?”

Meg wasn’t sure how to answer that question. She did not believe for one minute that the glass ship was the reason she had finally gotten a good night’s sleep. It was just a coincidence. There was a logical explanation for everything. She had been thinking about a ship, so she dreamed she was on one. Still, even if it was only the power of suggestion, it had worked.

“I guess so,” Meg admitted.

“Perfect,” Amelia said with a knowing grin. “Levi, why don’t you help Meg pick out something new to take with her?”

“Oh, no, that’s okay,” she said hastily.

“Nonsense,” Amelia sang, ignoring her completely.

Meg started to argue but was stopped by a tap on the shoulder from Levi. He gave a subtle shake of the head and beckoned for her to follow him down one of the many shelved corridors. Meg was hesitant to follow, but he took her hand and pulled her along after him.

“It’d be useless to argue,” Levi told her once they were out of earshot.

He noticed he was still holding her hand, and he quickly dropped it. There was an awkward silence during which they wandered aimlessly around the shop. Levi kept fiddling with his clothes or his watch. Meg watched all this with amusement. She was wondering if he was ever going to say anything when he loudly cleared his throat.

“So what would you like to see?” he asked.

“I don’t really know,” Meg said. “There’s so much to see. It’s incredible...but also kind of overwhelming.”

Levi nodded. “Yeah. That’s how I felt when I first came in here, but I kept coming back. That’s why Amelia gave me the job, even though I’m kind of a mess. She just couldn’t get rid of me.”

“I thought the store just opened?”

“It just opened here, but the store’s been around for a long time,” he explained. “Amelia likes to move around.”

“Where were you before you moved here?” Meg asked.

“Colorado. We set up in Manitou Springs. And before that we were in New York City, and I can’t quite remember where we were before that. I think it was somewhere in Canada.”

“Wow. And you up and move whenever? Just like that?”

“I like it here,” Levi answered simply. “Hey, how did you know who I was back there?”

“Oh,” Meg said, caught off guard by the sudden change in subject. “Amelia mentioned a Levi when I asked about the writing on the tag around the ship. And, well...”

“What?” he asked.

“You kind of look like your handwriting,” Meg replied.

Levi laughed. It was loud and raucous. Meg laughed too, covering her eyes with her hand.

“Ugh, sorry. That sounds stupid.”

“No,” he chuckled. “No, I can definitely see it.”

“So when you first came here, did Amelia let you borrow something, too?” Meg asked, returning to the previous conversation.

“Yeah, she did.”

“And it was?”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” he said as he took off.

Meg followed him through the maze. She was practically running to keep up with his long strides. He stopped abruptly halfway down the aisle and Meg barreled into him. Levi helped steady her, and then he drew her attention to something on the topmost shelf of the bookcase in front of them. Meg craned her neck and squinted.

“I can’t tell what it is,” Meg said apologetically.

Levi was unfazed. “Wait right here,” he said.

He disappeared around the corner. After a few moments, he returned steering a wheeled ladder through the aisles. It kept swerving this way and that. Meg tensed, waiting for him to hit one of the shelves, but he never did. He slid to a halt in front of her, locked the wheels into place, and nimbly climbed to the very top. Levi had misjudged the distance, however, and the object he intended to fetch was out of reach. Meg assumed he would climb down and readjust. Instead, Levi swung out, leaving half his body dangling in midair. Meg gasped, and Levi grinned. He grabbed the item and quickly climbed back down, jumping the last rung and landing on the floor with a bang.

“Ta da!” he sang.

Levi extended his hand, and on his palm rested a miniature glass castle. Meg reached out, but stopped short of touching it.

“May I?” she asked.

Levi nodded. She carefully took the castle from his hands and held it up to her eyes. It was rendered in exquisite detail. Meg could make out every stone and window, and there were even individual leaves of ivy crawling up one of the towers. On the ramparts stood a king gazing out over his kingdom.

“He reminds me of King Arthur,” Meg said as she handed the figure back to him.

“I’ve always wanted to be a knight of the round table,” Levi confessed.

“I’d rather be Merlin.”

“Really?”

“The Disney version,” Meg clarified. “I liked that he could change himself into all the different animals. Plus, blue is my favorite color.”

Hearing this split Levi’s face into a fantastic grin.

“Come on,” he said, tugging at her shirtsleeve.

Meg once again followed him through the maze. They were zigzagging around the bookcases so fast she was almost dizzy.

“Slow down,” Meg called. “My legs aren’t as long as yours.”

Levi came to another abrupt halt. This time, Meg was slightly more prepared. She skidded to a halt on the balls of her feet just inches from a collision.

“This is it,” Levi said, pointing to the shelf.

“What?”

“This is what you should take home with you,” he elaborated.

He was pointing to a row of small bottles organized in a neat line, each one a different color. He took one off the shelf and handed it to Meg. The bottle was lit from within like all the other items in the shop, but the light was a vibrant blue that tinted the glass. It had a black metal cap, and a paper label encircling it read *blue* in curving script.

“A vintage bottle of ink.”

“Do you like it?” Levi asked.

Meg smiled. “Yeah. It’s really cool.”

“Awesome. Let’s go back to the desk and I’ll wrap it up for you.”

“You’re going to wrap it?” Meg asked skeptically.

Levi laughed. “Well, Irissa or Amelia will.”

They made their way back to the others at a more leisurely pace. Levi navigated the shelves with ease. He enjoyed pointing out some of his favorite objects along the way. Sometimes he would turn to face Meg while doing so, walking backwards through the labyrinth of bookcases. It made Meg incredibly nervous.



“You’re going to break something,” Meg said as she emerged in the ring of light cast by the glass chandelier above the desk.

“Despite his rather haphazard approach to things, Levi has actually never broken a single piece of our collection,” Amelia said.

She was standing next to Irissa behind the desk attaching a small paper tag to an ornate snow globe. Irissa scoffed.

“Yet. Give it time,” she said.

“I resent that,” Levi broke in.

Amelia sighed before turning to Meg. “Did you find something?” she asked.

Meg handed her the bottle of ink.

“A lovely choice.”

Amelia rummaged behind the desk, searching for a box and twine. Irissa meanwhile glanced at the tag twisted around the bottle’s neck and then jotted something down in the old leather volume she had produced earlier. Meg realized it must hold a record of their transactions.

“You guys don’t use computers?” she asked.

“Much to my despair,” Irissa said.

“Irissa is our goddess of organization,” Amelia explained. “She would much rather have everything filed away electronically, but I think a computer would clash with the overall ambiance we’ve created. Don’t you agree?”

“I think I’ll stay out of this one,” Meg replied.

“Wise decision,” Irissa teased.

Amelia placed the bottle in a small box, and then began wrapping it in brown paper. Meg marveled at how neatly she folded and tucked the paper.

“We lost one,” Levi said suddenly.

Meg turned to find Levi sitting on the floor, examining the contents of the boxes he had carried in earlier. She thought something must be broken. He was studying an old Christmas ornament, and when he held it up for all of them to see, it was obvious what was wrong. There was no light coming from the ornament. The inside was black, like it had been scorched. Meg assumed the light had burned out, but she couldn’t understand why everyone looked so disappointed.

“Can’t you fix it?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” Irissa said. She stepped out from behind the desk and crouched down in front of Levi to get a better look. “But not always.”

“It’s a delicate process,” Amelia added. “Not all of them can be saved.”

There was a snip of scissors as she cut a piece of twine to size. She wrapped it around the perfectly wrapped box and tied it into a neat bow. She handed the parcel to Meg, who took it carefully into her hands.

“There you go.”

“Thank you. How much do I owe you?” Meg asked nervously.

Amelia waved her hand. “Absolutely nothing.”

“But...”

“Consider it a thirty day free trial,” Amelia said.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Just return the bottle in a week’s time. You have a good evening, Meg.”

“You too,” she replied.

“Bye, Meg!” Levi called, waving his arm wildly in the air.

Meg laughed. She gave a small wave as she made her way to the front of the shop. The bells sang her into the night as she stepped out onto the sidewalk. It was strange, moving from the shop's world of light to the darkness outside. She almost didn't want to move beyond the glow of the glass letters. With force of will she put one foot in front of the other and started the walk home. Meg reminded herself the light wasn't entirely gone; there was still a piece of the shop with her, delicately cradled in her hands.

## Chapter Seven

Meg stomped into her room and threw herself face first onto her bed. She sighed heavily into the mattress. It had been a long day. Every inch of her body ached. She and her mother had tackled the attic, which had been packed to capacity with boxes. Being the smaller of the two, Meg had been forced to crawl around in the miniscule space and pass things down to her mother. It was so hot up there without air conditioning that even Meg's lungs felt scorched. She had thought things would get better when she had finally cleared the space, but then she had to help her mother sort through all the boxes. Much of it was junk, so Meg spent the next few hours marching out of the air conditioning and into the overwhelming humid summer heat. She was tired, sweaty, and bitter.

She lay as still as possible and let the overhead fan brush cool air over her body. She needed to take a shower, but the idea of standing repulsed her. Meg rolled onto her side, and her eyes immediately sought the light seeping out of an antique perfume bottle. It was her latest loan from The Glass Slipper. The light coming out of it was rosy in color, and the night before Meg had dreamed of being in a vast English rose garden.

Meg smiled and some of her bitterness ebbed away. It had been a lovely dream—except for the end. As she had wandered through the garden, rose vines started growing across her path. The thorns caught in her jeans and pulled her back. When she had looked down, the greenery had withered to black. The long tendrils slowly slithered around her body. She made to run, but they gripped her tight, and that's when she had woken up.

It had bothered her, the dream. She hadn't had a nightmare since that first night at The Glass Slipper. The Kraken still haunted her dreams—it made an appearance every night—but it

hadn't been able to touch her. Meg had been so certain that the nightmare was fading and that it would go away once and for all. Now, a sliver of fear and doubt was gnawing at her.

She pressed her fists into her eyes and tried to picture the shop in her mind. She saw herself sitting on the blue couch. She saw Amelia, the patient matriarch, smiling at all of them and quietly shaking her head. She pictured Irissa and Levi bickering over something silly, eventually devolving into laughter. And she imagined all the bright, glittering light surrounding them.

The image soothed Meg. She sighed again, and she let her arms fall with a thunk onto the bedspread. She had been spending every night at The Glass Slipper, slipping away later and later each time. In some ways, it had become her shelter. It was the one place in town where no one knew her or her family or her past. She was just Meg to them, and that was enough. Besides, there was just something about the store. It was so peaceful and—not happy exactly. Happy made Meg think of someone jumping up and down with joy, and that wasn't The Glass Slipper. It was more of a quiet contentment, like a dog that had found the perfect patch of sunlight to nap in. Meg felt good when she was there in the glow of the chandelier and the glass trinkets.

There was a knock at the door. Meg jumped up and grabbed the perfume bottle, shoving it under one of her pillows.

“Hey,” her mom said, peeking around the door.

“Hey.”

“How're you holding up?” she asked.

“My muscles are screaming, and my feet are trying to decide whether or not to excommunicate themselves from my body,” Meg quipped.

Her mother laughed. “I'm sorry. But I think I can make it up to you.”

“You’ve hired the Johnson boys to do the rest of the cleaning and packing?”

“I ordered you a crawfish po’boy from The Blue Pelican,” she said.

“That’ll do,” Meg said, perking up.

“I thought so. Now, do you think you might want to shower first?”

“Hint taken.”

“Thank you. I’ll go pick up the food. See you in a few,” she said.

Meg listened to her footsteps receding down the hall. When she heard the front door close, she extracted the perfume bottle from beneath her pillow and put it back on her nightstand. She still hadn’t told her mother about her nightly visits to Amelia’s store. Meg had been going back every night for the last week, switching out one trinket for another. She kept meaning to tell her mother, but she could never find the perfect moment. Anyway it just didn’t feel right. It had become Meg’s secret, and she liked that.

She kicked off her smelly shoes and sifted through the last of her clean clothes. She found something decent to wear, and then headed off the bathroom. Meg hoped the shower would wash away the awfulness of the day and any trace of her nightmare.

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“I don’t understand how you can do it,” Levi said. He was shaking his tousled head in disgust.

“It’s delicious,” Meg insisted.

“Don’t be such a baby, Levi,” Irissa taunted.

“It has a face! Its eyes are staring at you as you it eat!”

They had gotten on the subject of food, and Meg had made the mistake of recommending the crawfish po’boys at The Blue Pelican. It had led to the discussion of crawfish boils. Amelia

and Irissa thought it was something they'd like to try, although Irissa wasn't keen on the messiness of it all. Levi, however, had been absolutely appalled by the idea.

"The crawfish are dead by the time you eat them. It's not like they're aware of what's happening," Irissa pointed out.

"That's even worse. You're desecrating their carcasses."

"Ugh, this is getting gross. Can we change the subject please?" Meg begged. The death and carcass imagery was really making her uncomfortable.

"I second that," Amelia said as she emerged from the back of the shop. She was carrying an enormous box, which could only mean new inventory. "I propose we discuss where to put the new merchandise."

"How do you guys even have room for all this stuff? You get new boxes every day. Well, every night," Meg corrected herself.

"Oh, there's always room somewhere," Amelia replied airily.

"Why don't you say 'ya'll'?" Levi asked. "You're a southerner. Isn't that what you're supposed to say?"

Meg rolled her eyes. "Crawfish."

"Eck," Levi croaked.

He gagged and shuddered while Irissa and Meg laughed. Amelia chuckled, too, but she quickly composed herself.

"All right. Division of labor: I'll catalogue, Irissa will label, Levi will shelve, and Meg, you can check for any damages."

Levi gave a mock salute. "Aye, captain."

They all set to work. Levi brought a box over to Meg. She settled herself into the cushions and began inspecting the packaged trinkets. It was enjoyable work, much more enjoyable than cleaning out the attic had been, but it soon lulled Meg into a daze. Going through the attic had been physically exhausting, and sorting through all memories had taken an emotional toll as well. Meg felt drained, and with the nightmare keeping her up, the rhythm of the work was making her incredibly sleepy. She sprawled on the couch and settled herself into a more comfortable position as she continued to check the objects one by one, but in no time at all she was fast asleep.

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A rattling noise roused Meg from her nap. She quickly sat up, thinking she had knocked over a box and broken all the glass pieces inside. There was no box at her feet, though. Meg looked around, but she was alone. Amelia, Irissa, and Levi had all disappeared.

“Hello?” Meg called.

The rattling noise sounded again. Meg glanced around and saw one last box sitting on the desk. She got up to investigate, hoping she wasn't about to find a rat or a spider moving around inside. She stood on her tiptoes and looked into the box. There was no rat and no spider. There was, however, a glass chess piece, a polished bird, and a glass bottle tucked away at the bottom. Meg wondered why they had been left behind. She picked up the bottle, and the inside was stained a tarry black.

“Oh,” Meg said aloud as she inspected the damage.

She had seen other burned out pieces, but the bottle was by far the worse. It was so charred it looked like the bottle was filled with black ink. Meg could barely see through the



glass. *This must be what Amelia was talking about, she thought. It's one of the ones that can't be fixed.*

Meg moved to put it back when the tag around the bottle's neck brushed against her hand. She automatically glanced down, and what she saw made her stop. There, in Irissa's neat script, was her name—Margaret May Findley Jones. She couldn't comprehend it. Why was her name on the bottle? Amelia had said the labels carried the artist's information, but this wasn't any work of Meg's. Was it a joke?

A flicker of movement caught her eye. Something was in the bottle. Meg was sure that's what had caused the rattling sound, because she could feel the glass moving ever so faintly in her hands. *It must be a joke, she thought. She peered into bottle, and the blackness moved. Meg blinked, thinking she must be half asleep still. She tried to focus her eyes, but the image didn't change. The black burn marks were taking on substance, shifting and changing beneath the glass. She watched mesmerized as a shape began to form. There was something that looked like an eye, and then long dark tendrils pressed against the inside of the glass.*

Meg gasped and let go of the bottle. It fell to the floor with a crash that echoed throughout the store. Shards of glass flew in every direction, sliding across the floor and hitting Meg's sneakers.

“Meg?”

Levi ran into the center of the shop with Irissa at his heels. They were staring from Meg to the shattered glass on the floor.

“Meg, are you okay?” Irissa asked.

Meg stared at them. She wasn't sure what had just happened. Had she been dreaming?

“I'm sorry,” she managed to stutter.

“What happened?” she pressed.

“I...I don't—”

Meg was distracted by black dust pooling at the epicenter of the broken glass. She gaped as she watched the pile grow larger, expanding into a writhing mass. She instinctively took a step back. She knew what it was going to be.

“Oh, no,” she heard Levi mutter.

The light from the chandelier dimmed as the Kraken towered over Meg, extending its tentacles towards her. She threw herself back, but there was nowhere to go. The edge of the desk rammed into her spine. She could feel the box slide away from the impact and hit the floor. She thought she heard more glass shatter, but she was too focused on the nightmare in front of her to be sure.

That's what it was. Her nightmare had come to life. It reached for her, wanting to drag her into that darkness she always saw in her dreams. Meg wanted to scream, but she couldn't find her voice. Adrenaline flooded her system, and she wanted to run, but tendrils of black dust were slowly creeping in around her. She thought about climbing over the desk, but she was scared of turning her back on the creature.

The room got darker, and Meg got colder the closer the Kraken came to her. She thought she heard someone calling her name, but it was hard to tell. The rushing sound of water was filling her ears. A smoky tentacle reached out and wrapped around her ankle. Meg kicked back, but the monster's grip only tightened. Meg felt a weight descend on her chest, and her lungs burned. It was as if there was no more oxygen left in the room. It felt like she was drowning.

A brilliant golden light cut across Meg and the Kraken. Meg would have called it sunlight, but it was more powerful than that. The Kraken recoiled and slithered away from Meg.

Warmth returned to her skin, and she found she could breath again. She watched as several shadows receded into the labyrinth of bookcases and disappeared.

“Are you all right, dear?”

Meg looked up to see Amelia standing next to her. She was studying Meg with a look of concern. Meg had her mouth open to answer, but words wouldn’t come out. The silence she left was filled by the sound of running footsteps. Levi and Irissa reappeared, dashing up to the front desk.

“They got out,” Irissa panted. “They slipped under the front door.”

“How many?” Amelia asked.

“We couldn’t tell,” Levi said.

Amelia went around to the desk. She emerged with the box Meg had knocked over.

“There’s nothing left. Do you remember what was in here?”

Levi and Irissa shook their heads. “No,” they said.

“Meg?”

Meg once again tried to make words, but nothing came out. She could only stare at the floor where the bottle had shattered.

“Meg?” Amelia said. She came around from behind the desk and planted herself in front of Meg. “Meg, what was in the box? How many figures were in there?”

“Meg?” Levi asked tentatively.

“I have to go,” she managed to utter.

“What?”

“I have to go!” she yelled.

She pushed past Amelia and Levi and stormed out of the shop. Before she knew what was happening her feet were pounding on the pavement and she was headed home. Her stride and her heartbeat were in sync, and she could hear the rhythm throbbing in her ears. Her breath was coming out in sobs and gasps. Meg couldn't understand what was happening. All she knew was that she was afraid of the darkness pressing in on her, and she desperately wanted to be home. She practically ran up her grandmother's driveway, and she had to stop herself from throwing open the door. A small portion of her self-preservation remained intact, and she gently eased open the front door and slipped inside.

She managed to shut the door without too much noise. She kicked off her sneakers and tiptoed through the living room, down the hall, and into the bathroom. She shut the door before flipping on the light. The face reflected in the mirror was ghostly white except for two splotches of bright red on the cheeks. Her forehead was misted with sweat. Meg turned on the cold water as high as it could go, hoping the noise would drown out the sound of her pulse. She cupped her hands under the faucet and let the icy cold liquid pool between her palms, and then she splashed her face. It sent a shiver down her spine, but Meg didn't care. It was the jolt she needed to prove she was really awake.

Meg turned off the water, but she didn't bother to pat her face dry. Instead, she turned off the light and made her way as quietly as possible to her bedroom. She shut the door behind her and proceeded to turn on all the lights within reach—the overhead light, her lamp, her desk lamp, even the old nightlight. Meg wanted as much illumination as possible. She stood in the middle of the room, soaking it in. It wasn't strong enough, but it would do.

Meg crawled into her bed and wrapped her comforter around her body like a cocoon. She wasn't sure if she was hot or cold, but it didn't really matter. The bedding was like her armor. It

would keep her safe. She lay down and snuggled into the mattress. She wanted to escape into mindless sleep, but she knew that she couldn't. Too much adrenaline was still pumping through her system, and if she closed her eyes, the Kraken would be waiting for her.

She picked up one of the books piled up on the shelf of her nightstand. Meg opened it to the first page and tried to read. She managed to get through the first sentence, but then the print began to swim before her eyes. She saw instead the shop and the Kraken. The scene kept replaying itself in her mind, making her shiver. She couldn't comprehend what had happened. All she knew is that inside she was screaming.

Meg shook her head and refocused on the book in front of her. She barely finished the first sentence again before the print started to shift and change. The black font twisted until long tendrils were swirling on the page, reaching out to grab her. Meg slammed the book shut and let it drop to the floor. She pulled the comforter more tightly around her and waited for dawn.

## Chapter Eight

A crack of thunder shook Meg's room and made the headboard of her bed rattle. The motion shook Meg awake more so than the sound. Her eyelids felt heavy as she forced them open, and there was a crick in her neck from having slept so tightly curled. She groaned as she forced herself into an upright position.

Her lights had been turned off and the book she had thrown to the floor was sitting on the corner of her nightstand. That could only mean that her mother was already up. She sighed and buried her head in her hands. The book on the floor was easy to explain away. All the lights being on was a different matter.

A flash of lightening illuminated her grey tinged bedroom, and another crack of thunder followed. Meg got up and cracked the blinds. The street outside was slick with rain, and the sky was such a dark grey it was almost black. *That's weird*, Meg thought. The weather forecast had predicted that it would only get hotter, and it hardly ever rained so late in the summer.

She let the blinds fall shut and plopped back down on her bed. Her mind was working more steadily now that she was fully awake, and that meant that the events of the previous night were coming back to her in full force. She groaned, throwing a pillow over her face. In the light of day, Meg's memories seemed ridiculous and impossible. Dust didn't turn into monsters. Nightmares didn't come to life. And the Kraken was not real. She must have been dreaming, maybe even sleepwalking. That had to have been it. She had been dreaming of the Kraken, and she hadn't been fully awake when she saw it.

Meg groaned again, imagining what the others must think of her. She had been acting mental. Then there was all the damage she had caused. It could have been part of the dream, but Meg suspected she really had broken several glass pieces during her episode. She couldn't even

begin the fathom how she was going to afford to replace everything. And how was she going to face everyone back at the shop? She had to, of course. She couldn't just run away from it. She knew that much. Throwing the pillow to the side, Meg tumbled out of bed. She glanced at her suitcase, but bypassed it in favor of the door. She could get ready later.

Meg padded down the hallway. She could hear a man's voice talking about precipitation and expected rainfall. She turned into the living room and plopped down on the couch next to her mother. They were silent for a moment as they watched the weather report, but then it cut to a commercial.

"Hey, sleepyhead," her mother said. She planted a kiss on Meg's cheek.

"Hey."

"I was about to come wake you up and see if you wanted some lunch," she said.

"Lunch? What time is it?" Meg asked.

"It's almost one."

"I didn't know it was that late."

"It's hard to tell with the rain. The weather report said it came out of nowhere, and it's only going to get worse. There's been a temperature drop, too. It's actually cold outside," her mom told her.

"That's insane," Meg said.

"So you want to tell me why all your lights were on this morning?"

Meg didn't immediately respond. She avoided her mother's gaze by picking at a loose thread in the couch cushion.

"Did you have a nightmare?" she pressed.

“Yes,” Meg with a sigh. “Yes. And I was afraid of the dark, so I turned all the lights on. And I feel really stupid, so could we just not talk about it?” she pleaded.

This wasn’t the whole truth, but it wasn’t a lie either. It would have to do. Her mom gave her a sad smile.

“No, we don’t have to talk about it,” she said. She brushed the hair out of Meg’s eyes. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s okay.”

“But honey?”

Meg finally looked at her mother.

“Don’t feel stupid,” she said.

Meg nodded. “So what about lunch?”

“I could whip something up for you. Or we could order something,” her mother said, taking the hint.

“Let’s order from The Greenhouse.”

“Pizza again?” she teased.

“Nah,” Meg said, shaking her head. “I’ll just get the shrimp sandwich.”

“Okay. I’ll go place the order.”

“I’m gonna get dressed and then I’ll go pick it up.”

“You sure?” her mother asked.

“Yeah.”

Meg rolled off the couch while her mother searched for her cell phone. The floor was cold beneath her bare feet, making her shiver. She went back to her room and searched for something appropriate to wear. It was surprisingly difficult. She had packed for heat and



humidity. Everything she touched was either a pair of shorts, a tee shirt, or a tank top. She had brought a pair of jeans, but those were sitting in the dirty clothes hamper.

With a sigh, Meg left her suitcase and dug through the boxes she had stacked back inside her closet. She found the one where she had stuffed all the rain gear, and she took out a shiny pair of yellow boots that had once belonged to her mother. She then dragged out the box they had marked “clothes” in large sharpie letters, the word “keep” printed in a smaller hand beneath it. Meg pried open the flaps. Inside was a strange assortment of garments. It was a mix of her grandmother’s and grandfather’s clothes and the random clothes she had left behind on her last visit.

Her hands sifted through the various materials. There were cotton dresses and wrinkled tee shirts, bulky sweaters and lace shawls. Meg could still smell her grandmother on the fabric. It made her ache. She pushed those things aside; she would never be able to wear them. Sorting through the layers of her grandfather’s clothing, Meg found a long sleeve thermal tee shirt that would keep her warm. A little more digging produced a blue hooded windbreaker and, beneath that, a pair of jeans Meg had left behind a few summers back.

She threw on her mismatched outfit and shoved her feet into the rain boots. Everything fit, more or less. She then went to the bathroom, where she managed to tuck her hair into a sloppy braid. The dark circles were back under her eyes, but Meg ignored them. She squeezed a dollop of toothpaste onto her toothbrush and furiously scrubbed her teeth.

She was nervous. The Glass Slipper was right across from The Greenhouse Sub Shop. That’s why she had chosen it. It wouldn’t be open, but Meg wanted to see it. She thought it would be a good way to ease herself into going back.

“Food’ll be ready in thirty minutes,” her mother said, poking her head into the bathroom.

“Okay,” Meg said after she spat out her toothpaste. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“What are you wearing?”

Meg glanced down at her outfit. “Some of granddad’s old things. The jeans are mine though.”

“And the boots used to be mine,” her mother laughed.

“I only had summer clothes, and you said it was cold outside,” Meg explained.

“Smart thinking,” she said. “I found an umbrella for you. I’ll put it by the car keys.”

“Sounds good,” Meg said as her mother left the room.

She rinsed her mouth out and spat into the sink once more. Rising up, she confronted her reflection in the mirror. *You can do this*, she thought to herself. Then she grit her minty fresh teeth and headed for the front door.

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Meg pulled into one of the many empty parking spaces in front of The Greenhouse. It was strange to see the town so deserted. She couldn’t remember a single Saturday in all her summers visiting her grandmother where Main Street was quiet.

She put the car in park and leaned back into the worn leather seat. She still had about twenty-five minutes to kill. Her eyes gravitated to the window where she watched the rain create rivulets that trickled down the glass. Slowly, she let her scope of vision move beyond the raindrops to the black asphalt made slick and shiny by the storm, and then to the pavement opposite. Finally, she lifted gaze to take in The Glass Slipper.

The sign had gone out.

Meg sat up so fast that the seatbelt tightened across her chest. She unbuckled it and pressed her face to the window. Since its opening, the shop's sign had never gone out. Even during the day it shone amidst the sunlight. Now it sat lifeless and fogged by the rain. Had they closed for good? Meg knew what had happened was awful, but surely her outburst hadn't been enough to drive Amelia out of town. She desperately needed to talk to her, to Levi, to Irissa. She needed to apologize, to explain herself. The problem was, she had no idea how to contact them. The shop got calls every night, but Meg didn't know the phone number. She had never needed to call. Meg pulled out her phone and Googled the store, but her search only brought up the fairytale and images from all the movie versions of Cinderella. No matter what words she typed in, nothing about the shop could be found.

Meg tossed her phone onto the passenger's seat in frustration. There had to be some other way to contact them. She thought about going to see them in person, but it dawned on her that she didn't know where any of them lived. It had never come up in conversation, and she hadn't thought to ask. She didn't think any of them had bought a house in town or rented an apartment. She would have heard about it. It was rare for outsiders to put down roots, and it was a proven fact the older generation loved to gossip.

She glanced at the storefront again, and her eyes trailed up. There was a set of windows sitting above the sign. A lot of the shops along the street had a second floor, but most of them were occupied by other businesses or gutted to create high ceilings. No one used the second story as housing, but maybe Amelia had. The thought was all Meg needed. She lunged out of the car, barely remembering to lock the doors behind her. She bolted through the rain and skidded to a halt in front of the shop's blue door. She peered through the window, but the glass was foggy and it was dark beyond. Meg slapped her hand against the wood.

“Amelia?” she yelled. She banged on the door again, her palm stinging from the effort.

“Amelia!”

There was no answer, but Meg thought she saw a flash of movement beyond the windowpane. Instinctively, she grabbed the door handle and pulled. The door flew open, causing Meg to stumble backwards. She stared into the store and was surprised to find it was as dark as the sign overhead. A flash of lightning briefly illuminated the entrance, and Meg stepped forward into the shop. She let the door close with a slam behind her.

“Hello?”

Her boots squelched against the hardwood floor as she crept deeper into the store. Without the light of the glass ornaments, she had to hold her hands out in front of her so as not to run in to any of the bookcases. Her fingers collided with wood, and she adjusted her course so that she could follow along with the shelf. In the distance she could see a faint glow. She thought it must be the chandelier, and she quickened her pace.

“Amelia?”

Something moved over Meg’s head. She stopped and squinted into the darkness above. She couldn’t see anything, but she knew something was there. She felt its presence.

“What the—” she whispered.

A loud cawing noise echoed through the store, and something dove at Meg’s head. She yelled and threw up her arms for protection. A bird’s beak pecked her hand.

“Ow,” she cried out.

Her hand stung, but her skin was already so wet from the rain that she couldn’t tell if she was bleeding. The bird cried out again and swooped low over her. Its enormous wing cuffed her

head. It was joined by a second bird, and together they flew at Meg, attempting to claw and peck at every inch of her. She screamed and swatted at the animals, trying to fight them off.

“Hey! Get off of her!”

Meg caught a glimpse of beam of light before one of the birds scratched her exposed wrist. She swung out and managed to hit its wing, sending it reeling. The light grew brighter, and suddenly Levi was beside her, carrying a flashlight and swatting at the birds.

“Come on,” he said, pulling at her windbreaker.

They bolted down the aisle, following the path laid out by his flashlight. The birds followed, and as Meg ducked another attempted blow, she could have sworn the number had multiplied. She risked it and looked up at the ceiling. A whole flock of midnight black birds was chasing them through the shop. Their eyes glinted and so did their sharp beaks. It made Meg think of the figure she had seen in the box last night—the polished glass bird stained black on the inside.

Meg turned back to Levi. She didn’t understand what was happening or why. She wanted to ask, but she was panting too hard. She could hear Levi panting too as he swatted another bird who had been bold enough to dive-bomb him.

“Almost there,” he yelled.

Meg could see a golden patch of light encircling the desk. It wasn’t coming from the chandelier, though. She could just make out Amelia and Irissa within the sphere, anxiously watching their approach. Levi grabbed Meg’s hand and swung her into the light with him.

The birds shrieked in outrage. Meg looked up in time to see them flying away from the light. Levi and Meg leaned against the desk for support as they tried to catch their breath. Meg noticed blood trickling down her wrist and a few nicks on the tops of her hands.

“Are you two all right?” Amelia asked.

Levi started to answer, but Meg cut him off.

“What the hell is going on?” Meg gasped.

Amelia sighed. “You left last night before I had a chance to explain.”

“Well, I’m clearly not going anywhere now,” Meg said as she gestured to the birds circling them just outside the reaches of the light. “Why are giant, angry crows flying around the store?”

“Ravens,” Levi said.

“What?”

“They’re ravens, not crows,” he elaborated.

“Whatever.”

“Meg,” Amelia said, regaining her attention. “What all was in the box last night?”

“A bird, a chess piece, and bottle,” Meg answered. There was a pause, and then her apology came flooding out of her. “I’m sorry I broke everything, Amelia. I’m really, really sorry. I’d been having a bad dream, and I wasn’t fully awake. I was still dreaming, and I know how crazy that sounds, but I didn’t mean any harm. And I’ll pay to replace everything, I swear.”

“You weren’t dreaming,” Amelia replied grimly.

“So you think I’m crazy,” Meg moaned.

“That’s not what I mean,” Amelia explained. “You were dreaming while you were asleep, but when you woke up you were fully awake. Everything you saw was real. The thing that came out of that bottle wasn’t a hallucination. It was your nightmare.”

Meg opened her mouth to say something, but she ended up shutting it instead. She didn’t know how to respond to that. She thought she might try again, when a brave raven suddenly flew

at them. Irissa screamed and threw a broom up into the air, madly swiping at the creature. She managed to hit it right on the beak, and the impact caused the raven to dissolve into a pile of dust.

“I hate birds,” she half sobbed, half screamed.

Meg would have found this funny, but she was too distracted by the dust. It was black and glittery, and it was moving. Like the dust from the broken bottle, it was pooling, reforming. She thought she could see the beginnings of an eye and a wing as the shape enlarged.

“Levi, quick!” Amelia commanded.

She thrust a jar into his hands. He ran over to the pile of dust just as it was beginning to form feet. It tried to hop away, but Levi unscrewed the lid and held out the jar. The amorphous creature froze, and then it slowly disintegrated. The dust fell—like sand in an hourglass—into the jar. When every last particle was gone, Levi clamped the lid back on the jar and resealed it.

Meg gaped. “This is insane,” she said, turning to Amelia. “What did he just do?”

“We have spare jars and bottles for emergencies like these. If you can get close enough, you can trap the nightmares in them. We just haven’t been able to get near this particular flock without running the risk of having our eyes pecked out,” she explained.

“So, you guys collect nightmares?”

“You’ve been checking out stuff for weeks,” Levi said. “Did any of those things seem like nightmares to you?”

Everyone tensed as another raven made a break into the light, but he lost heart halfway through. He came to an awkward standstill in midair before flying back into the darkness. A wounded caw was muffled by the ruffle of feathers.

“No, they didn’t,” Meg answered.

“We collect dreams. Every figurine, every bottle, every jar—all of them contain someone’s dream. We rent them out to people. They provide inspiration and comfort and...”

Amelia said.

“They can stop people from having nightmares,” Meg added.

Amelia smiled. “I was hoping we could make your bad dreams go away, but it was only a Band-Aid solution, I’m afraid.”

“I appreciate the effort,” she said.

“Can we please do something about the birds!” Irissa shrieked.

She was clutching the broom to her chest, and she looked like she might cry. Meg had to stifle a giggle. She felt bad for Irissa, and she felt worse for thinking it was funny. This was all her fault after all.

“Irissa, you’re safe as long as you stay in the light,” Amelia soothed.

“We can’t stay in the light forever!” she cried.

“Why can’t they come into the light? And where has the rest of the light gone?”

“Nightmares hate light. They can’t exist in it. But the ravens are feeding off Irissa’s fear, so they’re strong enough to snuff out all the dreams and the chandelier,” Levi said.

“So where’s all this light coming from?”

He gestured to Amelia. Something bright was glowing in her hand. Amelia held it up, and Meg could see that it was a glass slipper, just like Cinderella’s. It cast a strong, golden glow all around them.

“This was my dream,” Amelia said.

“You wanted to be Cinderella?”



“I wanted to be Cinderella’s fairy godmother,” she clarified. “I wanted to help people. To make their dreams come true. And with this shop, I’ve realized my dream. That’s a very rare thing. That’s why the ravens can’t snuff out this light. It’s too powerful.”

“I just want them to go away,” Irissa sobbed.

Amelia reached out and wrapped her arm around Irissa’s shoulders.

“How close do you have to get to trap these things?” Meg asked, gesturing to the looming ravens.

“Pretty close,” Levi answered.

“Okay,” she sighed. She snatched the jar from Levi’s hands.

“Meg!”

He tried to grab her, but she was already out of reach. She ran headlong into the darkness, her hands clamped tightly around the lid of the jar. The second she stepped into the shadows, the ravens attacked. They pecked and bit and scratched. Meg wasn’t afraid, though. All she was thinking about was Irissa. She was so scared, and Meg knew what it was like to be that frightened. That’s what the Kraken did to her, and no one was ever there to save her, even though she wished there was. If she could be that person for Irissa, she would.

Meg hunched over to protect her face as she carefully unscrewed the lid. She winced as a beak pulled at her hair, but she held on. With a deep breath, she straightened up and held the jar above her head. For a moment time slowed, and then the flock began to dissolve. The dust trickled down into the jar until there was only a single raven left. He gave one last mighty cry as he disintegrated into nothingness. Meg immediately clamped the lid on the jar and sealed it tight.

The store was so bright Meg had to squint. When her eyes adjusted, she found Irissa, Amelia, and Levi staring at her. She felt awkward beneath their gaze, so she averted hers by

looking at the glass jar in her hand. It was a Mason jar, and the inside was scorched black. If she concentrated, Meg could see a pattern of feathers twisting and moving. She walked back to the desk and handed the jar to Amelia.

“You okay?” she asked Irissa.

Irissa nodded. “Thanks.”

“It was my fault they got out to begin with.” She turned to Amelia. “So all those pieces of glass where I thought the light had burned out, they were actually carrying nightmares?” she asked.

“Yes, though your version of events is an appropriate analogy. Dreams can go bad, and when they do their light fades into darkness,” Amelia told her.

“Levi said the ravens were strong enough to snuff out all the lights. Is that why the weather suddenly took a turn?”

“Yes, the other two nightmares were much stronger than the birds. They have enough energy to make everything bleak and cold.”

Meg paused as the gravity of that information sunk in.

“We have to catch them don’t we?” Meg asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“One down, though,” Levi said, trying to be upbeat.

“One down, two to go,” Amelia said. She turned to Meg. “You don’t have to help us, Meg, but we would greatly appreciate it if you did.”

“No, I want to help,” Meg insisted, although the thought of coming face to face with the Kraken again made her feel sick.

“Thank you. Come back tonight, and we’ll go from there.”

Meg nodded. She tugged the sleeves of her shirt down to hide the cuts on her hands and wrists. She made her way towards the exit, hiding her disheveled hair by throwing up the hood of her windbreaker.

“I’ll see you guys tonight,” she said. With that, Meg ran back out into the rain and over to The Greenhouse to collect her food.

## Chapter Nine

A light rain tapped at the nylon of Meg's windbreaker as she walked along the pavement. She stuck to the glow of the streetlights wherever possible as she made her way to the center of town. She kept imagining movement in the shadows. Now that she knew the Kraken was real, she knew it was coming for her. She convinced herself it was lurking around every corner, but, deep down, she knew that was just paranoia. There was only one place the Kraken would be.

Levi and Irissa were waiting for Meg outside of The Glass Slipper. An icy sharp breeze plucked at Irissa's pale pink scarf, making it dance out in waves behind her. She grabbed the ends and tucked them even deeper beneath the neck of her grey coat.

"What took you so long?" Irissa grumbled from behind her layers.

"Sorry. My mom stayed up later than usual," she explained.

"You're nineteen. I think you can leave the house without permission."

"Uh...I haven't exactly told her," Meg said.

"I know you're not going to tell her about nightmares haunting the town, but you have told her about us right? About Amelia and the shop?" Irissa demanded.

"Um, no."

"Why not?" Levi asked. Meg marveled at how his features could be both curious and crestfallen at the same time.

"Lots of reasons," she said.

"Like?" he pressed.

"Like I didn't want her to know my nightmare was keeping me from sleeping. I didn't want her to know I was wandering around the town in the dark. I didn't want her to think I was going crazy. I thought I might be going crazy. Feel free to stop me any time."

“Oh,” Levi mumbled. “That’s fair I guess.”

“Where’s Amelia?” Meg asked, steering the conversation in a new direction.

“She’s upstairs,” Irissa said. “She’s going through inventory paperwork to see who the other nightmare belongs to, what it is, and where we might find it. She’s going to call us when she knows something.”

“And in the meantime?”

“We wander,” Levi answered with a shrug.

“Unless you have any idea where your sea monster is,” Irissa said.

Meg had to resist the urge to glance down the street towards the beach. She knew that’s where the Kraken was waiting, but she wasn’t ready to face it yet. She wasn’t sure she’d ever be ready to face it.

“No,” Meg lied. “I don’t.”

Meg could see that Irissa didn’t fully believe her, but Irissa let it go. She was shivering despite all her warm layers. She crossed her arms and tried to retreat further into her coat.

“Let’s start walking. I’m freezing.”

“Which way should we go?” Levi asked Meg.

Meg pointed left, up the sidewalk and away from the beach.

“Fabulous,” Irissa said as she brushed past them.

Levi gave a mock bow. “After you.”

They jogged to catch up with Irissa, who was already a few feet ahead of them. Together the trio plodded along the cold, wet sidewalk.

“So you said it was a chess piece?” Levi asked.

“Yeah. It was a black horse, so the knight.”

“Any idea where a knight might go?” Irissa asked.

Meg thought hard. There wasn't really anything medieval in a seaside town. Everything centered on the ocean, like the nautical street names and the dolphin fountain in the town green.

“The town green...” Meg said aloud.

“What about it?” Levi inquired.

“There's a kid's playground at the back of the town green. It has a big wooden play set shaped like a castle.”

“It's worth a shot,” Irissa said. “Lead the way.”

They followed Meg up the sidewalk. The traffic light at the four-way stop cast a green glow over their skin. Meg looked both ways before crossing the street out of habit, but there wasn't a car in sight. They walked a few minutes longer before Meg veered right up a set of stone steps that opened up onto a beautifully landscape area with a dolphin fountain gurgling in the center.

“The town green,” she said, her arms open wide. “And I think our hunch is solid.”

“Why's that?” Irissa asked.

Meg pointed past the fountain to a patch of darkness. “Because the playground is back there, and the two lights that go on at dusk have gone out.”

“Joy.”

They trudged through the wet grass, bits and pieces sticking to their shoes. The farther in they went the colder it got. Meg could see her breath on the night air. It curled like smoke before evaporating.

“We're definitely getting close,” Levi said. “Which way is the castle?”

“It’s over to the left somewhere, but I don’t know how we’re going to find it. It’s too dark.”

Irissa reached into her pocket and pulled out a red flashlight. A tiny click sounded, and then there was a faint circle of light at their feet. She moved the beam out, and it landed on a red and blue metal swing set.

“We’re close,” Meg told them. “Come on.”

Levi and Irissa followed Meg up the incline and past the swings. They all shivered as the temperature dropped even further. The beam of the flashlight skimmed over a slide and a set of seesaws. They passed a dolphin and a fish on bouncy springs, and then the castle came into view. It was tall, with three towers connected by rope bridges.

“Yeah, definitely in the right place,” Levi said.

Standing in the middle of the central tower was a knight made of onyx. His black armor gleamed in the dim beam of the flashlight, and Meg couldn’t help noticing the sword sheathed at his side. He stood at attention, but it was hard to tell if he had noticed them given that his helmet obscured his face.

“What should we do?” Meg asked.

Irissa shoved her hand into her other pocket and produced a jar. It was fat and round, the kind of jar you would find on the wall of a candy store. She thrust it into Meg’s hands.

“Catch him,” she said. “And try not to die in the process.” She took the flashlight and moved to the far left of the castle.

“Is she serious?”

Levi shrugged. “You take the right flank, I’ll go dead center. Hopefully, I can distract him long enough for you to catch him in the jar.”

“Okay,” Meg sighed. “Good luck, Galahad.”

She cradled the jar in her arms and took off towards the far right tower. There were steps on the side leading up into the structure, and there was also a ladder at the back, but getting in wasn't the problem. The problem was getting to the knight without him noticing. She'd have to take the rope bridge to reach the central tower, and the knight would hear her coming. Plus, the rope bridge would sway and slow her down. He could easily get away. She needed to sneak up on him, surprise him.

Meg darted behind the castle and crept past the rope bridge toward the knight. She tried to keep her steps light so she wouldn't draw his attention. She reached the middle tower just as Levi did. He glanced at her, but she shook her head and put a finger to her lips. She pointed to the sturdy metal ladder beside her, which connected the tower to solid ground. He gave a subtle nod and instead focused on the knight looming above him.

“Uh, hello,” Levi said.

Meg fought the urge to roll her eyes, but then again, what did you say in situations like this? The knight remained silent, and Meg gestured for Levi to keep talking. She needed noise to distract from the ringing of her shoes as they hit the metal rungs.

“I've...uh...I've come to challenge you,” he said.

Meg slipped up the ladder. It was slow going with the jar tucked under one arm, and the metal was slick with rainwater. She gripped the rails so tight her knuckles were white.

“Come down and fight me,” Levi continued, though without much enthusiasm. “Man to man.”



Meg was halfway up the tower. As far as she could tell, the knight hadn't moved. She lifted her foot to the next step, but it was too slippery. She slipped, her knee hitting one of the rungs. The impact made the metal ring out like a gong.

Meg looked up, and the knight stood over her. Climbing down would take too long, so she let go of the ladder and fell with a thud on the wet grass. The knight leapt off the tower, and Meg rolled out of his way just in time. He landed exactly where her head had been moments before. She tried to stand, but her feet kept sliding in the grass and she was trying desperately not to break the jar in her hands.

The knight advanced upon her, drawing his sword. Meg scrambled backwards, but she couldn't move fast enough. He raised the blade, but he never got a chance to swing. A rock flew through the air and hit his helmet with a clank.

"Run," Irissa yelled.

Meg stumbled to her feet as the knight steadied himself. With Meg out of the way, he turned his attention to Levi.

"We're even now," Irissa called to Meg.

"I don't think this is the time!" Meg yelled back.

The knight was advancing on Levi, slashing his sword. Levi managed to dodge it, but the grass was slick and it was difficult for him to maneuver.

Meg frantically searched for some kind of weapon. Her eyes landed on a thick branch beneath one of the many live oaks enclosing the playground, no doubt blown down during all the bad weather. She dashed over to the tree and picked it up. It was solid enough that it just might work. Meg ran back to where the knight had Levi backed against the play set.

"Levi!"

She tossed him the branch, which he thankfully caught. The knight made another slice with his sword, but Levi blocked the blow with the branch. The sword wedged itself into the wood. Levi shoved the knight, and he stumbled backward, dislodging the sword and giving Levi a chance to escape.

“Let’s go,” he said to Meg.

She ignored him and ran towards the unsteady knight. She positioned herself behind him and made to open the jar, but he was too quick. He spun around, and Meg had to duck to avoid his sword. She fell to her knees and rolled out of the way as Levi stepped in.

“Just get out of here!” he yelled.

Hands gripped Meg’s arm and helped pull her to her feet.

“We need to go,” Irissa panted. “Maybe we can lure him back to the store.”

“I don’t think he’ll go for it,” Meg argued.

“We have to try. Levi, come on,” Irissa called. She was snatching at Meg’s windbreaker, trying to drag her away.

Suddenly, the knight’s sword cleaved Levi’s branch in two. Irissa and Meg froze, their breath caught in their throat as they watched the scene unfold. The top half flew off into the darkness, and Levi stumbled. His boots slid in the slick grass, and he fell backwards.

The knight stood over Levi in triumph. He stared down at him for what felt like ages before he gently lifted his sword. *Oh my God*, Meg thought, and that was the last thought she was conscious of. She pulled free of Irissa’s grip and stepped in front of Levi. The sword swung down, and this time there was nothing to stop it. She kept her eyes open, staring at the knight’s helmet. She was vaguely aware of Irissa and Levi screaming as the sword came crashing down on her head.

Something light brushed the top of Meg's hair, and she noticed she wasn't in any pain. Dust tickled her skin and floated down to the ground as the knight's sword crumbled. He stood motionless for just a moment, regarding Meg. Then, armor creaking, he bent down on one knee and bowed his head. Hesitantly, she reached out and brushed her fingertips across the top of his helmet. The armor shimmered where Meg had touched it, and the color began to shift. It faded out from black to a blindingly bright white. The white spread all over, until every inch of the knight was covered in sparkling white.

The knight lifted his head to look at Meg. He reached out and placed his hand on the jar. Meg had completely forgotten she was still carrying it. He tapped the lid, and Meg understood. She twisted the metal cap off and held the glass out toward him. Time came to a standstill once again, and then motion returned as the knight turned to dust. It trickled into the jar, and Meg closed the lid after it.

"Whoa," Levi uttered as he came to stand beside Meg.

They regarded the jar in Meg's hands. It wasn't scorched looking like the Mason jar had been once the ravens had been captured. Instead it was glowing white hot like a star.

"What just happened?" Meg asked.

"I'm pretty sure you turned him back into a dream," Irissa said as she, too, came to examine the jar.

"Is that possible?"

"Apparently," she said. She looked sharply at Meg. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Meg shrugged. "I'm not sure I was. I just didn't want him to kill Levi."

"Yeah, thanks for that," he said with a breathless sort of laugh.

"Sure thing."

The three of them made their way back through the playground. The lights had returned to their full wattage, which made navigating much easier. Irissa turned off her flashlight and replaced it in her coat pocket. When they made it back to the sidewalk, Meg handed her the jar.

“So what now?”

“Now, I take this back to Amelia,” Irissa replied. She settled the jar in one of her pockets, the white light filtering through the fabric. “Happy hunting,” she said as she traipsed off into the night.

Meg turned to Levi. “What did she mean by that?”

“You know what she meant.” He dug in the pocket of his bomber jacket and pulled out an empty glass bottle.

“No,” Meg said empathically.

She crossed her arms and stomped off. Levi ran to catch up, skidding to a halt in front of her. She tried to sidestep him, but he easily blocked her path.

“I can’t do this, Levi,” she said.

“Come on, Meg.” He playfully tugged at her windbreaker, but she pulled away.

“No. I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can,” he insisted. “You were the one who caught the ravens, and look what you just did with that knight!”

“That’s different,” Meg argued.

“How is that different?”

“Those weren’t my nightmares.”

“They were still nightmares,” he pointed out.

Meg shook her head. “But they didn’t scare me. Not like the Kraken does. Besides...”

“What?” he asked.

“I only beat them because you guys needed my help. Irissa was terrified of the ravens, and the knight was going to attack you. I had to do something. With the Kraken...it’s just...it’s just different,” she finished.

“Sometimes it’s easier to be brave for someone else,” he said.

Meg nodded.

“Okay, so be brave for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have to get it back, Meg. And I need your help. So be brave for me,” Levi pleaded.

He held the bottle out to her.

Meg closed her eyes and took a deep, steadying breath. She did not want to face the Kraken, but she knew she couldn’t just ignore it. Levi was right—they had to get it back.

“Come on,” she sighed.

## Chapter Ten

A dense, curling fog blanketed the beach. It wound around Meg's legs in wisps as she and Levi stumbled through the shifting sand toward the water. They made their way by sound, following the crash of the surf against the shore. It was too dark to see anything. The moon and the stars were obscured behind billowing black clouds.

Meg was starting to shake, and it wasn't just from the cold. She balled her hands into fists, letting her nails dig into the palms of her hands. The sharp pain distracted her from the panic rising in her chest that was making it hard to breathe.

"You sure it's here?" Levi asked jokingly. Meg gave him a look. "Not the time for levity. Got it."

"It's here. This is where it always starts," Meg whispered. She wrapped her arms around her body as if she could somehow keep herself from falling apart.

"I'll be right here the whole time," Levi reassured her.

Meg forced a small smile for Levi's sake, but she didn't really think that he'd be able to protect her. The mermaids hadn't been able to, nor had her grandmother. She didn't think Levi stood a chance.

"Let's just walk, okay?"

Levi nodded and patiently plodded along in Meg's wake along the sand. They walked in silence. Meg was too nervous to speak. Her eyes kept darting out over the water, trying to spot the Kraken before it could sneak up on her, but it was near impossible in the darkness. Soon her head ached, and it was exacerbated by the pounding of her heart.

"I don't think this is working," Levi commented quietly. They had been walking for half an hour, but there was still no sign of the monster. "You're positive it's here?"

“Yes,” Meg said adamantly.

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Okay, okay. Why don’t you tell me about your dream?”

“What?”

“Well, what happens?” he asked. “Maybe that’ll help us find it.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” she said.

“If we don’t talk about it we’re going to end of up walking forever. This is almost over, Meg. We’re so close. Just walk me through it,” he begged.

Meg bit her lip, hesitant. “It’s different every time,” she said finally.

“There’s got to be some pattern,’ Levi insisted.

“I always end up in the water,” she admitted. “It’s peaceful, at first. I’ll see mermaids, but then they disappear. And the next thing I know the Kraken has me, and it squeezes me so tight that I can’t escape. I can’t breathe. And then it pulls me under.”

Levi paced back and forth in front of Meg as he digested the information. They were right on the edge of where dry sand became wet, and the ground was so uneven that he had trouble keeping himself upright. He kept running his hands through his hair in frustration, making it stand wildly on end. He looked like he had been electrocuted. At last he came to a halt in front of her.

“So our best bet for finding the Kraken,” he began.

“Is for me to go in,” Meg finished. The thought had occurred to her, too.

“I don’t like it,” Levi announced, shaking his head.

“I don’t either,” she countered. The very idea made her sick, but she couldn’t see another way. “But I don’t think we have a choice.”

Before he could stop her—or she could stop herself—Meg turned on her heel and clomped towards the water. She waded calf deep into the ocean, her rain boots sinking in to the salt-soaked sand. She had to pull hard to move them forward.

As she went even farther out, the waves slipped over the top of her boots and crashed into her knees. Meg shivered violently as the frigid water soaked into her clothes. It was so cold she momentarily wondered if it wouldn't just settle in her bones and never leave.

“Meg, that's far enough,” Levi yelled.

She pretended she couldn't hear him and forced herself to keep going. It was difficult, fighting against the density of the sea. It was as if the water trying to hold her still. She had to exaggerate her movements and double her strength just to inch along. She wasn't made for gliding through the ocean like the mermaids or the Kraken, a thought that made her feel even more vulnerable.

“Meg, stop!”

Meg did stop. She was almost hip deep in the water, and her entire body was shaking. She wanted to go back to dry land, back to her grandmother's house and the warmth of her bed, but she stayed put. She thought she could make out a darker shadow amidst the murky night.

“Look, just come back,” Levi said.

Meg leaned forward ever so slightly, trying to distinguish movement amongst the waves. She caught a glimpse of a bulbous body and a curling tentacle, and her breath caught in her throat.

“Meg!”

A tentacle reached out and grabbed Meg by the foot. The breath left her throat in a terrible scream as the Kraken pulled her under.



A giant gulp of seawater traveled down her throat and lodged itself somewhere in her chest. Her nose burned from the brine. Meg flailed her arms and tried to propel herself to the surface. She wasn't deep enough to drown, and if she could just get some oxygen she thought she might make it.

She pivoted her body so that she was on her stomach. Her hands dug into the loose sand, trying to gain some purchase against the creature's pull. Another tentacle slithered out and encircled her waist. She kicked as hard as could and clawed her way toward the surface, but a third inky tendril grabbed her arm and dragged her down.

Meg had stirred up so much silt that the granules stung her eyes. She shut them tight and tried not to breathe in the water. Her lungs were screaming. She desperately needed air.

Something gripped Meg beneath her arms and gave a great tug. Her sense of direction was muddled. She thrashed, thinking it was the Kraken pulling her deeper into the sea. The hold tightened, and Meg thought she could feel fingers. Her confusion momentarily paralyzed her, and with another great jerk her head broke the surface of the water. Levi held her close as she struggled to cough up seawater and take in oxygen at the same time.

"Hang on," he cried through gritted teeth.

Meg reached out and wrapped her arms around Levi. The Kraken was squeezing her so tight she cried out in pain. She wanted to lunge and kick, but if she did Levi wouldn't be able to hold on to her.

"Holy—" she heard Levi utter before a tall wave crashed into them.

She caught a glimpse of his face and could see that he was gawping at the Kraken behind her. She craned her neck and saw that the monster was closing in on them, its beak clicking menacingly. It pulled harder on Meg's body, and Levi struggled to keep her up.

“Let go,” she choked.

“Are you insane?”

“Just let go a little,” she insisted. “Trust me.”

Levi hesitated. Meg could read the indecision on his face. Another wave toppled over them and sent salt water into Meg’s nose and throat. Meg coughed, trying to expel the brine.

“Levi, please.”

Gradually, Levi loosened his grip. The Kraken could feel the change in tension, and it yanked Meg backward. She was so entwined with Levi that he came with her, falling to his knees.

“Just hold on,” Meg begged.

She twisted herself so that she was on her back again, facing the creature. Its beak was snapping at her boots. Meg lifted her leg and aimed a sharp kick at one of the Kraken’s orb like eyes. She knew she had hit her mark because the Kraken released her, and she fell with a splash into the water. Levi was still holding tight to her arms, and together they tumbled in the froth stirred up by the monster. It was screeching and writhing in pain. They managed to pull themselves up and stagger through the waves. Meg was so tired she had to crawl onto the sand. Levi took her elbow and tried to heave her to her feet.

“We’ve gotta get outta here,” he coughed.

Meg let Levi drag her onto the dry sand. They tripped and stumbled across it, trying to reach the sidewalk beyond. For a second Meg thought they might actually make it, but then something grabbed her leg and dragged her backwards.

The Kraken had left the sea and was fluidly propelling itself forward on its tentacles. It pinned Meg to the ground and loomed over her. Its rubbery skin smelled of fish and salt, and the

odor was so strong it overwhelmed Meg's senses. She coughed and sputtered as it pressed down on her chest.

"No," Levi yelled as he lunged at the creature.

It barely glanced his way. A tentacle encircled his waist and hoisted him off the ground. With a casual flick, Levi flew across the beach and landed with a wallop in the sand far away.

"Levi!" Meg screamed.

She squirmed under the Kraken's grip, trying frantically to free her arms or legs. The monster easily added more pressure, and Meg howled as pain shot through her body. More tentacles surrounded her until all she could see was a writhing mass of darkness. The beach, the town, everything was drowned out by the gloom. She couldn't even hear the waves anymore. Her ears were filled with white noise. Her lungs were struggling to find oxygen, and her breath was coming out in ragged gasps. The Kraken squeezed a tentacle around her chest, denying her air.

Meg looked into the Kraken's face, and she could see herself reflected in its one good eye. She looked petrified. She felt like she was going to die. That seemed a real possibility. Even though she was on land, even though she had made it to relative safety, the monster was still going to win. All it had to do was tighten its grip, and she would finally drown. There was no one left to save her. Levi had failed. The mermaids had failed.

Her grandmother's face flashed before her eyes.

"Gigi!" she screamed.

Meg wanted her grandmother now more than ever. She wanted her to throw open the bedroom door, bringing light and safety into the room. She wanted her grandmother to make the nightmare disappear and to make her feel safe.

She just wanted her grandmother.

Tears ran down Meg's cheeks while a tentacle slowly wrapped itself around her neck. A single tear dangled on her jaw before dropping onto the appendage. The impact caused the black dust to ripple. As the ripple spread wider and wider, the dust changed color. It was suddenly a piercing silver. The tentacle around her neck disintegrated, as did the other creeping tendrils, burning up like a lit fuse. When the silver dust reached the body, it collapsed in on itself and formed a tight sphere. The sphere sat suspended in midair, and then it exploded in a burst of light.

When the spots on her vision disappeared, Meg found she was surrounded by mermaids. They glided through the air about her, twisting and turning to create a ring of light. Meg watched, dazzled by the rainbow of colors that flicked through their tails as they moved. Each one smiled at Meg, and through her tears, she smiled back. Then they began to sing.

It was like nothing Meg had ever heard before. Their voices were like whale song, a lullaby, and a mournful violin all mixed together. The music surged through Meg and spread warmth through her frozen body. She felt it fill the black hole inside of her heart until the song resonated with every fiber of her being. It was a glorious experience. She felt infinite, like nothing could touch her.

She wanted it to last forever, but as the thought flitted across her mind the singing faded. The mermaids approached her one by one and brushed their fingers against Meg's salt stained cheeks. They paused for a second as if saying goodbye, then they darted over to where Levi stood a few paces away. They swirled around him flirtatiously before allowing themselves to fall to dust inside the bottle held open in Levi's palms. When the last scale vanished, he closed the lid and carefully placed the bottle back in his jacket pocket.

“You okay?” he asked tentatively.

Meg nodded. She was still sitting on the sand. He crouched down beside her, peering beneath her wet strands of hair to better see her face.

“I want to go home,” she finally said.

“Okay.”

Levi stood, holding out his hand for Meg. She took it, and he helped her to her feet. She swayed for a moment, unsteady, but he held her tight so she wouldn't fall. When she was sure she could walk, they trudged through the sand back to the sidewalk.

Meg wordlessly led the way to her grandmother's house. She wanted to say something to Levi, to reassure him, but she just couldn't. Her mind and her voice were too tired.

In no time at all they were standing in her driveway. Meg stared at Levi. He was drenched, and his usually tousled hair was plastered to his forehead. They were both exhausted, but the corners of his mouth managed to twitch into a smile.

“Goodnight, Meg,” he whispered.

“Goodnight,” she whispered back.

He loped off down the street, his hands shoved into his pockets. Meg watched him until he turned the corner and was out of sight.

Meg's boots squelched as she walked up the driveway. She sat down under the carport and pried them off her feet, seawater sloshing out and spilling onto the concrete. She peeled off her socks and left the boots by the back door to dry. She then walked barefooted to the front door. The handle gave way beneath her hand, and she gently pushed it open. The house was dark and quiet.

She slipped inside, and tiptoed to the bathroom. She didn't bother with the lights. Instead, she stripped out of her wet clothes and tossed them into the bathtub. She knew she would have to explain that in the morning, but right now she didn't care. She pulled the elastic out of her hair and wrapped it in a towel. Her mother's fluffy purple robe was hanging on the back of the door. Shivering, she took it down and wrapped it tightly around her body.

She left the bathroom and quietly entered her bedroom. The moonlight filtering through the blinds provided enough illumination for her to make her way to her suitcase. She rummaged through the layer of clothes clinging to the bottom of the bag, but there was nothing that would keep her warm. Meg once again reached for the box of old clothes and sifted through its contents instead. She found a pair of leggings she had forgotten she owned and a faded sweatshirt. She shimmied out of her mother's robe and started to dress.

The minute the sweatshirt went over her head, Meg knew it was her grandmother's. It smelled like her. She brought her hands to her face and inhaled. Memories of lazy Saturdays spent watching cartoons flashed across her mind. She smiled, and tears trickled down her face.

Meg thought she had cried herself hollow, but a fresh wave was overtaking her. Her breath came out in gasps as she stood there sobbing. Her soul ached. Without thinking, she padded down the hall and into her mother's room. She could hear her slow, steady breathing as she crawled into bed beside her.

"Mom," Meg said as she shook her awake. "Mom."

Her mother gazed at her groggily. "What's wrong?" she mumbled.

"I miss, Gigi," she cried.

Her mother was instantly alert. She reached out and brushed her daughter's cheeks, the tears wetting her fingertips.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said.

She held out her arms, and Meg fell into them. She let her mother hold her and stroke her hair while she cried. Her mother spoke to her, but Meg listened more to the sound of her voice than the actual words. It soothed her, simply knowing how much she was loved.

Meg cried and cried. She cried until there wasn't a single tear left. She cried until her mother's nightshirt felt damp to the touch, but she didn't seem to mind. She held Meg as tightly as she could. Meg exhaled, and for the first time in months, she felt like she could finally breathe. She snuggled closer to her mother, and before she knew it she was fast asleep.

## Epilogue

Meg threw open the door to her dorm room and dropped her leaden book bag on the floor. She threw herself face first onto her bed and inhaled the calming scent of freshly laundered sheets.

“Rough day?” her roommate asked. Katherine was sitting on her own bed, her chemistry book and homework laid out before her.

“The worst,” Meg mumbled into her comforter. She turned her head to look at Katherine. “Why am I taking calculus again?”

“Because you’re an overachiever.”

“That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Because you hate yourself,” Katherine fired back.

“That could be it,” Meg laughed. She rolled over and sprawled out into a more comfortable position.

“Oh, by the way, a package was delivered for you,” Katherine announced.

“Here?” Meg asked, bewildered. All mail was supposed to go through the campus post office. The front desk hated when packages were delivered to the dorms. “Who delivered it?”

“Some guy and a girl,” Katherine replied absentmindedly. She was flipping through her chemistry notes and squinting at her texting book.

Meg snapped her fingers. “Hi. What guy? What girl?”

“I don’t know. They just showed up with the package, and the girl made me swear I’d give it to you. She was really bossy.” She turned the page of her chemistry book. “The guy was kinda cute, though,” she added.

A shiny bubble of hope rose in Meg’s chest.



She had gone back to The Glass Slipper the day after her encounter with the Kraken, but the store had been empty. The sign had disappeared, and the windows were once again covered in newspaper. Amelia, Irissa, Levi—they had all vanished. Meg had been crushed. She had no idea that when Levi had said goodnight he had really meant goodbye. She would have liked to say goodbye, to all of them.

“Where’s the package?” she demanded eagerly.

Katherine waved her hand in the general direction of Meg’s side of the room. “I put it on your desk.”

It was a small parcel, wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. Meg knew at once that it was from The Glass Slipper. She snatched it off the desk and checked the outside, but there was nothing written there. Hoping maybe there was a note inside, she ripped off the wrappings and threw them to the floor. She was a little more careful as she opened the lid of the box. Inside was a small glass sphere. She tipped it out onto her palm and held it up for closer inspection. It was a massive marble, round and fat. She rolled it between her fingers, watching its silver light cast rainbows across her bedspread.

“A marble?” Katherine asked.

“It’s a long story,” Meg replied.

Katherine shrugged and returned to her work. Meg peered into the box, looking for that note. She found a small piece of paper wedged into the corner, and she felt elated. She extracted it and had to unfold it several times before she could read it:

A dream realized is a rare thing.

Meg sighed. It wasn't what she had been hoping for, but she wasn't all that surprised. After all, Amelia loved a good mystery. She took comfort in the fact that if they had delivered the package in person then they had to be set up near by. She would find them, eventually.

Meg held the marble up to her eye and peered inside the glass. Metallic dust floated through the space, twisting and shifting to form a beautiful mermaid. She swam gracefully throughout the marble, occasionally waving to Meg as she passed by. Her mouth was moving, and Meg was sure if she listened hard enough, she would be able to hear her singing.