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Secrets of the Tides

Written by Hannah Richell

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Secrets of the Tides

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"Fever of the heart and brain,
Sorrow, pestilence, and pain,
Moans of anguish, maniac laughter,
All the evils that hereafter
Shall afflict and vex mankind,
All into the air have risen
From the chambers of their prison;
Only Hope remains behind."

From 'The Masque of Pandora'
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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Secrets of the Tides

Hannah Richell

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Prologue

A half-empty train rattles through fields and farmland towards the grey concrete sprawl of the city. There is a young woman huddled in the farthest corner of the last carriage. Her hair is like a veil, hiding her tears. In her pocket is an antique brooch. Her fingers brush the cold arc of it before flipping it over and over in time to the rhythmic clatter of wheels on track. When she can resist no longer, she releases the clasp and stabs the pin deep into the flesh of her palm.

It's agony, but she won't stop. She presses the needle deeper still, until warm blood streams down her wrist and splashes crimson onto the carriage floor.

Finally, the train jerks and slows. Brakes squeal.

As they reach their destination she pushes the bloodied brooch deep into her coat pocket, grabs her bag and then drops down onto the platform

People dart about her. Two women shriek and embrace. A tall man in a turban races for the ticket barriers. A spotty teenager hops from foot to foot, gazing up at the departures board as he shovels crisps into his mouth. Everything around her seems to buzz and hum while she just stands there on the platform, a single fixed point, breathing deeply.

Signs for the Underground point one way but she ignores them, hefting her bag onto her shoulder and making for the street exit. She strikes out across a busy pedestrian crossing and turns left for the bridge. Big Ben looms in the distance; it is three minutes to twelve.

She walks with purpose; she knows where she is going and what has to be done. But then she sees the river, and the sight of it, a shifting black mass carving its way through the city, makes her shudder. Whenever she's imagined this moment the water has been grey and flat, not dark and viscous like seeping oil. But it doesn't matter now. There is

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no going back.

She stops half way across the bridge and leans her rucksack up against the wall. Then, with a quick glance about, she scoots up and over the barrier until she is clinging to the other side of the balustrade.

The toes of her trainers balance precariously on the concrete ledge. She grips the wall, wincing as her bleeding palms scrape the stone, and then twists so that she is facing the water below. The wind blows her hair, whipping it across her face and stinging her eyes until hot tears form. She blinks them back.

'Hey!' She hears a cry behind her. 'Hey, what are you doing?'

She is out of time.

She locks her gaze on a sea of grey buildings on the far horizon and, with a final breath, lets go of the balustrade. Then she is falling, falling, falling.

Any breath left in her body is punched out by the ice-cold water. She fights the urge to kick and struggle, instead surrendering herself to the inky blackness, letting the weight of her clothes take her stone-like towards the bottom.

By the time Big Ben chimes midday she is gone, lost to the murky depths below.

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Chapter 1

Dora
Present Day

It is late when Dora arrives home. She lets herself in through the heavy metal door of the old button factory and climbs the three flights of stairs to her flat. It's cold and gloomy in the stairwell but as her key turns in the door she hears music playing and the welcoming sound of saucepans and cutlery clattering from deep within the kitchen.

'Babe, I'm back,' she calls out, slipping off her killer shoes and kicking them into an ever-growing pile of footwear by the front door. A wet nose and huge brown eyes appear from behind the shabby leather sofa, followed by a long wagging tail. 'Hello Gormley,' she says, giving the dog an affectionate pat on the rump. 'Busy day?'

Dan's chocolate brown Labrador wags his tail again, yawns and slinks back into the lounge.

'Don't come into the kitchen,' she hears Dan yell. 'I'm cooking … something experimental … very Blumenthal …you're going to love it.'

Dora smiles; they both know Dan doesn't cook. She rifles through the post on the table by the door, nothing but bills. 'I didn't think we had any food?' she asks suspiciously.

'Er … we didn't. Oh shit!' There's the sound of something smashing.

'You went shopping?'

'Sort of. Just don't come in yet, it's nearly ready.'

Dora walks into the living space, a large, white open plan room flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows on opposite sides. As she moves through the room she startles at a movement out of the corner of her eye, but calms as she realises it's just her own pale reflection in the windows;

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she's feeling jumpy. Obediently she remains in the room, switching on a couple of lamps, returning a few of Dan's splayed art books back to the shelves next to the television. Gormley is already curled up on his bed next to the sofa, one lazy eye tracking her movements. Dora looks around at the room, wondering when it will ever really feel like *their* place. It's been six months and they've barely scratched the surface of the enormous project they took on. The exposed brick walls have been painted white and the floorboards sanded and polished. It's clean and spacious, but it feels a little like an exhibition space waiting to be filled. They just haven't had the time to turn it into a home; it's been one thing after another.

'Right, you can come in now,' she hears Dan shout.

Dora pushes the door to the kitchen; it sticks momentarily on the torn lino until she gives it a firm shove with her shoulder and it flies open with a bang.

Dan is standing by the wonky trestle table currently masquerading as their kitchen table. He indicates with a flourish two steaming bowls of tomato soup and a plate of buttered white sliced bread. She can see the open soup tin on the counter behind him. She walks across and puts her arms around his neck, kissing his stubbly chin.

'That's the nicest thing I've seen all day.'

'That bad huh? How did the presentation go?'

Dora shrugs. 'Hard to tell; the clients weren't giving much away.'

'But your boss was pleased?'

'I think so. He'll be more pleased if we sign them. It would be a real coup for the agency – good for me too,' she adds, 'as I'd be on the account.'

Dan releases her from his big embrace and ushers her to the table. 'Come on, let's eat before it gets cold.'

Dora seats herself at the table and reaches for a slice of bread. 'Thanks for this.'

'It's nothing, really.' He pushes a mug of tea towards her. 'Are you okay, you look a little pale.'

'I'm fine; it's just been a really long day. I'm tired.'

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He looks at her with concern. ‘You’re working too hard.’

‘I’m fine,’ she says again, with a shrug. Anyway, how was *your* day?’ she asks, steering the conversation away from her. ‘Did you get much done?’

It’s as if someone has switched a light on in Dan’s face. ‘It was terrific. I had a huge breakthrough. I know exactly what my next piece is going to be. And Kate Grimshaw rang me back to confirm her order for three of the sculptures from my showcase, so I’m certainly going to be busy over the next few months.’

‘That’s great!’ Dora raises her mug and he clinks his against it. ‘Really, it’s wonderful news.’ They both know Dan has been waiting for inspiration to strike. His last set of bronze sculptures showed at a tiny London gallery and were picked up by a noted art collector, but ever since he’s been struggling with the pressures of following up with something better. Dora knows he’s been privately agonising over the delay, so it’s a relief to hear he has, at last, found inspiration. ‘Do you want to tell me about the new piece?’

Dan shakes his head. ‘Sorry, not this one. It’s a surprise.’

‘Intriguing. I take it the back room is out of bounds for now then?’

‘Yes, and it’s a studio, remember, not a back room?’

She smiles down into her bowl and they fall into a comfortable silence, slurping at their soup until they are both staring down at empty dishes.

‘I’ll wash up,’ she offers.

‘Just a minute, I got you these,’ he says, holding out two brown capsules in the palm of his hand.

‘What are they?’ she asks, prodding them with suspicion. ‘They look like horse tranquilizers.’

‘Vitamins. Mrs Singh at the corner shop says you should start taking them.’ He beams up at her and Dora takes them from his outstretched hand, placing them next to her empty bowl.

‘Thanks,’ she says, wondering how many people he has already blabbed the news to. They really do need to talk, she realises. Not now though, not when he’s so happy about his work. It can wait.

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She wakes later that night to the sound of rain drumming on the roof above their bed and Dan scuttling around the room in a panic.

'Do you need a hand?' she asks, propping herself up on one elbow in the darkness.

'No, stay there where it's warm. I'm fine.' She hears him trip over a saucepan and the sound of water splashing across the floor. 'Effing-useless-roof.'

She smiles in the darkness and listens as he artfully rearranges the carefully cultivated collection of bowls and pans until the sound of water dripping on tin begins to mingle with the noise of the rain outside.

'It will be summer soon,' she tries cheerfully.

'Hmmm…' is all he says, which worries her. He is usually the optimistic one. The agent that had showed them around the crumbling old factory had proudly declared the space a 'New York-style loft apartment' but they had all known it was marketing flannel. Really they were standing in the dingy and dilapidated top floor of an old East End factory. It had potential, and could provide Dan with the work space he needed to create his massive bronze sculptures, but it was still a long way away from the beautiful, contemporary, open plan space Dora had transformed it into in her minds eye when they had first looked around. The reality was harder to live with and ever since they had bought the old place it has been Dan who has jollied her through her worries about rotten floorboards, rising damp, leaky plumbing and the holes in the roof.

'Come back to bed. We'll deal with it in the morning,' she tries.

'We've been saying that for five months.'

'I know. But we will, okay?'

Dan gives up and dives under the covers, rubbing his cold feet against hers until she yelps. 'Sorry, you're just so lovely and warm.'

She turns her back on him and nestles into the reassuring curve of his body. They are two proverbial spoons. His arms slide around her waist and his hands, rough and strong, come to rest on her stomach. She can feel his breath slow against her neck and realises he is already

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drifting off. She envies him his ability to fall asleep so easily: the sleep of the innocent. She hasn't been able to sleep like that for a very long time and now that she is awake, her mind is suddenly buzzing.

First she is reliving the Sunrise Cereals pitch at work; she remembers her part in the performance. She had thought it went well, but now lying there in the darkness, listening to the rain, she starts to wonder. She knows if she starts to stew on it she will be awake for hours so instead she tries to concentrate on relaxing her toes. Isn't that what those self-help books say to do when you can't sleep? Start at your toes and work your way up your legs, relaxing each part of your body in turn. By the time you get to your nose you're guaranteed to be asleep. She's sure she's heard that somewhere.

But she has only reached her knees, which prove very difficult to focus on, let alone relax, when Dora feels a cold, creeping panic trickling up from her guts. It's been the same thing the last few nights; a chilling grip on her insides and the sudden, overwhelming sensation of the breath being squeezed from her body, as if something heavy is lying on top of her, crushing her into the mattress. Dora's heart begins to thud wildly in her ribcage.

'Dan?' she says into the darkness.

There is no answer but the drumming of the rain and the loud beat of her heart.

'Dan, are you awake?' She nudges him.

'Mmmmm….' he groans. 'No.'

'We need to talk.' She can't bear to lie there alone a second longer.

Dan's arms tighten around her waist. 'Go to sleep. We'll sort the roof in the morning.'

'It's not the roof I want to talk about.' She swallows down the acid taste in her mouth. 'It's the … the baby.'

She can feel his arms stiffen slightly and his breath pause momentarily against her neck. 'What about the baby?' he murmurs.

'I think we need to talk about it.'

'Right now?'

'Yes.'

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Dan raises himself up on one elbow in the dark and looks at her. 'What's up?'

She takes a deep breath and tries to control her trembling limbs. 'It's like we're just drifting along, out of control, letting life wash over us. I think we should decide whether we actually want this or not. It's such a huge responsibility, having a baby. What I mean is, how can we even think about raising a child when we don't even have a dry place to live?' Dora can hear the hysterical edge in her voice.

Dan is quiet for a moment. 'We'll get the flat sorted. Don't worry. These new commissions will help the cash flow. Now it's spring we can get the roof fixed, and then we'll do the damp in the kitchen and the bathroom. Then it's just the cosmetic stuff.' He stifles a yawn. 'We always knew this place was going to be a long-term project. I thought you were up for it?'

'I was, I mean, I *am*,' she corrects. 'This isn't about the flat. Not really. I mean, it is, but it's more than that.' She swallows. 'Don't you ever wonder if you're ready to be a parent?'

Silence fills the room.

'I'm not sure,' she continues in a small voice, 'if I want to be a mother. It's such a responsibility. We wouldn't be a couple anymore. We'd be … a family.'

Dan sighs. 'I'm sure every new parent feels this way Dora. It's perfectly natural. I know it wasn't planned,' he gives another yawn, 'but it's exciting, don't you think? A family.' He pauses for a moment. 'That sounds good to me.'

Dora shifts slightly in his arms, turning to stare at the emptiness above their heads. Things for Dan are always so simple. He sees things in black and white. That's what she loves about him. But her life isn't black and white. It's shades of grey, like a storm-cloud oil painting hanging above a fireplace. How could a man like Dan, a man with nothing but lightness in his heart and an optimistic view of the world understand what she feels?

'Dora, is this about your family? About … well, you know?'

She nods in the darkness but cannot speak.

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‘I know it was terrible. I know, from the little you’ve talked about, that you still live with it. Believe me, Dora, I want to understand, I really do.’

She lies very still.

‘But this is a chance for you to move on, don’t you see?’ She can feel his grip tighten around her waist and his hands stroke her stomach with gentle, reassuring movements. ‘It’s a new life … a new start … us and our baby. We’ll be our very own family. Don’t you want that?’

Dora doesn’t know what to say. Of course she wants a life with Dan. She loves him and their life together in London. He is her rock. And yet, at the same time, she is utterly paralysed. Years have passed and yet she still feels like the same girl she was all those years ago. Nothing has changed, not really. How can she even consider the enormous responsibility of motherhood … of being responsible for another human being when she has proved so catastrophically irresponsible in the past? And how can she contemplate starting a family of her own when the one she grew up in – the one she adored and thought would be there for her forever – has been torn apart so completely. The truth is that she doesn’t believe she deserves a family of her own. She doesn’t deserve a fresh start with Dan. She doesn’t deserve happiness. But how can she tell him that?

‘Go to sleep,’ Dan murmurs into her neck. ‘Everything always seems worse at night. We’ll talk tomorrow.’ His grip loosens on her slightly and she can tell that she is losing him to sleep again. ‘You’ll feel better in the morning,’ he whispers.

‘Night,’ she says before turning in his arms to gaze into the blackness of the bedroom. Dan is wrong. She knows she won’t feel better in the morning. She has spent the last ten years willing each morning to be better … to feel better. And each morning she awakens to the sickening knowledge that she is to blame for the disintegration of her family. She feels, sometimes, as though they’ve all abandoned her, as though she’s been cut loose and left to drift through life on her own. But then she remembers she is to blame for that. It is her fault they have been scattered like the floating debris from a shipwreck. She feels the guilt of

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it like a deep, throbbing pain.

As Dan begins to gently snore, Dora closes her eyes. She wants sleep to claim her too, but she knows it is a long way off. Instead, she lets her mind wander down the pathways of her past. Slowly, it drifts down a wide tree-lined drive. She can almost hear the wind rushing through the tall sycamore trees and smell the salt carried on the breeze. She rounds a corner in her mind and there it is, a rambling old farmhouse standing high upon the Dorset cliffs, its white-washed walls gleaming like a beacon in the sunshine. As she draws closer she sees the tangle of ivy creeping up its exterior, curling around the eaves of the grey slate roof. She drifts closer still and sees the solid oak front door, bleached with weather and age. In her mind's eye she pushes on the door, the warm smooth wood familiar under her fingers, and enters a hallway, cool and dark and haunted with the footsteps of a generation of Tides. She walks past an open door, ignoring the elegant dark-haired woman bent over a desk of books and papers. She turns away from the sound of giggles echoing down the creaking staircase and passes a handsome, fair-haired man seated in the drawing room peering at the newspaper spread across his lap. Instead she makes for the conservatory where the scent of roses and lilac wafts enticingly through the open doors. Drifting through, she wanders down the sprawling lawn towards the siren's song of the sea, crashing far away onto the cliffs below.

As she reaches a twisted old cherry tree down in the orchard she turns and studies the house, gazing up at the wide sash windows. She stares at them, searching for answers deep within their shadows, but the glass is blackened by the glare of the sun.

Clifftops. The house she once called home.

Dan shifts and sighs in his sleep and as Dora moves her hands onto her still-flat belly and contemplates her future, she suddenly understands. She cannot hide any longer. She must return to Clifftops. She must return to face her past.

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