

Sisters of Land and Sea
2019

This is a tale of two sisters, born the same day, twenty minutes apart. They were as close as twins could be; they knew each other's thoughts, could finish each other's sentences. When one felt pain, the other shivered uncontrollably. But when it came to appearance and dreams, no two sisters could be more different.

Margaret, the elder, had striking blue eyes and ebony hair like her mother's – so dark, in fact, that ravens often considered her as one of their own. They perched outside her open window and watched as she tossed and turned until dawn. The sea roiled and roared in Margaret's dreams, and a dark figure emerged from its depths. This figure never had discernible features, and always left Margaret gasping in fright.

Little Louisa, however, had dark, wide-set eyes and pale brown hair – so pale, in fact, that field mice mistook it for a parent's fur and would curl up in her hair after she lay down to sleep. The water remained calm and serene in Louisa's dreams, and while she too saw a faceless figure, she awoke feeling peaceful, ready to begin a new day.

The girls lived with their uncle, as their parents had left long ago; one they'd never met, the other died when they were just seven. On the morning before their twelfth birthday, Uncle announced that they would visit their beach house. Their mother had left written instructions, “Bring the girls to the water's edge at midnight the day they turn twelve. Have them look to the ocean and wait. Their future depends on it.” That was it. No explanation, no clues.

“I'm not going,” Margaret said.

Louisa rose from the breakfast table. “I'll pack my things.”

“It's your mother's parting wish,” Uncle said to Margaret. “Why don't you want to go?”

“It has something to do with the dreams. I'm sure of it,” Margaret said.

“Dreams?”

“The ones we have every night,” said Louisa.

Uncle looked from one girl to the other, “How long has this been going on?”

“Since the night mom died,” Margaret said.

Louisa nodded in confirmation.

“Tell me,” Uncle said as he placed a reassuring hand over the white-knuckled fist

Margaret pressed on the table.

Margaret stared at Uncle's hand, and with a hair-parting sigh, opened her fist and took his hand in hers. “It's always the same,” she began. “I am on a stormy beach, wind and rain slash my face, the waves roll and smash against the shore. The sky is dark, whether from the storm or night, I don't know, but it's scary.” Uncle squeezed her hand in encouragement. “Then, up from the sea comes a shadow, big, like a grown man. It has no features, and although it moves toward me, I see no legs or arms.” She looked up at Uncle. “It's like a person covered in a sheet pretending to be a ghost, you know?” Uncle nodded in understanding. “It stops a few feet from me, then I wake up.”

Uncle gathered Margaret into his arms. “I wish you'd told me sooner. Maybe I could've helped.”

“How? Can you stop me from dreaming?” Margaret pulled back with a frown.

“No.” Uncle ran a hand through his hair. “I suppose all I can do is offer comfort.”

Margaret hugged him again. “Telling you does help.”

“The first night we had the dreams,” Louisa said while sinking back into her chair, “I told Margaret mine was the same.” She looked at her sister. “That wasn't true. Mine is actually nice.”

“What?” Margaret pushed away from Uncle to face her sister. “Why would you lie?”

“You were so upset. I wanted you to feel better.”

“It's been five years.” Margaret shook her head in disbelief, a tight ball of betrayal settling in her stomach. “Why haven't you said something? How could you keep this secret?”

“When should I have told you?” Louisa turned her palms up in question.

“Maybe the next day?” Margaret shrugged her uncertainty.

“The day we found out mom died?” Louisa asked as she stood. “Were either of us thinking about dreams?”

“What about after, Louisa? You could've told me a week later.”

“How? You had that dream over and over, were upset each time. How was my telling you going to help?” Louisa lifted a hand in offering. “I've wanted to tell you for years, I didn't know how.”

“That's crap.”

“Margaret, enough.” Uncle said as he lay a hand her shoulder. She moved away from his touch and dropped down in her chair, arms crossed.

“Louisa, sit down and tell us about your dream,” Uncle said. “Then we can work it out.”

“The sea is calm in my dreams,” Louisa focused on the circles she began tracing with her finger on the table, “gentle waves lap at the shore and a full moon shimmers across the water. A figure rises from the ocean in mine too, and like Margaret's, it has no features or limbs. I also wake up just as it reaches me,” she peeked up at Margaret, “but I feel safe.”

Incredulity dropped Margaret's jaw. She turned to Uncle, “why are our dreams different?” He could only shake his head in ignorance. “Why is mine frightening and your's isn't?” she asked Louisa.

“I don't know”

“Why do I have to suffer more? Wasn't losing mom enough?” She shoved from her chair and ran up stairs.

“I'm sorry,” Louisa called after Margaret and made to follow. Uncle stopped her.

“Give her time,” he said.

“Can I come in?” Louisa asked as she knocked on the bedroom door.

“I guess,” Margaret said as she picked lint from her quilt.

Louisa sat on the edge of the bed, “Do you hate me?”

Margaret looked at the ceiling. “No,” she said, then pinned Louisa with a stare. “I'm not happy with you, but I don't hate you.”

“I really am sorry.” Louisa reached for her sister's hand. “I never meant to keep it secret, or to hurt you.”

“I get it,” Margaret took her sister's hand, “but I'd still like to know why my dream is scary and your's isn't. I mean, I *really* don't want to go now.”

“Uncle said we have to,” Louisa said. “If what mother wrote is true, that our future depends on this trip, then he won't chance staying.” She gave Margaret a grim smile. “He also said, if nothing else, the trip might stop your dreams.” She squeezed her sister's hand. “Maybe we'll find out why the dreams are different too.”

Margaret paced around her room after Louisa left. She kicked her school backpack in frustration and a snack bag full of crackers flew out. She broke them up and threw them out the window. Might as well give the ravens a treat if she had to go away. Turning toward her bed, she stretched out and pressed her hot cheek to the cool pillow, hoping a dreamless sleep would come

and let her forget the morning. A few minutes passed and she heard one, then another, and finally a third clink on her windowsill. Curious about the sound, she got up and found three stones on the sill, each shaped like a seashell. The ravens were telling her to go.

Louisa wandered outside to the back shed and poured a handful of dry oats near its entrance. She knew the mice would enjoy them while she was gone. One mouse slipped from under the door and sat down to eat, then came another. A third darted out and back, then finally settled in with the others. Louisa noticed something white peeking out from under the door. She reached for it, scattering the mice with her movement, and pulled out a nibbled scrap of paper covered with faded script. It read: "Tell them I love them. Tell them I'm sorry. Tell them . . ." The next words were scratched out, and then, "Tell them their father was . . ." The mice had eaten away the remaining words. Louisa ran back to the house.

"Uncle! Uncle, where are you?" Louisa called.

"What is it?" Uncle said as he came out of his study.

"I found this in the shed," Louisa handed him the paper. "I'm sure it was written by mother."

Uncle read the few words and rubbed the back of his neck. "I think you're right."

"What's going on?" Margaret asked as she came downstairs.

"I found a letter from mother," she told Margaret. "Is this the start of the instructions she left, Uncle? What do you think she was going to say about our father?"

"This isn't from her instructions. She said she loved you, of course, but she made no mention of your father. Maybe she wrote something unflattering then decided to start over." Now he rubbed his eyes. "So much in one day," he said to himself. "Girls," he looked up, "I need time to sort out everything for tomorrow. Leave this for today. We'll talk more on the ride." He