

## CHAPTER ONE

She was a girl carved from the purest milk-white stone and she rested on the floor of the sea at a depth just far enough down that the wavy light filtered all around her, illuminating her watery world from above.

Of course, she couldn't remember her birth. And she had no recollection of how she had come to be at the bottom of the sea. Because it was all she had ever known, the stone girl assumed it was how it had always been, and for centuries she accepted that simple idea as the explanation for her own existence.

The girl's amusements - the ways in which she passed her time - were few, but pleasurable. Sometimes a pair of sleek dolphins cruised by in the near distance. They danced a twirling ballet for the girl as they passed. At other times a purple octopus slithered over her bare feet, its tentacles tickling her toes.

But the little yellow minnows had become the stone girl's dearest friends. They were so curious and nervous and shimmery. They often swam just beyond the end of her nose, and for an instant their shining eyes would peer inquisitively into her own.

It was in those rare moments, when the light from above was aligned with the position of the fish floating before her, that the girl was granted her only glimpse of her own appearance. At those times a minnow's eye became a tiny, bulging mirror. The girl would look into that mirror, and into the distorted reflection of her own pale face. She

noted the taciturn smile faintly etched on her lips. She studied her own innocent eyes gazing back at herself from the green-blue sea.

The girl often wondered what the look in her eyes might mean. It was impossible to know if it was a look of great sadness or great joy, of thoughtfulness or simply a blank stare. The subtle style in which she had been created over a thousand years before, along with the tiny size of the minnow's eye, made it hard for her to discern the exact emotions displayed on her face.

*Perhaps, she told herself, it's all the feelings mixed up together.*

Before she could decide for sure, the fish with mirrors for eyes would dart away. Those yellow minnows always made the girl laugh, albeit in her own silent way.

But when her bright yellow friends were busy elsewhere, doing whatever it was that fish had to do, the girl was left with no other occupation but to gaze at her own thin arm.

That arm, with its delicate hand opening like a white starfish beyond her wrist, was all the girl had ever known of her body. In the motionless, statuesque pose that she held, her arm was all she could see. It stretched before her out of the edge of her vision. And because she was standing at a slight angle leaning back, her arm was held so that she seemed always to be reaching toward the glittering ceiling of the sea.

The girl loved her arm. Over time she had come to fondly appreciate her hand as well, although she didn't understand either one of them. They were like mysterious parts of a dream she just couldn't quite remember. But it gave the girl a good feeling to look at her arm and hand, the feeling that there was some kind of magic and hope hidden away inside her secretive soul of stone.

Time passed beneath the sea, as time does everywhere - silently, slowly - each moment slipping into the edge of the next moment to follow like a shadow passing through a door. The girl felt neither overly happy, nor sad; neither desirous, nor dreadful. Except for her girlish appearance, she seemed to have very few of the qualities associated with regular girls made of flesh and blood. There in that deep water, quiet as a barnacle, she lived an elemental life.

But then came the night when everything changed.

