

“*When, Mommy? When* will you be back?” Imogene sniffed back the last of her tears and searched deep into her mother’s eyes. Perhaps that was why her favourite colour was blue. Just like her dear mother’s beautiful eyes.

“Well, honey. The thing is, that it’ll be a long time. Can you be big and brave for me for a long time? Will you always remember in your heart, no matter what anyone else says, that I will be back for you? Mommy and Daddy both? You have to remember this above all else. It is important.” Imogene pulled away and looked up at her mother in wonder. Now she knew that she was in charge of an important emergency, too. Her important emergency was to always remember. Yes, she could do that. She nodded, after careful consideration of all her mother had said. The poor child had so many questions, but she had the feeling that she would not have time to ask them all.

“But, where will I stay? Who will look after me?” For a brief moment, Imogene had forgotten where she even was. That Auntie Agnes and even Sampson were as far away from her mind as anything in the world could be. And once again, she asked her mother the most important question of all.

“When will you be back, Mommy?”

Elsie looked her daughter square in the eyes. Imogene’s eyes were the exact same shade of ocean blue as her own eyes. In fact, they were the same blue as Agnes’, the same as Sampson’s, and the same blue as her very own husband’s. She held Imogene’s unwavering gaze fast as she answered.

“You will stay here, my love. Auntie Agnes will take care of you. But you must be patient with her, as she has never been as lucky as I am, to have children of her own. And Sampson, I’ll bet he and you will become the very best of friends. You know, Sampson is my very best friend, too! You can trust him with everything, my love. I know that I do.” Elsie paused; she waited for Imogene to absorb all

that she had said. It was important that Imogene remember everything. When she was confident of that, she continued. "I will be back for you when you are ten. That is five years from now. I cannot come for you until then. But, you will always be with me in here." Elsie gently brought her daughter's hand to her chest, so that Imogene could feel the beating of her heart. She then took her own hand, and placed it on her daughter's chest. "And I will always be with you, in here." The two embraced again. Their tears all but spent, they sat there for a long time just that way. Elsie held onto her precious child for as long as she dared, even long after she knew that she had fallen fast asleep. With gentle hands, she reluctantly laid her back down upon the bed, and for a while simply stood over her, watching. She then reached back behind her head, and undid the clasp of her golden chain. On the chain hung a pair of glass dolphins, turquoise in colour, and between the dolphins, set in a ring of pure gold, rested a perfectly round pearl. Elsie knew how much Imogene adored this rare gem, and she laid it on the bedside table beside the lamp. She swallowed hard then as she took one last look at her very own sleeping beauty, then turned, and left the bedroom.

Elsie stole quietly down the grand staircase that led to the main floor. Sampson was waiting for her by the back service entrance. Quietly, they nodded to one another, held hands, and left the majestic Tudor style mansion, Imogene, and Auntie Agnes behind. Not once did either of them look back. Less than one hour later, Sampson returned to Auntie Agnes' estate alone. No one, other than he and Elsie would ever know that he'd gone anywhere that night. Nor would anyone ever guess that he'd had anything to do with her disappearance. Not until five very long years later.