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The Vanishing Hourglass

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Introduction

Gwen Archer's life altered the moment she stepped over the threshold of Ash & Glass, the eccentric antique shop nestled in the winding alleys of Bath, England. Inheriting the shop from her mother should have brought Gwen comfort, perhaps even closure, after the heartbreak of loss. Instead, it presented her with unopened boxes of memories; relics collected by a woman whose past was veiled with secrets and silent truths. The shop brimmed with the scent of old wood and polished brass, each artifact whispering its own story—but none so compelling as the hourglass she would soon discover.

Gwen had always been drawn to history. She found solace in the careful study of the past, piecing together lost lives from fragments left behind. But no amount of academic rigor could prepare her for the grief that hollowed her after her mother's passing. Haunted by lingering questions about her mother's life and the enigmatic hours she spent inside Ash & Glass, Gwen hesitated, torn between the urge to let everything go and the sense of kinship she felt with the shop's mysterious inventory.

It was in a forgotten corner, beneath faded velvet and timeworn books, that she unearthed the hourglass—a thing of exquisite craftsmanship, its glass bulb swirling with iridescent sand, etched with tangled motifs that seemed to shift when touched by light. An attached tag, in her mother's looping hand, read simply: "The last of its kind. Guard it well." The warning was cryptic, yet Gwen was consumed by a compulsion she couldn't explain—a pull that felt both terrifying and inevitable.

Her first encounter with the hourglass was a convergence of magic and misadventure. One fateful evening, as dusk spilled gold through stained-glass windows, Gwen brushed her fingertips over the carved symbols and inadvertently triggered the device. The world spun and melted away, colors and sound dissolving as she was cast adrift—only to awaken in the cobblestone heart of a Victorian Bath that was at once familiar and completely alien. Gwen knew then that her inheritance was more than just antiques: it was a passage through time itself, and a responsibility beyond anything she had ever imagined.

As Gwen stumbled through eras—each leap catapulting her into new intrigue and age-old dangers—she would come to realize that her journey was never about escaping the past, but confronting it. Every chamber of time held clues about the hourglass's origin, her mother's shadowed history, and a secret society that had guarded these mysteries for centuries. With each leap, she forged new alliances and fell afoul of enemies determined to claim the hourglass for their own—forcing her to question the very fabric of trust, legacy, and fate.

This is the story of Gwen Archer: a woman caught between centuries, racing to solve a murder that echoes through generations, and to break a curse before she, too, vanishes in the sands of time. The Vanishing Hourglass invites you to step inside Bath's secret pasts—where every moment matters, and the next turn could change history forever.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Inheritance of Ash & Glass

The scent of dust motes dancing in sunbeams was the first thing Gwen noticed, a dry, aged fragrance that clung to everything in Ash & Glass. It was a smell deeply intertwined with her childhood, with afternoons spent perched on a velvet stool, listening to the chime of the antique shop's bell as customers entered and exited. Now, that bell hung silent, wrapped in a thin layer of cobwebs, just like the rest of the shop.

Her mother, Elara, had run Ash & Glass for as long as Gwen could remember. Not just a shop, it was a repository of curiosities, a place where time seemed to slow, where every object held a whisper of the past. Elara had always been a woman of quiet intensity, her knowledge of history profound, her eyes often distant, as if she saw more than what was immediately before her. Gwen had often wondered if her mother was simply a dreamer, or if there was something more to her fascination with the antiquated and the arcane.

The shop was a labyrinth of forgotten treasures: grandfather clocks stood sentinel in corners, their hands frozen at various arbitrary times; stacks of leather-bound books leaned precariously; and display cases glittered with Victorian jewellery, Roman coins, and fragmented pottery. Inheriting it felt less like a gift and more like a monumental task, a physical manifestation of the unresolved grief that still clung to Gwen's heart like a persistent shadow.

It had been three months since Elara's sudden passing, a heart attack that had stolen her away too quickly, leaving Gwen adrift in a sea of unanswered questions. They had been close, yes, but Elara had always maintained a certain guardedness, a boundary Gwen could never quite breach. Now, confronted with the sheer volume of her mother's life contained within these four walls, Gwen felt that barrier more acutely than ever.

"Just get through it, Gwen," she murmured to herself, pushing a stray strand of auburn hair from her eyes. "One box at a time." Her plan was simple: catalogue, sort, and eventually, sell. The idea of keeping Ash & Glass open was unthinkable. It represented too much, demanded too much. Her own life, her burgeoning career as a historical researcher, felt miles away, buried under layers of her mother's legacy.

She started in the back room, a cluttered space Elara had affectionately called her "discovery den." Here, the true chaos reigned. Boxes were stacked to the ceiling, haphazardly labelled – or, more often, not labelled at all. Gwen pulled on a pair of dusty gloves, determined. This room, she suspected, held the keys to understanding

Elara's true passions, the things she wouldn't display in the main shop.

The first few boxes yielded predictable results: old ledgers, invoices, a surprisingly large collection of antique thimbles. Gwen found herself smiling faintly at some of her mother's more quirky acquisitions. Elara had an eye for the unusual, a penchant for items that told a story, no matter how small.

She unearthed a box marked only with a faded 'E,' filled with Elara's personal effects. Inside, nestled among silk scarves and a worn leather journal, was a small, tarnished silver locket. Gwen opened it, expecting to see a faded photograph of a young Elara or her father, but it was empty. A faint etching on the inside, however, caught her eye: a delicate symbol she didn't recognize, two intertwining lines forming an abstract, almost organic shape. She slipped the locket into her pocket, a small spark of curiosity ignited.

Hours passed, marked only by the shifting angles of sunlight filtering through the grimy window. Her muscles ached, and her hands were streaked with dust, but a strange sense of purpose had begun to settle over her. This wasn't just cleaning; it was an archaeological dig into her own past, a way to connect with the mother she felt she never fully knew.

It was when she was clearing a dusty alcove, hidden behind a towering stack of antique maps, that she found it. Not in a box, but simply sitting on a low shelf, almost deliberately placed yet entirely out of sight. It wasn't a large item, perhaps a foot tall, but it commanded attention.

It was an hourglass.

But not just any hourglass. This one was crafted from a dark, almost obsidian-like glass, its surface smooth and cool to the touch. It curved gracefully, two perfect bulbs connected by a slender waist. What truly drew her in, however, was the sand within. It wasn't the familiar golden-brown or white, but a swirling, opalescent substance that shimmered with an inner light, shifting through hues of deep violet, emerald green, and a startling, fiery amber. It seemed to pulse faintly, almost as if alive.

The hourglass stood on a small, ornate pedestal of dark, polished wood, intricately carved with the same intertwined symbols she had seen on the locket, repeated in a continuous, flowing pattern around its base. It felt impossibly old, imbued with a quiet power that hummed just beneath the surface of her perception.

Her mother's looping script was instantly recognizable on the small, yellowed tag tied to its delicate waist. "The last of its kind. Guard it well." The words resonated with a strange, foreboding weight, an echo of Elara's often enigmatic pronouncements. What did 'last of its kind' mean? And why would something so unique be tucked away in a

forgotten corner?

Gwen lifted it carefully. It was heavier than it looked, solid and substantial. The glass was cool against her palms, smooth and flawless despite its apparent age. She turned it, mesmerized by the swirling sands, which seemed to resist the pull of gravity, moving sluggishly, as if in a thick, unseen liquid.

As her fingers traced the intricate carvings on the base, a small, almost imperceptible click sounded from within the hourglass. It wasn't loud, but in the quiet shop, it was startling. A faint tremor ran through the object, and the opalescent sand, which had been slowly swirling, suddenly gathered speed. It began to cascade downwards, not in a gentle flow, but in a vibrant, luminous torrent, like a waterfall of pure light.

A strange vibration started in her fingertips and spread rapidly through her arm, then her entire body. The air in the room grew heavy, crackling with an unseen energy. The scent of dust and old books vanished, replaced by an intoxicating, unfamiliar aroma of damp earth and something metallic, like distant thunder. The shop around her began to distort, its familiar shapes wavering, blurring at the edges. The grandfather clocks in the main room chimed, not in unison, but one after another, their tones overlapping in a cacophony that pulsed with the vibrating air.

Gwen felt a dizzying pull, as if the floor beneath her was falling away. The colours of the shop, the warm browns and muted greys, began to bleed into each other, swirling into a vortex of vibrant, almost blinding light. Her vision narrowed, focusing solely on the torrent of luminous sand within the hourglass, now a blinding river of shimmering particles.

Panic began to rise in her throat. She tried to cry out, to drop the strange device, but her limbs felt heavy, unresponsive. The world spun faster, the light intensifying, until it consumed everything. A piercing, high-pitched hum filled her ears, growing louder and louder, until it was the only sound.

Then, abruptly, silence. And darkness. A profound, encompassing darkness that swallowed all sensation. Gwen felt a moment of disoriented freefall, a chilling sensation of being untethered, adrift in nothingness.

And then, just as suddenly, a jarring halt.

Her eyes snapped open. The air was cold, crisp, and carried the distinct smell of coal smoke and damp stone. The brilliant light had vanished, replaced by the faint, flickering glow of gas lamps. Her head swam, and she swayed, disoriented, the hourglass still clutched tightly in her hands.

She was standing on a cobblestone street. But it wasn't the familiar, relatively quiet

alleyway where Ash & Glass nestled. The street was wider, bustling with activity, yet eerily silent compared to the cacophony she'd just experienced. Towering, ornate Victorian buildings lined the thoroughfare, their windows gleaming dully in the artificial light. Carriages, pulled by magnificent horses, clattered past, their wheels stirring up mud from the damp ground.

Women in elaborate gowns with bustles and bonnets glided by, their faces partially obscured by veils. Men in top hats and long coats strode with an air of purpose. Their voices, when they spoke, were a low murmur, their accents distinct, unfamiliar.

The very air felt different, denser, colder. And the shop... Ash & Glass was gone. In its place stood a grand, imposing townhouse, its dark brick facade imposing and unfamiliar.

Gwen looked down at her own clothes. Her modern jeans and jumper felt strangely out of place, anachronistic. A sudden, chilling realization washed over her, sending a jolt of ice through her veins. This wasn't her Bath. This wasn't her time.

The piercing hum had been a portal. The hourglass, 'the last of its kind,' had not just told time; it had twisted it. She was no longer in the 21st century. She was undeniably, terrifyingly, somewhere in the past. And the opalescent sand in the hourglass, which now lay still and dormant, seemed to mock her, leaving her stranded in a world that was both familiar and utterly alien. A single, terrifying thought echoed in her mind:
How do I get back?

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