

“Clever, dark, and hopeful . . . a love letter to reading and the power that childhood stories have over us long after we’ve grown up.”

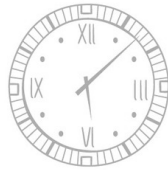
—V. E. SCHWAB, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*



MEG SHAFFER

# *The Wishing Game*

A NOVEL



MEG SHAFFER



BALLANTINE BOOKS  
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*The Wishing Game* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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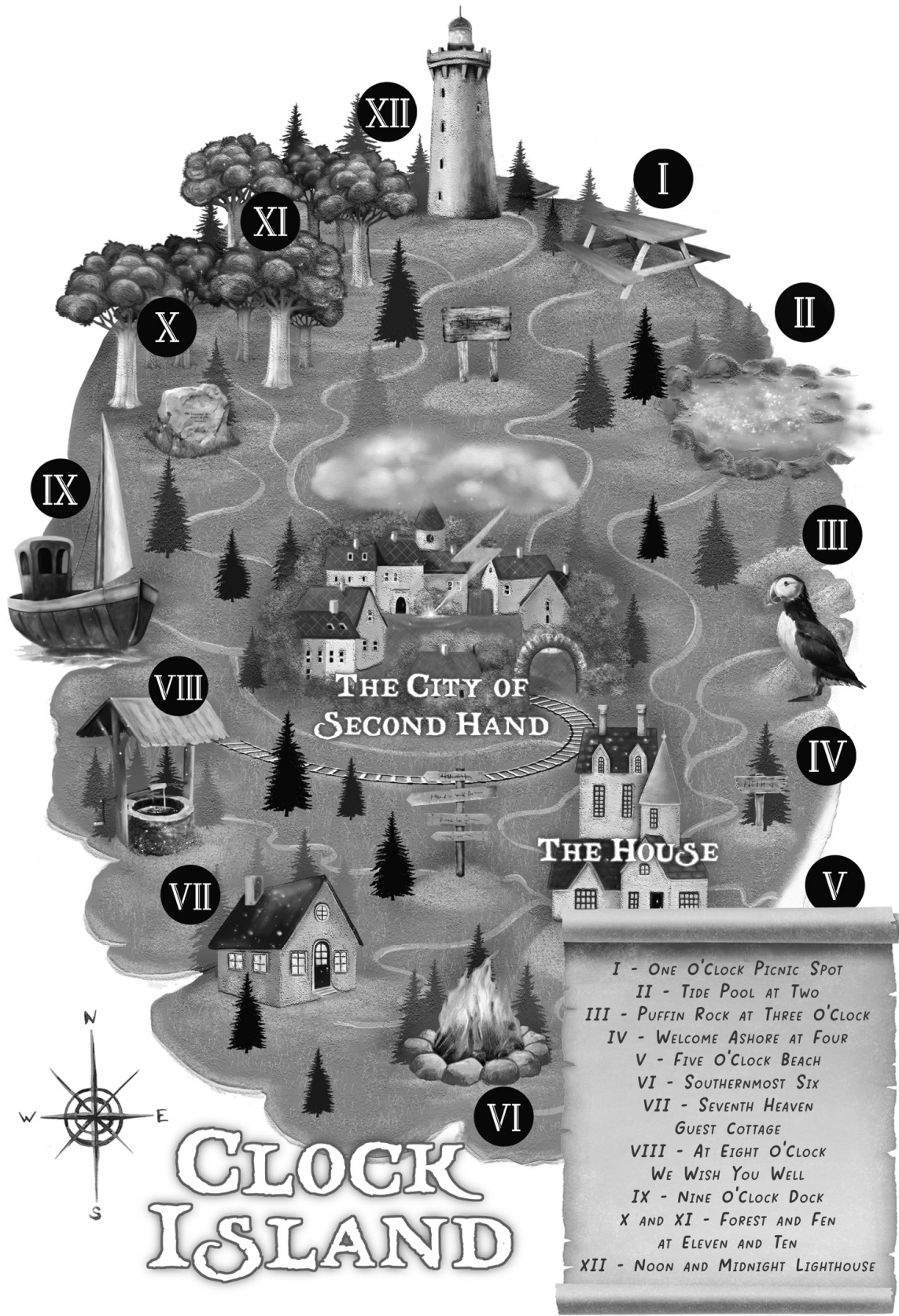
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*About the Author*



# CLOCK ISLAND

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- IV - WELCOME ASHORE AT FOUR
- V - FIVE O'CLOCK BEACH
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WE WISH YOU WELL
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AT ELEVEN AND TEN
- XII - NOON AND MIDNIGHT LIGHTHOUSE

## PROLOGUE

*May*

**E**VERY NIGHT, HUGO WENT for a walk on the Five O’Clock Beach, but tonight was the first time in five years his wandering feet spelled out an SOS in the sand.

He traced the letters carefully, drawing them large enough that they could be seen from space. Not that it mattered. The tide would wash the Five clean by dawn.

It had been a bit of whimsy on Jack’s part naming it the Five O’Clock Beach. Destiny, Jack said of finding this little patch of Atlantic forest twenty-odd years ago. These ninety acres right off the coast of southern Maine formed a near-perfect circle. Jack Masterson, who’d created Clock Island on paper and in imaginations, could now build it in real life. In his living room, Jack kept a clock with the numbers marked by pictures of places on the island—the lighthouse at the twelve, the beach at the five, the guesthouse at the seven, the wishing well at the eight—which led to conversations like...

*Where are you going?*

*Five O’Clock.*

*When will you be back?*

*By the lighthouse.*

Places were times. Times were places. Confusing at first. Then charming.

Hugo found it neither confusing nor charming anymore. One could go mad living in a house like that. Maybe that’s what happened to Jack.



Or maybe that's what happened to Hugo.

SOS.

Save Our Sanity.

The sand was so cold on his naked feet it felt wet. What day was it? May 14? May 15? He couldn't say for sure, but he knew summer would be here soon. His fifth summer on Clock Island. Maybe, he thought, one summer too many. Or was it five summers too many?

Hugo reminded himself he was just thirty-four years old, which meant—if he was doing his maths correctly (unlikely as painters weren't known for their maths skills)—he'd spent almost 15 percent of his life on an island playing bloody nanny to a grown man.

Could he leave? He'd been dreaming of leaving for years, but only the way a teenager dreams of running away from home. It was different now. Now he was making plans or at least making plans to make plans. Where would he even go? Back to London? His mum was there, but she was finally starting over—new husband, new stepdaughters, new happiness or something like it. He didn't want to be in the way.

All right, Amsterdam? No, he'd never get any work done there. Rome? Same story. Manhattan, then? Brooklyn? Or five miles away in Portland so he could keep an eye on Jack from a close but healthy distance?

Could Hugo do it? Could he abandon his old friend here with no one left to help him tell one hour from the next, the lighthouse from the guesthouse?

If only the old man would start writing again. Pick up a pen, a pencil, a typewriter, a stick to write in the sand...anything. Hugo would even take dictation if Jack asked him to—and he had offered.

“Please, for the love of God, Charles Dickens, and Ray Bradbury,” he'd said to Jack as recently as yesterday, “write something. Anything. Wasting talent like yours is like burning a pile of money in front of a poorhouse. It's cruel and it stinks.”

They were the very words Jack had thrown into his face years ago back when Hugo was the one drinking his talent to death. They were just as sharp and true now as they were then. Millions of children out there, and former children, too, would weep with joy if Jack Masterson ever published a new

book about Clock Island and the mysterious Master Mastermind who lived in the shadows and granted wishes to brave children. Jack's publisher regularly sent boxes of fan mail to the house, thousands of children urging Jack to write again.

SOS, those letters begged.

Save Our Stories.

But Jack had done nothing for five years but futz around in his garden, read a few pages of a book, take a long nap, drink too much wine at dinner, and fall into his nightmares by the time the little hand was on the Nine O'Clock Dock.

Something had to change. Soon. At dinner tonight, Jack hadn't made it to the bottom of his wine bottle as usual. He'd been quieter, which was either a good sign or a very bad one. And no bitter riddles either, not even Jack's favorite...

*Two men on an island and both blame the water  
for the loss of a wife and the death of a daughter  
but neither ever married, and neither's a father.  
What is the secret of the girls and the water?*

Too much to hope that Jack was coming out of it? Finally?

Hugo strode across the sand to the edge of the tide. He let the waves creep up close to his toes but no further. He and the ocean weren't on speaking terms anymore. Was this eccentric? Yes. But that was fine. He was a painter. He was supposed to be eccentric. Once, he'd loved the ocean, loved seeing it every morning, every night, seeing all its facets, all its faces. Not many people knew what the sea looked like in all seasons under all phases of the moon, but he did. Now he knew the ocean was as dangerous as a sleeping volcano. At peace, it was magnificent, but when it wanted to, it could bring down kingdoms. Five years ago, it had brought low the small, strange kingdom of Clock Island.

Jack might believe in wishing—or he had once upon a time—but Hugo didn't. Hard work and dumb luck got him to where he was. Nothing else.

But tonight, Hugo wished and wished hard that something would shake Jack from his apathy, break the spell, give him a reason to write again. Any reason. Love? Money? Spite? Something to do besides slowly drowning himself in overpriced Cabernet?

Hugo turned his back on the water. He found his shoes and dusted the sand from them.

When he came to Clock Island, he'd sworn to himself he'd stay one or two months. Then he said he'd stay until Jack was back on his feet. Five years later and here he still was.

No. No more. Time's up. Time to go. By this time next spring, he'd be gone. He couldn't sit and watch his old friend fade like ink on old paper until no one could read the writing anymore.

His decision made, Hugo started for the path. Just then, he saw a light come on in a window.

The window of Jack's writing factory.

The writing factory that only the housekeeper had set foot inside for years...and today was her day off.

The light in that window was low and golden. Jack's desk lamp. Jack was sitting at his desk for the first time in years. Was the Mastermind putting pen to paper again?

Hugo waited for the light to go out, proof it was a mistake, a whim, Jack looking for a lost letter or misplaced book.

The light stayed on.

It was too much to hope for, and yet Hugo hoped for it with all his heart and wished for it on every star in the night sky. He wished and hoped and prayed for it.

Prayed for the oldest miracle in the book—a dead man coming back to life.

“All right, old man,” Hugo said to the light in the window of the house on Clock Island. “It's about bloody time.”



*Make a Wish*



*Astrid woke from a deep and dreamless sleep. What had woken her? Her cat jumping on the bed? No, Vince Purraldi was sound asleep curled up in his basket on the rug. Sometimes the wind woke Astrid up when it rattled the roof of their old house, but the tree branches were quiet outside her window. No wind tonight. Although she was scared, she got out of bed and went to the window. Maybe a bird had tapped on the glass?*

*Astrid gasped as the room was flooded with white light, like a car's headlights but a thousand times stronger and brighter.*

*Then it was gone. Is that what had woken her? That blast of light in her room?*

*Where had it come from? she wondered.*

*Astrid grabbed her binoculars hanging off her bedpost. She knelt at the window, binoculars pressed to her eyes, and gazed across the water to where a lonesome island lay like a sleeping turtle in the cold ocean.*

*The light flashed again.*

*It had come from the lighthouse. The lighthouse on the island.*

*"But," Astrid whispered to the window, "that lighthouse has been dark forever."*

*What did it mean?*

*The answer came as suddenly to her as the light in her window.*

*Quietly as she could, she left her bedroom and slipped into the room across the hall. Max, her nine-year-old brother, was sleeping so hard he was drooling on his pillow. Ugh. Gross. Boys. Astrid poked Max in the shoulder, then did it again. It took twelve shoulder pokes to get him to wake up.*

*“What. What? Whaaat?” He opened his eyes, wiping away the drool with his pajama sleeve.*

*“Max, it’s the Mastermind.”*

*That got his attention. He sat straight up in bed. “What about him?”*

*She smiled in the dark.*

*“He’s come back to Clock Island.”*

—From *The House on Clock Island*, Clock Island Book One, by Jack Masterson, 1990