

Chapter One: The Light at Gull Rock

TEST FIXTURE — original sample text written for production testing only. Not for publication.

Maren Hale had kept the light at Gull Rock for eleven years, and she knew the tower the way other people knew their own kitchens. She knew which stair complained in cold weather and which one sang when the wind came hard off the water. She knew the smell of hot brass and kerosene, and the exact weight of the lamp-room key in her coat pocket.

On the last evening of October, the sea was very calm and quiet. The gulls had gone in early. The tide tables said low water at six, but Maren did not trust the tables half as much as she trusted the ache in her left knee, which had predicted every storm since she was thirty.

She climbed the ninety-four steps at dusk with a basket on her arm: bread, cheese, a tin of tea, and the logbook wrapped in oilcloth. At the top she set the basket down and went through the ritual she never skipped. She checked the oil. She trimmed the wick. She polished the great lens with a cloth so soft it had once been a shirt, moving in slow circles the way her predecessor, old Tomas Wren, had taught her the winter she arrived.

"You talk to it," Tomas had said, watching her that first week. "Not because it listens. Because you listen better when you talk."

Maren still talked to the lens. That evening she told it about the supply boat that had not come on Tuesday, and about the letter from her sister in Port Ellery that she had read three times and still not answered. The letter asked, in kind and careful words, whether Maren meant to spend her whole life on a rock.

She lit the lamp at sunset, at exactly the minute written in the logbook, and watched the beam take hold of the dark. It swept out over

the water in a long, steady arc, touching the channel markers, the black teeth of the reef, and the empty place where the supply boat should have been. For a moment everything was in order.

Then she saw the boat.

It was not the supply boat. It was smaller, a fishing smack with a torn sail, running too close to the reef and showing no light at all. Maren counted its distance the way Tomas had taught her, by beam sweeps. One sweep. Two. On the third sweep she saw it lurch, as if the sea had taken hold of its keel.

She did not hesitate, not even for a second. She hauled the fog bell rope though there was no fog, striking the bell again and again, because sound carries where light cannot warn. She lit the red flare she kept by the door, the one she was only supposed to use in a real emergency, and held it high until her arm shook. On the water below, the little boat turned — slowly, stubbornly — away from the reef and toward the safe channel.

Maren watched until its lantern, at last lit, bobbed steady in deeper water. Only then did she notice that her hands were trembling and the tea had gone cold in the tin.

She wrote it all in the logbook, in her plain square hand: the time, the weather, the boat, the flare. Underneath, after a moment, she added one line that was not required by any regulation.

The light is not for the ships that know the way. It is for the ones that do not.

Then she wound the clockwork, trimmed the wick once more, and settled in the keeper's chair to watch the long night through, with the beam turning above her like a slow, faithful star.