# The Light on Sennen Head

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ONE

# The Light on Sennen Head

The keeper's cottage at Sennen Head had a door that no longer fitted its frame, and every night for eleven years Aled Prosser had shouldered it shut against the weather. It was not a difficult thing. It was simply a thing that had to be done at a particular hour, in a particular way, and Aled had come to believe that a life was mostly made of such things — small obligations, honoured without ceremony, until the honouring became the life itself.

He climbed the tower stairs at four. There were ninety-six of them and he counted none. Halfway up, where the stone turned cold enough to feel through wool, he stopped as he always stopped, and listened to the sea working at the rocks below with the patience of something that had nowhere else to be.

The lamp room smelled of paraffin and brass polish and the particular dust that gathers in rooms nobody sleeps in. Aled trimmed the wick, wound the clock that turned the lens, and set the flame. The light went out across the water in a slow revolving stroke, and somewhere past the shoal a trawler

answered with a single blink of its masthead lamp, the way they had greeted one another for years without ever exchanging a word.

That was the last ordinary night.

In the morning a letter came up from the village in the pocket of a boy who had run the whole way and wanted it known. The Trinity House seal was the colour of dried blood. Aled read it standing in the doorway with the wind pulling at the paper, read it a second time sitting down, and then folded it into eight and put it in the tin where he kept things he did not intend to think about.

The lighthouse was to be automated in the spring. A machine would keep the light. The keeper's post at Sennen Head, established in 1847, would be discontinued.

He did not tell anyone that day, or the next. It seemed to him that the news belonged to the tower as much as to himself, and that the tower ought to be given time.

TWO

# What the Sea Returns

Mared came up from Penzance on the Thursday bus with a suitcase she did not intend to open. She had been away nine years, which was long enough for the hedges to have grown over the footpath and not nearly long enough for anything else.

Her father was on the gallery when she came round the headland, a small dark figure at the top of a white column, doing something to the railings with a wire brush. He did not wave. She had not expected him to. He had a way of receiving people that resembled the way the coast received weather: without comment, and without moving.

"You'll want tea," he said, when she reached the door.

"I'd want an explanation first."

"Tea's quicker."

They sat in the kitchen, where the table had a list to starboard that Aled had corrected for years with a folded envelope under one leg. Mared looked at the envelope. It was a different envelope than the one she remembered, which told her more about the intervening decade than any letter would have.

"They're taking the light," she said.

"They're not taking it. It stays. They're taking me."

"That's the same thing."

"It isn't." He turned his cup a quarter turn on the saucer, a gesture she had watched him make ten thousand times and had never once asked about. "The light was here before me. It will be here after. I was only ever the part of it that had to be fed."

Outside, the wind changed, and the note the tower made changed with it — a low sound in the stairwell that Mared had grown up mistaking for the building thinking. She realised she had missed it, and was annoyed to have realised it.

"What will you do?"

"Shoulder the door shut," Aled said. "Until March."

She stayed a week, and then she stayed another, and neither of them made any remark about it. In the evenings she climbed the ninety-six stairs behind him and stood at the glass while the lens turned, and the beam swept out over water that gave nothing back, and she began to understand that she had not come to bring him home. She had come because this was the last winter anyone would ever keep this light by hand, and someone in the family ought to have seen it.

THREE

# The Winter Log

The log was a ledger bound in black board, and every keeper since 1847 had written in it. Aled had filled four volumes and was two-thirds through a fifth. The entries were not diaries. They recorded the hour the lamp was lit, the hour it was extinguished, the visibility, the wind, and anything that had happened which a future keeper might need to know.

Mared read them at night when she could not sleep, working backwards through the volumes, and what struck her was not what the keepers had written but the enormous discipline of what they had not. A man had drowned in the cove in 1911; the entry read "Body recovered, 0640. Lamp lit 1618, extinguished 0722. Visibility good." Whatever else that keeper had felt, he had put it somewhere other than the ledger, and the ledger was the only thing that survived him.

She asked her father about it once.

"It's not the place for it," he said.

"Then where's the place for it?"

He considered this for so long that she assumed he had decided not to answer.

"The stairs," he said at last. "You do your thinking on the stairs. By the time you're at the top you're a keeper again."

In the second week of February the storm came that the forecasts had been circling for days. It took the roof off the fish store at Sennen Cove, put a trawler on the rocks at Gwenver, and blew for thirty-one hours. Aled kept the light through all of it. Mared kept Aled — carried up paraffin, kept the stove in, and at three in the morning, when the wind found the gap in the lamp-room glazing and the flame guttered and nearly went, she held her coat across the gap with both arms for forty minutes while her father worked.

Afterwards he wrote in the ledger: "Gale, SW, storm force 10 gusting 11. Glazing failed, north-east pane, temporarily stopped. Lamp maintained. Lit 1731, extinguished 0748. Visibility poor."

He did not write that his daughter had been there. Mared looked at the entry for a long time, and then she understood that this was not an omission. It was the highest thing he knew how to say: she had been part of the light being kept, and the light had been kept, and the ledger recorded that the light had been kept.

In March the engineers came with their crates. Aled shouldered the door shut behind them, out of habit, and then stood for a moment with his hand flat against the wood.