The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter

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For everyone who kept a light on for someone who never knew it.

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CHAPTER 1

Severance

MAREN'S BADGE BLINKED RED.

She tapped it again against the reader by the turnstile in the Lumentide lobby, the way you jiggle a car key that has worked every morning for fourteen years, and it blinked red again with a small, polite tone she had never heard before. It was 8:52 on Thursday, January 18. Behind her a guy from the payments team was holding a cold brew and staring at his own badge as if it had said something rude about his mother. The security guard, Hector, who had once lent her a phone charger during an outage that lasted until two in the morning, did not look up from his monitor. He looked very hard at not looking up.

"Maren?"

A woman she had never seen before was walking across the lobby toward her. She was about thirty and wore a cream blazer, and she had a lanyard that said PEOPLE PARTNER in the company's teal font. She held an iPad against her chest like a shield.

"I'm Kenzie," the woman said. "Do you have a few minutes?"

Maren had a 9:30 with the storage team about a migration she had been planning since October. She had a draft design doc with forty-one unresolved comments. She said, "Sure."

They went to a conference room on the ground floor called Tamalpais, all the rooms being named after California mountains by someone who had clearly run out of mountains around the third floor and started using hills. The blinds were down. A box of Kleenex sat on the table, centered, with one tissue already

pulled up through the slot in a little white peak. Somebody had prepared that tissue. Somebody had come in early and set the stage, and Maren, who had spent her career designing systems that failed gracefully, found herself admiring the thoroughness for a full second before she understood what it was for.

Kenzie read from the iPad. Restructuring. Eleven hundred roles across engineering. Not a reflection of performance. Severance package, COBRA, an outplacement service with a cheerful name. Her laptop access had been revoked at 6 a.m. Pacific. Her personal items would be shipped.

"I have a plant," Maren said.

Kenzie made a note. "What kind of plant?"

"A pothos. It's on the windowsill by the second-floor kitchen. It's not technically mine. Nobody else waters it."

"I'll make sure someone knows about the plant."

Maren did not use the tissue. She wanted that noted somewhere, in whatever file Kenzie kept. She signed for the paperwork with a stylus that dragged on the glass, and her signature came out looking like a seismograph reading, and then Hector walked her to the parking lot and said, "Sorry, Maren," and she said, "It's fine, Hector," which was the single biggest lie she told that year until April.

She sat in her 2016 Civic with the engine off. The fleece she was wearing, gray Patagonia, a size too big, bought at the Palo Alto store in 2019 and worn most days since, still had a badge clip on the zipper pull. She unclipped it and put the badge in the cup holder, where it lay among the quarters and a dried-out Chapstick, a small rectangle of laminated nothing with her face on it from a better haircut.

Fourteen years. She had known the system they'd built so well she could feel when it was about to page her, a kind of itch behind the sternum at three in the morning. She had known which database would fall over first in a traffic spike and which engineer would panic. She had not known this. That was the part that bothered her most, sitting there in the lot on Ellis Street while people in teal lanyards walked in and out of the glass doors. Somewhere there had been a spreadsheet with her name in it, sorted by some column she had never seen.

She drove home and watered her own plants instead.

* * *

The lawyer called on a Monday, three weeks and four days later, while Maren was at her kitchen table in Mountain View rewriting her résumé for the ninth time. The first eight had been too long, then too short, then, in version six, briefly unhinged.

"Is this Maren Brannock?" The voice was a man's, older, unhurried, with the flattened vowels she hadn't heard out loud in years but recognized the way you recognize the smell of a school cafeteria. "My name's Paul Grindle. I'm an attorney in Rockland, Maine. I'm calling about your father."

She knew. People said that afterward, *I knew*, and she had always assumed it was a story they told themselves. But a Maine lawyer did not call you about your father for good news. Walt Brannock did not win things. He did not get engaged.

"He died on February ninth," Grindle said. "I'm very sorry. It was a fall, at the house. The stairs in the tower. A friend of his found him in the morning."

"Which friend?"

There was a short pause. "A woman from town. She's been helping with arrangements, along with myself. He wanted to be cremated, and that's been done. I hope that's all right."

Maren looked at the screen of her laptop, where the cursor sat blinking after the words *Led a team of eight engineers in*. She tried to remember the last time she had heard her father's voice. Christmas 2021, maybe. He had called on the twenty-sixth, a day late, and said "Well," and then "How's the weather out there," and she had told him about the weather for four minutes, and then he had said "Well" again and that was that. He had never been any good on the phone. She had decided a long time ago that this was a choice.

"I'm calling," Grindle went on, "because you're the sole beneficiary under his will. He left you the property at Gannet Head. That's the keeper's house, the oil house and the tower itself, along with about four acres. The Coast Guard still owns and maintains the light. The optic, the fog signal. But the structures are yours. There's no mortgage. He bought it outright in 2006."

"He bought the lighthouse."

"At a federal auction. Eighty-seven thousand dollars." Grindle said it with a kind of local pride, as though Walt had gotten a good deal on a used truck.

"There's a modest checking account and a 2009 Tacoma. And some personal effects, which are still in the house."

"I didn't know he owned it."

Another pause, longer. She could hear a radiator ticking somewhere on his end, three thousand miles away.

"Well," Grindle said, and for one horrible second he sounded exactly like her father. "He did."

* * *

She called her mother that night. Linda picked up on the second ring, as she always did, because Linda believed letting a phone ring more than twice was a form of moral failure.

"Oh, honey," Linda said, and then nothing for long enough that Maren checked the screen to see if the call had dropped. "I'm sorry. I am. When's the service?"

"There isn't one. He was cremated."

"That sounds like him."

"He left me the house. At Gannet Head."

"Well," Linda said, briskly now, a door closing somewhere in her voice. "You'll sell it, I suppose. Gary's knee is acting up again, did I tell you? They want to do a scope."

Maren let her talk about Gary's knee. Gary was a retired hydrologist who did crosswords in pen and had once driven four hours to replace her car battery, and she liked him enormously. She let the knee carry them both to the end of the call. Afterward she sat in the dark of the apartment on Castro Street, for which she paid $3,450 a month, and opened a spreadsheet.

This was what she did. When a thing was too big, she broke it into cells.

The severance was six weeks flat plus two weeks for every year of service, which came to thirty-four weeks of base pay. Thirty-four weeks from January 18 landed on September 12. She typed the date in bold. Under it she listed rent, car insurance, the COBRA premium, which was $812 a month and felt like a ransom note, and the slow drip of everything else. Under that she listed the job market, which she did not quantify because it would only have been a column of ze-

ros. Half the people she knew had been cut in the past eighteen months. The other half were updating their LinkedIn photos at suspicious hours.

Then she opened a second tab and typed *Gannet Head Light* into the search bar.

There were photographs. A squat white granite tower with a black iron lantern on top, standing on a knob of rock among spruce trees. A white clapboard keeper's house with a red roof, attached to the tower by a short covered walkway. A small brick building off to the side. The sea all around, gray in some pictures and an improbable green in others. A Wikipedia entry: built 1857, keeper's house 1879, automated 1989. She knew all that. She had lived in that house until she was six. She remembered almost none of it, only the cold of a linoleum floor under bare feet, and a light that came around on the ceiling of her bedroom at night, regular as a clock, so that for years in California she couldn't fall asleep in a room that stayed dark.

She found Port Ellery on a map, a thumbprint on the western shore of Penobscot Bay. Population 1,912. A lobster co-op. A diner. A hardware store. A lot of people on Tripadvisor who had driven out to see the lighthouse and found it closed to the public and a sign that said PRIVATE PROPERTY in hand-painted letters, and who had given the experience three stars out of what seemed to be spite.

She went back to the first tab and added a row. *Property, Maine. Value: ?* Then she sat looking at the question mark for a long time.

The idea arrived around one in the morning, as most of her worst and best ideas did. She knew a hundred people like herself. She knew a thousand. People who had been laid off or were waiting to be, or who still had jobs and lay awake anyway, people who would pay real money to sit somewhere with no signal and look at weather. A retreat. No wifi. Fog and chowder and an actual lighthouse. She did rough numbers in a new tab: six guest rooms, $400 a night, sixty percent occupancy from May to October. It wasn't Lumentide money. It wasn't nothing. If she could get it running before September 12, the house could pay for itself, and she would have something to put on the résumé besides a gap.

It was also, she was aware, a way of never having to decide what she felt about the man who had bought it.

She booked the flight on a Tuesday in March, for April 11. Delta to Boston, then a Cape Air puddle-jumper to Knox County Regional in Owls Head, outside Rockland. She looked at the return-flight options for a while. Then she booked one way, closed the laptop and went to bed, and lay awake in the dark room on Castro Street, which stayed dark all night.

* * *

The Cape Air plane was a Cessna with nine seats, and the pilot was also the person who loaded the bags. He looked about nineteen. He told the passengers, all six of them, that there was "a little fog at the other end," in the tone of a man telling you there might be a little traffic, and for the last twenty minutes of the flight the windows went the solid white of a refrigerator door. Maren held the armrest, which was also the wall. A woman across the narrow aisle knitted without looking at her needles. When the wheels touched down, nobody clapped. Maren had the distinct sense that clapping would have been a social error of the first order.

The terminal at Owls Head was one room. Through its glass doors the world was gone, just a gray wall that smelled of salt and something like wet cardboard, and a single orange windsock hanging limp at the edge of what she could see. It was forty-three degrees. In Mountain View it had been seventy-one.

A woman stood just inside the door with her hands in the pockets of a navy barn jacket. She was short, in her seventies, with white hair cropped close and a pair of reading glasses pushed up into it like a headband. She had the stance of someone who had been on her feet since five and saw no reason to stop. When Maren came through with her rolling suitcase and her backpack, the woman looked her up and down, once, quickly, the way you'd check a delivery against an invoice.

"You're Maren."

"Yes."

"Ruth Coombs. Paul Grindle asked me to bring you the keys." She held out a ring of them. There were at least fifteen, old brass and newer steel, some with paper tags gone soft from handling. "Truck's out front."

"Paul said a friend of my father's—"

"That's me." Ruth turned and pushed through the door into the fog.

Her truck was a Ford Ranger with COOMBS HARDWARE & MARINE, WATER ST., PORT ELLERY lettered on the door in a font from roughly 1985. The cab smelled of coffee and bar-and-chain oil. Ruth drove with both hands, fast, through fog Maren couldn't see ten feet into, past shapes that might have been houses or might have been trees, and she did not turn on the radio, and she did not talk.

Maren tried twice.

"How long did you know him?"

"Long time," Ruth said, and downshifted for a curve Maren hadn't seen coming.

Some miles later: "Paul said you found him."

Ruth's hands stayed exactly where they were on the wheel. "I did."

That was all. The wipers went back and forth, clearing water from glass that immediately fogged again. They crossed a bridge over something wide and dark. They passed a blinking yellow traffic light hanging over an empty intersection, swaying a little, and Ruth said, "That's town," and then they were past it.

After a while she said, "What are you planning to do with the place?"

"I'm thinking about a retreat. For tech people. No internet."

Ruth seemed to consider this for about a quarter mile. "There's barely internet now," she said.

The road turned to gravel and then to two ruts with grass growing up the middle. Spruce closed in on both sides, black and dripping. And then, from somewhere ahead and above, came a sound Maren felt in her back teeth before she heard it properly: a low groan, two notes, one dropping into the other, long and mournful as a cow with a grievance. It went on. It stopped. Twenty seconds later it came again.

She remembered it. She didn't know she remembered it until that second.

"Fog signal," Ruth said. "Coast Guard's. You'll get used to it."

"Did he?"

Ruth stopped the truck in front of a shape that resolved, as Maren stared, into the corner of a white clapboard house. A porch light was on. Somebody had left it on.

"Front door's the big Schlage," Ruth said. "Back door sticks, you have to lift it. Furnace is oil, it's full. I put milk and eggs and some bread in the fridge.

There's a list of numbers on the counter." She looked straight ahead through the windshield, at the fog. "The brick building out back, I don't have a key to that. Never did."

"Okay."

"I'm at the store six days. Closed Sundays." Ruth reached across her, popped the door, and for a moment her face was close, and Maren saw that her eyes were wet and that she was furious about it. "Get some sleep."

She was gone before Maren had her suitcase all the way up the porch steps, taillights smearing to pink and then to nothing.

* * *

The house smelled of Old Spice and diesel and old wood. It was colder inside than out. Maren found the thermostat, a round Honeywell older than she was, and turned it up, and somewhere under the floor a furnace shuddered and caught. The kitchen had green linoleum and a white enamel sink with a rust stain shaped like Florida. The list of numbers on the counter was in a careful, slanting hand: plumber, oil delivery, Paul Grindle, *Ruth (store)*, *Ruth (home)*. On the table sat a single mug, washed and turned upside down on a folded dish towel.

On a hook by the back door hung a pair of drugstore reading glasses on a beaded chain, the chain looped twice around the hook. She stood looking at them with her coat still on. Then she went to find a bed.

The upstairs had three bedrooms. The biggest was his, and she closed that door without turning on the light. The smallest, at the end of the hall, had a slanted ceiling, a narrow iron bed made up with a wool blanket and a window that faced the sea, or where the sea presumably was. She didn't decide to sleep in it. She was just standing in it, and then she was sitting on the bed untying her shoes.

She lay down in her fleece. The fog signal groaned, paused, groaned. The furnace ticked. Her phone showed one bar, then none, then one again, as if it couldn't make up its mind.

The light came around.

It swept across the slanted ceiling from left to right, a long pale bar of white, there and gone. Maren lay still. She counted without meaning to, the way she

counted everything. Four, five, six. And there it was again, crossing the ceiling in the same place, at the same speed, as steady as a heartbeat she had forgotten she had.

She was still counting when she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2

The Oil House

"Historical," Gil Haskell said, and tapped the pipe under the kitchen sink with the handle of his screwdriver. It made a dull, wet sound, like knocking on a melon. "That's galvanized. That's older than galvanized. I'd want to look at it in better light before I said what it is."

He was in his sixties, built low and square, in a Carhartt jacket faded to the color of weak tea, and he had arrived at eight sharp in a white Silverado with a ladder rack and a bumper sticker that said I'D RATHER BE HAULING. Maren had found him on a list Ruth Coombs left on the counter, three names in pencil, one of them crossed out and annotated *dead*. Gil was the one with a check mark.

They did the house first. He pressed his thumb into the windowsill in the front parlor and it went in to the first knuckle. He lay on his back in the cellar with a flashlight and said "Huh" four times, each one lower than the last. He put a moisture meter against the plaster in the upstairs hall and showed her the number without comment, the way a doctor turns the scale around. She followed him with her phone in her hand, typing notes, and kept explaining the plan to the back of his jacket.

"Six guest rooms," she said. "Three up here, two if we split the parlor, one in the ell. No wifi. That's the point. People pay to have it taken away."

"People pay for that."

"Four hundred a night. I've run the comps."

"Have you." He knelt and pulled back a corner of the hall runner. The floorboards underneath were dark and soft along the baseboard. "They'll want hot

water, your four-hundred-dollar people."

Outside, the fog had burned back to a gauzy wall about a hundred yards offshore, and the grass on the point was the flattened, colorless stuff of April in Maine, half mud, studded with old snow in the shadows of the spruce. The tower stood white against all of it. Gil didn't look at the tower. The Coast Guard had the light, he said, and the Coast Guard could have it. He walked the foundation of the keeper's house, kicked at the granite, crouched at the corner where the gutter had been dumping into the sill for what he estimated was a decade.

"A hundred and forty," he said finally, standing up with a hand on his knee. "Thousand. That's to make it legal for strangers to sleep in. Not pretty. Legal."

Maren had budgeted sixty. She didn't say so. She did the arithmetic on her severance, which she had already done that morning and the night before, and it came out the same both times.

"That's a number," she said.

"It is." He wrote it on the back of a business card and handed it to her. Then he started toward his truck, and the path took him past the oil house.

It was a squat brick building twenty yards behind the kitchen, smaller than a one-car garage, with a slate roof, a steel door painted the same green as the house trim, and a padlock the size of a fist. Some kind of antenna, or the bones of one, stood bolted to the ridge. Gil slowed down. Then he stopped altogether and stood looking at it with his hands in his jacket pockets, longer than he had looked at anything else that morning, including the cellar.

"You want me to price that too?"

"I don't have a key," Maren said. "Ruth doesn't either."

"No." Gil nodded slowly, as if that matched something he already knew. "Walt never let anybody near that one. Thirty years I've been coming out here to fix his gutters and he'd walk me the long way round."

Gil left at ten-fifteen with a wave out the truck window that took in the house, the tower and possibly the whole state of Maine. Maren stood in the dooryard until the sound of the Silverado was gone into the spruce, and then for a while after, and then she went inside and made coffee in her father's percolator, which took eleven minutes and tasted like a radiator.

She sat at the kitchen table with a yellow legal pad. The table was pine, scarred along one edge where somebody had used it to brace a hacksaw, and it

had a level drawer that held exactly one fork, a church key and a roll of electrical tape. She moved the tape to the windowsill. She uncapped a pen.

The house first. She drew it the way she'd have whiteboarded a service diagram, boxes and arrows: kitchen, parlor, the ell off the back, the three bedrooms upstairs and the bathroom with the clawfoot tub that Gil had looked at and declined to touch. She numbered the guest rooms one through six. Room four was the parlor split in half, which meant a stud wall and a second door and probably a permit. Room six was the ell, which had its own entrance and a floor that sloped toward the bay at an angle she could feel in her ankles. She wrote *NO WIFI* across the top in capitals and underlined it twice, and then, because it looked like a ransom note, wrote *Unplug at the Edge* underneath it in smaller letters and crossed that out too.

Then the numbers. Six rooms at four hundred was twenty-four hundred a night. Nobody ran full, so she knocked it to sixty percent, and to a season of May through October, because she had stood on that point in April and she was not selling it to anyone in February. That came to something over two hundred and sixty thousand gross a year, before cleaning and insurance and the breakfast she'd somehow have to cook. It looked wonderful. It looked like a pitch deck.

Against that: a hundred and forty thousand to make it legal. Seventy-one thousand and change in checking. The 401(k), which she had promised herself she would not touch and which she now circled in pen anyway, lightly, as if it might not notice. Severance through September 12. A bank somewhere that would want to know why a laid-off engineer with no hospitality experience deserved a construction loan on a building whose plumbing was historical.

She did the sums three ways. They came out close enough to work if nothing went wrong, which in her experience was the assumption that sank every launch she'd ever been part of.

Her coffee had gone cold. She got up to dump it and found herself at the window over the sink instead, mug in hand.

The oil house sat in the middle of the window frame, squat and dark, its green door shut. In daylight the antenna on the ridge looked less like bones and more like something somebody had built on purpose and kept up. One guy wire was new. She could tell from the shine.

She went back to the table and looked at the site plan she'd drawn in the margin: house, tower, the gravel turnaround with four parking spaces, a dotted path to the rocks. Behind the kitchen there was a small rectangle. She hadn't labeled it. She hadn't assigned it a number or a purpose or a dollar figure. It was the only thing on the page that was just a box.

She picked up the pen. She put it down. Through the glass, the padlock caught a little of the thin April sun.

The key ring was on the hook by the back door, under her father's reading glasses, where Ruth had hung it the night before without comment. It weighed about a pound. Maren counted twenty-three keys on the walk across the dooryard. There were brass ones gone brown, a couple of Fords, a skinny one that could only belong to a mailbox, a squat Yale with *DO NOT DUPLICATE* stamped on it like a dare, and one key so old and toothy it looked like it had been made to open a church.

She started at the split ring and worked her way around.

The padlock was a Master Lock, laminated steel, the heavy kind with a rubber bumper around the body that was still black and still soft when she pressed it with her thumb. The shackle was chrome. It shone. Everything else on that side of the oil house had gone the color of the sea: the hasp a dull orange, the screws bleeding rust down the green paint in neat little streaks. The lock looked as if it had been hung that morning.

Key one didn't go in. Key two went in halfway and stuck, and she had to wiggle it out, which took a minute and a word her mother didn't like. Keys three through nine didn't go in. The church key was laughable. The Yale slid all the way home and wouldn't turn, and she stood there with her wrist cranked over, putting more torque on it than any key was built to take, until she felt the brass begin to give and let go.

She went round the ring twice. Then she went round a third time, slowly, holding each key up against the keyway and comparing the cuts by eye, the way she'd have compared two versions of a config file. Twenty-three keys. None of them fit. The man had kept a key to everything he'd ever owned, including, apparently, a 1970s Ford, and not to the one door he'd walked a contractor the long way round to avoid.

It was her building. It said so on a deed in Paul Grindle's office in Rockland. She'd flown three thousand miles and was paying a mortgage-free property tax bill of four thousand two hundred dollars to own a brick box she wasn't allowed inside.

The nearest house was a gray Cape a half mile back toward town, with a satellite dish and a boat on a trailer under a blue tarp. The man who answered the door was about seventy, in socks, and had clearly been watching her car come up his driveway for some time. She explained. He looked at her for a while.

"Walt's place," he said.

"Mine now."

"Huh." He went out to the garage and came back with a DeWalt grinder and a cutoff wheel still in its cardboard sleeve, and held onto it a beat longer than he needed to before he handed it over. "Wear glasses," he said. "And bring that back."

She found a pair of safety glasses in her father's kitchen drawer, under the fork, which she should have noticed earlier. The grinder screamed. She braced her boot against the door and leaned the wheel into the shackle, and sparks came off it in a long orange fan that skittered across the granite step and died in the wet grass. It took longer than YouTube had suggested. Her forearms buzzed. Then the wheel bit through, and the shackle sprang open with a small, offended click.

She switched off the grinder and the silence rang.

The lock lay in her palm, hot through her glove. On the back, half peeled, was a price sticker: COOMBS HARDWARE & MARINE, $38.99. Salt air ate cheap steel in a single winter. This one had no rust on it at all. Somebody had bought it new and hung it on this door, a year ago, maybe two, long after the last time her father had let her call go to voicemail.

The door stuck at the bottom and she had to put her shoulder into it. It gave all at once, and she stumbled a step into the dark and stood there, blind, breathing kerosene.

It wasn't fresh kerosene. It was the ghost of it, a hundred years of it soaked into the brick, layered over with something warmer and more recent: coffee, dust burning off a heater element, a faint sweetness she couldn't place until her eyes started working and she saw the open tin of Werther's on the shelf. The room

was maybe eight feet by ten. One window, painted over on the inside, a gray square of light at the top where the paint had been scraped away in a neat strip about two inches high. Exactly the height of a man's eyes if he was sitting down.

There was a chair. It was a wooden office chair on casters, the kind every school threw out in about 1985, with a folded boat cushion on the seat. It faced a plywood counter screwed to the wall, and on the counter, in a row, as tidy as a kitchen, sat the following: a VHF radio, an Icom, its face lit a soft amber; a gray metal lamp the size of a coffee can with a pistol grip and a trigger, which she would later learn to call an Aldis and at that moment called nothing at all; a squarish screen, older than the radio, in a beige plastic case with masking tape on the bezel; and a green Stanley thermos with the cup screwed on.

The amber light was the thing. She looked at it for a long time.

68, said the display. Below that, smaller: *SQL*. A pinhole of green blinked beside the volume knob, steady as a pulse.

She put her hand on top of the radio. It was warm. Not hot. Warm the way a laptop is warm when it's been sleeping on the bed all afternoon, the way a thing gets when it has been switched on and left on, doing nothing very much, for a long time. A gray cable ran from the back of it up the wall and out through a hole in the ceiling packed with what looked like spray foam. A second, fatter cable came down beside it to the beige screen, which was dark. She followed both with her eyes to the roof, where the antenna was. Where the new guy wire was.

The space heater under the counter was unplugged. She touched it anyway. Cold.

On the wall over the counter, above the radio, a shelf ran the whole width of the room, two-by-eight lumber on steel brackets, and on the shelf stood the books. Green ledgers, cloth spines, the cheap kind sold in any office supply aisle, packed tight and upright like a set of encyclopedias. No titles. Just numbers, in black marker, in capitals she recognized from the side of a brown paper bag in 1988. They ran left to right. They stopped short of the end of the shelf. There was a space there, about the width of one book, and a little rectangle in the dust where something had stood and wasn't standing now.

Maren stood with her hand still flat on the warm radio.

She had assumed, from the doorway, from the window, from the whole of the dooryard and the padlock and the contractor's long way round, that she was

opening a tomb. A dead man's junk room. Things a person stops using. But a dead man doesn't buy a thirty-nine-dollar padlock, and nobody leaves a radio on for two months in an empty building in Maine in the winter without someone paying the Central Maine Power bill and, it occurred to her slowly, coming in now and then to make sure it still worked.

The thermos was half full. She unscrewed the cup and sniffed. Coffee. Black. Cold, but not sour.

Behind her, the door swung on its old hinges and bumped gently against her heel, as if someone had pushed it.

It was the wind. She knew it was the wind. She turned around anyway, and there was nothing there but the wet gray dooryard and the house with its blank windows, and she felt foolish enough to drag a rusted coffee can of nails across the threshold to hold the door open.

The light from outside didn't reach much past the chair. She found a switch on the side of the beige screen, a little black toggle under the masking tape, and flicked it before she could think better of it. Something inside clicked and began to hum. For about ten seconds nothing happened. Then the glass went from black to a deep bottle green, and a thin bright line swung out from the center like the hand of a clock that had somewhere to be, and as it went round it left a smear of fainter green behind it, a ragged shape low on one side that she understood, on the third sweep, was the point. The land she was standing on. Out beyond it, a quarter inch away on the glass, a small hard blot lit up every time the line passed, faded, and lit again.

She didn't know yet what it was called. She knew it hadn't moved in a hundred years.

The books were too high to read sitting down, so she stood on the boat cushion, which was a bad idea, and ran a finger along the spines. 1, 2, 3. On up to 33. She pulled one out of the middle without choosing, the way you'd pull a card for a magic trick. Number 9. The cover was soft at the corners and someone had written on it in the same capitals: JAN 1997 –. No end date. Just the dash.

She climbed down and sat in his chair, because it was the only place to sit, and opened the book on her knees, where the green from the screen lay across the page.

0215. Fog since 2300, can't see the bell. F/V Lorna D., Pete Gagnon, compass light out, came in on the wrong side of the can. Had him on radar at 1/2 mile. Talked him north 200 yds, then east. Flashed him once so he'd know where I was. Cleared Hogsback 0241. Heard his engine all the way to the harbor. Cold.

Then a ruled line, and the next night, and the next. Two entries in February. One in March, three in a row in June, every one of them after midnight and every one of them signed with nothing. No *W.B.* No *Keeper*. Just the time and the boat and the weather and one word at the bottom, like a man closing a door.

The light was automated in 1989. Maren had known that the way she knew her own blood type. It was the whole explanation, the root cause, the single line in the log where her father's career ended and he went off to be whatever he'd been instead, which was a man who mailed a check every Christmas and didn't call. Retired. She had always pictured it literally. A gold watch. A recliner somewhere inland.

She looked at the cold coffee. At the scraped strip in the window paint, eye level for a seated man.

Her elbow brushed the radio when she set the book down, and the squelch knob turned a quarter inch under her sleeve. The speaker opened. A soft, wide hiss filled the little brick room, the sound of the whole bay with nobody on it, and the green line went round, and round, and lit the ledge every time.

CHAPTER 3

Thirty-Three Volumes

Nothing got read until everything was backed up. That was the rule, and Maren had made it at 9:40 p.m., standing in the oil house with volume nine still open in her hands and the radio hissing at her like a kettle somebody had forgotten.

She carried the ledgers up to the house in four trips, eight or nine at a time, hugged against her fleece the way she'd once carried server blades down a cold aisle in a data center in Santa Clara. Then she lined them up on the kitchen table in numbered order, spines out, two rows. Thirty-three. The table was oak, scarred white in rings where a hot mug had been set down without a coaster roughly ten thousand times. Her father's mug, presumably. She moved volume one so it didn't sit on a ring, then felt stupid and moved it back.

The setup was simple. Desk lamp angled low to kill the glare. Phone propped on a box of Morton salt, camera locked, focus tapped to the center of the page. Open, shoot, check the frame, turn. Open, shoot, check, turn. She did not let her eyes settle on the words. She looked at the edges of the paper and the corners of the frame and the little thumbnail that slid into the bottom of the screen, and if a line of blocky capitals swam up at her she let it go out of focus, the way you let a stranger's conversation on a train stay noise.

It was procedure. Any engineer would tell you the same thing: you don't start poking at a system before you've imaged the disk. You make the copy first, and you make it complete, and then whatever you break, you can get back.

The beam came through the window over the sink every six seconds and laid a pale bar across the ledgers and was gone. She stopped counting it after a while.

By volume eleven she had a rhythm. By volume fourteen the phone said 2,086 photos and her storage warning came up, and she paused to start the upload to the cloud, and that was when she saw her hands.

They were shaking. Not much. A fine tremor, the kind you get after the third espresso, except she hadn't had coffee since the airport. She set the phone down and held her right hand flat above the table and watched it. The fingers wouldn't sit still.

She thought about the padlock she'd cut, new, bought within two years at Coombs Hardware. She thought about the thermos, half full, and a radio that somebody had left on. Somebody had a reason to keep that room exactly as it was. Somebody could come back for it.

That was what the shaking was. She was afraid that if she went to bed, she would come down in the morning and the table would be empty, just oak and white rings, and there would be nothing left of him but a pair of reading glasses on a hook and a check that would never come at Christmas again.

The upload bar crawled to eleven percent. Maren pulled her chair closer and opened volume fifteen.

* * *

By Saturday the spreadsheet had seven columns. Date, time, vessel, skipper, position, conditions, notes. She'd started with five and added two when the data asked for them, which was how it was supposed to go, and she took a small, private satisfaction in that, sitting at the oak table with a mug of Maxwell House she'd found in the cupboard behind a can of Dinty Moore that expired in 2019.

The handwriting was the first problem. Her father wrote in capitals when he was tired and in a cramped, forward-leaning script when he wasn't, and the script was worse. His sevens had bars through them. His fours were closed triangles. A smear on page 31 of volume six turned out, after twenty minutes at maximum zoom, to be a coffee ring with the word FOG under it.

The shorthand was the second problem. It was private, and it hadn't been built for anybody else to read. TP came up forty times before she was sure it meant *talked past*. HB was the Hogsback, obviously. SR2 was *showed red twice*, which she took from the entry in volume nine and then found everywhere, SR1, SR3, once SR5 with an underline. Positions were bearings and distances from

the point, written in cables. *2 cbl SSE.* She had to look up a cable. It was a tenth of a nautical mile, about 608 feet, and once she knew that she could see the boats on a map, small and lost and very close to the rocks.

0512. Fog. F/V Sea Hag, Lenny B., plotter dn. 3 cbl S of HB, heading in blind. TP on 68. SR2. Late for him. Toast.

She typed it in. Date, time, *Sea Hag*, Lenny B., 3 cbl S, fog/plotter. Then her cursor sat in the notes column, blinking, waiting for *Toast*.

That was the third problem, and it was hers, not his. Every entry ended with a word like that. Cold. Coffee. Rain. Gulls. Once, in March 2003, *Knee*. They weren't data. They were a man talking to himself at five in the morning, and every time she read one she heard it in a voice she hadn't heard in years, low and dry and slightly amused, the voice that used to say *There she is* when she came down to breakfast. She typed them in anyway, because a backup that drops fields is no backup. Then she hid column G.

On Monday she reached the end of volume thirty-three, ran a count, ran it again and sorted.

Four hundred and twelve entries.

Ninety-seven distinct vessels, give or take the *Mary Beth* and the *Marybeth*, which she decided after some argument with herself were the same boat with an owner who couldn't spell. Some came up once. The *Sea Hag* came up eleven times, and Lenny B. was late for six of them.

She sorted by the conditions column, expecting a long tail of noise, the miscellaneous rescues any coastline throws up: an engine fire, a man overboard, a kid in a kayak. There wasn't one. Every row said fog, or said something had died on a boat, a radar, a plotter, a compass light, a GPS, and most said both. She filtered by position. Every one of them sat within half a mile of the Hogsback.

She scrolled from the top to the bottom and back again, thirty-four years of it, and not one row broke the rule.

Outside the window the beam came around and went, came around and went, over water nobody was on.

Which proved nothing, and she knew it. She had sat through enough postmortems to know what a man could do with a pattern once he'd decided it was there. Somebody always had a dashboard that lined up beautifully with the outage, right up until you asked where the data came from and it turned out they'd

picked the window themselves. Her father had written these books. He could have written down only the nights that fit. He could have been a lonely old man with a radio scanner and a habit, filling ledgers with other people's trouble and calling it a job.

So she checked.

NOAA kept hourly observations from the airport at Owls Head going back further than she'd hoped, through a federal website that looked like it had been designed in 2004 and never touched since. She downloaded the files year by year, CSVs with column headers like HourlyVisibility and HourlyPresentWeatherType, and wrote a short Python script on the kitchen table to join them to her spreadsheet by date and hour. It took forty minutes, most of it spent fighting the date formats. Her father wrote *14 MAR 03*. The government wrote 2003-03-14T05:53:00. Neither one was going to give an inch.

She ran it. Then she sat back with her arms folded and watched the output scroll, waiting for it to break.

It didn't. Row after row, the airport eight miles away had reported visibility of a quarter mile or less within an hour of the time in the log. Fog, mist, fog. The *Sea Hag*'s toast morning came back at an eighth of a mile. The handful of clear nights all had a dead plotter or a radar fault in column F, and she checked every one of them by hand anyway. Out of 412 rows, three didn't match, and when she pulled up the raw data for those three, the station had been down for maintenance. Missing values. Not contradictions.

Maren got up and filled the kettle and didn't turn it on.

There was a second thing, and she'd been half seeing it for days without letting it surface. She went back to the photos. Her father never named himself. Not once in thirty-three volumes did he write *I* when he could leave it out, and he never signed an entry, never initialed a page, never put *W.B.* on a cover. The ledgers had been written by nobody. But in maybe a third of the entries he'd copied down the radio traffic word for word, in quotes, the way you'd paste an error message rather than describe it, and the boats on the other end of those calls knew exactly who they were talking to.

"Lightkeeper, Lightkeeper, Sea Hag, you up?"

"Lightkeeper, it's Harold. Radar's out again, sorry."

"Thanks, Lightkeeper. Owe you."

She did a search on the transcribed text she'd typed into column G. *Lightkeeper*: 131 times. *Walt*: zero. *Brannock*: zero. Ninety-seven boats over thirty-four years, and none of them had ever used his name, or else he'd never once written it down when they did.

She thought of the man she remembered, who answered the phone at Christmas with "Yup" and passed it to nobody because there was nobody else in the house. Who said "Well," and then "Well," again, and then asked about the weather in California as if it were a long-standing concern of his.

On the screen, the cursor blinked in the search box. *Lightkeeper*. 131 results.

The kettle sat cold on the burner.

She shut the laptop at a little after eleven and carried the ledgers back out to the oil house in two trips, a stack of seventeen and a stack of sixteen, held against her fleece like library books. The fog had come in while she wasn't looking. It sat on the point the way it always seemed to here, not drifting in so much as turning out to have been there all along, and the fog signal let go its two-tone groan just as she got the door open, which she was still not used to and which made her say something she'd have been fired for in Tamalpais.

The shelf was a plank of pine on two iron brackets, painted the same institutional green as everything else the Coast Guard had once owned. She'd taken the books down without much ceremony on the first day. Now she put them back in order, one through thirty-three, spines out, the numbers in her father's capitals on white tape. She pressed the last one flush with her palm.

There was room left over.

Not a lot. A strip of bare plank between volume thirty-three and the bracket, about an inch and a half wide. She slid volume thirty-three to the right until it touched the iron, and the gap opened on its left instead, and she slid it back. Then she took volume twelve off the shelf and set it in the space, and it fit the way a key fits. Not snug. Exact.

She held the flashlight low across the plank. Dust lay along the whole length of the shelf, gray and fine and even, a little thicker toward the wall. In front of the gap it stopped. There was a clean rectangle of green paint, with sharp edges and no film on it at all, the size of the bottom of a ledger.

Back in the kitchen she opened the laptop and didn't bother sitting down. Volume thirty-three, last photo. She'd typed it in on Sunday and gone straight

on to the totals without reading it, which was the kind of thing she used to write up junior engineers for.

> *18 DEC 22. 0612. Fog, SE 10, snow later. F/V Wren, girl alone, plotter dropping out. New one. Talked her past the Hogsback on 68. Showed red once. Talks a lot. Cold.*

She searched the spreadsheet for *Wren*. One result. She searched the transcribed radio traffic, in case he'd written it some other way, *Wrenn*, *Ren*, the girl's name instead of the boat's. Nothing. Ninety-six boats had come back to him, some of them over and over, Lenny B. late six times. The *Wren* had shown up once, on the last page of the last book Maren had, and then the books stopped.

Except they hadn't. Nobody buys a ledger in December and stops writing in it for good the same week, and nobody leaves an inch and a half of space at the end of a shelf by accident. Her father had been alive for fourteen months after that entry. He'd died two days after a night she had no record of. And the coffee in the thermos had still been warm.

She thought about the padlock. Brass, new, a Coombs Hardware sticker on the back. Twenty-three keys on her father's ring, and not one of them had fit it.

So somebody else had the key.

The workroom was a lean-to off the back of the kitchen, eight feet by ten, with a bench made from a solid-core door laid across two sawhorses and a pegboard where every tool had its outline drawn in black marker. Two outlines were empty. A hammer and something long and thin she couldn't name. Maren spent a minute on that before she made herself stop.

The radar display came out of the oil house on its bracket after she'd backed out four rusted lag bolts with a socket wrench from the pegboard. It was a Furuno, beige going on yellow, with a cracked bezel and a sticker on the side that said *PROPERTY OF F/V DOROTHY ANN* in someone else's handwriting. It weighed more than it looked. She carried it across the wet grass against her stomach, and by the time she set it on the bench the front of her fleece was soaked.

She had assumed she'd have to run cable from the scanner on the oil house roof. She didn't. In the corner of the workroom, coming through a hole in the clapboard stuffed with steel wool, was a coil of gray cable with a strip of white

tape on the end. *SCANNER*, in her father's capitals. Somebody had already had this idea. Somebody had drilled the hole.

The first failure was the connector, which was a round twelve-pin thing that matched nothing in her backpack. The second was the adapter she made from a USB-to-serial dongle she'd bought for a conference demo in 2017, which Windows refused to recognize because the chip inside was a counterfeit Prolific and the driver knew it. She found an older driver on a forum for model railroaders, unsigned, dated 2009, and installed it with the specific dread of a woman who used to give talks about supply-chain security. It worked. The laptop said COM4.

COM4 said nothing.

She tried 4800 baud, which was the marine standard, and got a scroll of garbage, accented letters and box characters and once, unhelpfully, the word *ÿÿÿOK*. She tried 38400. Worse. She swapped the transmit and receive wires on the theory that whoever had spliced this harness had done it from the boat's point of view, and the garbage stopped, and the screen went blank, which felt like progress and wasn't. At one-fifteen she ate four of her father's Werther's in a row. At two she found the Furuno's manual as a scanned PDF, every page slightly crooked, and on page sixty-one a pinout diagram with a pencil-style annotation that some long-dead uploader had made in MS Paint: *USE PINS 3 + 7 NOT 3 + 5!!*

She moved one wire.

The terminal filled. Not garbage this time. Lines of numbers in tidy columns, bearing and range and a strength value, refreshing every two and a half seconds as the scanner on the roof swung around in the fog. She watched it scroll for a full minute before she trusted it. Then she wrote forty lines of Python, ugly ones, to turn each row into a dot on a black square.

The first sweep painted the shoreline in green, the curve of the point and the harbor mouth beyond it. The second filled in what she'd been waiting for: a hard, ragged cluster at bearing 041, a quarter of a mile out, bright as a thumbprint. Half tide, falling. The Hogsback, showing its back.

She sat with it while the sweeps came round. The fog signal groaned. On the screen the ledge pulsed and held, pulsed and held, and the water around it stayed black and empty, all the way to the edge of the square.

It was 0248. She pulled the legal pad toward her and wrote the time, the bearing and the range, and then, after a while, nothing else.

CHAPTER 4

Water Street

Mouse droppings in the silverware drawer decided it. Maren had been ready to live on saltines and her father's Werther's until the money ran out, but on Tuesday morning she opened the drawer for a spoon and found a neat little scatter of evidence among the forks, and she shut it again and stood there with her hand flat on the counter. Then she made a list.

It had eleven items on it. Mouse traps (lots). Bleach. Coffee that was not Maxwell House. A hose washer, because the outdoor spigot dripped at a rate she had timed at one drop every 1.8 seconds. Below the line she'd drawn, in smaller letters, the questions: *Who bought the padlock. Who knows about the radio. Who is Wren.*

The road from the point into Port Ellery was two and a half miles of mud season, which in Maine was apparently an actual season with its own name and its own rules, the main rule being that the gravel stretch past the Gagnon mailbox turned to pudding by noon. Her father's truck, a 2011 Tacoma with 214,000 miles and a pine-tree air freshener so old it smelled of nothing, handled it the way a tired horse handles a hill. She came into town past the Congregational church and the one traffic light, which blinked yellow in all directions and seemed to have no opinion about anything.

Water Street ran along the harbor. Lobster boats sat on their moorings with their bows all pointed the same way, like a class of kids listening to a teacher. The tide was out and the whole place smelled of mud flat and bait.

Coombs Hardware & Marine occupied a white clapboard building with a porch and a sign that had been repainted more recently than the building. Inside

it was dim and narrow and smelled of rope. Ruth Coombs was on a stepladder halfway down the second aisle, restocking a hook of brass snaps, and she said "Morning" without turning around.

"I need mouse traps," Maren said.

"Victor or the humane kind?"

"Which ones work?"

"Victor." Ruth came down the ladder with her reading glasses pushed up into her white hair, small and quick, and walked to the end of the aisle without looking at the shelves. She handed Maren a four-pack. Then she handed her a second four-pack. "Old house. They come in through the cellar when it thaws. Peanut butter, not cheese. Cheese is cartoons."

At the register a man in rubber boots was buying a single hose clamp and said, "Ruthie," on his way out, and Ruth said, "Danny," and that was apparently a full conversation. Maren filed the name. Ruthie. Not Ruth, not to anyone who'd known her longer than four days.

She put the traps on the counter with the bleach, the coffee and a hose washer Ruthie had found in a drawer of four hundred hose washers by feel. Ruthie rang them up on a register that printed its receipts in purple.

"Twenty-eight sixty," Ruthie said.

Maren paid. She had planned this part. She had planned it in the truck, the way she'd once planned the opening of a postmortem meeting, so that nobody could get defensive before the facts were on the table.

"The lock on the oil house was new," she said. "It had one of your stickers on it."

"Lot of locks have my stickers on them. I'm the only place in town sells locks." Ruthie tore the receipt off and folded it in half. "You get Gil out there?"

"Gil came Saturday. He says a hundred and forty thousand."

"Gil always says a hundred and forty thousand. Then he finds something." She put the traps in a paper bag. "What are you going to do about the septic?"

"I don't know yet. Did my father buy that lock?"

"Did he say anything about the septic? Gil?"

"He said it was historical."

Ruthie made a small noise that might have been a laugh. She folded the top of the bag over twice and creased it with her thumbnail, the way you'd seal an

envelope.

"Somebody's been in there," Maren said. "The radio was on. There was coffee in the thermos. Not old coffee."

"You still thinking about the inn?"

"Retreat."

"What's the difference?"

"About eighty dollars a night." Maren leaned on the counter. "Ruthie. You found him. You must have been out there a lot."

Ruthie looked at her over the counter for long enough that Maren became aware of the clock above the door, a Sea Scouts promotional clock from some decade that had liked orange. Then Ruthie pulled her glasses down onto her nose and looked at a clipboard.

"How many rooms?" she said.

"Six."

"Where are people going to park, six rooms? You can't park on that point in March, you'll lose a car." She made a note on the clipboard that had nothing to do with Maren. "You'll want more traps than that. Come back Friday, I've got a case coming."

That was the end of it. Maren knew the shape of a closed ticket when she saw one. She took her bag and her purple receipt, and on the porch she stood for a minute looking at the harbor, the way people in movies did when they had been stonewalled, and felt slightly ridiculous, and went down the steps.

* * *

The Port Ellery Lobster Co-op was a long gray shed on pilings at the end of the public landing, with a hand-lettered sign that said RETAIL TUES–SAT and a smaller one under it that said NO RETAIL. Nobody had resolved this. Inside there was a scale, a whiteboard with the day's boat price written on it ($6.25, which Maren gathered was low and had been low for a while), a Bunn coffee machine and three men in orange bibs standing around it the way engineers stand around a whiteboard, mostly not talking.

The woman behind the counter was about sixty, wore a Red Sox fleece and introduced herself as Carol before Maren could say anything. Maren had come with a different list, the one from her spreadsheet. She'd printed it at the library

on Monday: the twelve vessel names that showed up most often in her father's logs. *Mary Beth. Second Wind. Lisette. Abigail Rose. Three Daughters.* She'd thought she could ask, casually, whether any of those boats still fished out of here. She had not thought about what *casually* looked like when you were holding a printout.

"Those all ours," Carol said, reading upside down. "Most of them. *Mary Beth*'s gone, Harold sold her to a fella in Stonington. *Three Daughters* is Danny Ricker. Why?"

"They're in some papers of my father's."

"Who's your father?"

"Walt Brannock," Maren said. "I'm Maren. Brannock."

She said it louder than she meant to, the second time. One of the men by the coffee machine set his cup down on the counter. He was broad through the chest and sunburned in April, which seemed like an achievement, with a face that had been out in a lot of weather and a way of standing that favored his left leg. He didn't look at her. He looked at the cup. It was a full cup, a big one, the steam still coming off it.

Then he walked out. He went through the side door onto the wharf and let it bang behind him. Through the salt-spotted window Maren watched him go down the ramp to the float, limping on the steep part, and step down into a skiff without using his hands.

Nobody said anything. One of the other men took a sip of his own coffee.

"Sam," Carol said eventually, as if this explained it.

"Did I do something?"

"Sam Pelletier." Carol pulled the coffee cup toward her side of the counter and poured it into the sink, slowly, and rinsed the cup. "Don't take it personal."

That sounded like exactly the kind of thing people said when it was personal. Maren looked at the printout in her hand, at the twelve names in Arial 11, and folded it into quarters.

"Danny Ricker," she said. "Is he around?"

"Hauling," Carol said. "They're all hauling. You want to buy any lobster? It's a retail day."

The sign said both. Maren bought two lobsters, at nine dollars a pound, because it felt rude not to, and had no idea how to kill them.

* * *

The Harbor Lunch was across from the bank and had nine booths, a counter with stools that spun and a laminated menu on which the haddock chowder was listed twice at two different prices. Maren ordered the cheaper one. She put the lobsters in their wet paper bag on the seat beside her like a date.

She had her laptop open. This was a habit she'd been trying to break, along with checking LinkedIn to see which of her former coworkers had posted their *Some personal news* announcements, but it was easier to sit alone in a diner behind a screen than without one. She opened the spreadsheet and sorted by vessel. *Lisette* showed up nineteen times between 1996 and 2021. Captain listed, in her father's hand, only as *E*.

She was scrolling through the photographs of the *Lisette* entries when a man slid into the other side of her booth.

He was in his fifties, tanned in a way that came from boats you didn't have to work on, in a navy quarter-zip with a small embroidered logo on the chest she couldn't read upside down. His teeth were very straight and very white. He had a coffee, which he'd brought with him from the counter, and he set it down beside her chowder as if they'd been sitting together for an hour.

"Maren," he said. "Dennis Farrow. I'm sorry about your dad."

"Did you know him?"

"I met him twice. He was a character." Farrow smiled. "He threw me off the point the second time. Very politely. Well, politely for Walt."

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"It's Port Ellery. There's here, or there's the Irving station." He took a business card out of a slim leather case and slid it across the table with two fingers. It was heavy cream stock. FARROW COASTAL HOSPITALITY, Portland and Kennebunkport, and a phone number. On the back, in blue ink, he'd already written something. "I'll be quick, because I know you've got things going on. I do small inns. Twelve to twenty keys. Historic properties, mostly. I've been looking at Gannet Head for about six years."

"It's not for sale."

"Everything's for sale. I'm not being a jerk, I promise, that's just the business." He tapped the card. "Turn it over."

She turned it over. *$1,600,000*, he had written, and underlined it.

"Cash," Farrow said. "No financing contingency. As is, which, I've seen that house from the water, as is is a gift I'm giving you. My guys close in thirty days. You don't have to fix a single thing. You don't have to deal with Gil Haskell, who is a nice man and who will bleed you for two years."

She did not like that he knew about Gil. She did not like it at all.

"The Coast Guard owns the light," she said.

"The Coast Guard owns the optic and the horn and an easement. You own the tower and the house and the oil house and four point two acres." He said *oil house* the same way he said everything else, easy, and she watched him for anything extra in it and found nothing. "I'd keep the tower. People love a tower. Weddings."

"I'm doing a retreat."

"I heard." He nodded like this was a good idea he'd once had himself. "No wifi, right? Tech people."

"Who told you that?"

"You told Gil. Gil told his wife. His wife does hair." Farrow turned his coffee cup a quarter turn on the table. "Look, I think it's a great concept. I just think it's a concept for a different building. That house was built in 1879 for one guy and his family and a goat. You'll need an engineered septic, sprinklers if you go over five rooms, ADA access on the ground floor, and the road. Don't forget the road. The town won't plow past the Gagnons'."

"I'm aware of the road."

"I know you are." He got up. He left the coffee. "Thirty days, cash. The offer's good till the end of June. After that, honestly, I've got a place in Camden I'm looking at, and I don't need two." At the end of the booth he paused, and for a second the smile came off and he looked like a tired man in his fifties who had driven up from Portland on a Tuesday. "Your dad was out there by himself a long time. It's a lot of house to be lonely in."

Then he paid at the register, for both of them, before she could stop him.

Maren sat with the card. The chowder had a skin on it now. The number on the back was written in a confident, even hand, the hand of someone who wrote numbers like that often, and she found that she had already, without deciding to, divided it by the monthly cost of a one-bedroom apartment in Sunnyvale. It came out to a little over five years of rent. She put the card face down.

* * *

"You're Walt's girl."

The voice came from the last booth, the one by the kitchen door, which Maren had assumed was empty because she hadn't seen anybody in it. An old man was sitting there with his back to the wall. He wore a green wool jacket buttoned to the collar and held a magnifying glass the size of a saucer over a folded copy of the *Courier-Gazette*. He did not look up from it, and when he did turn his head toward her his eyes didn't quite land on her face. They landed somewhere to the left of it, near the coat hook.

"I am," she said.

"Thought so. You've got his walk." He lowered the magnifier. "I can't see worth a damn, but I can hear a walk. Sit."

She sat, taking the lobsters with her. Up close he was small and gray-whiskered and older than the jacket. A cane leaned against the booth. His hands were enormous and spotted and very still.

"Everett Thibodeau," he said. "Ev."

The *E*. She knew it before she'd thought it through, the way she sometimes knew where a bug lived before she'd read the code. "You fish the *Lisette*."

"I fish her when the doctor's not looking." He folded the newspaper. "Short string. Eighty traps. My granddaughter says I'm going to drive her into the Hogsback one of these days." He said the name of the ledge without any weight, the way you'd say the name of a road.

Maren had her phone in her hand. She had a photograph on it, from volume twenty-two, page forty, and she almost held it out before remembering he couldn't read it. So she read it to him, quietly, while the cook banged a pan behind the door.

> *2145. Fog, vis nil. F/V Lisette, E., radar dead off the ledge. Talked him in on 68. Showed white then red. Fixed set at his mooring Tues. Pie.*

Ev listened to the whole thing with his head tilted. When she was done he didn't say anything for a while.

"Strawberry rhubarb," he said finally. "My wife made it. Walt wouldn't take money. He'd take pie."

"He fixed your radar."

"Three times." Ev held up three fingers, as if she might need help with the number. "Ninety-eight, oh-four and I want to say twenty-nineteen. Raytheon, the first one. Pile of junk. He'd come out to the mooring in that little skiff of his with a tackle box full of tubes and sit in my wheelhouse half the morning cussing at it, and he'd get it going, and he'd never take a dime. Not one time."

"Why?"

Ev's face did something then, very small. The mouth closed. He reached for the newspaper and the magnifier, and he held the magnifier over the paper again though Maren could see it was the obituaries page, upside down.

"Mr. Thibodeau," she said. "The other boats called him Lightkeeper. On the radio. Did you know it was him?"

"Tide's coming in," Ev said to the newspaper.

"Who else knew?"

"I'm meeting my granddaughter at one."

"Ev. Please. Somebody's been using his radio since he died. Somebody put a new lock on it."

He moved the magnifier an inch to the right. She watched him not answer. He was very good at it, better than Ruthie, who at least had to keep her hands busy. Ev just sat there being seventy-nine years old with the obituaries upside down, and after a full minute the cook came out and topped up his coffee without asking, and called him *Mister Ev*, and the moment was gone the way fog goes, all at once and then entirely.

"He fixed my radar," Ev said, as she stood up. "Three times. That's what I've got."

* * *

She drove home the long way, by the shore road, because she wanted the time.

The sums went like this. Severance through September 12, which was twenty-one weeks from now. Checking account: $31,400 and change, after the flight and the truck insurance and the nine-dollar lobsters. Gil's number, $140,000, and Ruthie's opinion that Gil's number was a starting point. The septic, unknown. The road, unknown, and possibly not hers to fix. Six rooms at $400 a night was $2,400 a night if they were all full, which they would not be,

not in the first year, not in a building where the plumbing was historical and the town didn't plow. She'd run that model on Saturday with an occupancy of 40 percent and had felt good about it. Now she ran it at 25 and felt worse.

On the other side of the ledger: one card, cream stock, face down in the cupholder. Sixteen hundred thousand dollars. Thirty days.

She didn't like the way the numbers came out. She didn't like how fast she'd done them, either.

At the Gagnon mailbox the gravel had gone to pudding exactly as advertised, and the Tacoma slid sideways in a way that made her grip the wheel and say "No, no, no" out loud, to a truck, and then it found purchase and climbed out onto the hard ground under the spruce. The point opened up ahead. The tower stood white against a sky going the color of dishwater, and below it the oil house sat squat and brick with its door shut, the cut padlock still hanging in the hasp where she'd left it, a fact she now noticed she didn't love.

She parked. She carried in the traps and the bleach and the coffee and the lobsters, who had stopped moving at some point on the shore road and whose fate she would deal with later. She baited eight traps with Jif. She did not think about Sam Pelletier's coffee going down Carol's sink. She did not think about Dennis Farrow knowing who Gil Haskell's wife was.

Then she went out to the oil house, because she couldn't not, and opened the door.

The radio was where she'd left it, its little screen glowing amber on channel 68, the squelch hissing low. The thermos was where she'd left it. The shelf of green ledgers was where she'd left it, thirty-three volumes and the clean rectangle of floorboard-colored shelf at the end where the dust didn't reach.

And on the workbench, beside her laptop, square in the middle of the legal pad where she'd written *0248* and the bearing and the range and nothing else, someone had set a roll of Werther's Originals, new, the cellophane still on it.

CHAPTER 5

Three Long, One Short

BY MIDNIGHT THE FOG HAD EATEN THE POINT.

It came in off the bay around eleven, the way the weather service on her phone had promised it wouldn't, first as a softening of the bell buoy's edges and then as a wall that rolled up over the rocks and took the spruce, the woodpile, the oil house and finally the tower itself, so that from the kitchen window Maren could see nothing past her own reflection holding a mug of chamomile she didn't want. It was June 14. She had been in Maine nine weeks. In that time she had caught eleven mice, ripped out the downstairs bathroom with Gil's nephew, and not once looked out a window at night and seen nothing at all.

She went up to bed anyway, because that was the rule. She lay on her back in the end room and waited for the beam.

It came, every six seconds, but wrong. The fog took the white flash and smeared it, so instead of a clean bar sweeping the ceiling she got a slow brightening, like someone opening and shutting a refrigerator in the next room. Then the horn went. Two tones, low and lower, a groan she felt in the bed frame. Thirty seconds of silence. Groan again.

It was the silence that bothered her. No surf on the ledge, no wind in the spruce, no engines from the harbor. The fog swallowed everything except the Coast Guard's horn, which kept announcing a lighthouse to a bay that couldn't see it. Maren had read 412 of her father's entries. She had a spreadsheet with conditional formatting. She knew the Hogsback lay on a bearing of 041 at a quarter mile, and she knew how many times he'd written *Coffee*, and none of

that told her what a person was supposed to do at 12:10 in the morning when the world went white and quiet and every boat in Penobscot Bay was, presumably, tied up and sensible.

Presumably. That was the word she'd have flagged in a code review.

At 12:40 she got up and put on the fleece over her T-shirt and stood at the bedroom window with her forehead nearly on the glass. The roll of Werther's was still on the legal pad in the oil house, untouched for two months. She hadn't eaten one. She hadn't thrown it out either.

The fog shifted. Not much, a seam opening somewhere off the point, a darker gray inside the gray where the water must be. And in it, low and to the right, a light.

It blinked. Long. Long. Long. A gap, then a quick short wink, then darkness. She counted it the way she'd counted the beam on her first night, out loud and barely above a whisper. Long, long, long, short. Dark for maybe four seconds. Then again.

She knew it. She knew it the way you know your own handwriting on an old envelope, before your brain catches up. In column G of the spreadsheet, the one she'd labeled NOTES/UNKNOWN, there were twenty-nine rows where her father had written the same shorthand, and she'd highlighted every one of them yellow because she couldn't work out what it meant.

0155. Thick. 3L 1S off the point. Answered. Talked him in. Cold.

Long, long, long, short. Out in the fog, somebody was asking for Walt.

She took the stairs two at a time and then remembered she was forty-one.

The oil house padlock was a new one from Coombs, the key on a shoelace around her neck, and she fumbled it in the fog with her phone flashlight clamped in her teeth. The Aldis lamp sat on the shelf below the logbooks, a gray metal thing like a cartoon ray gun, its cord running to a battery box the size of a car battery because that was what it was. She'd tested it once in April, pointed at the woodpile. She had not practiced. She lifted both, and the battery alone was a good forty pounds. She grabbed volume 22 off the shelf because three of her yellow rows lived in it, and went for the tower.

The tower stairs were iron, ninety-one of them, curling up the inside of the granite with a rope rail somebody had added in the seventies. She had climbed them maybe six times. Each time she'd stopped at the bottom, at the third step,

which was where Ruthie had found him, and looked at it, and then gone up anyway. Tonight she didn't stop. She went up with the battery banging her shin every fourth step and the lamp hooked over her wrist by its strap, counting under her breath because counting was something to do.

At the top the hatch to the gallery stuck, then gave. The cold hit her in the face.

It was worse up here. The fog moved, which she hadn't expected, sliding past the railing in long wet sheets, and the horn went off directly below her feet so hard she felt it in her molars. Behind her the LED optic turned its six-second flash into the murk and lit nothing but water droplets. She set the battery down, clipped the leads on by feel, and opened volume 22 on the gallery floor under the flashlight.

0210. Thick. 3L 1S off the point. Answered. F/V Ruth Ann. Talked him in. Coffee.

Answered. Answered how? She flipped back four pages, forward six. Soundings. A sketch of the ledge with an arrow through the gap. A grocery list, for God's sake: *eggs, Bag Balm, batteries D*. Nothing that said what an answer looked like.

Out on the water the light went again. Long, long, long, short.

She put the lamp to her shoulder and aimed where she thought it was. The trigger worked a shutter inside, and she squeezed it, and the shutter clacked, and a fat white bar shot out into the fog and lit up a wall of nothing ten feet off the railing. She tried to send it back. Three long. Her first long was fine. Her second was too short because the wind shoved her elbow. The third she held so long it was probably a lecture. Then the short, which came out as two because her finger slipped. She tried again. Worse. The shutter clacked like a stapler.

Long, long, long, short, said the water. Patient. Or not patient. She couldn't tell from a light.

She sent it a third time, slower, saying the words out loud. Long. Long. Long. Short. Her hands were wet and her thumb had gone numb against the cold metal housing. She lowered the lamp and waited.

The horn groaned. Thirty seconds.

Nothing came back.

She waited through two more groans, then three, the flashlight beam lying across the open logbook where the pages had started to curl in the damp. The seam in the fog had closed. Low and to the right there was only gray, the same gray as everywhere else, and somewhere inside it a boat that had either understood her, or turned away, or was sitting out there on a quarter-mile of black water trying to work out what kind of idiot was up in Walt Brannock's tower.

Then, under the next groan of the horn, something else.

It was faint and it came from below, from the ground, from the open door of the oil house she had not bothered to shut behind her. A crackle. A burst of static and the ghost of a word, then nothing, then static again. In two months that radio had never made a sound except the hiss she'd heard the day she cut the lock, and she'd stopped hearing even that, the way you stop hearing a refrigerator.

She left the lamp. She left the battery and the logbook and went down the ninety-one steps faster than anybody should go down ninety-one iron steps in the dark, one hand sliding on the rope rail, the flashlight swinging wild across the granite. At the bottom she did not look at the third step. She ran across the wet grass in her slippers.

The oil house smelled like it always did, kerosene and old coffee and the faint sweetness of the Werther's. The Icom's display glowed green on the workbench. 68. The squelch broke open as she came through the door.

"Gannet Head. You up?" A man's voice, old, cracked down the middle like a dropped plate. A pause full of engine noise. "Walt? You there, Walt?"

She stood with her hand on the back of her father's chair. The microphone hung on its clip, coiled cord, a button on the side worn shiny where a thumb had pressed it for years. She had read the manual in April. She had read it the way she read terms of service, which was to say she knew where the information was and had retained none of it.

"Walt." Not a question this time. "I got fog right down on the water and I'm hearing surf off my starboard I don't care for. Come on, now."

There were several things she could say. She ran them like test cases. *He's not available.* As though her father were in a meeting. *Who is this?* Rude, and also stupid, because whoever this was had a boat and the rocks were real and she had

a voice and a radio and a dead man's sketches lying open on a gallery ninety-one steps up. *Wrong number.* Ridiculous.

She unclipped the mic. Her thumb found the worn spot.

"This is." She let go of the button by accident, pressed it again. "This is Gannet Head. This is Maren. Walt's daughter." Her mouth had gone dry. "He's gone. He died in February. I'm sorry."

The static ran on long enough that she thought she'd done something wrong with the button. She checked it. Checked the channel. Still 68.

"I know it," the voice said. Quieter now. "I know he did. I was at the church." A breath, rough. "Habit, I guess. Forty-odd years of asking for him."

Then she knew the voice. Stubborn, a little sly, a man who'd been paid in pie.

"Mr. Thibodeau?"

"Ev. It's Ev." The engine note changed, dropped, as if he'd pulled the throttle back. "Saw your light up there. Didn't know what to make of it. Thought for a minute." He didn't finish. "Never mind what I thought. Your father'd have me in the harbor by now with the kettle on. I can't see my own bow rail, Maren, and I couldn't see it in daylight either. So you tell me. Is there anybody up there knows where that ledge is?"

Her eyes went to the shelf, to thirty-three green spines and one empty space.

"Hold on," she said into the mic, and then, because that didn't sound like anything a person on a boat wanted to hear: "Give me one minute. Stay where you are."

"Can't stay where I am. Tide's making."

She pulled volume nine down, and seven, and fourteen, because those were the ones where she remembered sketches, and laid them open across the bench on top of the radar manual and a dish of Werther's wrappers. The same ledge, drawn by the same hand over twenty years. A long lump like a loaf of bread, a cross for the rock that showed at half tide, a dotted line curving between the ledge and the point with an arrow at each end. In the margins her father had written things like *keep R4 on port til bell* and *HB 041 / 2 cbl*, which she had decoded on a Saturday in April at her kitchen table with a cup of tea going cold and had felt clever about. Clever at a kitchen table was different. Her hands knew that before she did.

"Ev. Can you see the bell? Is there a bell?"

"I can hear the bell. Seeing's not on offer."

"Okay. Okay. Keep the bell on your port side." She traced the dotted line with her fingernail. "And steer zero four one."

Nothing came back. The horn groaned outside, the long low note and then the lower one, and the Icom's display sat there green and unbothered. She counted. Eleven seconds. Fourteen. Something cold went through her stomach and stayed there.

"Ev?"

"Maren." His voice was very even, the way her mother's had gone when Maren was sixteen and backing the Camry toward a hydrant. "Zero four one off this bell puts me on top of it."

She looked at the sketch again. *HB 041.* Hogsback, 041. The bearing *to* the ledge, from the tower. From where she was standing. She had plotted the thing herself on the radar in April, at 0248, and logged it, and then sent a seventy-nine-year-old man straight at it.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Don't. That's where the rock is." She pressed her free hand flat on the page as if the page might move. "Come right. Come back to the right."

"How far right?"

She didn't know. That was the truth, and it was a terrible thing to discover with your thumb on a transmit button. She dragged the laptop across the bench and woke it, and the radar sweep came up green on black, the point a solid smear at the bottom, the ledge a cluster of bright speckle where she'd tagged it. Out past the speckle, moving slow, a single fat return. Him. Much closer to the speckle than she liked.

"Ev, I've got you on the radar. You're." She measured with her thumb against the screen, which was not how anyone measured anything. "You're maybe two hundred yards off it. Turn right. Keep turning. I'll tell you when."

The return crawled. The silence went on long enough that she started to hear her own breathing on the open channel, which meant she'd been keying the mic without talking, which meant he couldn't answer. She let go.

"Coming right," said Ev, already mid-sentence, as if he'd been saying it for a while.

She watched the blip swing. She watched it slide along the edge of the speckle the way a drop of water slides along a counter, not quite touching. In the margin of volume fourteen, under the dotted line, her father had written *when R4 abeam, straight in. Easy.* She found she disliked him very much for the word easy.

"There's a red can," she said. "R4. When it's beside you, go straight for the harbor."

"I know where the harbor is, dear. I been going there since Eisenhower."

At 0209 the blip cleared the last of the speckle. At 0215 the radio said, "Open water. Hearing the bell astern. That'll do," and then, after a moment, "That'll do, Maren."

She didn't answer. She was already out the door and across the grass, and then up all ninety-one steps again with her lungs burning, and on the gallery she found the lamp where she'd left it and the logbook soft with damp. The fog had thinned toward the north. Down there, small and low, a red light and a green one and a white one above them moved away from her across the black, so slowly she had to look at the railing post beside them to be sure they were moving at all.

She stayed until there was nothing left to look at but the fog closing back in behind him.

The oil house was warmer than the gallery by about four degrees and smelled of hot electronics and old coffee. Maren put the damp logbook on the bench and peeled the cover open with two fingers, the way you'd handle a wet paper bag. Volume thirty-three. Her father's last entry, December 18, 2022, sat a third of the way down a left-hand page, and below it the green ruled lines ran on empty to the bottom and over onto the next sheet and the next, as if he'd simply stopped carrying this one up the stairs.

0605. Fog. F/V Wren, girl alone, plotter dark. Talked her in on 68. Knows the bell now. Cold.

She found a pen in the coffee can. Bic, blue, chewed. He chewed his pens. She hadn't known that, and she put the cap in her fleece pocket instead of in her mouth.

Then she sat for a while with the nib a quarter inch off the paper.

It was only a record. She had written ten thousand of them: incident reports, postmortems, a three-page document once about a cron job that ran on Pacific time when everyone else had agreed to UTC. You wrote down what happened so the next person didn't have to guess. The next person, here, was nobody. Or it was her.

She wrote it in his format because she didn't know another one.

0215. Fog thick. F/V Lisette, Ev. Three long one short off the point. Answered w/ lamp (badly). Talked him past the Hogsback on 68. Sent him at it first on 041. Came right in time. R4 abeam, straight in.

Her printing looked nothing like his. Smaller, slanted, the hand of someone who mostly typed. She reread it and it read like a confession, which she supposed it was. Then she added one word at the end, because he always did, and because it was true.

Sorry.

The horn went, long and then longer and lower, and the walls took it in. Maren looked at the five lines under her father's five lines and felt something she didn't have a name for that sat right behind her breastbone, the same place the cold had gone when Ev stopped answering.

If she left it, she was in the book. She was the person who'd answered the light. Whoever had bought that padlock at Coombs and left the radio warm and set a roll of Werther's on her legal pad would come in some night and read this, and they would know that the Brannock girl from California had picked up the mic. So would she, every time she opened the cover.

She drew a line through the first sentence. Then the next. One line each, ruled straight against the edge of the radar manual, so the words stayed legible underneath like a thing under ice. She stopped before the last line. *Sorry* sat there by itself at the end, uncrossed, and she couldn't make her hand do it.

She closed the book.

On the bench the Icom hissed softly on 68, the green numbers steady. Somewhere out past the point, in the part of the bay her father had drawn over and over like homework, the bell went on ringing for nobody she could see.

CHAPTER 6

Unauthorized Lights

Boatswain's Mate First Class Teresa Alvarado counted the stairs under her breath, and when she reached the top she said, "Ninety-one," as though she'd caught them trying to cheat.

She had arrived at 8:15 on Tuesday in a white Coast Guard pickup with a ladder rack and a toolbox the size of a carry-on, and she'd stood in the kitchen doorway with her cover tucked under one arm while Maren hunted for a mug that didn't have a chip in it. Mid-thirties, compact, dark hair scraped into a bun so tight it looked load-bearing. Her boots were cleaner than anything Maren owned. She declined the coffee. Then she accepted it, black, after looking at the pot for a while.

"Your dad always had it on," she said. "Every quarter. I figured it was a rule."

In the lantern room the morning was the flat pewter of a bay that hadn't decided anything yet. The old Fresnel lens was long gone, shipped off to a museum in Rockland in 1993 according to a brass plaque downstairs. In its place sat the thing the Coast Guard actually cared about, a squat LED unit on a pedestal that looked, to Maren's eye, like a very expensive kitchen canister. Alvarado unlatched a panel, plugged a ruggedized tablet into a port, and frowned at it with professional affection.

"Battery bank's tired," she said. "I'll swap two cells. Solar controller's fine. You get much salt on the glass?"

"I don't know. Should I?"

"Everybody gets salt on the glass." She wiped a pane with a microfiber cloth from her back pocket and held it up, gray. "There. Salt."

Maren had spent fourteen years watching people open a meeting with ten minutes of weather. She recognized a warm-up when she was standing inside one. Alvarado asked about the fog signal (fine, loud, two notes like a cow with opinions), about the generator in the shed (Maren had no idea), about whether the gallery railing had been loose all winter or just since March. She wrote everything down in a green notebook that made Maren's stomach drop for half a second before she saw it was the government kind, spiral-bound, with a cutting-edge Coast Guard logo on the cover.

Then Alvarado closed the panel and didn't open another one.

"So," she said. "Something I'm supposed to mention."

She looked out at the water while she said it. Off the point the Hogsback was showing at half tide, a long brown back with weed on it, gulls standing around on top like they owned the deed.

"Sector got a report. Somebody saying they observed non-standard lights displayed from private property at this location." She said it slowly, the way you'd read a label off a medicine bottle to someone hard of hearing. "Within the last couple weeks."

Maren's hands found the cold rail behind her. The Aldis lamp was in the oil house, under a towel. The battery for it was on the kitchen counter, charging next to the toaster, about twenty feet from where Alvarado had stood drinking her coffee.

"Non-standard," Maren said.

"Anything that could be mistaken for an aid to navigation. Flashing, colored, rhythmic." Alvarado tucked the cloth back into her pocket. "Title thirty-three. It's a federal matter. Doesn't have to be anything. Kids with a flashlight. Somebody's porch light on a timer." She shrugged, a small one, almost apologetic. "I'm just letting you know it's on the record."

On the record. Maren knew exactly what that meant; she'd written enough incident tickets to know a ticket wasn't a verdict. It was a timestamp somebody could point at later.

"Who reported it?"

"I couldn't tell you that."

Which was not, Maren noticed, the same thing as *I don't know.*

Alvarado picked up her tablet, then set it down again on the pedestal and looked at Maren properly for the first time since the stairs. Her eyes went to the gallery door, to the place on the iron deck where, four nights ago, Maren had knelt with the lamp and blinked nonsense into the fog until her thumb cramped.

"Your dad," Alvarado said, "used to tell me the fog here was the worst on the bay." She tilted her head. "He said a lot of things, though."

Maren opened the gallery door because the lantern room had suddenly gotten too small for two people and a federal regulation. The air outside was wet and smelled of rockweed and somebody's diesel a long way off. She stepped onto the iron deck. After a moment Alvarado followed, tablet tucked against her ribs, and stood with her boots planted a careful foot back from the railing she had just written down as loose.

Below them the keeper's house looked smaller than it did from the kitchen. The oil house looked like what it was: a brick box with a fresh padlock Maren had bought at Coombs Hardware for $18.99, because she hadn't been able to think what else to do.

"It was Dennis Farrow," Maren said.

Alvarado didn't answer. A gull lifted off the Hogsback, circled once, and landed in exactly the same spot.

"Portland. Quarter-zip. Teeth like a dental brochure." Maren heard her own voice getting faster and couldn't seem to stop it. "He wants to buy this place for a boutique inn. He gave me a number in the Harbor Lunch and said it was good till the end of June, and then a week later the Coast Guard turns up with a report about my porch light. I'm not asking you to say it. I'm just telling you I know."

"Ms. Brannock."

"Maren."

"Maren." Alvarado looked at the horizon, where the fog was sitting in a gray bar like it was waiting for a bus. "When Sector gets a complaint, somebody has to follow it up. That's the job. Doesn't matter who calls. Lobsterman, summer person, guy from Portland, guy from Mars. It goes in the system and somebody drives out." She paused. "This quarter, that's me."

It wasn't a no. Maren had sat through a hundred postmortems where the person who'd pushed the bad config said *the process worked as designed*, and it had never once meant they hadn't pushed it.

She thought about Farrow sliding his card across the Formica, his thumb resting on it a second longer than necessary, the way you'd hold a door you wanted credit for. She'd been right about him being slick and wrong about him being patient. He didn't need her to say yes. He needed the price to drop. And a property with a federal complaint against it, a lighthouse whose owner might be flashing illegal signals at fishing boats, was worth less to anyone who wasn't Dennis Farrow. He hadn't even had to get his loafers wet. One phone call, and the United States government was standing on her deck in clean boots.

"So what happens now," Maren said.

"Now? Nothing, probably." Alvarado finally turned to face her. "I write that I came out, I talked to the owner, I didn't observe any non-standard lights. Which I didn't." She let that sit. "If there's a second report, it's a different conversation. Somebody with more stripes than me. Maybe a letter."

"And if there's a third?"

"Don't let there be a third." Alvarado glanced down at the oil house, then back. Her face didn't change, but something behind it did, as if she'd decided to spend a little of whatever she'd been saving. "Whatever old equipment your dad had lying around out there, I'd keep it dark. I mean the lamp especially. Radio's a different animal. Anybody can talk on a radio."

Maren opened her mouth and found nothing in it.

Alvarado held out the empty mug. Maren took it. The handle was still warm.

"Thanks for the coffee," Alvarado said. "He made it stronger."

She went back through the gallery door and started down. Maren listened to her boots on the iron treads, steady, unhurried, and somewhere around the fortieth step the counting started again, low, under her breath. At the bottom the kitchen door opened and closed. A minute later the white pickup backed around in the gravel, and before it pulled away Alvarado leaned forward over the wheel and looked up at the tower, straight at Maren. She held it longer than a person looks at someone she's just written up. Then she lifted two fingers off the

wheel, the way people around here waved at oncoming trucks, and drove out past the spruce toward the road.

* * *

The papers at Paul Grindle's office on Union Street took forty minutes to sign and two hours to wait for, because the notary had gone to her granddaughter's dance recital and nobody had thought to mention it. Maren spent the gap in the Hannaford on Route 1 buying things she didn't need: a second box of steel wool for the mouse holes, a bag of Cape Cod chips, a rotisserie chicken she ate a wing of in the parking lot with the engine running. By the time she turned off the shore road onto the gravel it was a quarter past eight, and the light was going the color of weak tea.

The beam had already started. She saw it come around over the spruce, six seconds, and go again.

She parked where she always parked, nose to the woodpile, and got out with the chicken in one hand and her keys in the other. Halfway to the kitchen steps she stopped.

The door was shut. That was the first thing. It was shut, but wrong, sitting a quarter inch proud of the frame the way a door does when it's been closed by someone who didn't know it had to be lifted. Then she saw the jamb. A long pale tongue of wood had split away beside the strike plate, fresh enough to be yellow inside, and there were two dents in the paint at hip height, side by side, about the width of a flat bar.

Maren stood on the bottom step and listened. Gulls. The tide working at the rocks below the point. Her own breathing, which was louder than she liked.

She pushed the door with one knuckle. It swung in.

She went through the house the way she'd once gone through a production outage at two in the morning, room by room, expecting the worst in every one. The kitchen was the kitchen. Her mug in the sink, Alvarado's beside it. The front room, with Walt's recliner and its afghan the color of canned salmon, untouched. She climbed the stairs with the chicken still in her hand because putting it down felt like admitting something. Her bedroom. His bedroom, which she still hadn't slept in. The bathroom with the historical plumbing. Every drawer shut. Nothing tipped. Nothing kicked over. The reading glasses

hung on their hook by the back door with the chain looped twice, the way she'd found them in April.

She came back down feeling almost foolish. Then she looked out the kitchen window.

Across the yard the oil house door stood wide open, a black rectangle in the brick.

She didn't remember crossing the grass. She remembered the padlock, her $18.99 padlock, lying in the wet clover still locked, and the hasp beside it with all four screws pulled out of the old mortar like teeth. Somebody had taken the easy route. Somebody had known the hasp was the weak part.

Inside it smelled like it always did, kerosene and old coffee. The radio sat dark on its shelf, exactly where she'd left it. The Aldis lamp was on the workbench with its battery cable coiled beside it, the way she'd coiled it four nights ago after climbing down with her thumb aching. The radar display. The thermos. The roll of Werther's, three gone, which was her fault.

The shelf.

She'd put the ledgers back in his order, one through thirty-three, left to right, spines out. Thirty-two green spines were still there. At the left end, where volume one should have been leaning against the bracket, there was a gap exactly one book wide, and in the dust on the board the faint clean rectangle where it had stood since 1988 or 1989 or whenever her father had first set it down.

Maren turned around slowly.

Through the open door she could see across the yard to the lit kitchen window, and on the table inside, plain as a display case, her MacBook. Open. Charging. Fourteen hundred dollars of aluminum with a sticker on the lid from a Lumentide hackathon in 2019, sitting six feet from a door anyone could walk through.

Nobody had touched it.

Nobody had touched the lamp, either, or the radio, or the thirty-two other books that would have fit in the same bag. Whoever had stood in this room had walked past all of it, taken one ledger off the left end of the shelf, and left.

The beam came around again and lit the open door, and went.

She called him from the kitchen with the door still hanging open behind her, because shutting it would have meant touching it, and some stubborn piece of

her brain had filed the jamb under evidence.

The card was where she'd left it, tucked under the fruit bowl that had never held fruit. FARROW COASTAL HOSPITALITY. An office number in Portland and, under it in blue ballpoint, a cell he'd added at the Harbor Lunch with a little flourish, as if he were signing a cast. She dialed the office first. It was twenty to nine. She didn't care. Her thumb was shaking hard enough that she had to do it twice.

It rang four times and clicked over, and a different ring started, and then Dennis Farrow said, "Farrow," over the sound of a television and somebody laughing in another room.

"This is Maren Brannock."

"Maren. Hey." The television dropped away; she pictured him walking into a hallway, quarter-zip and all. "I didn't expect... Is this about the number? Because I can be flexible on the close."

"You filed a complaint with the Coast Guard."

A pause. Not a long one. "I raised a concern. That's a navigation issue, it's public safety, anybody would..."

"And then today, while I was in Rockland, somebody broke into my house." She heard her own voice go flat and fast, the voice she used to use on vendors who'd missed an SLA. "Pried the kitchen door. Pulled the hasp off the oil house. Took one book. One. The first volume of my father's log. So I'd like to know whether you sent somebody, or whether you drove up yourself, because I'm about to call the sheriff and I'd like to get the name right."

Nothing. The laughing in the other room went on without him.

"I'm sorry," Farrow said. "His what?"

"Don't."

"No, I'm... Maren, I genuinely don't know what you're talking about. A log? Like a ship's log?" He sounded like a man reading a menu in a language he'd taken one semester of. "I filed one form. One. A broker of mine drove past in May and said there'd been a light out there on a foggy night, a handheld or something, and I thought, okay, that's a liability, that's a thing I can mention. That's all. I don't break into houses. I have a bad back. I have a guy who changes my lightbulbs."

"You wanted the price down."

"Of course I wanted the price down. That's my whole job." He breathed out. "But what would I want with a book? I didn't know there was a book. I still don't know what's in it."

She opened her mouth and found she had nothing ready. The beam came around and laid its white bar across the linoleum, across her socks, across the split yellow wood of the jamb.

"Is anything else missing?" Farrow said. Quieter now. "Are you okay out there? Are you by yourself?"

That was the worst part. He sounded like he meant it.

"I'll call you back," she said, which wasn't true, and hung up.

She stood with the phone against her sternum. The chicken sat on the counter in its plastic dome, sweating. She had been so sure. She'd had it all mapped, complaint to Coast Guard to break-in, one clean line from cause to effect, Farrow at the top of the stack. And the man at the top of the stack had just asked her what a logbook was.

So somebody else. Somebody who knew there was a volume one, and knew which end of the shelf it lived on, and knew the hasp was soft and she'd be gone for the afternoon. Somebody who had wanted that book, and only that book, badly enough to bring a flat bar.

Maren went to the door and finally lifted it into the frame the way it liked, and it wouldn't latch. She dragged a kitchen chair over and wedged it under the knob.

Out past the point, the fog signal groaned once, low and then lower, though the night was clear.

CHAPTER 7

October 14, 1988

15 Oct 88. Starting this because I have to.

She had photographed that line on her first night, at the kitchen table, sometime after ten. She knew she had, because there it was on her laptop at 4:10 in the morning, image 0007 of 3,926, slightly blurred where her hand had shaken. She had photographed it and never read it. That was the rule she'd made: back up first, read later. Then later had turned into a Python script that went hunting for the letters F/V, and the first page of volume one had no F/V on it anywhere, so the script had stepped right over it like a cat over a puddle. Row 1 of her spreadsheet was a boat. Row 1 was the *Lisette*, E., March 21, 1989. She had never looked at what came before.

The chair was still wedged under the kitchen doorknob. She had slept, if that was the word, on the couch in her fleece with the bread knife on the coffee table, which in daylight would look ridiculous and at 3 a.m. had seemed like basic planning. The beam came around every six seconds and whitened the far wall. The laptop fan ticked.

She went back to image 0001. The cover: VOL. 1 in the blocky capitals, and under it, smaller, *1988–*, with nothing after the dash. Then the flyleaf, blank. Then the inside cover, where somebody, him, had written the station's coordinates in pencil and then erased them hard enough to scuff the paper. Then the first entry.

15 Oct 88. Starting this because I have to. 2140. Fog in from SW. Started horn by hand, timer slow to catch. Light good. 2300. Checked gen. 0010. Checked gen.

0145. Checked gen. Backup turns over. Ran it 10 min. 0400. Light good. Nobody out.

No personal word at the end. She scrolled. The next night was the same, and the next, the generator checked four, five, seven times between dusk and dawn. *Ran backup 10 min. Ran backup 15 min.* On October 21 there was a line that said only *Diesel delivery. Told Fogg to top off both*, and on the twenty-third, *Light good. Light good. Light good*, three times down the margin at hourly intervals, the handwriting getting smaller.

Maren pulled the laptop closer.

The light had been automated in October 1989. She knew that the way she knew her own badge number, which was to say she'd typed it into a spreadsheet header and never thought about it again. In October 1988 her father had been the keeper. Not a man in a shed with a scavenged radar, but the actual government keeper, in uniform, with a government logbook that the government would have expected him to fill in every watch. There was no reason on earth for a Coast Guard keeper to keep a second, private log in a drugstore ledger. Unless the first one wasn't for him.

She checked. She went through every image from 0007 to 0140, all of autumn 1988 and the winter after, and there were no boats in it at all. Just the light, and the horn, and the generator, night after night, checked and checked again like a man going back to make sure he'd turned off the stove. In February he'd written *Snow. Cold.* In January, *M's birthday*, and nothing else that night.

She read that one twice. Then she shut the laptop, because it was 4:40 and her eyes had started doing the thing where the screen crawled.

Somebody had come into her kitchen with a flat bar and walked past a $2,400 MacBook to take a book that, as far as her spreadsheet was concerned, contained one boat.

* * *

The Port Ellery Public Library opened at ten on Wednesdays and occupied a white clapboard building on Elm Street that had been a Grange hall until 1971. The sign said so. It also said *Please Wipe Your Feet, This Means You*. Inside it smelled of radiator dust and the particular glue of plastic book jackets, and the

woman at the desk, whose name tag said BEV, looked at Maren's fleece and her unwashed hair and said, "You're Walt's girl."

"I'm looking for old newspapers," Maren said.

"Which ones?"

"The Courier-Gazette. October 1988."

Bev did not ask why. She took off her glasses, which hung on a beaded cord, and let them drop against her cardigan, and Maren thought of the leash on its hook by her father's door and had to look at the card catalog for a second.

"Microfilm's in the back," Bev said. "Reader takes quarters for prints. Doesn't always give you the print." She opened a drawer and pushed a paper roll of quarters across the desk. "Ten dollars. You'll want them."

The reader was a beige Minolta the size of a dorm fridge, with a scratched glass plate and a coin slot that had been reinforced at some point with silver duct tape. The reels lived in small gray boxes in a wooden cabinet, labeled by hand: C-G JUL–SEP 1988, C-G OCT–DEC 1988. Maren threaded the film wrong twice. The third time it went, and the screen lit up with a grocery ad from Shop 'n Save, chuck roast $1.49 a pound, and she cranked forward through September with the little knob, the pages sliding past sideways like weather.

The Courier-Gazette came out Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. She had looked that up at five in the morning instead of sleeping. If something had happened on the night of October 14, a Friday, the Saturday paper would have gone to press too early to catch it.

Tuesday, October 18, 1988. Front page, above the fold.

TWO LOST AS DRAGGER STRIKES HOGSBACK

There was a photograph, gone gray and grainy in the transfer, taken from a boat at what must have been low water: a fishing vessel lying over on her side on a long hump of rock, stern up, her outriggers sticking out at angles like something that had been stepped on. Behind her, out of focus, was a white tower on a dark point. The caption said *The F/V Constance Grey on the Hogsback ledge Friday morning. Gannet Head Light is visible in the background.*

Maren read the story the way she'd read the first page of volume one. Slowly. Then again.

The *Constance Grey*, a 44-foot dragger out of Port Ellery, had struck the Hogsback at approximately 2:20 a.m. Friday in thick fog while returning from

the grounds. Two of her three crew had drowned. Calvin "Cal" Pelletier, 34, the boat's owner and captain, of Port Ellery. Donald "Donny" Ames, 22, sternman, also of Port Ellery. The third man, Everett Thibodeau, 43, had climbed onto the ledge and held there through the tide until a Coast Guard boat out of Rockland took him off shortly after first light. He had been treated at Penobscot Bay Medical Center for hypothermia and a broken wrist.

Mr. Pelletier, the paper said, left his wife and a son, Samuel, 10.

She sat back. The chair creaked.

A broad man at the co-op counter, sunburned in April, with a knee he favored. Carol saying *Sam* and Sam setting down a full coffee and walking out the door when Maren said her own last name, and Maren standing there thinking, with real irritation, that people in small towns were strange about outsiders. She had actually thought that. She'd thought he was rude.

The fourth paragraph was the one she had come for, though she hadn't known it until she got there.

The Coast Guard has opened an investigation into reports that the light at Gannet Head was not operating at the time of the grounding. Lt. j.g. Mark Desrosiers of Group Southwest Harbor confirmed Monday that the station experienced "an equipment casualty" during the night and that the matter is under review. The keeper on duty, Boatswain's Mate First Class W. Brannock, declined to comment. Brannock has been keeper at Gannet Head since 1979 and lives at the station with his wife and young daughter.

Young daughter.

She pressed the PRINT button. The machine thought about it, made a noise like a toaster in pain and swallowed her quarter. She fed it another. It hummed and pushed out a warm gray sheet, the type faint and the photograph gone almost entirely black, and she held it in both hands and found that she was looking at the white smudge of the tower in the background, and the dark smudge of the house beside it, and trying to work out which window was the small end bedroom.

There was no way to tell. It was a smudge.

She'd been five. She had spent fourteen years at Lumentide being the person who remembered things, the person who could tell you which deploy had broken the payments service in 2017 and what the commit message had said, and

she had nothing from October 1988. Not a siren, not a crying mother, not a strange car in the driveway. What she had from Gannet Head, if she was honest, was a handful of loose frames with no dates on them. A yellow raincoat. The smell of the oil house, maybe, though maybe she was supplying that now. Her father's hand, enormous, holding hers on the stairs and saying *one at a time, Mare, the tower's not going anywhere.* She'd been thinking about that one since April, every time she climbed the ninety-one steps, and she had never once wondered what year it came from.

She cranked forward.

Thursday's paper had a funeral notice for Donald Ames, services at St. Bernard's, and a photograph of a young man in a Bruins cap squinting into the sun, a baby face with an attempt at a mustache. Saturday's had a letter to the editor from someone named R. Coombs, Water Street, asking people to stop calling the Pelletier house. Maren read the letter three times. It was four sentences long and said nothing about the light, nothing about the keeper, only that a family deserved to grieve in peace and that anyone with something to say about that night could say it to the Coast Guard and leave a ten-year-old boy alone.

Ruthie had been forty-ish in 1988. She had owned the hardware store even then, apparently. She had written to the paper.

November was ordinary: a bean supper, a moose collision on Route 1, a zoning fight about a boatyard. Maren fed the machine a quarter every time she wanted a print and the machine kept about one in three. Bev came back once with a mug of coffee, set it on the cabinet without a word and went away again. The coffee was terrible and Maren drank all of it.

December 15, 1988. Page three, below a photo of a Christmas tree being hoisted onto the town wharf by a crane.

BOARD CITES GENERATOR IN GANNET HEAD OUTAGE

It was short. A Coast Guard board of inquiry had concluded that the light and fog signal at Gannet Head Light Station had been inoperative from approximately 1:50 a.m. to 3:15 a.m. on October 14 due to failure of the station's primary generator and subsequent failure of the backup unit to start. The keeper, BM1 Walter Brannock, had remained at the station throughout and had attempted repairs until power was restored. The station log, the article said, documented his efforts. No disciplinary action was recommended. The board noted

that the station was scheduled for automation, and that automation would eliminate "the human element in power management."

The human element.

Maren did the subtraction without wanting to. 1:50 to 3:15. Eighty-five minutes. The *Constance Grey* had hit at 2:20, half an hour into the dark, with a crew of three steering for a light that wasn't there and listening for a horn that wasn't sounding. Cal Pelletier had been thirty-four. He'd been younger than she was now by seven years.

And then volume one, beginning the next night. *Checked gen. Checked gen. Checked gen.* A man going out every hour to put his hand on a machine that had already done the worst thing it could do.

She'd been treating that first page as a curiosity, a quirk in the data. Now she couldn't stop seeing his handwriting shrink down the margin on October 23. *Light good. Light good. Light good.*

There was something wrong with it, though, and she sat in the plastic chair with the gray prints in her lap and tried to find it, the way she would have hunted for the one line in a log file that didn't fit. The board said he'd stayed at the station. The board said the log documented it. It was all very tidy. Cause, effect, finding, closed. She had spent her whole adult life believing that was how the world worked when you were careful enough, and here was a tidy report, and she didn't trust it at all, and she could not have said why. Maybe only because the man in it had then spent thirty-four years in a cold brick room making sure it never happened to anybody else, and that seemed like a lot of penance for a generator.

Maybe she just wanted it to be something else. She knew that about herself. She wrote it on the back of a print in small letters, *you want it to be something else*, so she couldn't pretend later that she didn't.

And Ev.

She put her face in her hands for a moment, in the back room of a Grange hall, with the Minolta humming.

Ev Thibodeau, at the Harbor Lunch, with his cloudy eyes and his pie, telling her Walt had fixed his radar three times and then shutting his mouth like a door. Ev on channel 68 at one in the morning in June, asking for Walt out of habit. Ev, whom she had told to steer 041. She'd been reading the bearing off her father's

sketch from the wrong end. 041 was the line from the tower to the Hogsback. She had sat in the oil house in her socks and very confidently given the only living survivor of the *Constance Grey* a course that would have put him back on the same rock, and he had said, mild as milk, *That'd be the ledge, dear,* and waited while she fixed it.

He had held on there until dawn. With a broken wrist. In October.

She thought about the *Lisette*, row 1 of her spreadsheet, March 21, 1989. Five months after. The very first boat. She had color-coded it green, the way she color-coded everything that resolved cleanly.

* * *

Bev was reshelving large-print Westerns when Maren brought the reel back.

"Find what you wanted?"

"I don't know," Maren said. Then, because that sounded like an evasion and Bev did not seem like a person who had much use for those: "Did you know my father?"

"Everybody knew your father." Bev slid a Louis L'Amour into place and squared it with one finger. "He came in Thursdays. Took out the tide tables every year even though they're free at Ruthie's. Said ours were easier on the eyes." She looked at the gray box in Maren's hands, at the label, and her face did not change, exactly. It just stopped moving. "Some people would tell you to leave that be."

"Are you some people?"

"I'm the librarian," Bev said. "I'm the one who gives you the quarters."

Outside, the fog had burned off to a white haze, and Elm Street was full of the ordinary noon business of Port Ellery: a pickup with a dog in the bed, a kid on a bike with a fishing rod across the handlebars, the one blinking light down at the corner of Water Street going yellow, yellow, yellow over nobody. Maren sat in Walt's truck with the prints on the passenger seat and the engine off.

Whoever had come with the flat bar had known what volume one was. Not that there were logbooks, which a few people might have guessed, but that the first one started on October 15, 1988, and what that date meant. She'd thought this morning she was looking for someone who wanted the book. Now she thought she was looking for someone who wanted it to say something.

The topmost print was the December one. *The station log documented his efforts.* Her quarter had paid for that sentence.

She took out her phone. Her mother's contact was where it always was, second from the top of her favorites, under the pharmacy. Her mother had lived in that house in October 1988. Her mother had been the wife in *his wife and young daughter*, and four years later her mother had packed two suitcases and a five-year-old's bedding into a rented Corsica and driven to California, and in thirty-two years had said nothing about Gannet Head except that it was cold and he was impossible.

Maren had always believed the second part. It had been one of her fixed facts.

She looked at the screen. In Sacramento it was 9:40 in the morning, and Linda would be doing the crossword on the back patio with Gary, in the good chair, with the sprinklers going.

CHAPTER 8

Sacramento Time

Her mother answered on the fifth ring, which meant she had looked at the screen and thought about it.

"Sweetheart. We were just talking about you. Gary, it's Maren." The phone went muffled against a shoulder and came back. "He says hi. He's got his leg up on the ottoman. They finally gave him a date for the left one, August twentieth, and the surgeon looks about twelve, I swear, he has one of those little..."

"Mom."

"...beards. What."

"I'm in Port Ellery. I just came from the library."

On the other end the sprinklers ticked around. Maren could picture the exact arc of them, the way they caught the edge of the patio table every third pass and Linda moved her coffee without looking.

"Well, that's nice. Are they still in that building by the..."

"I found the Courier-Gazette from October 1988. The Constance Grey."

"I don't know what you want me to say about that."

"I want you to tell me where Dad was."

There was a pause long enough for a sprinkler to come around twice. Then her mother said, brightly, to someone who was not Maren, "Oh, honey, you've knocked the ice pack off. Hang on. No, don't get up. Maren, I have to go, he's going to put his weight on it and undo six weeks of physical therapy. I'll call you back."

"Will you?"

"I said I would."

The call log said four minutes and eleven seconds. Maren sat with the phone in her lap and watched the traffic light go yellow over an empty intersection, and a man in a Co-op hat crossed against it with a bag of ice on his shoulder. Linda would not call back. Maren knew this the way she knew a service would time out before she saw the error. She had thirty-two years of data.

She drove home with the prints face down on the passenger seat.

* * *

The hasp on the oil house was still hanging by one screw where the flat bar had torn it out. Maren had bought a new one at Coombs that morning, and a box of three-inch deck screws, and she spent the afternoon putting it on. She drilled the pilot holes too big the first time and had to move the whole plate an inch to the left, into fresh brick mortar that crumbled like dry cake. It took two hours for a job Gil Haskell would have done in ten minutes while talking about the Red Sox. She didn't care. It kept her hands busy and her phone in her back pocket, where she could feel it not ringing.

At six she gave up and called again.

Linda picked up on the first ring and said nothing at all.

"Mom?"

Nothing. Not a hang-up, either. The line stayed open. Maren could hear a screen door on a spring, and then the specific hollow quiet of a person who has walked outside to stand by the side of a house where nobody inside can hear her. A dog two yards over. A car going by slowly, the way cars went by in that neighborhood, as if they had all night.

Maren sat down on the oil house step. She didn't fill the silence. It was the one useful thing she had learned in fourteen years of postmortems: when someone goes quiet, they're deciding, and the worst thing you can do is decide for them. The call timer on her screen ticked past one minute. Two. A gull landed on the ridge of the keeper's house and looked at her as if she owed it something. Three minutes. She could hear her mother breathing, small careful breaths through the nose.

At three minutes and forty-seven seconds, Linda said, "You had a fever."

Maren didn't move.

"You'd had it two days. Ear infection, we thought. I'd taken you to Dr. Pratt on the Monday and he gave us the pink stuff, the amoxicillin, you liked it, you used to call it the bubblegum medicine. And you seemed better. You seemed fine. My sister had just had Kyle, he was three weeks old and Joanne wasn't coping, and I'd been promising for a month to go up to Bangor and help. So I went up on the Thursday. Your father said go. He said you were fine. You were fine." She stopped. "Do you remember any of this?"

"No."

"Good." Linda's voice did something. "That's good."

"Mom."

"It went up in the night. He told me later he heard you making a noise, a sort of grunting, and he went in and you were burning up, and he carried you to the kitchen to get a cloth, and you went over. On the floor. By the stove. Your eyes rolled back and you were jerking and your lips were going blue and he didn't know what it was. He thought you were dying. He'd been in the Coast Guard eighteen years and pulled people out of the water and he told me he had never been so frightened of anything in his life."

Maren looked across the yard at the kitchen window. Four panes. She'd been meaning to replace the cracked one.

"He called me from the hospital in Rockland at ten past two in the morning," her mother said. "And I can't do the rest of this right now with Gary in the next room asking where the remote is. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'll call you."

This time the call ended from the other end. Eleven minutes, thirty-two seconds.

* * *

She did not go up the tower that night. She didn't go in the oil house either, though the radio was on standby and the fog was coming in low across the water by nine, a soft gray front that took the bell buoy first and then R4 and then the far shore. The beam swept through it every six seconds and lit nothing. Maren made toast she didn't eat. She found she had walked into the kitchen four separate times and stood looking at the floor by the stove.

It was linoleum, a pattern of tan and brown squares meant to look like tile and looking like linoleum, worn through to the black backing in a path from the door to the sink. She had no idea how old it was. The Coast Guard had owned the house until 2006 and nobody spends federal money on a kitchen floor at an automated station, so it was possible. It was possible she had been on this exact floor.

At 10:52 her phone lit up on the counter. MOM.

"I'm in the car," Linda said. "In the garage. Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing."

"Gary's asleep. He takes the oxycodone at ten and he's out like a light. Like a..." A small sound that was not quite a laugh. "Well. Where are you?"

Maren looked down. She was sitting on the kitchen floor with her back against the cabinet under the sink, her knees up, the fleece zipped to her chin. She had not decided to sit there.

"In the kitchen," she said.

There was a long breath on the line. "Is it the same floor?"

"I don't know."

"Brown squares."

"Yes."

"Oh, God," her mother said.

The beam came round, crossed the window, and went.

"All right," Linda said. "All right. He called me at ten past two. I was on Joanne's couch with Kyle asleep on my chest, and the phone went in the kitchen and I knew. You always know. He said, 'She's all right, Lin, she's all right, it was a febrile seizure, they've got her temperature down, she's asleep.' A hundred and five point two, they'd measured her at. I said I'm coming. And I said, who's at the light? And he didn't answer."

"He left it."

"He left it. You couldn't wait for an ambulance out there, not in 1988, not in fog, it'd have been forty minutes just to get to you. So he wrapped you in the afghan off the couch and carried you out to the truck in his undershirt and drove you to Rockland himself. And when they'd got hold of you, he handed you to a nurse named Beverly. I met her afterward. She told me he kissed your forehead and ran. She said he was in the building eight minutes, if that."

Maren pressed the heel of her hand against the floor. It was cold, and very slightly gritty.

"The power had been flickering all evening," Linda said. "The wind was up before the fog came in. The line out to the point used to go down in any kind of weather, it went down two or three times a winter. And when it did there was a backup generator that was supposed to come on by itself. Most times it did. Sometimes the transfer switch stuck and you had to go down and kick it, and I mean literally kick it, he kept a particular boot by the door for it. Five minutes' work. He'd done it a dozen times. That night the line went down while he was on the road, and the switch stuck, and there was nobody there to kick it."

"How long?"

"Eighty-five minutes. He worked it out afterward from the clock on the panel, the one that stopped when the power went. Eighty-five minutes with no light on the Hogsback and no horn. And at twenty past two, while he was driving back up Route 1 doing God knows what speed in the fog, that boat came in from the east thinking the light was obscured, I suppose, thinking they were further out. Cal Pelletier had fished out of Port Ellery his whole life. He knew those waters as well as anyone. He'd have been looking for the light."

Maren had read the inquiry summary that afternoon, on the microfilm, through a smear on the glass where somebody before her had put a thumb. *The vessel's master was evidently unaware of the outage.*

"I got to the hospital about four," Linda said. "You were asleep with an IV in your hand, this tiny hand, and I sat with you. He came in at seven. He had grease to the elbows and his face was gray, and he sat down on the other side of the bed and he said, 'A boat's gone onto the Hogsback. Two men.' And that was all he said for about a day."

"And the log."

"The log." Her mother's voice went flat and businesslike, the voice she'd used for thirty years on parents who wanted their child moved to a different teacher. "The station log said he'd been on duty all night and the generator had failed and he'd spent the outage in the engine room trying to restore power. It said all that. He wrote it the next morning. And the inquiry read it and talked to him and talked to Ev Thibodeau, who'd been clinging to a rock all night and couldn't tell them anything except that it was dark, and they blamed the genera-

tor. Which was true. That's the thing. It was a true thing with the truth taken out."

"Did he ask you to lie?"

"He never asked me anything. Nobody asked me anything. I wasn't in the log." A car door, or something like it, a soft thump. "He said one thing about it. Once. At this table, at that kitchen table, maybe a week after. He said, 'Telling them won't bring those men back.' And I said, no, it won't. And I meant it. God help me, I agreed with him. You were five years old and he was the only paycheck and if he'd told the truth they'd have taken the station and the pension and probably the house we were sitting in, and where would we have gone? And I had your discharge sheet on the refrigerator. It was right there under a magnet shaped like a lobster. *Admitted 0152.* Every morning I'd get the milk out and there it was."

The beam crossed the window. Six seconds. Maren counted them without meaning to, the way she had counted them her first night here.

"You stayed four years," she said.

"I stayed four years."

"Why?"

"Because I thought it would pass. Because I loved him. Pick one." Linda breathed. "And because of you. He was good with you, you know. You don't remember, but he was. He used to let you ride on his shoulders up the tower and you'd count the stairs and you'd always lose track around sixty and he'd have to start you over."

Ninety-one, Maren thought.

"It didn't pass," her mother said. "It got worse. The next foggy night after the funeral, he went out to that brick shed with a thermos and the radio and he didn't come in till it lifted. And the next one. And the next. He'd have been automated in a year and out of a job and he knew it, and he still went out there every time it fogged in, all night, talking to boats. Talking to strangers. The way he never once talked to me about it. I'd lie in bed and hear him through the window on the radio, just this low voice going on and on, so patient, and he would come in at dawn and drink his coffee and say, 'Well,' and go to sleep. Four years of that. I couldn't share him with a rock in the water."

The kitchen clock said 11:20. Maren hadn't noticed it before. It was a cheap battery one shaped like a ship's wheel and it ran three minutes fast.

"So you left."

"So I left. September 1992. I packed you up while he was asleep after a fog night. I told him I was going. He didn't try to stop me. He carried your bed out to the car." Linda's voice cracked once and mended. "And then I did something else, and you need to hear this part too, because I've been sitting in this garage for half an hour trying to find a way to leave it out."

Maren waited.

"When you asked why he didn't call, I told you he was busy. When you were older I told you he was impossible. And then you stopped asking, and I let you stop. He called, Maren. The first year he called maybe a dozen times. He was terrible at it. He'd say 'Well,' and then nothing, just breathing, the way he'd breathe on that radio waiting for somebody to answer, and you'd stand there in the hall holding the phone and after a minute you'd hand it back to me. And I didn't make you take it. I could have. I could have told you who he was. I let you think he didn't care because it was easier than explaining why I'd gone." She stopped. "That's all of it. That's all I've got."

Maren found she was holding the phone against her ear so hard it hurt.

"I'm not asking you to say anything," Linda said. "I'm going to go in now. Gary wakes up around midnight to use the bathroom and if I'm not there he'll think I've been kidnapped. I love you. I'll call you Sunday. I mean it this time."

"Okay," Maren said. It was the only word she had.

Forty-one minutes, six seconds.

She sat on the floor for a long time after. Then she got up, stiff, and took her laptop off the counter and opened the folder of phone photos she had backed up twice, and scrolled to the back half of volume one, to autumn 1992. She knew the entry was there. She had logged it in her spreadsheet in April as nothing worth flagging: no vessel, no call, column F blank.

19 Sep 92. 0300. Fog. Nobody out. House empty. Cold.

She closed the laptop.

Then, because she could not help it, because it was what her brain did with a number it didn't like, she pulled up a map. Gannet Head to the old hospital site

in Rockland: twenty-three miles by Route 1. In fog, in 1988, in a Ford pickup with a seizing child wrapped in an afghan, call it forty minutes at least. Forty there. Forty back. Eighty minutes on the road.

Eighty-five minutes dark.

Five minutes, then, to carry her in, and hand her to a nurse named Beverly, and decide. She ran it again and got the same number.

CHAPTER 9

Ruthie's Drawer

The sign on the door of Coombs Hardware & Marine said OPEN 7–5 MON–SAT, and at 6:58 on Friday morning Maren was parked under it with the engine off, watching her breath fog the windshield of a car that had cost her $38 a day for eleven weeks. She had slept about ninety minutes. In the passenger seat was a list she had written at 3 a.m. on the back of a Hannaford receipt, numbered one through nine. *Padlock. Werther's. Who kept the radio on. Wren. Vol 34.* The list continued down to *Did you know about 1988*, which she had underlined twice and then crossed out, because she was fairly sure of the answer and not at all sure she could hear it before coffee.

At 7:00 exactly the lights came on inside. At 7:01 Ruthie flipped the sign.

Maren didn't go in. She sat there for most of the morning while trucks pulled up and pulled away, a man in Grundéns carried out a coil of yellow line over his shoulder like a sash, and a woman walked in with a broken lamp and left without it. Twice Maren put her hand on the door handle. Once she drove to the Harbor Lunch, bought a coffee she didn't drink, and drove back to the same spot. She read the list again. It looked like a bug report. It looked, she thought, like every question she had asked Ruthie in April, rearranged, and Ruthie had answered every one of those with a question of her own about guest rooms and septic.

At 11:48 she went in.

The bell over the door was a real bell, brass, on a curl of spring steel. Ruthie was behind the counter ringing up a bilge pump for a kid of about sixteen who was paying in fives and ones. Her reading glasses were pushed up into her white

hair, and she was explaining, without being asked, that the kid's uncle had bought the wrong float switch last year and she wasn't going to let it happen twice in one family.

"Tell him it's the same as the Rule he's got, only it works," she said. "Tell him I said so."

"He won't like it."

"He doesn't like anything. Go on."

The bell rang again behind him. Ruthie looked at Maren, and then at the receipt in Maren's hand, and Maren realized she was holding the list up between them like a summons. She folded it and put it in the pocket of her fleece.

"Traps working?" Ruthie said.

"Four mice."

"There's more."

"I know."

Ruthie straightened a display of Fox 40 whistles that didn't need straightening. She was waiting. Maren could feel the shape of the first question in her mouth, *who bought the padlock*, and she could already hear the answer: *people buy padlocks, dear, it's a hardware store.* She had spent fourteen years at Lumentide asking precise questions of systems that returned precise answers, and none of that was going to work here. The system in front of her was seventy-four and had been deciding for months which of Maren's questions to let through.

She let go of the list.

"What was he doing on the stairs?" Maren said. "The night he died. Why was he going up?"

Ruthie's hand stopped on the whistles.

She didn't look up. For a moment the only sound in the shop was the hum of the old Coca-Cola cooler by the door, the one that now held bait worms and Moxie. Then Ruthie took her glasses out of her hair, folded them, and put them in the breast pocket of her cardigan, and Maren had the strange sense of watching somebody take off a uniform.

"Took you long enough," Ruthie said.

She came around the counter, walked past Maren to the door, turned the sign to CLOSED, and shot the deadbolt. The clock over the paint counter said

11:57. Ruthie looked at it, seemed to decide three minutes was close enough, and said, "Upstairs."

* * *

The stairs went up behind the paint-mixing machine, narrow and steep, with a rope handrail threaded through iron eyes. Maren counted them without meaning to. Fourteen. At the top was a door with a brass knob worn bare on one side, and behind it an apartment that smelled like percolator coffee and Jergens lotion and, very faintly, something Maren couldn't place until she was all the way inside and then placed all at once.

Old Spice.

It wasn't strong. It was the kind of smell that lived in fabric. A navy wool watch cap hung on a peg by the door, beside a woman's raincoat and a canvas tote from the Camden library. On the floor under the peg was a pair of size-thirteen Xtratufs, the brown kind, with the left heel worn down at an angle Maren recognized from somewhere she didn't want to examine.

"I keep meaning to give those to the Legion," Ruthie said, and did not.

The room looked over Water Street through two tall windows. There was a plaid couch, a television with rabbit ears on top as though somebody didn't trust cable, and against the far wall a gray steel desk of the kind that turned up at government auctions, dented at one corner, with a green blotter and a mug of pens. Ruthie went straight to it. She unlocked the top right drawer with a key from the ring on her belt, and as she sorted for it Maren saw, on the same ring, a stubby brass key stamped MASTER.

"That's the padlock," Maren said.

"It is."

"You told me you never had a key."

"I told you I never had a key to that building." Ruthie found the one she wanted. "When you got here, I didn't. I'd put it in this drawer the morning I found him and I didn't touch it till you'd been here a week and I figured you'd sell to that Farrow man and some kid from Portland would pitch the whole room in a dumpster. So I went out. Twice. Turned the radio back on. He never shut it off, not in thirty-five years, and I couldn't stand thinking of it cold." She looked at Maren over the drawer. "And then you went and cut my lock."

"The Werther's."

"He always had them. I thought you should know that much." Ruthie pulled the drawer open. "I'm not proud of the rest of it. Sit down."

Maren sat on the edge of the couch. Ruthie took things out one at a time and set them on the coffee table between them, the way Maren had once watched a bomb-disposal team on television lay out the parts of something they'd made safe.

A green ledger, the same cheap cardboard-cornered kind as the thirty-three in the oil house. Its cover had a dark stain across the bottom third and a dent in one corner, and the spine was cracked so the book wouldn't quite close. On the front, in her father's blocky capitals: 34.

A smaller notebook, black, a Boorum & Pease with a cloth spine, swollen as if it had once gotten wet and dried badly.

A white envelope, long, unsealed, with the flap tucked in.

And a shoebox. Stride Rite, child's size. Ruthie set it down last and kept her hand on the lid a second longer than she needed to.

"He had the ledger with him," Ruthie said. "When he fell. It was under him."

Maren looked at the stain on the cover and stopped looking at it.

"Fog came in the night of the eighth, around eleven. I could see it from here, coming up the harbor. He'd have gone up to the lantern room to look. He did that, even though he had the radar. Said the radar told you where things were and the window told you what kind of night it was." Ruthie sat down in the armchair across from Maren, hands on her knees. "I called at seven the next morning like I always did. He didn't answer. That's not unusual, he's terrible on the phone, you know that. I called again at eight. I drove out at quarter past."

"You don't have to—"

"I know I don't." Ruthie's voice stayed flat. "He was at the bottom. About four steps from the bottom, really. The doctor said it was his heart first and the stairs after, and I've decided to believe her. The book was under his chest. His glasses were still on the leash." She touched her own cardigan pocket. "I took the book before I called anybody. I knew what he wanted done with it. He'd told me enough times."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted me to give it to you when you asked the right question." Ruthie almost smiled. "That's how he put it. Like a fairy tale. I said, Walt, what's the right question, and he said, You'll know it when she asks it. Which was no help at all, which was typical." She nodded at the receipt sticking out of Maren's fleece pocket. "You came in here in April asking who kept the light on and who bought the lock and who's this boat in the book. All about the room. You never once asked about him."

Maren opened her mouth and closed it.

"I'm not scolding," Ruthie said. "I'm explaining why I was such a pill."

The shoebox sat between them. Maren reached for the ledger instead, because it was the thing she knew how to handle, and opened it to the first page. *18 Dec 22.* The F/V *Wren*, the girl alone, the same entry she had found at the end of volume thirty-three, carried forward on a fresh page in the way her father always started a new book, with the last line of the old one copied out so nothing fell between. She flipped forward. Fifty-odd pages of fog. She knew she would photograph every one of them before she read them properly, and she knew she wouldn't wait.

But Ruthie had leaned forward and lifted the lid off the shoebox, and Maren put the ledger down.

Cards. Envelopes, really, standing on end in two rows, packed tight, the way people file recipes. The ones at the back were yellowed, the ones at the front still white. Every one was addressed in the same blocky capitals.

MAREN BRANNOCK.

Maren took the first one out of the back row. An address on Fair Oaks Boulevard in Sacramento, the apartment she and her mother had lived in from fourth grade until Linda married Gary. A purple 29-cent stamp, an American flag over Mount Rushmore. No postmark. Nobody had ever handed it to a mail carrier.

She took out the next one. Same address, same stamp. The one after had a 32-cent stamp. Then 33. Then the address changed to the dorm at UC Davis, Tercero Hall, which her father could not possibly have known, except there it was, and the room number was correct. Then a rental on F Street in Davis. Then Sunnyvale. Then the apartment on Escuela Avenue in Mountain View where

she had lived for the last nine years and where, four months ago, she had packed up a box of mugs and a monitor riser and a pothos clipping in a jar.

The stamps climbed through the decades like a growth chart. 34. 37. 39. 41. Then the round gold Liberty Bell Forever stamps, and later flags, and later something with a lighthouse on it that she could only guess he had found extremely funny.

"Thirty-one," Ruthie said. "I counted. One every year from ninety-three on."

"He knew where I lived."

"He always knew where you lived."

"How?"

Ruthie lifted one shoulder. "He asked your mother, early on, I think. After that he had ways. He wasn't a stupid man. He just couldn't use a telephone."

"He could use a stamp." Maren's voice came out wrong, too high. "He bought a stamp. Thirty-one times he went to the post office, or wherever, and bought a stamp, and put it on, and then didn't put it in a mailbox. That's not forgetting. That's a decision you make thirty-one times."

"Yes," Ruthie said. "It is."

Maren put the Mountain View card back in its slot without opening it. She couldn't. Not here, with someone watching. She lined it up with the others so the edges matched and then sat with both hands flat on her knees, the way Ruthie was sitting, and only noticed afterward that she was copying her.

"You're going to want to know about me," Ruthie said.

"I didn't—"

"You're going to. So." Ruthie looked at the windows. Out on Water Street somebody tried the shop door, rattled it, read the sign and went away. "Twenty years. Give or take. Since the winter of oh-four, when his furnace quit and he came in here for a part I didn't have, and I drove him to Belfast to get it, and we stopped at the Chocolate Grille on the way back. Twenty years Thursdays and Sundays and most of the in-between. He asked me to move out to the point I don't know how many times. Every Christmas, regular as a tide table."

"And you didn't."

"I have a store. I have stairs I'm used to." Ruthie's mouth worked. "And that house was full. You understand me? There wasn't room. He had you in it, and he had those two boys from the *Constance Grey* in it, and he had that light he

wasn't allowed to keep anymore, and I wasn't going to sit in the kitchen and compete with a building."

Maren looked at the watch cap on its peg, and the boots.

"Nobody in town knew?"

"Everybody in town knew." Ruthie snorted. "This is Port Ellery. Carol at the co-op knew before I did. People just didn't say. It's a thing we're good at here, not saying. You may have noticed."

"I noticed."

"Well." Ruthie picked up the black notebook and the envelope and held them out. "Then you'll want these too, and you'll want to read them somewhere I'm not."

The notebook was lighter than it looked. Maren opened the cover. Inside, on the first ruled page, her father's capitals were smaller and less steady than in the ledgers, as though the pen had been pushing against something.

> *15 Oct 88. Private. Not for the station log. The station log is a lie and I wrote it. What follows is what happened.*

That was as far as she could make herself read. She closed it and laid her palm on the cover. The envelope had no stamp. It was addressed, in the same hand, to MRS. CALVIN PELLETIER AND FAMILY, and below that, smaller, as if added later: AND SAM. The flap was tucked in, not sealed, and the paper inside was thick enough to be several pages.

"He wrote that in eighty-nine," Ruthie said. "He showed me once. Said he'd mail it the day he was brave enough. He used to take it out every October and put it back." She paused. "Sam Pelletier's going to need to see that at some point. I'm not the one to hand it to him."

"Neither am I."

"Ayuh, well." Ruthie said it like a door closing. "You're what's left."

Maren picked up the ledger again, because it was a ledger and she knew what to do with ledgers, and turned to the back. The last pages were February. The handwriting held steady right to the end, the 24-hour times, the boats she now half recognized from her spreadsheet. A *Lisette* in January. A *Patience* with a dead compass. Then a run of mornings with only one name, again and again, sea

smoke and snow showers and the same small boat. Her father had been seventy-seven. He had been climbing ninety-one stairs in the dark to look out a window.

The last entry was halfway down the page. Under it the paper was blank, and the blankness went on for the rest of the book.

> *7 Feb 24. 0610. Sea smoke, vis nil. F/V Wren, plotter froze off R4. Talked her through on 68. Wren in safe. Told her nothing. Same as always.*

No personal word at the end. No *Coffee*, no *Cold*. Maren read it four times, then turned back a page and forward again as though another line might have hidden itself in the gutter. There wasn't one.

"Who is she?" Maren said. "The *Wren*. Who is it he never told?"

Ruthie stood up and went to the window and stood looking down at Water Street with her arms folded, at the one blinking light and the co-op beyond it and the gray water past that.

"That one isn't mine," she said. "Go ask Ev Thibodeau what he's been telling people since the funeral. Then you'll know who to ask next."

CHAPTER 10

The Wren

Ev Thibodeau's kitchen smelled of percolator coffee and the kerosene heater he kept going in June because, he said, his blood had quit on him around the time his eyes did. He sat at an oilcloth table with a magnifying sheet propped against the sugar bowl and a scanner on the windowsill turned low, the co-op boats checking in on 10 like neighbors calling over a fence. Maren had brought a blueberry pie from the Hannaford in Rockland. He smelled it before she got the lid off.

"Store pie," he said.

"It's what they had."

"Walt brought store pie once. I fixed my own radar that time, out of spite." He pulled the tin toward him anyway and cut a wedge with the side of his fork. "Ruthie send you?"

"She said to ask what you've been telling people since the funeral."

He chewed. The scanner said something about a trap line fouled off Mark Island, and Ev turned his head toward it the way a dog does, then back. His eyes were pale and wet and aimed about four inches to the left of her face.

Maren had made a list, of course. She had dropped the last list on Ruthie's floor and was trying not to make another, but the facts had arranged themselves on the drive over whether she liked it or not. Whoever broke into the oil house had known it was the oil house. He had walked past a two-thousand-dollar MacBook and a signal lamp and a radio worth more than her car. He had gone along a shelf of thirty-three identical green ledgers and taken the first one. Only

the first. That wasn't a burglar. That was a man who knew what year he was looking for.

"Somebody knew exactly where to look," she said. "He knew there were logbooks. He knew which one."

"Lot of people knew Walt wrote things down."

"Name one."

Ev set his fork on the plate, very precisely, lining it up with the edge by feel. He didn't answer. Out on Pine Street a truck downshifted for the hill.

"Ev."

"They had the coffee after, at the Legion," he said. "Ham sandwiches. Somebody made those little whoopie pies. Sam was standing by the urn not talking to anybody, and I'd had a couple of beers in the truck first, which I don't do, and I thought he ought to know." He rubbed his thumb along the oilcloth, back and forth over a cigarette burn that had probably been there since the Carter administration. "Thought somebody alive ought to know."

"Know what?"

"That night. On the ledge." He said it flat, the way the radio read tide heights. "I had my arms around a rock and the water coming up my boots, and I could see the point. Tower was dark. Fine, generator, that's what they said after. But the house was dark too. Every window. Walt had a lamp in that kitchen he never shut off, not once in nine years I'd been fishing past it. And it wasn't burning." He picked the fork up again and put it down. "Nobody fights a generator with the house lights off and his wife's car gone. I knew that at nineteen minutes past two in 1988, and I kept it shut for thirty-five years, and then I opened it up at a funeral by a coffee urn."

"What did Sam say?"

"Didn't say anything. Asked me was I sure. I said Walt kept books on everything, and if there was anything to find it'd be in there." He turned his face toward the window, toward the scanner, toward the bright square of light he could probably only feel. "I meant the Coast Guard books. Government ones. I didn't know about the others till you."

Maren sat very still. February. The service had been in February, which meant Sam Pelletier had stood at the co-op counter in April and heard her name and put down his coffee with that sentence already in him. Two months of it by

then. Four months now. He'd had all of mud season to turn it over, every foggy morning hauling past the point and the house and the kitchen window, and then he'd found out the daughter had come back and was poking around in the brick building nobody was allowed near.

He'd taken volume one because he thought the story started there.

"He's going to think it proves something," she said.

Ev reached across the table and found her wrist on the first try. His hand was cold and enormous and shook a little.

"Whatever's in that book," he said, "it isn't what he wants."

* * *

The Pelletier wharf was at the far end of Water Street, past the co-op and the town float, a gray plank finger that leaned a little to the south as if it had been listening to the harbor for a hundred years and gotten tired. Lobster crates stood stacked four high along one side, yellow and green and a faded orange that might once have been red. A bait barrel sweated herring into the June air. The sky had the color and texture of a dishrag, and the tide was most of the way out, so the pilings showed their black weed and their barnacles all the way down to the mud.

Sam Pelletier was on his knees on the planks with a trap open in front of him, lacing new twine into a broken head with a plastic needle. He didn't look up when her sneakers hit the boards. He looked up when she stopped.

"You're on private property," he said.

"So were you."

He went back to the twine. Pulled a knot tight. His forearms were sunburned in a hard line at the elbow, and his right leg was stuck out straight beside him, the knee wrapped in a black neoprene brace gone gray with salt.

"I talked to Ev," Maren said.

"Ev talks."

"He told you the house was dark." She had decided in the truck that she would not wait for him to deny it, because a denial was a branch she'd have to follow, and she didn't have the patience left. "You pried my kitchen door with something flat. A bar. You tore the hasp off the oil house. You walked past everything worth money and took volume one."

Sam set the needle down on the trap. For a moment he stayed kneeling, looking at the water between the planks. Then he got up, which took him longer than it should have, a hand on the crates and a grunt when the knee came straight, and he walked to a gray Ford parked at the head of the wharf without saying anything at all. She heard the door open. She heard it slam.

He came back with the ledger in a Hannaford bag and pushed it at her chest hard enough that she had to step back to catch it.

"There," he said. "Take it."

She looked down. Green cover, soft corners, a water ring on the back that hadn't been there before. VOL. 1 in her father's capitals.

"It starts the fifteenth," Sam said. "You know that? You read it? October fifteenth. My father went in the water on the fourteenth. The book starts the day after." He laughed, one short ugly sound. "Your old man writes down every boat in the bay for thirty-five years, what color their lights are, what kind of coffee he drank, and he starts the day after. One day. That's all I needed. One page."

"Sam."

"I read the whole thing. Twice. Kitchen table, three in the morning, like an idiot." He was pacing now, a short uneven track between the bait barrel and the crates, three steps and turn, the bad knee swinging stiff. "Fog this, fog that. Talked so-and-so past the ledge. Like he was a saint. Like nothing happened before he picked up the pen."

A gull landed on the piling behind him and looked at them both.

"I wasn't going to sell it," he said. "I wasn't going to put it in the paper. I don't want your house." He stopped pacing. He stood with his back mostly to her and his hands open at his sides, and the anger seemed to go out through the soles of his boots into the planks, leaving him smaller and wetter and forty-six years old. "I was ten. They told me the generator. Just the generator, just bad luck, like weather. I've been hauling past that ledge since I was fourteen thinking it was nobody. Nobody did it. Nobody was there."

He wiped his face with the back of his wrist, quick, as though it was spray.

"I wanted it wrote down somewhere," he said. "What happened. That's all. I wanted to see it in his hand."

Maren held the Hannaford bag against her fleece. In the inside pocket, zipped, was a black notebook with a date on the first page.

She unzipped the pocket. The notebook was the size of a paperback, black pebbled cover, the elastic band long since gone slack, and it had been warm against her ribs all the way down Water Street. She held it out.

Sam looked at it and didn't take it.

"It's not a logbook," she said. "He didn't put this in the logbooks. He wrote it the day after and kept it in a drawer for thirty-five years, and then he gave it to somebody to give to me." She kept her arm out. "It's the page you wanted."

He wiped his hand on his jeans before he took it. She noticed that, and wished she hadn't. He opened it standing up, the knee locked, his back to the harbor so the light from the dishrag sky came over his shoulder onto the paper, and she watched his eyes go to the date first, the way hers had. *15 Oct 88.* Then down.

She knew the first page well enough to follow him through it without looking.

Station log for 14 Oct is a lie. I wrote it. Writing the true one here.

0128 M seized on kitchen floor. Fever 105 plus. L in Bangor. No phone answer at Rockland. Took her in the truck. Left the light running on main. Did not wake anyone. Did not call Group.

Main failed after I left. Transfer switch stuck. Backup never took. Light dark 85 min by the clock on the panel when I got back. Fog signal off too.

Constance Grey on the Hogsback approx 0220. Cal Pelletier. Donny Ames. Ev on the ledge till light.

I was in the hospital lot in Rockland holding my daughter. She is all right.

They are not.

There was more. A second page about the board of inquiry, a third that was mostly crossed out, the beginning of a letter to Sam's mother that stopped halfway down. Sam didn't turn to them. He stayed on the first page a long time. The gull on the piling lifted off and came down again on the next one over. Somewhere out past the town float an outboard coughed twice and caught.

He read it again. She could tell by where his eyes started.

"Eighty-five minutes," he said.

"Yes."

"Panel clock." He tapped the line with a thick finger, once, hard enough to dent the paper. "He looked at the clock. He came back and looked at the clock

and wrote it down." He closed the notebook and held it against his leg. He didn't hand it back. "So that's it. That's what I came in your house for."

Maren waited for something to happen to his face. She had pictured this in the truck, a version of it, the way she used to picture a fix going out to production: the alert clears, the graph drops back to baseline, everyone goes home. Sam's face didn't do anything. He looked at the black cover and then at the water and then back at the cover, and his jaw worked on one side like he was chewing something that wouldn't go down.

"I thought I'd feel different," he said.

She didn't say anything. She didn't trust whatever she might say.

"Ten minutes ago I wanted his name on it. Now I got his name on it." He shook his head. "My father's still in the water."

"I know."

"You don't know." He said it without heat, which was worse. Then he turned on her, the notebook coming up in his fist. "Here's what I want to know. Why'd he stay?"

"Stay where?"

"*There.*" He pointed with the notebook, past the co-op roof and the steeple and the spruce line, toward the point where the tower stood, out of sight from here but not out of mind, never for anyone in this town. "They automated it. Took the job away. He could've gone anyplace. Ohio. Your California. Some place with no water in it. And he goes and buys the thing. Pays money for it. Sits out there twenty years looking at the ledge every morning out his kitchen window." His voice cracked on *window* and he pushed through it. "Who does that? What kind of man buys the place he did that?"

The outboard was getting closer. Maren could feel the notebook's absence against her ribs, and volume thirty-four, thicker, still zipped in the other pocket, pressing on her hip like a hand.

Maren unzipped it.

"I don't know why he stayed," she said. "I've been reading him for two months and I don't know. But I know what he did with it."

Volume thirty-four was the same green as the others, the same soft cardboard corners, except that one of them was crushed flat and the spine had a dark stain along the bottom edge that she had decided, the first night, not to think about.

She opened it past the middle, where she'd tucked a Werther's wrapper as a bookmark, and turned it around so it faced him.

He didn't reach for it. She held it up anyway.

0447. Fog to the water. F/V Wren *out of Port Ellery, the girl again. Plotter froze off Hogsback. Brought her inside R4 on 68. She talked the whole way. Coffee.*

0512. Thick. F/V Wren. *Asked was I a robot. Told her no. Asked was I sure. Toast.*

0530. Wren. Showed her the gap between the ledge and the point. Holds her course like Cal did. Didn't say so.

Sam's eyes stopped on the third one. Maren watched them stop.

"The *Wren* came in at the back of volume thirty-three," she said. "December 2022. A girl alone. In this one she's on almost every page with fog on it."

"I know whose boat it is." He took the book out of her hands. Not roughly. The way you'd take a line somebody was about to drop.

He read it standing up, the knee locked, the black notebook still clamped against his thigh with his other hand, so he had to turn the pages with his thumb. She could hear each one go. July. August. A run of mornings in September where the entries got shorter and the times got earlier and the final word was the same three days running, *Cold*, and then a morning where it was *Good*, which her father had used, by her spreadsheet's count, four times in thirty-five years. Sam went back to that one. He went forward again. The outboard came around the end of the town float, a kid in an orange hoodie standing at the tiller of a skiff, and the kid lifted a hand to Sam. Sam didn't see it. The kid let the hand drop and puttered off toward the moorings.

Maren knew where the last page was. She watched him find it.

7 Feb 24. 0610. Fog lifting. Wren *in safe. Told her nothing. Same as always.*

Underneath that, nothing. Ruled lines all the way to the bottom of the page, and the page after, and the forty-some pages after that, empty and very slightly warped where the book had lain on the stairs.

Sam stood there. The light was going. The sky over the co-op had gone from dishrag to pewter and the water under the wharf had turned the color of a closed laptop lid, and the bell buoy off the breakwater rang twice in a swell she couldn't see. She waited for him to say something. She waited the way she'd once waited

on a support call, with her mouth shut, counting, because the other person always filled the silence eventually.

He didn't fill it.

He closed volume thirty-four, carefully, the crushed corner lined up with the cover. He held it out to her. She took it. Their hands didn't touch. Then he put the black notebook inside his jacket, zipped it, turned, and walked up the wharf with the bad knee swinging stiff on every second step, past the bait shed, past the stack of wire traps with the Pelletier buoys hung on the end, yellow over black, and up onto Water Street, where the one traffic light was blinking amber at nobody.

He didn't look back. She'd been fairly sure he wouldn't.

Maren stood on the planks with the Hannaford bag hanging from one wrist and the logbook against her chest. Penance, she thought. Or a man who couldn't stop checking whether the door was locked. Or something simpler and worse, a father practicing on somebody else's daughter because he'd lost the address of his own. The data didn't say. The data said *Coffee* and *Toast* and *Told her nothing*.

Out past the steeple, low on the cloud, a pale smear brightened and faded.

She counted. One, two, three, four, five, six.

It came again.

CHAPTER 11

The Hogsback

Four-oh-six, and the coffee had gone cold for the second time.

Maren had been awake since a little after two, when the fog signal started its two-tone groan and kept at it, low note, high note, every thirty seconds, like an old dog that wanted something from the other side of a door. She'd given up on sleep at three. Now she sat at the workroom bench in the oil house in her gray fleece and a pair of her father's wool socks, with the laptop open in front of her and the radio on standby at her elbow, its little amber display reading 68 the way it had read 68 since the day she cut the lock.

Six days. On the twelfth the severance stopped, and she had a legal pad upstairs with the arithmetic on it in ink so she couldn't fudge it later.

She wasn't thinking about the legal pad.

The radar sweep went round on the laptop screen, a pale green arm that she had spent most of July teaching to talk to a MacBook through a serial adapter, a Python script and a great deal of language she would not have used in a standup meeting. The point sat at the center like a thumbprint. The Hogsback painted every sweep at 041, a hard little bruise a quarter mile out. R4 blinked where R4 always blinked. And to the southwest, filling the lower left of the screen, was a ragged band of clutter that hadn't been there at midnight. At midnight it had been forty miles off and loose, like a handful of gravel thrown on a table. Now it was twelve miles off, it had edges, and it was coming.

She checked NOAA on her phone. *Small craft advisory. Squalls with gusts to 35 kt after 0500. Visibility one quarter nm or less in fog.* She read it twice and set the phone face down, as though that helped.

Then she did the thing she'd been doing every foggy morning since the wharf.

Carol at the co-op kept a camera on the roof for the harbormaster, a cheap thing that refreshed every thirty seconds and mostly showed gulls. Maren had bookmarked it in June without telling anyone. At this hour the harbor was a gray soup with a sodium lamp burning a hole in it, but the lamp sat right over the inner moorings, and under it, if you knew where to look, you could see the ball for the *Wren*. White, with a green stripe. Abby had painted the stripe herself. Ev had told her that, unprompted, in the voice people use for the weather.

The ball was there. The boat wasn't.

Maren refreshed. Ball. Water. Nothing tied to it. She refreshed again and the gull on the piling had moved and the mooring was still empty, the pennant trailing off it in the slack tide like a dropped shoelace.

She looked at the clock in the corner of the screen. 0419.

The logbook was open beside the laptop, volume thirty-four, the crushed corner flattened under a can of WD-40. She didn't need to look at it. She'd read the page so many times that it came up behind her eyes on its own.

0505. Fog. F/V Wren *out early again, hauling inside the ledge. Plotter freezing. Talked her round R4. She talks more than the radio. Toast.*

He'd known her habits. Out early, before the fog burned off, so she could haul and be back on the mooring before the big boats came in and made her feel small. Ev had told Maren that too.

31. The squall line ate another mile. The fog signal groaned. Maren put her hand on the radio, not to key it, just to have it under her palm, the case warm from the standby circuit, and she thought about her father sitting on this same stool with this same warmth under his hand and a cold cup of coffee he'd write down later in one word.

At 0440 the speaker hissed, broke, and filled with a voice.

"Lightkeeper, Lightkeeper, this is *Wren*." High and fast and too close to the mic. "Lightkeeper, you there? My plotter just went black, the whole thing, it's just black, and I can hear surf. I can hear it breaking and I can't see anything. I don't know which side it's on. Please. Are you there?"

Maren had the mic in her hand before she'd decided anything. Her thumb found the key the way it found Ctrl-S.

"*Wren*, this is Gannet Head. I'm here." Her voice came out an octave too high and she dragged it down. "Pull your throttle back to idle. Don't turn. Just idle and tell me what you hear."

A gasp of open mic, engine noise, the hollow slap of water on a hull. "Okay. Okay, idle. It's on my left, I think. Or ahead. It sort of moves. Who is this? You're not him."

"No," Maren said. "Stay on this channel."

On the laptop, a dozen small echoes salted the water inside R4, any one of which might be a twenty-eight-foot boat and any one of which might be a wave. She was leaning in to sort them when the speaker opened again on a different voice, lower, wind across the mic.

"Abs. Abby, it's Dad."

Maren took her hand off the key.

"I'm on the boat. I'm standing right on it." A pause with breathing in it. "The engine's all over the floor. I got the injectors out on a rag. I can't come get you, sweetheart, I can't..."

The transmission cut there, as though he'd squeezed the handheld instead of letting go of it. Maren pictured him under that sodium lamp, a big sunburned man in a cockpit full of engine parts with his thumb crushing the button. She could see Carol's camera from where she sat. She didn't look at it.

Then, flat and fast: "Gannet Head, Pelletier. I'm coming to you. Keep her talking."

* * *

The fog took his headlights until they were almost at the gate. Maren had the Aldis lamp on its strap over one shoulder, the battery in a canvas bag over the other, and the laptop clamped against her ribs with the cable trailing back to the jack her father had labeled LANTERN in those blocky capitals she'd found in July and not understood until right now. She had the oil house handheld clipped to her fleece. Abby was saying something about the smell of rockweed.

Sam got out of the truck without shutting the door. He had a yellow tide booklet in his fist, the free one Coombs gave out at the register every January,

and he went past her to the tower door as if she were a post.

He took the first step with his good leg. Then the bad one came up after it, slow, and he made a sound through his teeth.

Ninety-one steps. Maren had counted them on her first night and every night since, the way she counted everything. She'd never counted them behind someone. He climbed with one hand on the rail and the other bracing his right knee, good leg up, bad leg after, and every eight or nine steps he stopped with his forehead nearly on the iron and said nothing at all. Below, the beam of her headlamp jittered on the granite. Above, the LED optic turned behind its glass, and every six seconds the stairwell lit white and went dark.

"*Wren*, you still idling?" Maren said into the handheld.

"Yes. The surf's louder. Is that bad? That's bad."

Sam stopped. He didn't turn around. Step forty-something, by Maren's count.

"Tell her," he said. "Tell her you hear her."

"I hear you, Abby," Maren said. "We're coming up."

At the top he hauled himself through the hatch into the lantern room and stood bent over with both hands on his thighs, breathing like a man who'd been held underwater. Sweat ran down past his ear into his collar. Maren came up behind him and set the laptop on the sill. The squall line had crept another mile.

Sam straightened slowly and looked out through the glass at nothing. Gray in every direction, lit and unlit, lit and unlit. Somewhere out in it, a quarter mile or a few hundred yards, his daughter sat at idle beside the ledge that had killed his father, and there was no boat he could put under himself and no rope he could throw.

He looked down at the tide booklet in his hand like he'd forgotten bringing it. Then at the lamp on Maren's shoulder.

"All right," he said. He opened the booklet to September and smoothed it flat on the sill with a palm the size of a dinner plate. "Low was 0218. You want the height or you want me to shut up?"

"Height," Maren said.

He ran a finger down the column. "Low was point four. It's coming. Call it three feet now, a little better." He glanced at his watch, a big black Casio with a

cracked face. "Three-one at quarter to. Rising about a foot every forty minutes from here, give or take."

She wrote 3.1 on the back of her hand with a Sharpie because there was nowhere else to write it.

The lantern room had not been built for two people and a laptop. The optic sat in the middle on its pedestal, a fat cylinder of LEDs that hummed and threw its white sweep out every six seconds, and the space between the optic and the glass was about the width of an airplane aisle. Maren knelt on the iron grating with the MacBook on the sill. Sam stood behind her with his bad leg locked straight and the tide booklet flat under his palm. The Aldis lamp sat at her knee, dark, like something that might bite.

The radar was worse up here. Or no worse, and she was just more frightened of it. The scavenged antenna on the oil house roof swept the bay and sent its picture up the cable her father had run, and her little Python window drew it in green: the point, solid; the long smear of the Hogsback at 041; R4 a hard dot to the southeast; and in between, a scatter of returns that came and went with every pass. Waves. Rain from the front edge of the squall. A boat.

"Which one's her," Sam said.

"I don't know yet."

"You don't know."

"*Wren*, Gannet Head," Maren said into the handheld. "Can you knock your engine in gear for five seconds and then back to idle? Just five seconds."

"Okay. Okay. Going."

Maren watched. Three sweeps. On the fourth, one of the small echoes northeast of R4 slid a hair to the west and held when the others didn't. It was closer to the ledge than she wanted. A lot closer. Then the next sweep came through and the dot was gone, swallowed into the edge of the Hogsback's return like a crumb pressed into bread.

"There," she said. "No. There." It came back. Faded. Came back.

Sam leaned over her shoulder and she smelled diesel and sweat and the cold off his jacket. He didn't say anything. He breathed through his nose.

"She's set toward it," Maren said. "The flood's carrying her up onto it."

"I know which way the flood goes."

She had every page of thirty-three volumes on this machine, and the one that mattered was the half-page sketch in volume 14, the clearest of the Hogsbacks he'd drawn. She'd scanned it in July because it had the best soundings. She pulled it up beside the radar window, dragged its corners, dropped the opacity to forty percent and laid it over the picture, rotating until his pencil point matched the green point. His ledge sat on the radar's ledge almost exactly. He'd drawn the Hogsback the way he always drew it, in heavy cross-hatching with the pencil pressed so hard she could see the furrows in the photo, and a row of little x's along the seaward side like stitches.

She had looked at this drawing perhaps forty times. She had always looked at the ledge.

Between the inshore end of the Hogsback and the tip of the point, where she'd assumed there was only shoal and weed, he had drawn two light parallel lines. Thin. Almost apologetic. Inside them, in his small figures, soundings: *7. 8. 8. 6.* And in the margin, in capitals she had to zoom to read:

GAP. SAND. 7 FT AT LOW WATER PLUS 4. NOT BEFORE. TOWER ON STBD BOW, KEEP IT THERE.

"Sam," she said. "What's the bottom between the Hogsback and the point."

"Nothing. Rocks. Nobody goes through there."

"He did." She turned the laptop toward him. "He's got soundings. He says it's passable at low plus four feet."

Sam stared at the screen. The optic swept white across his face and left it gray again.

"We've got three-one," Maren said.

On the radar, the small dot slid a little closer to the stitches.

Sam looked at his watch. Then at the window, where the gray had gone darker on the southwest side, a bruise coming up through the fog. The first rain ticked against the glass like someone tapping to be let in.

"That front's twenty minutes out," he said. "Maybe less."

"Then she can't sit there forty."

"She can't go through on three feet either."

"She doesn't go through yet. She holds." Maren keyed the handheld. "*Wren*, Gannet Head. Abby, I want you to put your bow on one-eight-zero and give it

just enough throttle to stand still. You're going to feel the current pushing you. Push back. That's all you have to do for a while."

"One-eight-zero. Okay. How long's a while?"

"I'll tell you."

The dot stopped creeping. It shivered on the edge of the stitches, sweep after sweep, and held. Maren let out a breath she had apparently been saving since Tuesday.

"Three-four," Sam said.

The rain thickened. On the screen the squall's leading edge came in as a ragged green wall, swallowing returns as it went, and every pass the little dot got harder to pick out of it. Maren thumbed the Aldis lamp's switch on, felt the heat bloom against her knee, and opened the shutter toward 041. Three long. One short. Alvarado's careful voice came to her, *a second report would escalate*, and she sent it again anyway.

"Abby. Do you see a light?"

A long hiss. "I see something. Off my right. Is that you?"

"That's me. Keep it there."

"Three-seven," Sam said. His voice had gone flat as a tabletop.

Then the surf. Maren heard it through the radio before Abby did anything, a deep hollow boom like a door slamming in a basement, and then Abby's voice came apart.

"I can hear it, it's right there, it's *right there*, I'm going to hit, I can't..."

Sam's hand closed on the sill hard enough to buckle the booklet.

Maren knew the phrase. She had typed it into column F of her spreadsheet nineteen times and once, in May, thought it was the most boring sentence in the English language.

"Abby. Easy now. That's the ledge talking, and it talks louder than it is. You've got water. I can see your water. Bow on one-eight-zero and breathe."

The hiss went on long enough for Maren to count to six.

"Okay," Abby said, small. "Okay. One-eight-zero."

"Four-oh," Sam said, and then, because he could not stop himself, "four-oh, go, go."

"*Wren*, come right to two-two-five, slow. Find my light. Put it on your right bow and keep it there. Don't chase it. Just keep it." Maren opened the shutter.

Long, long, long, short. "Count with me. One, two, three..."

The dot left the stitches and slid into the space between his two faint pencil lines. The squall hit the tower. The glass went white with water and the whole lantern room shuddered, and for three sweeps she couldn't find the boat at all, and Sam said "Maren" once, just her name, and then the green wall smeared past and the dot was there, past the inshore end of the Hogsback, past the point, in the open.

"Two-two-five," Abby said. Her voice cracked in the middle. "I've got... there's nothing. There's just water. I've got water. I can see the green can. I can see the can!"

Sam sagged against the rail with his bad leg out in front of him and put the back of his wrist over his eyes, and the optic swept across him and away.

"Good job, *Wren*," Maren said. "Head on in. Stay on 68 till you're tied up."

She closed the shutter. Her fingers smelled of hot metal. On the laptop, under the fading rain, the pencil sketch still floated at forty percent over the bay, and in its lower corner, below the soundings, below the gap, there was a small arrow she had never noticed. It pointed off the edge of the page. Beside it, in those same blocky capitals: *SEE VOL. 2. FOR M.*

CHAPTER 12

Volume Thirty-Five

It took her eleven minutes to find the page, which was ten more than it should have, because Abby was still talking on 68 all the way up the channel and Sam kept saying "Okay, Ab, okay," into the handset as if she could hear him, and because Maren's thumb would not stay steady on the phone. She had backed up every page of thirty-three volumes, and the photos were in order, and none of that helped when the person scrolling couldn't read.

Volume two, page forty-one. She zoomed in.

2 Nov 90. 1340. LW, wind NW light, flat. Rowed the gap between Hogsback and the point with lead line. Three passes. Sand, 4 ft at MLW, nothing hard. Nobody uses it. If M ever runs this water she ought to know it's there. M's birthday.

Below the entry he had drawn the gap again, smaller, with a little rowboat in it the size of a fingernail. The rowboat had two oars. He had shaded them.

Maren set the phone face down on the console. Sam had gone quiet behind her. Through the streaming glass the squall was moving off toward Vinalhaven, and the optic went on sweeping the rain the way it had done every six seconds since 1989, for nobody, for everybody.

"She's at the float," Sam said. "She's tying up."

"Good."

He looked at the phone and then at her, and he didn't ask, and she didn't tell him.

* * *

Boatswain's Mate First Class Teresa Alvarado came back on the first Tuesday in October, at 8:15 again, and this time she did not count the stairs. She stood in the kitchen with her cover under her arm and a manila envelope in her other hand and looked at the coffee maker, which was new, and at the sink, which was old.

"Gil Haskell says the plumbing's historical," Maren said.

"Gil says that about my mother's house." Alvarado set the envelope on the table. "I'm going to tell you some things, and you're going to nod, and then I'm going to have that coffee."

Maren nodded.

"On September sixth, Sector got a weather report for this stretch of coast that mentions lightning." Alvarado said it flatly, reading off the inside of her own head. "Lightning makes flashes. People see flashes. Sector also got a phone call at 0710 that morning from a lobsterman named Samuel Pelletier, who wanted to know who he should talk to if anybody tried to write up a light at Gannet Head, because he'd like to talk to them personally."

"He called you?"

"He called the duty officer. The duty officer is twenty-four years old. He wrote down everything Mr. Pelletier said, including some words I had to look up." She slid a single stapled sheet from the envelope. "Radio watch only. Channel 16 monitored, 68 as a working channel, because that's what they use around here and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Every call goes in a log. Times, vessels, positions, what you told them. No lights. The lamp stays in that brick building unless the building is on fire."

"And if somebody's on the ledge?"

Alvarado looked at her for a while. "Then you call us first. And then you do what you do, and you write it down honestly, and I read it."

Maren signed in two places. Alvarado signed under her, in a small square hand, and then took a second thing out of the envelope: a certificate on heavy cream stock, with an anchor and an eagle and Maren's name spelled correctly, which Lumentide had managed only about half the time. VOLUNTEER RADIO WATCH, it said, and under that, in smaller type, a phrase about assist-

ance to the maritime public that sounded like it had been written by a committee and then signed by a human being.

"It doesn't mean anything legally," Alvarado said. "My chief makes them on the color printer. People like them."

Maren pinned it to the corkboard over the sink with a red pushpin, next to the tide table from Coombs Hardware and a receipt for a sump pump she was still disputing. It hung slightly crooked. She left it that way.

"Your father ever get one of those?" Alvarado said.

"He never asked."

"No," Alvarado said. "I guess he wouldn't have." She drank half the coffee standing, said it was good, which was a lie, and went up to service the optic. Maren heard her on the stairs, and somewhere around the fortieth step, faintly, counting.

* * *

Dennis Farrow's offer had been good until the end of June, and then, by a letter on heavy letterhead in August, good until October 1, "in recognition of the unusual circumstances." The letter was in the junk drawer under the batteries. On October 1 Maren found it while looking for a nine-volt, read the date, and put it back.

On October 2 he left a voicemail. He said he hoped she was well. He said the market for coastal hospitality remained strong, and that he'd heard (he said this with a small laugh) that she'd been doing some kind of radio thing, which was charming, really, and could be part of the brand. He said his door was always open.

She listened to the whole thing on the gallery with the phone held a little away from her ear, as though it might be damp. Then she went inside and caulked the window in room four.

* * *

Gil had finished four of the six rooms, on a payment plan Ruthie had apparently negotiated with him in a single phone call that neither of them would describe. Rooms five and six had plastic over the doors and a sign in Maren's handwriting that said HISTORICAL. The first guests arrived on Friday, October 11, in a

rented Tahoe from Portland, all four of them from Palo Alto, all four of them wearing the same quilted vest in different colors.

Their names were Priyanka, Theo, and a married couple called Wes and Dana who finished each other's sentences in a way Maren found exhausting by the end of the driveway. Theo had been cut from Stripe in March. Priyanka had not been cut from anything; she had simply stopped sleeping. Wes and Dana had founded something together and sold it and now didn't know what to do with their hands.

The basket was a Longaberger that Ruthie had donated with the comment that it had been her sister-in-law's and she was glad to see it leave the building. Maren held it out in the front hall.

"All of them," she said. "The watch too, Wes."

"It's a health device."

"It's a phone that's ashamed of itself."

They put them in. Priyanka put hers in last and kept two fingers on it for a second, like a person setting down a bird.

The first day was bad. Maren had expected that. She had built a whole slide in her head about it, back in April, with a curve on it labeled *withdrawal*. Dana asked three times what the wifi password was, as a joke, and the third time was not a joke. Theo walked to the end of the point at four in the afternoon and stood holding his empty right hand at chest height, thumb moving. Wes wanted to know whether the fog signal was going to do that all night. It was. At 11:40 Maren found Priyanka in the kitchen in a borrowed fleece, eating peanut butter out of the jar with a spoon and looking at the corkboard.

"What's that?"

"I keep a radio watch."

"For what?"

"Boats." Maren filled the kettle. "There's a ledge out there. Sometimes their electronics quit in the fog."

Priyanka looked out at the dark window, where the six-second flash went across the glass and was gone. "And you just. Sit up."

"When there's fog."

"Does anybody know?"

Maren thought about that while the kettle ticked. "A few people," she said.

By Saturday afternoon Theo had read most of a paperback mystery from the shelf in the parlor and wanted to argue about the ending. Wes and Dana had gone down to the rocks at low water and come back with a periwinkle in a coffee cup that they wanted to keep and could not be talked out of naming. Priyanka slept until ten. Nobody asked about the basket. On Sunday morning Theo asked whether he could come up to the oil house and look at the radar, and Maren let him, and he stood behind her for twenty minutes with his hands in his vest pockets, watching the green sweep go around, and didn't say anything at all, which was the nicest thing a guest had done so far.

* * *

Sam's truck came up the drive on Sunday at a little after two, with Abby in the passenger seat talking before the door was fully open.

She was smaller than Maren had pictured. That was the first thing. On the radio she had sounded tall, the way people sound tall when they talk fast and loud over an engine, and in person she came up to about Maren's collarbone, in a Maine Maritime sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up and a braid that had been done in a hurry. She stopped at the bottom of the porch steps and looked up.

"Say something," Abby said.

"Hello?"

"No, say the thing." Abby made her voice lower and flatter. "*Keep it on your right bow and keep it there.*"

Maren felt her face go hot. "Keep it on your right bow," she said, "and keep it there."

Abby put both hands on top of her head. "Okay. Okay, that's weird. That's really weird. You're not him. I mean, obviously you're not him, Dad told me, I know you're not him, but I've had that voice in my head since I was sixteen and I always pictured a guy with, like, a beard, an old guy, a really big old guy, and the whole time it was a guy and then for one morning it was you, and I couldn't tell. On the radio. I couldn't tell the difference. Isn't that weird?"

"She talks," Sam said, coming around the hood with a paper bag. "Sorry."

"She's fine."

"I'm fine," Abby said. "I drove down from Castine at six. I have a fluid dynamics quiz Tuesday. Can I see it? The radio? Dad said there's a radar on the roof he built out of a dead boat."

"He didn't build it," Maren said. "He scavenged it. I fixed it."

"Can I see it?"

They went out to the oil house, and Abby stood in the doorway with her mouth open and then came in and touched everything: the Icom, the thermos, the green spines of the ledgers, the Aldis lamp on its shelf, which she lifted, tested the weight of, and set down very carefully, like it was somebody else's baby. Maren took volume thirty-four down and opened it to the right page and put it on the workbench, and stepped back.

Abby read standing up, the way her father had. She read the way people read their own names on a list, fast once, then slow.

"He never said," she said finally. "He'd just come on. 'Morning, *Wren*.' Like he'd been waiting." She ran a thumb down the margin. "I thought maybe it was somebody at the co-op. I thought it might be Carol's husband for a while."

"Carol's husband can't work a toaster," Sam said from the door.

"I didn't know that then." Abby closed the book and kept her hand flat on the cover. "I used to bring him a Whoopie pie. I'd leave it on the float at the co-op on the way out. On a piling. Like an offering, I don't know. They were always gone when I came back." She looked at her father. "Did you take them?"

Sam looked at the radar.

"Dad."

"Gulls," he said. "Probably gulls."

In the kitchen Maren made coffee in the new machine, and Sam sat at the table with his bad leg stuck out into the room where somebody would certainly trip on it, and drank half a mug, and set it down.

"That's weak," he said.

"It's the setting on the bag."

"Your father made it so you could stand a spoon in it." He picked the mug up again. "Tasted like a tire. This is fine. It's weak." He drank the rest and pushed it toward her for more, and she filled it. He looked at the certificate over the sink for a while without saying anything, and then at the window, where a lobster

boat was working the string off the point, and Maren realized he was reading the buoys.

"That's Gagnon," he said. "He's too close in."

"He's fine. He's got radar."

"Radar," Sam said, as if she'd said horoscope. He turned the mug a quarter turn on the table. "I gave the notebook to my mother. She's eighty. She read it twice and put it in the Bible with my father's obituary. She said to tell you she's sorry about your seizure." He looked at the mug. "That's what she said. About your seizure."

Maren did not trust her voice, so she cut him a slice of the pie Ruthie had sent up that morning, and he ate it, and said it was dry, and ate another.

* * *

Slack water came at 4:52 that afternoon, high tide, flat as a plate. Ruthie drove up in the hardware store's van with the box on the passenger seat buckled in.

"He'd have hated that," Ruthie said, unbuckling it. "Seat belt. He'd say a box of ash doesn't need a seat belt. I'd say rules are rules, Walter."

The guests were down at the far rocks with a bag of driftwood and a debate about fire. Maren and Ruthie went the other way, out along the granite past the fog signal house to the end of the point, where the spruce gave out and there was only bare rock and the water a few feet below, so still that the Hogsback, at full tide, showed nowhere at all. Just a smooth patch. A darker green.

Ruthie had brought nothing to read and had told Maren on the phone that if Maren brought anything to read she'd be walking home. She stood with the box against her hip. She was wearing her reading glasses on top of her head and, Maren saw now, something else around her neck under the collar of her coat, a thin chain.

"I took it off the hook," Ruthie said, seeing her look. "The day after. I shouldn't have. It was in the house, it was yours."

"The leash."

"He called it that because I said he needed one." Ruthie pulled it out. It was the chain from his reading glasses, without the glasses, a cheap brass-colored thing gone dark at the links. She lifted it over her head, slowly, careful of her hair, and held it out in her fist. "He'd say it's yours. I'm only the hardware store."

Maren took it. It was warm. She put it in the pocket of her fleece and kept her hand around it there.

"You do it," Ruthie said, and handed her the box. "I'll talk."

She didn't, though. She stood at Maren's elbow and said nothing at all while Maren opened the plastic bag inside the box and leaned down toward the water, the way you'd lean to set something on a low shelf. There was no wind. The ash did not blow anywhere picturesque. It went onto the flat water in a pale gray skin and lay there, turning a little, and then very slowly began to go, not out to sea, but along the point, north, toward the gap between the ledge and the shore, the way the flood would have carried it if it had been running. It wasn't. It went anyway.

"Well," Ruthie said. "He always did know the way through there."

She blew her nose on a paper towel from the van. Down the shore one of the Palo Alto people had got the fire going, and the smoke went straight up, a single gray line, and the fog signal house ticked as its metal cooled. They stood until the ash was gone and the water was only water.

"Thirty-one cards," Ruthie said, on the walk back. "I'd have mailed them. Every year I told him. Every year he'd say she's got her life."

"I know."

"You don't. That's fine. You don't have to." She stopped at the van and looked up at the tower. "Get a cat. Mice are back. I can tell by your face."

* * *

The fog came in at twenty past ten. Maren watched it come from the kitchen window: first the green can off the channel went soft, then the lights on Owls Head, then the far end of the point, until the six-second flash was a wide white smear passing across nothing. The signal began, two tones, low and lower. Upstairs one of the guests said "Oh, come *on*," and someone else laughed.

She pulled on the gray fleece, filled the thermos, put two Werther's in her pocket, and crossed the wet grass to the oil house.

The ledger was on the workbench where she had left it that afternoon, still in its plastic sleeve with the Coombs price sticker on the corner: $6.49, green, cardboard corners, the cheap kind. She had bought it in August and had not opened it. She slit the plastic with a thumbnail.

On the cover, in pencil, she wrote VOL. 35. Her capitals were thinner than his. They leaned. She did not try to fix them.

She turned on the Icom. Channel 16, then 68. The radar came up green, and the sweep went around, and around, and the Hogsback sat at 041 where it had always been, a hard little smudge under the clutter. She took the leash out of her pocket and turned it over in her hand, and then, because there was nothing else to do with it, she hung it from the hook over the bench where the lamp cord went.

She uncapped the pen.

13 Oct 24. 2231. Fog thick, vis under ¼ nm. Wind S light. LW 0512. Watch set, 16 and 68. Four guests in the house, asleep, mostly. Nothing on the scope.

She looked at the line for a while. The squelch hissed. The fog signal groaned through the brick, and across the yard, in the end bedroom of the house, she knew the flash was sweeping the ceiling where she had lain in April counting it, and where, at five, before any of this, she must have counted it too.

She wrote one more word at the end of the entry, small, the way he would have.

Here.

At 2247 the radio opened, a burst of engine noise and a man's voice she did not know, young, nervous, from somewhere out past R4.

"Gannet Head, Gannet Head. Anybody keep a watch there anymore?"

She picked up the handset.

About the Author

Claire Whitmore writes fiction about ordinary people who discover that the past is closer than they thought. Her stories are drawn to small communities, quiet acts of courage and the secrets families keep from one another, often in places where weather and landscape shape lives as much as people do. The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter brings those interests together in a mystery about inheritance, guilt and the long work of making amends. When she isn't writing, Claire is usually reading, listening to other people's stories or looking for her next setting.