

I



1972

1

RELIEF

When Jory opens the curtains, the day is light and grey, the radio playing a half-known song. He listens to the news, about a girl who's gone missing from a bus stop up north, and drinks from a mug of brown tea. Poor Mother's beside herself – well, she would be. Short hair, short skirt, big eyes, that's how he pictures the girl, shivering in the cold, and an empty bus stop where someone should have stood, waving or drowning, and the bus pulls up and away, never the wiser, and the pavement shines on in the black rain.

The sea is quiet, with the glass-like quality that comes after bad weather. Jory unlatches the window and the fresh air is very nearly solid, an edible thing, clinking between the trawler cottages like an ice cube in a drink. There's nothing like the smell of the sea, nothing close: briny, clean, like vinegar kept in the fridge. Today it's soundless. Jory knows loud seas and silent seas, heaving seas and mirror seas, seas where your boat feels like the last blink of humankind on a roll so determined and angry that you believe in what you don't believe in, such as the sea being that halfway thing between heaven and hell, or whatever lies up there and whatever lurks down deep. A

EMMA STONEX

fisherman told him once about the sea having two faces. You have to take the both, he said, the good and the bad, and never turn your back on either one of them.

Today, after a long time, the sea is on their side. They'll do it today.



He's in charge of whether the boat goes out there or not. Even if the wind's good at nine it doesn't mean it'll be good by ten, and whatever he's got in the harbour, say he's got four-foot-high waves in the harbour, he can guess they'll be forty feet round the tower. Whatever it is ashore, it'll be ten times as much round the light.

The new delivery is twentyish, with yellow hair and thick glasses. They make his eyes look small, twitchy; he reminds Jory of something kept in a cage, living in sawdust. He's standing there on the jetty in his cord bellbottoms, frayed ends darkened by the slopping sea. Early morning it's quiet on the quay, a dog walker and a milk crate unloading. The frigid pause between Christmas and New Year.

Jory and his crew haul in the boy's supplies – Trident red cartons containing two months' clothes and food, fresh meat, fruit, proper milk not powdered, a newspaper, box of tea, Golden Virginia – and rope them down, covering the containers in tarpaulin. The keepers will be pleased: they'll have been on tinned stew the past four weeks and whatever was on the *Mail's* front page the day the last relief went out.

In the shallows, the water burps seaweed, slurping and

THE LAMPLIGHTERS

sucking round the sides of the boat. The boy climbs in, his plimsolls wet, groping the sides like a blind man. Under one arm he carries a parcel of belongings tied up with string – books, cassette recorder, tapes, whatever he'll use to pass the time. He's a student, most likely: Trident gets a lot of students these days. He'll be writing music, that'll be his thing. Up in the lantern thinking this is the life. They all need an activity to do, especially on the towers – can't spend your whole time running up and down the stairs. Jory knew a keeper way back when, a fine craftsman who put ships in bottles; he'd spend his whole stay doing them and they were beautiful things by the end of it. And then they got televisions put in and this keeper threw it all away, literally chucked his whole kit out the window into the sea, and from then on sat watching the box every free moment he got.

'Have you been doing this long?' the boy asks. Jory says yeah, longer than you've been alive. 'Didn't think we'd make it,' he says. 'I've been waiting since Tuesday. They put me in digs in the village and very nice it was too, but not so nice as I'd want to stay there much longer. Every day I was looking out and thinking, will we ever get off? Talk about a bloody storm. Have to say I don't know how it'll be out there when we get another. They told me you've never seen a storm till you've seen it from the sea, and it feels like the tower's going to collapse right from underneath you and wash away.'

The new ones always want to talk. It's nerves, Jory thinks, about the crossing and if the wind might change, about the landing, about the men on the light, whether he'll fit in with

EMMA STONEX

them, what the one in charge is like. It isn't this boy's light yet; probably it won't ever be. Supernumeraries come and go, land light this time, rock the next, shuttled round the country like a pinball. Jory's seen scores of them, keen to start and taken up in the romantic bit of it, but it isn't as romantic as that. Three men alone on a lighthouse in the middle of the sea. There's nothing special about it, nothing at all, just three men and a lot of water. It takes a certain sort to withstand being locked up. Loneliness. Isolation. Monotony. Nothing for miles except sea and sea and sea. No friends. No women. Just the other two, day in, day out, unable to get away from them, it could drive you stark mad.

It's usual to wait days for the changeover, weeks even. Once he had a keeper stuck out there on a lost relief for four months straight.

'You'll get used to the weather,' he says to the boy.

'I hope so.'

'And you won't be half as ticked off as the poor sod who's due ashore.'

In a bevy at the stern his relief crew look despondently out to sea, smoking and grunting conversation, their damp fingers soaking their cigarettes. They could be painted into a dour seascape, brushed roughly with thick oils. 'What're we waiting for?' one of them shouts. 'D'you want the tide to turn before we're off?' They've got the engineer with them too, out to fix the radio. Normally, on relief day, they'd have been in touch with the light five times already, but the storm took out the transmission.

Jory covers the last of the boxes and starts the motor and

THE LAMPLIGHTERS

then they're away, the boat rocking and bobbing like a bath toy over the wavelets. A flock of gulls quarrel on a cockle-speckled rock; a blue trawler chugs idly into land. As the shoreline dwindles the water grows brisker, green waves leaping, crests that spume and dissolve. Further out the colours bleed darkly, the sea turning to khaki and the sky to ominous slate. Water butts and slops against the prow; strings of sea foam surge and disperse. Jory chews a roll-up that's been flattened in his pocket but is still just about smokable, eyes on the horizon, smoke in his mouth. His ears ache in the cold. Overhead a white bird wheels in a vast, drab sky.

He can decipher the Maiden in the haze, a lone spike, dignified, remote. She's fifteen nautical miles out. Keepers prefer that, he knows: not to be so close to land that you can see it from the set-off and be reminded of home.

The boy sits with his back to her – a funny way to start, Jory thinks, with your back to the thing you're going to. He worries at a scratch on his thumb. His face looks soft and ill, uninitiated. But every seaman has to find his legs.

'You been on a tower before, sonny?'

'I was out at Trevoise. Then down at St Catherine's.'

'But never a tower.'

'No, never a tower.'

'Got to have the stomach for it,' says Jory. 'Have to get along with people too, no matter what they're like.'

'Oh, I'll be fine about that.'

'Course you will. Your PK's a good sort, that makes a difference.'

'What about the others?'

EMMA STONEX

‘Was told to watch out for the Super. But being your age roughly, no doubt you’ll get along fine.’

‘What about him?’

Jory smiles at the boy’s expression. ‘No need to look like that. Service is full of stories, not all of them true.’

The sea heaves and churns beneath them, blackly rolling, slapping and slinging; the breeze backs up, skittering across the water, making it pimple and scatter. A buffet of spray explodes at the bow and the waves grow heavy and secretively deep. When Jory was a boy and they used to catch the boat from Lymington to Yarmouth, he would peer over the railings on deck and marvel at how the sea did this quietly, without you really noticing, how the shelf dropped and the land was lost, where if you fell in it would be a hundred feet down. There would be garfish and smoothhounds: weird, bloated, glimmering shapes with soft, exploring tentacles and eyes like cloudy marbles.

The lighthouse draws near, a line becoming a post, a post becoming a finger.

‘There she is. The Maiden Rock.’

By now they can see the sea-stain around her base, the scar of violent weather accumulated by decades of rule. Though he’s done it many times, getting close to the Queen of the Lighthouses always makes Jory feel a certain way – scolded, insignificant, maybe slightly afraid. A fifty-metre column of heroic Victorian engineering, the Maiden looms palely magnificent against the horizon, a stoic bastion of seafarers’ safety.

‘She was one of the first,’ says Jory. ‘Eighteen ninety-three. Twice wrecked before they finally lit her wick. The saying goes

THE LAMPLIGHTERS

she makes a sound when the weather hits hard, like a woman crying, where the wind gets in between the rocks.'

Details creep out of the grey – the lighthouse windows, the concrete ring of the set-off, and the narrow trail of iron rungs leading up to the access door, known as the dog steps.

'Can they see us?'

'By now.'

But as Jory says it, he's searching for the figure he'd expect to see waiting down there on the set-off, the Principal Keeper in his navy uniform and peaked white cap, or the Assistant waving them in. They'll have been watching the water since sunrise.

He eyes the cauldron around the base of the lighthouse with caution, deciding the best approach, if he'll put the boat ahead or astern, if he'll anchor her down or let her stay loose. Freezing water splurges across a sunken warren of rocks; when the sea fills up, the rocks disappear; when it drops, they emerge like black, glistening molars. Of all the towers it's the Bishop, the Wolf and the Maiden that are hardest to land, and if he had to pick, he'd say the Maiden took it. Sailors' legend had it she was built on the jaws of a fossilized sea monster. Dozens died in her construction and the reef has killed many an off-course mariner. She doesn't like outsiders; she doesn't welcome people.

But he's still waiting to see a keeper or two. They're not getting this boy away unless there's someone on the end of the landing gear. At that point with the drop and surge he'll be ten feet down one minute and ten up the next, and if he loses sight of it his rope's snapping and his man's taking a cold bath.

EMMA STONEX

It's a hairy business but that's the towers all over. To a land man the sea is a constant enough thing, but Jory knows it isn't constant: it's fickle and unpredictable, and it'll get you if you let it.

'Where are they?'

He hardly hears his mate's yell against the gush of water.

Jory signals they'll go around. The boy looks green. The engineer too. Jory ought to reassure them, but he isn't quite reassured himself. In all the years he's come to the Maiden he's never taken the boat around the back of the tower.

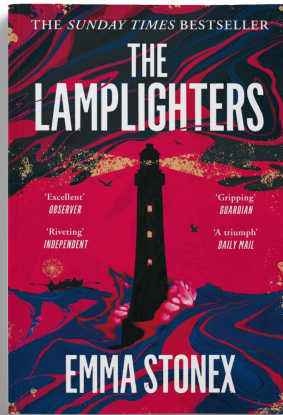
The scale of the lighthouse rears up at them, sheer granite. Jory cranes his head to the entrance door, sixty feet above water, solid gunmetal and defiantly closed.

His crew holler; they call for the keepers and blow a shrill whistle. Further up, higher still, the tower tapers into the sky, and the sky, in return, glances down at their little vessel, thrown about in confusion. There's that bird again, the one that followed them out. Wheeling, wheeling, calling a message they don't understand. The boy leans over the side of the boat and loses his breakfast to the sea.

They rise, they fall; they wait and wait.

Jory looks up at the tower, hulked out of its own shadow, and all he can hear are the waves, the crash and spit of foam, the slurp and wash of the rocks, and all he can think of is the missing girl on the radio that he heard about that morning, and the bus stop, the empty bus stop, and the driving, relentless rain.

CLICK HERE NOW TO CONTINUE READING *THE LAMPLIGHTERS*



'A TRIUMPH' *DAILY MAIL*

Cornwall, 1972. Three keepers vanish from a remote lighthouse, miles from the shore. The entrance door is locked from the inside. The clocks have stopped. The Principal Keeper's weather log describes a mighty storm, but the skies have been clear all week.

What happened to those three men, out on the tower? The heavy sea whispers their names. The tide shifts beneath the swell, drowning ghosts. Can their secrets ever be recovered from the waves?

Twenty years later, the women they left behind are still struggling to move on. Helen, Jenny and Michelle should have been united by the tragedy, but instead it drove them apart. And then a writer approaches them. He wants to give them a chance to tell their side of the story. But only in confronting their darkest fears can the truth begin to surface . . .