Name: _____ Date: _____

The Keeper's Log

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1302 words

Wren's aunt had accepted a summer job at Gull Point Lighthouse, which had been abandoned for sixty years. The town planned to transform it into a museum, and Aunt Dilys was hired to organize everything inside. Wren came along for the entire week. They slept in the keeper's old cottage at the foot of the tower, where the wind whispered constantly against the windows, and the ocean kept up a long, low, mysterious grumble through the night. The whole landscape felt remarkably lonely.

On the first morning, Wren climbed the tower stairs with a mug of cocoa and discovered the keeper's log lying open on the desk. It was an enormous book with a cracked leather cover, and the final page was dated 1911. But beneath that date, in black ink that still glistened with wetness, someone had written a single sentence: "Night clear. Lamp lit at dusk. No sign of the Marigold." Wren touched the words, and a smudge of ink came away on her fingertip.

She showed the log to her aunt, who frowned and suggested that it must be a prank by teenagers from the town. However, the door at the bottom of the tower had been locked all night, and the only key hung from Aunt Dilys's belt. The following morning there was another entry, written in the same careful handwriting: "Wind rising from the northeast. Lamp lit at dusk. No sign of the Marigold." Once again, the ink was wet, and the whole room smelled faintly of salt.

By the third morning, Wren had made a firm decision. Her aunt believed the writer was an ordinary person who could somehow pick locks, but Wren was beginning to suspect something extraordinary. The handwriting looked ancient, with long, looping tails on every letter, the way people wrote in the days of quill pens. She resolved to investigate the mystery herself. That night, she would stay awake and watch the log, and her aunt agreed to keep her company, wrapped in a blanket on the stairs.

They waited at the top of the tower, in the circular room beneath the enormous glass lens. At first there was nothing except the creaking of the iron railings and the distant breathing of the sea. Wren's eyelids grew heavy, and Aunt Dilys began to nod. Then, shortly after midnight, the temperature dropped dramatically. The air turned as cold as a cellar, and Wren's breath formed a pale cloud, and every hair on her arms slowly stood on end. Nothing in the room seemed ordinary anymore.

A chair scraped across the floor, although nobody was touching it. Wren watched a pen rise from the desk and hover above the open log. It dipped itself into the ink bottle, and then, with astonishing patience, it began to write. Beside her, Aunt Dilys had become completely motionless, her blanket slipping from her shoulders. Neither of them screamed. It was a quiet,

sorrowful kind of fear, more like standing in an empty hallway than meeting a monster. Wren could scarcely remember how to breathe.

Behind the desk, the darkness gradually thickened into the silhouette of a man. He was tall, with a heavy coat and a gray beard, and his face was turned toward the window, where the ocean lay black and endless. In his hand he carried a lantern that produced no light at all. He was watching the horizon the way a person watches a doorway for someone who has promised to come home. Nothing about him looked threatening, only unbearably and endlessly lonely.

Wren finally found her voice, although it emerged as a whisper. "Who are you waiting for?" she asked. The figure did not turn around, but the pen moved again, and four words appeared in the log: "The Marigold. She is late." Wren swallowed hard. She understood, suddenly and completely, that the keeper had been writing these same sentences for sixty years, one for every night, and that he had no idea how many nights had passed. It was the saddest sentence she had ever read.

By morning the log lay closed, and the unnatural cold had disappeared. Wren and her aunt sat on the cottage steps with their cocoa, saying very little. "A ghost," Aunt Dilys said at last, in a small, strange voice. "A genuine one." Then she took a deep breath, because she was a person who solved problems for a living. "Well," she announced. "If he is waiting for a boat, then we had better discover what happened to the boat." Neither of them had slept at all.

They spent the whole day in the old harbor office, which now contained the town's historical records. Wren searched through dusty boxes of yellowed papers until her fingers were completely gray. Eventually, she located a thin folder labeled 1911. Inside was a brief report, which explained that the fishing boat Marigold had departed from Gull Point on a morning of perfect weather, carrying a crew of four. A tremendous storm had swept in that night, and the Marigold was never seen at Gull Point again.

Wren read the report three times, and it made her heart ache. The keeper must have kept his lamp burning through the entire storm, and the storm had eventually blown itself out, and still the Marigold never arrived. But the folder contained one more item: a postcard, tucked into the very back. It showed a faded picture of a harbor, and it carried a stamp from a town three hundred miles away. In a shaky hand, someone had written, "All hands safe. Boat lost, but we are alive. Home by spring. Tell Hal at the lighthouse."

Wren stared at the card in disbelief, because it had been mailed in 1911, and nobody had ever delivered the message. For sixty years it had sat forgotten in a drawer at the harbor office. The keeper had waited all that time because the news had never reached him. The crew of the Marigold had not been lost at all. They had been carried safely ashore far down the coast, and they had returned to their families, and they had grown old and contented and told sea stories to their grandchildren.

That night, Wren carried the postcard up the tower stairs. The cold was waiting for her, and the silhouette of the keeper stood at the window with his silent lantern. "Mister Hal," said Wren, as steadily as she could manage. "I have news of the Marigold." The figure turned toward her, very slowly. Wren read the message aloud, word for word. When she finished, the entire room seemed to release a long breath, like a sail going slack. The room felt solemn and enormous.

Then Wren sat down at the desk and picked up the pen. Her hand trembled, but she composed the final entry in the log, beneath all those years of waiting: "Marigold's crew safe. All hands home. The lamp may rest." As she set down the pen, the freezing air lifted. The keeper's face looked calm and young and full of relief. He bowed his head to Wren, and the lantern in his hand flickered and, for one moment, glowed a warm gold. Then the room was only a room.

In the morning, the log held no new ink. Wren climbed the stairs every day for the rest of the week, and nothing was ever written again. The museum opened that summer, and in the glass case beside the log, the postcard now has a card of its own. It explains how a keeper waited sixty years for a boat that had already reached home. Wren still visits sometimes, and on clear nights, if she looks up from the beach, she believes she can see the lamp glow, just for a second, a gentle gold.

Questions

1. What does Wren find in the log each morning?

A. A drawing
B. A new line in wet ink
C. A map

2. What is the keeper waiting for?

A. A letter
B. The morning
C. The boat Marigold

3. What does the postcard say?

A. The crew of the Marigold was safe
B. The lighthouse was sold
C. A storm was coming

4. Why does the keeper keep writing the same lines?

A. He likes to write
B. He never learned the boat was safe
C. He wants to scare people

5. What does relief mean here?

A. A kind of boat

B. A loud noise

C. A calm feeling after worry

Words to know

lighthouse: a tower with a big lamp

lens: curved glass that bends light

keeper: a person who looks after a place

harbor: a safe place for boats

relief: a calm feeling after worry

Answer key: The Keeper's Log

1. B. A new line in wet ink
2. C. The boat Marigold
3. A. The crew of the Marigold was safe
4. B. He never learned the boat was safe
5. C. A calm feeling after worry