

The Keeper

"Where am I?" I whisper into the damp, musty air. "What is making me so itchy?"

I drag my clammy hands over the flat surface near my hips, and envision myself lying on a bed of pine needles in the middle of a dark, sinister forest. Off in the distance, I hear a deep, gruff voice calling my name "Emily! Emily!"

Lightheaded, disoriented and afraid to move, I cautiously turn my head. The pungent smell of musty hay assaults my nostrils; it is a smell I recognize from living on a farm. Through heavy eyelids, I focus on the only visible window. My body feels like lead, but with the sting of what feels like a hundred needles piercing my skin, I get up uneasily, glad to be off the mound of soggy hay. The rhythmic pounding between my ears grows louder; did something fall on my head? I don't remember lying on the mound of hay.

To help steady myself, I trail my fingers along the smooth bulging stones, strategically placed between rough crumbling mortar. The thought of how pretty the pastel colored stones looked on the outside when I squeezed through the hole in the foundation flashes through my mind. I also vaguely remember seeing the date 1917, engraved in concrete near the foundation hole. Fear nips at my heels; I push myself forward until I reach the small window. A stream of daylight penetrates the grimy windowpane, causing millions of miniature fog lights to flicker in the mist. Near the wall to my left, old pieces of wood are cluttered in a pile on the dirt floor. My eyes begin to explore my surroundings further when a movement overhead grabs my attention; I glance upward; my breath catches in my throat. EERIE! There are hundreds of creepy old cobwebs laden with dust and debris dangling from the beams of the long-forgotten lighthouse. A shiver creeps through my soul.

Lightning flashes! Its beam capturing a man crouched in the corner beside a large wooden barrel overflowing with pink and white buoys. The pink was likely red eons ago. He looks like the man from an old newspaper clipping my mother keeps in her scrapbook. I freeze! Another flash of lightning confirms the prominent scar running from his right eyebrow to the corner of his lower lip. I am sure that he *is* the man in the newspaper. What happened to him? Think! Think! Now I remember, he had been out in his little fishing boat and was attacked while casting his fishing net. I remember very well the story he told; "I never saw her coming, she was in the net, then the next thing I knew I was looking down the throat of a great white shark flashing a million razor-sharp teeth." I remember village folks saying he was never the same after the attack; it had also left him scarred on the inside. He was a marked man who became known as "The Keeper". After the accident, he seldom left the lighthouse, chased all those who tried to visit him, and shunned people in need. Only one word fills my mind, "RUN."

As thunder booms and the ocean roars, I'm airborne, destined to crash. I feel the damp soil grinding into my left cheek, the palms of my hands, and my clothes. My body slowly slides to a stop, I draw a deep breath and flip over onto my back. A burning sensation grips the back of my upper thigh, and my scream echoes through this ghostly cellar. Tears flood my half-closed eyes as I double over, and rock back and forth trying to lessen the pain. It doesn't help the throbbing, but my vision clears. The lighthouse keeper is hovering above my body, his face framed between strands of long scraggly gray hair; his lifeless eyes locked with mine. He leans his head forward in a bow-like gesture, continuing the motion until he looks like a fishhook, and that is when I begin to feel a sweeping sensation on the surface of my leg. The pain subsides as the keeper melts into the shadows.

I roll onto my side so I can get up by putting pressure on my good leg. That is when I see the small dome-shaped opening, like that of an igloo, in the lower section of the wall next to the barrel. It is no longer concealed by the lighthouse keeper. Instead of rising, I creep my way through the rubble and around the barrel. Then, I skedaddle like a bug on a mission, through the opening into the spring day filled with thick fog, and the salty scent of the ocean. Another flash of lightening spurs me into action.

Surprisingly, I can sprint up the narrow path leading from the lighthouse to the road. I can't help but wonder why the keeper's spirit remains in the old lighthouse—he has been dead a long time. It doesn't appear that he wants to hurt me, and he did magically heal my leg. Maybe he didn't do a lot of good during his life, so he is guarding me, hoping to set himself free. Behind me, the howl of a coyote penetrates the air, shattering my thoughts and sending goosebumps up my arms. When I look over my shoulder, there is no coyote, only the keeper, standing proudly in front of the lighthouse, near the edge of the woods, not as a prisoner, but as a protector. I feel a sense of peace as he smiles, waves goodbye, and fades into the light.