THE ANIMAL LIGHTHOUSE
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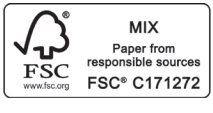
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Chapter One

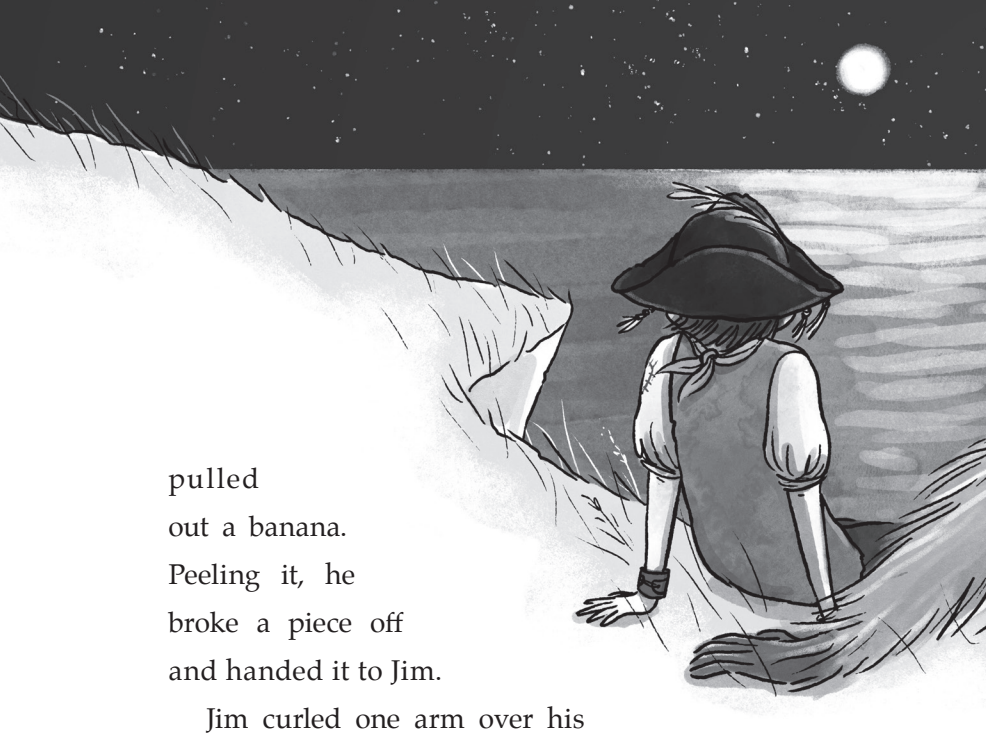
It was a dark night on the island.

Moonlight rippled over the black sea, from the horizon down to Seal Cove below. Jim sat with his legs dangling over the cliff edge, a cool breeze flicking up the hairs on his shins. He listened to the growls and *aarf-aarf-aarfs* of chubby seals jostling for beach space, smiling at the thought of them bouncing off each other's bellies.

Grass ruffled behind him.

Turning, Jim watched old Oskar waddle up to the cliff edge and lower himself down beside him. The orangutan pushed his little round glasses up his button nose. He and Jim looked out across the dark sea, moonlight shimmering like a white carpet on the waves.

Oskar rummaged in a pouch on his tool belt and



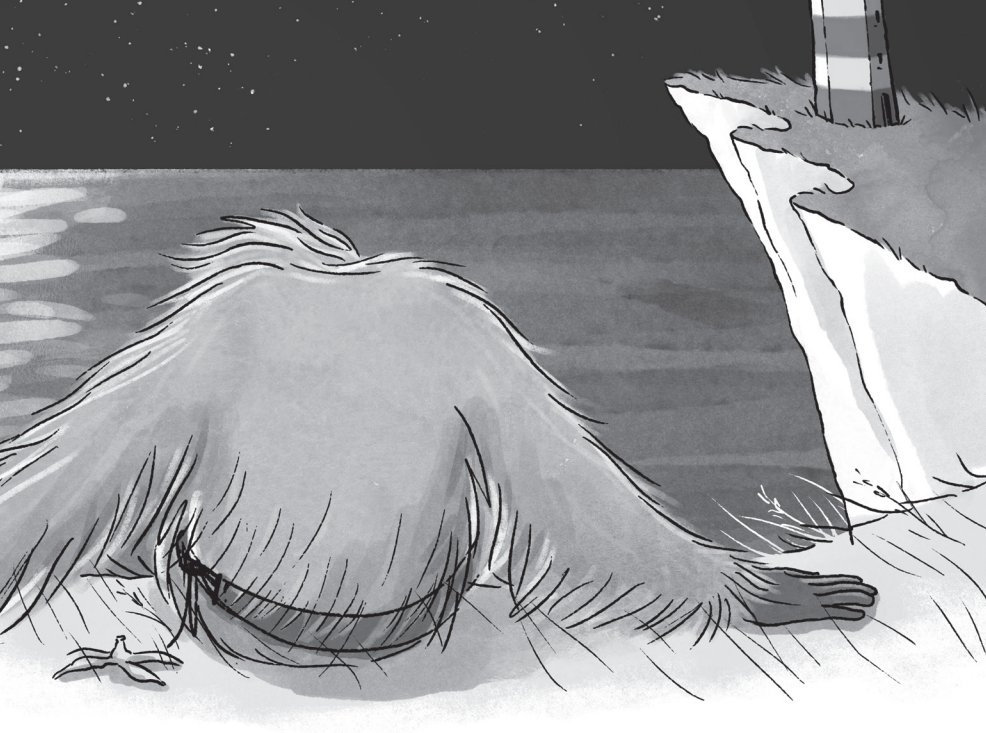
pulled out a banana. Peeling it, he broke a piece off and handed it to Jim.

Jim curled one arm over his head and rammed the banana chunk in his mouth. Mushing it up, he stuck his tongue out at the orangutan.

Oskar snorted, slapped his knee and did the same. Gooey, yellow banana dribbled off the end of his long, grey tongue and down his chin.

They laughed, slurping up the pulp, as lighthouse beams above them glided over the bay and out to sea, lighting up Black Eel Rock. One, *swoosh.* Two, *swoosh.* Three, *swoosh,* three and a half, *swoosh.*

The last beam was always a dimmer yellow, as if it were an echo of the three before it. But it still lit up the



water, the light tumbling silently across the waves.

'What are you thinking about, Jim?' Oskar stroked his chin with long, hairy fingers. The old orangutan's furry head glowed with a moonlit, orange-white halo.

'I was thinking how we're sitting here looking out, but no one out *there* can see in.'

'You should be used to that by now.' Oskar finished munching the rest of his banana. 'I have explained how the last beam works.'

'I know. And I get it. But it still feels strange. How the lighthouse can *do* that.'

Oskar gently thumped him on the arm, and Jim sighed.

'All right, I was *also* thinking about how I got to the island. Will you tell me the story again?'

'It is getting late. Almost time for bed.' The orangutan shuffled around. 'And, besides, that story will still be the same tomorrow.'

'And you'll *still* leave bits out . . .'

Oskar closed his beady eyes behind his glasses. 'I have told you many times: we are your family. All of us, here, on this island. And . . . all of us,' the orangutan curled his arm around Jim's neck, flipping him backwards into an upside-down headlock, 'want you back inside the lighthouse!' Oskar picked Jim up by the breeches as if he was a feather floating in the wind and placed him down on the grass. 'Come on, it is your bedtime. And almost mine too.'

Groaning, Jim followed the orangutan back across the field to the lighthouse.

Oskar stopped by the lighthouse's huge black metal door, then glanced out to sea. Plucking a pocket watch out of his tool belt, he squinted at it. 'Trent is late.'

'He *is* old.'

Jim snaked his arm to Oskar's tool belt, pulling out the scratched, gold spyglass. Opening it, he scanned the night horizon.

'*CHEESY TOAD FEET!*' A loud, croaky voice echoed across the bay.

'Aha, there he goes!'

Jim leaned into the lens. 'Yep, he's just southwest of Black Eel Rock tonight.' About a hundred yards beyond Seal Cove, Jim saw circular ripples in the sea. In the middle was an oval-shaped bulge, moonlight shimmering off it. At one end of the bulge was a wrinkly, bald head poking out of the water.

'*CHEESY . . . TOAD . . . FEET!*' The old turtle's flappy-skinned chin wobbled as he yelled.

Jim watched the turtle take a deep breath and vanish under the night sea. He handed the spyglass back to Oskar. 'I wonder what *cheesy toad feet* means?' Most of the island's animals ignored the 208-year-old turtle, but Jim never did.

Oskar shrugged. 'Who knows, Jim. Last night, it was *surprise strawberry mischief*. The night before, *running thistle shadows*.' He pulled open the lighthouse door.

'Bedtime,' he said and ushered Jim inside with one orange-haired arm.

'Yes, goodnight!' Jim grabbed the bannister and climbed up the spiral, stone staircase. Leaping from foot to foot, curling his toes to grip the stone, he heard the clang of the closing door below. Oskar would be in his room on the ground floor now, crouched over his desk, blinking wearily through his magnifying glass – the one that made his beady old eyes look bigger than his head – at some piece of lighthouse machinery he had to repair.

Outside Rafi's room on the second floor, Jim turned the door handle as quietly as he could and tiptoed into the pitch-black. He took four precise steps forward, brushing against Rafi's back-scratching post, slid sideways three times to avoid the 'spare' pile of rotting cabbage the raccoon kept in the middle of the room; and, finally, stretched up his arms to pull down the ceiling ladder. The one leading to *his* room.



The ladder creaked as it slid down on its Oskar-built metal rails. Wincing, Jim lifted his foot up to—

'Perhaps you could try and be a bit LOUDER!' A *tut* echoed through the darkness.

'Oh, sorry Rafi, I was trying to be—'

'The LOUDEST BOY in the world?' Rafi's high-pitched voice rang around the room. Then came the rustling, thumping sound of the raccoon plumping up his pillows. Smiling to himself in the darkness, Jim began to climb the ladder.

'You'd better not have eaten any of my cabbage this time!'

Jim rolled his eyes. 'Rafi, I *never* eat your rotten cabbage. It's the bugs from the basement, you know this.'

Rafi huffed, mumbling something about sharing rooms with a smelly boy. 'It's past your bedtime – *go to sleep*!'

'That's what I'm trying to do.'

'Well do it QUIETLY please!' The raccoon sighed and his voice softened. 'Sleep well.'

'You too.' Jim scrambled up, into the glow of his cosy hidden room, pulled up the ladder and bolted the floor hatch shut.

Yawning, he went over to his porthole-sized window and looked out, once more, at the dark sea. The lighthouse beams soared through the air, lighting up the bay. And, as the cool, salty breeze drifted in his room, he jumped into bed and fell straight to sleep.

At the same time, Oskar sat in his room, gently swinging back and forth in his creaky old rocking chair. The room smelt of grease and oil and – with his tiny, round glasses perched at the end of his button nose – the orangutan squinted, concentrating as he twisted a screw into the wooden handle of a long Charleville musket.

Oskar flipped the rifle over, remembering the day it had washed up after a shipwreck. That had been *long* before Jim was born. He closed his eyes and pictured the storm the night that ship went down. It had been one of the worst nights the island had ever seen. There had been nothing any of the animals could do.

He paused, hearing the memory of those huge waves crashing against the cliffs.

No one should have survived that shipwreck. Yet someone had.

He glanced at the young man's portrait on the wall, the one Elsa had trunk-painted so long ago now.

Stretching to put the rifle down, the screwdriver fell onto the desk and rolled noisily across the wood. It ripped the corner of a parchment poking out beneath a pile of books. Oskar caught the screwdriver and slid the old paper out.

Pushing his glasses up his nose, he held the paper near the flickering candle, reading the first few faded, grey words:

To Whomsoever,

It is my ardent hope that you have found my boy alive and well . . .

His heart beat faster. This note had come with Jim, washed up in a barnacle-coated barrel on Flamingo Beach. Twelve years ago. Oskar grunted. He crumpled up the parchment, shoving it back under the books, not wanting to read the rest.

Pulling himself out of the chair, he clambered up into the carved tree-trunk nook fixed to the wall near the ceiling. Then Oskar, too, sank into a deep sleep.