

Cape Ursus

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Chapter 7

The following weeks brought clouds and relentless showers. The wind seemed to scoop the water straight out of the sea before pouring it out onto their heads. Every now and again, the island woke to a sky blown clear, with the sun rising over a landscape littered with pools and puddles that shimmered like lumps of quartz. A flu epidemic that didn't discriminate between craftsmen, quarry workers and beach fishers swept the island. Fearful, overprotective parents kept their children at home, and there were days when Ellie could count the number of pupils who turned up to class on the fingers of one hand. Pastor Picardt was among those ordered to stay in bed by Doctor Flintlock, so the parishioners were forced to spend an entire service listening to Chaplain Tulbagh's nervous wittering.

Also keeping a low profile was Alder Flintlock. The foreman and his splinted finger remained holed up in the quarry for now. It meant that Timber, who made the most of the ungodly weather to work on his tableau inside the system of tunnels, wasn't obstructed in any way.

When even the indestructible Corylus Dekker ran a fever, Ellie took over nocturnal lighthouse duties for a week. This proved to be easier than anticipated. Her stepfather had stockpiled such a vast amount of peat that she didn't have to skimp on briquettes. With that many pressed and dried logs it was easy enough to keep a tall and bright flame going. Impressed, a recovering Corylus actually praised her light-keeping skills. She was peeling carrots when he did so, and the unexpected praise came as such a surprise that she nicked her thumb.

Sometimes she'd see a packet pass by in the dead of night. She'd follow the electrically illuminated ship to where the water and the night sky became one. More often than not she looked out over an empty sea. One time, she'd fallen asleep with exhaustion and the flame had retreated back into the chimney. When, at the crack of dawn, Corylus found his stepdaughter asleep in the watch room he flew into a rage. He forced her down the ladder, opened the hatch and held his hand over the embers to demonstrate just how lukewarm the fire was.

'No more shipwrecks off these shores.' He slammed the hatch shut. 'Not as long as I live. Not as long as you live.' He grabbed her by the shoulders. 'Promise!'

She gave him her word. Not that she could make good on it, though.

That Saturday, the sea disappeared behind a curtain of rain. Big, pelting drops caused the bluff to gleam like dubbin. It was freezing cold and pitch-dark, but inside the belly of the lighthouse Ellie was blazing hot. Not unlike a fireman on a steam locomotive, the young woman shovelled spades full of peat into the fire. But however much she stoked, the wind forced the flame back inside the chimney or else reduced it to a small flickering ghost. After a while, she gave up. She was dead beat. Sooty sweat made her cheeks and neck itch. She patted the peat dust off her clothes, clambered up the ladder and scanned the sea with the wind howling in her ears. In the quiet watch room, with the warm bricks at her back and the rain galloping over

the rooftiles, her imagination got the better of her. She thought back to her childhood years, when the seasons weren't yet rolling around the cobbled stones like ruffians and the winters were reassuringly cold. In her mind's eye, the island woke up to a thick blanket of snow. She saw the fire baskets on the square, the choir singing Christmas carols in the gallery, the children feasting on freshly baked goods. Her thoughts drifted further, to the thaw that created huge puddles and wet feet, to hatching flounders and to caterpillars turning into clothes moths, piglets growing into sows, which got big with young themselves, only to bleed out on a hook once they'd reached full maturity. She saw her pupils grow up and lose their milk teeth. And in the end she saw herself, Ellie Dekker, in the autumn of her life. We never knew her, the islanders would say, not *really*. She lives in seclusion up there on the bluff on the island's edge, among the seagulls and the crows that she feeds crusts and prawn heads. She sleeps away her days beside the stove and spends her nights in that wretched tower, ruining her eyes by gawping at the sea. Rumour has it that she used to be friends with Timothy Baring. Remember *him*? That mute chap known as Timber? Yes, the one who used to doodle all over the quarry. Rumour has it that after his parents passed, he packed his bags, went down into the tunnels and stepped into one of his paintings there. Rumour has it that he lived happily ever after on his side of the island, where barges bob around in the bay and the apple trees are laden with shiny fruit, ripe for the picking, where in a downpour like this you can walk underneath the canopy of Hoeker woods without getting wet. Does Ellie Dekker ever miss her old friend? We don't know. We rarely see her in the village these days, not even for Sunday mass, and when she does make an appearance all she does is mutter to herself.

Ellie banged her nodding head against the bricks. Rubbing her pate with one hand, she leaned forward and forced herself to leave the watch room with its cosy warmth and her delusions. The night closed in around her on all sides. The chimney mouth was a shadow among the shadows – the fire had withdrawn into the chimney. She was on the verge of descending down to the furnace room when she spotted a small light dancing on the water. She dashed into the watch room, tearing a fingernail as she snatched Father's binoculars off the hook.

A boat.

A boat sailing along the coast.

A fine piece of naval engineering it was, this sailing craft, with a hull that rose elegantly out of the water and a bow as pointy as a mole's snout. The scratched lenses of the binoculars caught just enough light off the storm lantern dangling from the mast for Ellie to make out two figures on deck. The flexible oilskins they were wearing didn't seem to hinder their movements much. The shorter one of the two was at the helm, the other peered non-stop at the fraying and tearing surface of the sea. The sailors seemed to know what they were doing. The boat spun free from the pull of the island and kept well away from the breakwaters. Through the scuffed lenses Ellie could see the sails grow larger – it looked as if they'd decided to sail past the island's northern tip, even if it meant heading into the wind the whole time.

Ellie clutched the binoculars to her chest and stared ahead in the pitch-dark.

Was this her chance?

She gave her clothes the once-over, thinking of all the preparations she hadn't made and the knapsack full of essentials she hadn't packed. She scolded herself for her blatant lack of readiness.

With the binoculars around her neck, she dashed down the stairs.

Not to feed the fire with peat until the pipe spat out a metres-high flame. Not to blast the horn and warn the yacht about the island and its wretched coast. No, right here and now her wakeful lighthouse nights were about to end. Her lighthouse nights were about to end, because between two gulps of breaths she'd decided to turn her back on the island. She'd sneak past the house where her mother lay sleeping and walk down the stone steps to the bluff. She'd enter the cave and launch the dinghy. The sea was choppier than it had been during her run-throughs, but as long as she managed to keep the boat perpendicular to the waves, she wouldn't capsize. She'd let the current pull her out of the strait, directly to the open sea. She'd row until her arm muscles were screaming with pain. The crew would reef the sails, drop anchor and sling a hook over the side of the dinghy. They'd hoist her on board and use a rope to tie the rowboat to their vessel.

At the first port of call, she'd bid them farewell. She could sell the dinghy to a merchant or a fisherman to make it through the first few months. Perhaps she could use the money to travel to Paris and see Notre Dame. Or else she could stay on board the yacht, learn the craft and sail the seven seas, like Gulliver.

Halfway down the vegetable garden, she turned back. If she was going to be picked up, she had to be noticed first. She snatched the storm lantern off the hook, and on seeing that the reservoir held enough oil she opened the furnace hatch, stuffed a wad of cotton between the jaws of a pair of pliers, thrust those into the flames and used the burning wad to light the lantern wick. She'd just finished doing this when the lantern was brusquely yanked from her fingers.

Corylus.

Wide awake.

Swearing like a trooper.

'If that ship founders, it'll be your fault!'

They shovelled spades full of peat into the fire and stoked the flames white-hot. He dispatched her to the storeroom for more clods, but immediately called her back and sent her up the tower to sound the foghorn instead.

'Squeeze every last bit of air out of your lungs!'

'Isn't it too late for that?'

He hurled the spade at her head. 'Blow as if the end of the world is nigh. Strike terror into their hearts, so they get the hell out of here.'

His voice all but cracked.

Tears stung her eyes as she climbed the ladder again. That was her chance gone. She'd dithered too long. The seamen would navigate their boat away from the coast and disappear on the horizon, never to come back. She was doomed to spend the rest of her life on shipwreck island. But when she leaned over the banister up in the tower, she noticed that the vessel still hadn't rounded the cape. Whatever the seamen tried, the boat kept being pushed back by the waves, not making any headway whatsoever.

The fire crackled and roared. The flame shot white-hot out of the chimney. Corylus appeared beside her on the platform, his face covered in soot and scabs.

'She's sailing too close to the wind,' he hissed. 'Keep too close and the sail will luff. If you don't pick up speed fast enough you're hopelessly lost. And they're not picking up enough speed.' He took the binoculars from her hands. 'Those two don't belong on the water.'

His words sent shivers down her spine.

Not once but twice, the vessel was nearly crushed against the cliff face. Next, it heeled when the keel scraped across an underwater reef. The sailors gave up. They released the rig and let the boat bear away. With its sails reefed, the yacht drifted south and disappeared behind the cliffs.

'They're looking for a bay to drop anchor,' Father said. 'They won't make it. Let's go!'

They climbed down the tower, snatching the storm lantern as they went, put on their pea coats and crossed over to the island. When they got to the end of the cliff path, they heard the church bells ring. Every islander knew what that bronze voice was saying when it rang out at this nocturnal hour.

There was a ship to salvage.