

THE MOONLIT PAGE

The Lighthouse on Page Sixty-Three

A Full Bedtime Story



Two unfinished novels. Two very particular readers.

Free illustrated English fiction | About 5 minutes

Story and illustration created with AI and editorial review.

ABS-0228-FREE-V1 | First illustrated reader edition

The lighthouse had reached page sixty-three.

Mina knew this because Jo opened the green novel and showed her, holding a finger under the narrow strip of card as if it were a creature that might escape.

"Progress," said Jo.

"Is it?"

"Compared with page forty-one."

They stood beside the returns slot in the town library. Outside, a bus sighed at its stop. Inside, someone was wheeling a trolley with one wheel that made a small, regular complaint.

Mina had lent Jo the lighthouse bookmark three weeks earlier, on the grounds that a folded receipt was not a dependable system. Since then Jo had recommended the green novel to Mina twice.

"Have they reached the island?" Mina asked.

"There are still arrangements."

"What sort?"

"Complicated ones. Someone has acquired a trunk."

Mina tried to look encouraged. She had been promised an island with an abandoned hotel. At present it seemed unlikely that anyone would get out of the railway station.

Jo removed the bookmark and handed it back. A little of the blue sea had worn away at one corner. The lighthouse itself remained thoroughly white and upright.

"It's due today," Jo said. "I'm returning it."

"The book?"

"Unless you want the lighthouse in the library collection."

Mina took a yellow paperback from her bag.

"Mine is due too."

"The one with the sisters?"

"One of them has gone to Portugal."

"That sounds promising."

"The other one is thinking about it."

They considered the two books.

Mina and Jo had been friends since their first jobs in the same department store, twenty-two years earlier. They no longer worked together, but they still met at the library on alternate Saturdays. Jo repaired bicycles now. Mina managed the bookings for a small theatre. For some reason, they had begun treating their library meetings as the final stage of a course neither remembered joining.

"Which page?" Jo asked.

"Eighty."

Jo looked impressed.

"Large print," Mina added.

She opened the yellow book. Her place was marked with a narrow paper strip cut from a cereal packet.

"A dependable system," said Jo.

"It has a picture of oats."

They moved aside for a man carrying a stack of children's books. Mina slipped the cereal strip into her bag. Jo dropped the green novel into the slot, where it landed with a soft thud. Mina returned the yellow one after it.

For the first time in months, neither of them had a book the other was waiting for her to finish.

Jo looked towards the shelves.

“What did you like about the sisters?”

“Their aunt's kitchen. There's a little window between it and the dining room, and they keep passing things through. Once it's an entire long birthday cake.”

“Did the cake fit?”

“Only sideways. That's why I wanted you to read it.”

“Oh,” said Jo. “I thought you liked the family secrets.”

“I couldn't keep track of who knew them.”

They walked towards the reading chairs by the tall windows. Mina had a favourite chair there, though she had spent the last several visits pointing it out rather than sitting in it.

“What did you like about the island book?” she asked.

“The trunk.”

Mina stopped.

“Not what was in it. The catch was broken, and the man in the station had to work out how to close it without tying rope around the handle. There's a whole page about the mechanism.”

“Does he fix it?”

“Yes.”

“Then you've finished your bit.”

Jo laughed, quietly enough that the woman at the newspaper table did not look up.

Beside the chairs stood a low display of books from different shelves. Mina picked up a collection of short comic pieces. Jo took a book about the construction of everyday objects, opened it in the middle, and found a drawing of an umbrella turning inside out.

She turned the book towards Mina.

"Don't," Mina said.

"I haven't said anything."

"I can hear a recommendation getting ready."

Jo turned it back.

Mina tried the first page of the collection. Then the second. A woman in the opening piece was attempting to rehearse a speech while her neighbour tested a doorbell, and the timing was very good. She put the lighthouse between those two pages and looked at Jo.

"This might be—"

Jo raised an eyebrow.

"Mine," Mina finished.

They sat down. Jo held her book open with both hands. Mina laid the lighthouse across the lower margin of her page, where it would not hide the last line.

After a while, Jo reached for the little table between their chairs. It was too far back to be useful. Mina caught the other edge, and together they drew it forward a few inches, then settled again with their books.