



## **The Light Keeper**

**Night had not yet melded into day when Charlotte Lucero left the cottage and began the climb up the mountain path.** The soft breeze barely nudged her hair the color of a starless night sky. She trudged up the mountainside with the lantern lighting the way, even though enough sunlight joined with full moonlight to accomplish the same task. She could still see the thin strands of white move with the subtle waves across the open waters surrounding her island home.

The further Charlotte walked the more the fragrance of the nightly meal dwindled. The aroma of vegetables from the garden simmering in broth on the wood stove faded from her narrow nose but didn't leave her memory. Charlotte's stomach rumbled but she knew that at least an hour would pass before she would join the rest of her family at the table.

Every night for two weeks her father had instructed her on the illumination task. “Add a little more oil,” her father had told her the night before. “That’s it. That’s enough. You never want to overfill the bowl.” This night would be her first on her own.

Charlotte approached the steepest part of the hill, setting the lantern on a ridge further up the path and climbed until she reached the lantern, then repeated the action several times more until she finally came to the red door. Once in front of it, she inserted the skeleton key and opened the door, releasing the smell of damp air and salty sea contained within the round stone walls.

Next came the forty stone steps that spiraled upward. After passing the large vat of oil, she took each step while grasping the lantern almost as tall as she was. The circular tower only held darkness and she couldn’t see anything without it. No matter how hard she tried, the metal of the lantern scraped against the stone wall as she used it to light the way.

When Charlotte reached the top, she moved to a barrel near the center of the room and opened it, freeing a blaze of golden luminescence trapped underneath the wooden cover. She picked up a large ladle hanging on the barrel and began to pour the luminous oil into a large bowl on a stand in the middle of the room. Charlotte could already see the glow reflecting in the windows that surrounded the bowl, glass portals that stood from floor to tall ceiling.

Charlotte narrowed her eyes as she concentrated on the task. The night before, ten ladles’ full had been sufficient to fill the bowl to the right level. And ten ladles that night seemed just right to add to the remnants left from the night before. By the eighth ladle, Charlotte momentarily looked away from the bowl because the light was so intense on her young eyes.

“Narrow your lids,” her father had told her. “Don’t ever take your eyes off the oil or you will surely make a mistake.

Charlotte remembered what he'd said and returned her gaze to the bowl to watch from the slits between her eyelids. When she saw that each window pane fully reflected the illumination, she knew her job was complete.

Charlotte saw that the barrel was still full of oil before she returned the cover. As she made her way back down the stairs and then the path, she remembered that it was her responsibility to return at midnight to make sure that the oil that remained would be enough to last through the night. When she reached her home, she found food on the table and a warm refuge from the cool and damp sea air.

After supper, her father took her out onto the farthest point of land above the rocky crags where the island met the sea. He planted his hands on his hips, looked up at the illumination tower and nodded. "Very good, little Charlotte. You make our family very proud."

After she returned from the final trip that evening when the hour struck twelve, Charlotte felt particularly satisfied as her father's words eased her mind into sleep.

For eight nights the lighting went well. Every evening, Charlotte twice made the trip to the top room of the illumination tower. And every night she returned to her bed. When she awoke every morning, she went outside and looked up to see the remaining light in the tower merge with the dawn's new glow.

On the morning of the ninth day, Charlotte barely noticed the wind tossing around the leaves scattered across the land as she watched from the lookout as her father's boat left the dock. He began his several-hour journey to the mainland for monthly provisions. After her father's boat disappeared into the distance, she finished breakfast, read her books, completed her math problems and helped her younger brother and sister, the twins Bridget and Harold, with their science project—filling two glass jars with colored water and using small plates for an experiment on the pressure of the atmosphere. Charlotte stopped midday for lunch with her siblings, joined them in hammocks for a midday nap afterwards, and then settled at her sketchbook for an

afternoon spent drawing. While her sister and brother played outside in the garden, Charlotte sketched the new blooms from just a few of the flower pots growing in the nearby greenhouse. The task commanded so much of Charlotte's attention that she didn't notice the clinking of glass or the rumble of limbs falling from trees.

After a long finally completing her last sketch, Charlotte looked at the clock and saw it was after 5:30. When she looked out the window her sister and brother were not in the garden as she expected they would be. She had only a short time to prepare supper and complete her evening task. "Bridget! Harold!" she called to them, fighting the growing fear that she would have too much to do and she wouldn't get to the illumination tower until night fall. "Why is this the day that da chose to go to shore?" she asked herself.

Outside, she found the broken glass from the jars and plates used in the science experiment. She picked up the shards and saw many branches littering the ground. She called to her sister and brother one more time.

"There you are!" Charlotte grasped her siblings' collars as she pulled them from behind two large trees where they were studying the insects crawling across a particularly large branch. "Where have you been?! Don't answer that. I can see where you've been." She took their hands and pulled them against the blustery wind as she made her way toward the cottage. Once inside the kitchen, she led them to the kitchen table and pulled the cloth covering the basket in the middle of it. "Now sit there and have a piece of bread. I'll feed you once I come back."

"But I'm hungrier for more than that!" Bridget pouted.

"This won't near fill me up!" whined Harold.

"But I'll be back soon to give you more. Just stay there, and don't leave the house!" Charlotte grabbed her coat and left through the back door

Panic began to build in her as she fought her way up the mountain path. Her father would have to see the rocks to keep from destroying his small boat when he returned. And she needed to light up the island for any ship that might be seeking shelter there or making its way to the mainland.

After what seemed like hours, Charlotte finally reached the top floor of the tower. She hastily filled the bowl and returned the cover to the barrel. The light filled the top room and she felt satisfied that enough light shone to help any sailors nearby. Her confidence waned, though, when she saw the churning dark clouds above her in the darkening sky. This will have to be enough, she told herself, watching the boat launch as she moved down the path toward the cottage.

Charlotte prepared a simple supper that night of cheese, bread and fruit, listening carefully for the door to open and her father to step inside, safe and sound.

“Father’s awfully late tonight,” Bridget said.

“I hope he hasn’t drowned,” Harold added, but he didn’t act that concerned, as if he didn’t really know what it was to drown.

After her sister and brother went to bed and the clock struck eleven, Charlotte grew so worried that she lit the lantern early and made her way out the door in the howling wind. She walked the path but down this time instead of up, while raindrops pelted her like needles. When she reached the boat dock, she felt relieved to see her father’s boat, a small bobbing shadow on the surface of the water. She grasped the lantern tightly, held it out so he could see it as he slowly rowed toward the shore.

When the boat finally reached the dock, she helped him tie the rope to the pillar and he struggled to pull himself up with Charlotte’s help. Just as soon as he got to his feet, he told her, “There’s a ship, Charlotte. And it looks familiar.”

Before she'd had a chance to respond, Charlotte followed the direction to where her father pointed. When she looked up at the tower, she saw the faint light coming from inside it.

“Papa! Someone needs to add more oil!”

“I fell and hurt my leg getting into the boat. You'll have to do it. I'll never get up there in time.” Her father grasped her shoulders while the wind tossed his hair and the rain glazed his face. “I'll take care of your brother and sister. You'll have to make your way to the tower yourself.”

Charlotte tried not to panic or cry, although she wanted to do both. Instead, she helped her father get to the door of the cottage, then accepted his hug and encouraging words while she climbed up the path as usual.

Charlotte had to take small careful steps as the pathway was very slick. She worried sometimes that she would not reach the door without falling off the side. But with all of her efforts she made it to the red door and the top of the stairs. When she looked in the bowl, she saw that she had not put as much oil as she'd thought. And when she opened the barrel, she saw that it was nearly empty.

“How will I ever get the oil from the tank downstairs to the top on time?!” she asked no one. She remembered the ship on the ocean and how important it would be to light the tower as fast as she could.

Charlotte made a plan; she would take the bowl downstairs, fill it, and use the light to come back up the stairs and put the bowl back in its place.

She lifted the bowl from its perch and used the long sleeves of her tunic, doubling the cloth over, to carry the hot vessel. She stepped carefully down one step, then the next and the next. She let out the breath she'd been holding when she reached the bottom

floor. There, she opened the large vat and for the first time on her own, syphoned the oil into the bowl until it was full.

I'll come back tomorrow to fill the barrel, she told herself as she walked, again stepping slowly and struggling to hold the scolding hot bowl to the side so that she could see where she was stepping. Finally, she reached the top, set the bowl in place, and watched the golden light fill the window panes all around.

Exhausted, she made her way down the stairway, through the red door, and locked it behind her. Even with the storm, she could see the wide open sea around her, mirroring the churning black clouds. A large ship moved toward the island through the angry waves with the wind beating hard against its sails.

Charlotte moved cautiously but swiftly down the pathway, sometimes stopping to pull her feet from the sucking mud as she made her way. She passed the cottage and by the time she reached the boat dock the rain had drenched her. Watching the ship quickly approach the dock, she worried that even with the light, it would crash against the boulders before it reached the slightly calmer lagoon just below the cottage. She realized how gargantuan the ship was, its masts rising high above her when it finally reached the end of the long dock. After the anchor dropped, figures lowered small boats brimming with passengers. Charlotte looked carefully at the portals lit from inside as many of the passengers and ship's crew poured out of the smaller boats, all soaked to the skin. She wouldn't relax until she finally saw the ship's first officer approaching the dock like a tall and willowy shadow. The captain didn't wait for the boat to arrive at the dock but made a precarious jump and landed with a thud a few feet in front of her. Charlotte took her lantern and walked up to the imposing figure barely affected by the wind and rain. She shone the lantern light in line with her own face.

"There's the light keeper!" The captain pulled her into an embrace.

"Just bringing my mama home safe again from a long voyage," Charlotte whispered and pulled back to see the light of the lantern illuminate her mother's smile.