

LIGHTHOUSE OF THE NETHERWORLDS



MAXWELL N. ANDREWS

Lighthouse of the Netherworlds

Maxwell N. Andrews

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Scrawled on the Bookk of the Seaa

We are mere raindrops falling on their vast ocean of history

Ripped page from the Bookk of the Landd

*War bleeds blood from our soldiers, but the innocent suffer the
most: drip by drip, their humanity trickles away, leaving only a
shell of once was*

Sermon taken from the Bookk of the Skyy

*Death is a part of life – we should not fear its shadow. Our
souls lay dormant waiting for death's embrace. Let the winds
carry this child's soul to its final resting place... beyond our
lands... beyond our seas... beyond our skies... in the world
beyond worlds*

Writers, I envy you, for I am but a storyteller

CHAPTER ONE

Eleventh Night

*By compass by day, by stars by night, The Scarlet Lady held true
and sailed into the light.*

— The Bookk of the Seaa

Rachel's screams fell silent. As icy water ran down her throat and into her lungs, bony hands as cold as frost began pulling her downwards. The numbing cold dulled her senses, but she felt a sharp pain above her left temple, and a bright blue light blinded her.

The distant light then dwindled, illuminating the scores of decimated carcasses that twitched violently in their final death throes. As the carcasses' putrefied flesh crystallised, they drifted down into the depths of the obsidian ocean, leaving eerie trails of their morbid remains behind.

Rachel's eyes grew cold. As the tarry water suffocated her lungs, the disturbing dream drowned with her, and she awoke with a start.

Breathlessly, she squinted through leaden eyelids, but the pink walls of her bedroom gave her no comfort. Her piercing green eyes stared up at the pink polka-dotted ceiling with dread, but they turned towards the porthole window, and as her sweaty alabaster hands twisted the duvet cover, she felt the familiar knot in her stomach and the pain it brought.

'Please, not again,' she pleaded, recoiling as she endured the searing agony as it ripped through her body, but the pain soon vanished, and her blanched fingers wiped the warm teardrops that had trickled down her cheeks. Impassively, she watched the morning sun as it kissed the misty horizon. Nestled in the dewy porthole windowpane, the moon's wilting umbra evaporated into the ether, and another fresh dawn broke forth.

Rachel took a deep breath and relished the warmth upon her face, but her respite didn't last long. Over to her left, an overbearing whirring noise assailed her eardrums. In utter panic, she rolled over and glared daggers at the battered brass clock that squatted on her bedside cabinet.

Astride the mechanical clock, twin bells quivered with anticipation. The clock's poorly drawn face grinned devilishly back at her, and its boisterous bells rang out with gusto.

'I'm awake – I'm awake,' she snapped, glowering at the cheerful clock, whose excessive pealing ended with a firm and decisive whack.

Rachel waited for the clock's minute hand to move – but it sulked. As six o' clock hadn't marched on, she rubbed her drowsy bloodshot eyes.

Slowly, but surely, the September sunshine burned the dew off the windowpane, and stark shadows crept across her messy bedroom floor.

Rachel gazed bleary-eyed at the wonky wooden walls, whose fitted wardrobe, fitted chest of drawers, fitted dressing table and fitted bunk bed came with the willow treehouse whether she wanted them or not.

With a lingering sigh, she stared at her father's woeful attempt at decorating her bedroom. Her freshly painted bedroom still smelt of something most peculiar; and sprouting along the skirting board, a furry blanket of green moss spread along the warped woodwork.

DRIP! DRIP! DRIP!

Heavy water droplets fell noisily from the ceiling.

Rachel craned her neck and stared at the five plastic buckets that surrounded her bunk bed. They were almost full to overflowing with the woodsy waters from the attic above (and her father *still* hadn't found the root of the problem), but she didn't mind the dripping water because the tap-tap-tapping sound never failed to lull her into the Land of Nod.

However, the same recurring nightmare had put an end to her usual uninterrupted slumber, and after enduring eleven nights of unbridled terror, she had misgivings about moving into a new home in a new town.

Rachel now resided in a blustery cul-de-sac, high up on the outskirts of an insignificant seaside town called Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea.

Her father had put on a brave face and only complained about the house on one occasion: last Sunday morning, the house creaked and groaned as a gale-force wind had suddenly whipped up from the north and pounded their property. He had poked his head over his dog-eared newspaper and peered beyond the rattling windows at the wild ocean waves and told her the house was getting on in years, and it's probably got a bad bout of rheumatism perched on top of the cliff in all weathers.

Rachel felt the sudden draft of cold air whistling under her bedroom door, and after another nightmare and lack of sleep, she felt groggy, ill-tempered, and her pink pyjamas were soaked with sticky sweat, so she really needed to get up, take a shower and put some fresh clothes on. However, her ruminative thoughts came to an untidy end: muffled noises seeped through the festooned-knotted floorboards; her parents were awake and on the move. Without a moment's hesitation, she delved into the plethora of pink pillows and slumped against the mattress.

With the thickest and longest pillow wrapped around her ears, she waited for her parents' dawn chorus.

'I CAN'T FIND MY CLEAN UNDERPANTS,' bellowed her father irately, sounding a bit miffed. 'I'M SURE I PACKED THEM AWAY LAST NIGHT.'

'I HAD TO MOVE THEM,' shouted her mother huffily. 'NOW, LOOK UNDER THE FOOT OF THE BED. THE BOXES ARE CLEARLY LABELED, AND BEFORE YOU ASK – YOUR SOCKS ARE ON THE WASHING LINE...'

Her parents' banter ended abruptly with a clattering of cutlery and a clangouring of cups. Her mother yelled up the spiral staircase and asked in a rushed but heated tone, '*Rachel – what do you want for breakfast?*'

Rachel didn't answer. She didn't want to think about food at this ungodly hour, and over the past few days, her appetite had slowly waned. Only the other day, she had just nibbled on her father's freshly made homemade muffins, throwing the spongy remains and slices of tangy fruit over the fence and into the next-door neighbour's dog bowl.

Ignoring the butterflies in her stomach, she puffed up her pillows and glanced at the bedside table. Her most treasured family photograph stood beside the chided clock. Rachel recalled that wintry morning with crystal clarity and shivered as she immersed herself in that memory.

* * *

Rachel never knew winter could be so cold and bitter.

The Boxing Day church service seemed to go on forever, but during his rhetoric, the vicar thanked her parents for their generous donation towards the ailing church roof. With their last hymn still ringing in their ears, the choir led the stampede out of the church, but with a little more decorum, the vicar followed them out into the snow-laden graveyard. With chapped lips, dripping noses and red-tipped ears, the freezing cold choir huddled together like penguins as they thanked the parishioners who had braved the inclement weather to come to church.

Rachel couldn't wait to get home and in front of the coal fire, but just as her father struggled to close the church's black wooden gate, someone shouted, '*Oh, Mr and Mrs Cook – a moment if you please.*'

Using his gnarled walking stick, the elderly vicar motioned them over to the calcified steps of a crumbling ivy-matted mausoleum. There was no escaping his demands: they were having their photograph taken for the next issue of *The Sign of the Times* – the church's local newsletter. His antiquated camera had seen better days, but he assured them it was in perfect working order and disappeared beneath the blackened shroud.

Rachel stamped her chilblain feet and blew on her chapped hands, choosing to ignore the vicar's cheerful request to smile and say, 'Cheese!'

* * *

Leaving the blinding flash and her reverie behind, she gave the snowy snapshot a final glance. Grinning wildly out of the picture, her father, Paul, appeared as pleased as punch; however, her mother, Lorraine, seemed somewhat distracted as he squeezed her hourglass waist.

Turning forty a few weeks ago, her mother looked as glamorous as ever. Her porcelain complexion, high cheekbones and dark black hair had helped her to win numerous beauty pageants, or so her father had told her with a twinkle in his dewy eyes. Inheriting none of her mother's traits, she hoped she would at least ascend to her mother's lofty heights.

On the other hand, her father's thick black toupee barely reached up to her mother's neck – even on tiptoes. Pushing fifty, his morbid lack of exercise fuelled his expanding girth, and his taste testing at the baking factory wasn't helping his weight, either. Only his job, the pub and a game of golf lured him out of the house.

Rachel's heart skipped a beat. The sharp rap against the bedroom door and her mother's strangled voice shattered the slumbering silence – muddling her memories.

'IT'S TIME TO GET UP, YOUNG LADY,' Lorraine hollered.

At first, she wanted to ignore her mother's outlandish suggestion, but she bellowed irascibly, 'I DON'T WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL.'

Thumping footsteps came to a thudding halt; she heard her father whispering heavily to her mother. As the hushed tones petered away, the bedroom's starfish doorknob began to move, but it turned no more as her mother said soothingly, 'I know it's going to be strange going to a new school, Rachel, but you'll make new friends in no time – you'll see.'

'*And new enemies,*' muttered Rachel, so softly even the mouse living behind the skirting board wouldn't have heard her cutting remark.

'I've already spoken to the headmaster about your previous school,' added Paul in a placatory tone. 'He's going to keep a watchful eye out for you in the coming months – you know – until you're settled in.'

Rachel took a deep breath and let out a resigned sigh. 'Well, I'll need a strong cup of tea to start the day,' she told them, easing the tension, knowing full well her parents were only doing their best considering

their dire financial situation. 'OK, maybe a couple of hard-boiled eggs,' she added spritely, finally giving into to her hunger pangs.

'I'll put the kettle on,' Paul announced.

'And I'll make you a couple of slices of jammy buttered toast,' added Lorraine hotly. 'You'll need to keep your strength up this morning.'

As her parents rushed down the staircase, she closed her sullen eyes and tried hard not to think about the past few months, but she caved in.

* * *

Rachel used to live high above the market town of Upper Inkcome at number eighteen, Princes Drive. The town wasn't *on*, *by* or anywhere *near* the sea (for the residents of Upper Inkcome that would have been unthinkable), and even its freshwater lake and dam remained hidden amongst acres of checkerboard pastures and endless rolling hills.

Her parents never took her to see the vast lake, as they soon found out that if they took her anywhere near the sea or any body of water, she would wail and scream at the top of her lungs.

Every Sunday night, they would try to bathe her in a few inches of tepid water, but she would pitch a fit, soaking them as she thrashed about, desperate to get out of the tub. However, as the years passed, her morbid fear of water slowly evaporated away.

Rachel thought about the ornate turtle-shell bathtub in her old home, and by the time she had turned six, it had one other use than getting her squeaky-clean: if she stood on tiptoes between its flipper-shaped taps, she could see through the stained-glass window, hoping for a glimpse of her father's portly silhouette on the eighteenth hole.

Her parents' house overlooked the town's exclusive luxurious golf course, where her father *used* to spend most Saturday mornings in preference to going shopping with her mother. His unhealthy obsession with the sport had cost him dearly. Almost a year to the day, he had slunk off work to play golf with Todd Jenkins, his equally sports-mad golfing workmate, who scoffed mockingly at the weather forecaster's repeated warning of heavy thunderstorms due that very afternoon.

Her father, however, almost died on the eighteenth hole, as his stroke of luck in getting a hole in one had quickly turned to misfortune. As he ran around in circles whooping and waving his long iron high above his head, a flash and then a deafening crack had put an end to his jubilation.

An hour later and slightly singed – but very much alive – her father lay on a hospital gurney, the left cuff on his discarded blackened shirt beside him, still smouldering as she gave him a tearful embrace. He had survived the lightning bolt, but his molten long iron had landed on the golf clubhouse roof, setting it alight – burning it to the ground.

The next day, a steady stream of well-wishers lined up to see her father in his hospital bed, including a Mr Jinks, an insurance assessor, who didn't wish him well at all. In fact, Mr Jinks told her father he wasn't welcome back at the golf club, whose clubhouse had relocated into one of the spare rooms above *The Golden Toad*, her father's local pub, and adding to his other woes, Mr Jinks had him banned from there as well.

In her new house, the plain bathroom window faced north and the ocean beyond. Rachel wasn't thrilled about the aquatic view through the porthole window, but at least she wouldn't have to see the charred remains of the golf clubhouse, a constant reminder of the day she nearly lost her father. Here she went again, thinking about days gone by. Her late grandmother had often told her, '*The past is past – don't dwell on it.*'

A veil of sadness threatened to overwhelm her, and she fought back the tears as she thought about her grandmother, who had suddenly passed away in her sleep earlier that year. Rachel had lost a dear friend and a confidante that day, and she missed their heart to heart. On Sunday afternoons – and with an overloaded tea tray in hand – the pair of them would retire to the drawing room, well out of earshot from her parents.

Rachel would often talk about her gift: her grandmother seemed to be the only one who understood that (sometimes) her uncanny gift of recall wasn't a blessing – but a curse.

Rachel could remember her very first birthday party as if it were yesterday. Her party had started out with balloon animals and babies bouncing on mothers' knees, but *Cecil the Clown* had caught his laces in his bulbous boots. His unfortunate trip had sent him sailing headfirst into her pink birthday cake and surfing across the table, cutting through the spread of sandwiches and the plastic tumblers full of fizzy drinks.

With his painted face covered in icing powder, his frizzy ginger hair matted with strawberry jelly, a lighted candle up one nostril and a candy cane up the other, he had frightened the children and made them cry.

Now almost ten years on, she thought about the Wednesday that had changed everything. Her troubled mind thought about that strange day, and those fluid memories came flooding back.

CHAPTER TWO

Warty Wednesday

An unwelcoming Spanish plume had spread swiftly across the country. The population of Upper Inkcome sweltered in the hot and humid air.

Rachel's ceiling fan creaked but mostly squeaked, almost giving up the ghost as it struggled to keep going. Her bedroom windows were wide open, but the muggy stagnant air kept her dozing in and out of slumber until she heard whistling and the town hall clock chiming four times.

On hearing the clinking of bottles, she buried her sweaty head into her damp pillows as Gussy Grimshaw, her unseen milkman, went about his cheery business of delivering bottles of fresh milk from door to door, whistling merrily away to himself without a care in the world. Rachel waited impatiently for his electric milk float to squeal out of the road.

With her teeth still on edge, she winced in pain and fumbled for the light switch. Almost awake, she stared down at her left hand: an outcrop of unsightly warts had sprouted across her palm. At that moment, a cool, sweet-smelling breeze blew steadily in through the window, and her warty pain lessened, and she slowly drifted off into a deep, restful sleep...

* * *

Later that morning, her mother took her to see their family doctor. Doctor Butterworth's blotchy bespectacled face inspected every square inch of her left hand. He reached for a pen and tapped the well-chewed plastic cap against his yellow-stained teeth. He *ummed* and *ahed* as he stared up at the peeling ceiling, but he eventually grabbed a bit of paper and wrote an unintelligible runny scrawl on its crinkled surface.

With the saliva-stained prescription in her hand, Rachel trotted after her mother as she headed purposely towards the hustle and bustle of the Carrefour farmers' market – popping into the chemists along the way.

Their first port of call should have been Bumble's Beehive stall, but Mrs Cutler saw the pair of them through her shop window. Irene Cutler, a jeweller by trade, tapped against the glass and beckoned them into her shop. In celebration of her impending wedding anniversary, Lorraine had asked Irene to reset her ornate wedding ring with an even bigger and more ostentatious diamond.

In a weary voice, Irene said, for some reason, she had risen at four o'clock that morning and decided to finish the ring. Stifling a yawn with

the back of her hand, she placed the plush velvet case into Lorraine's willing palm and gave her a tired but warm smile.

(Rachel chuckled inwardly and wondered if her father would notice that his joint bank account had taken an unexpected turn for the worse.)

As Lorraine chatted to Irene about her tenth wedding anniversary, Rachel perused the countless aisles of jewellery and thought about the marquee that had arrived that morning – waking her up at five o'clock. As she had left the house, the humongous white tent rose like twin steeples, towering above their landscaped garden for the entire town to see. To all appearances, it looked like the circus was in town, but she cast that silly thought aside, knowing full well that she couldn't recall the circus *ever* coming to Upper Inkcome.

With the wedding ring back in its velvet case, Lorraine asked Rachel if she would keep it safe (and with a mischievous look in her eye, she told her, 'I very much doubt anyone's going to think there's anything worth stealing in your raggedy backpack.')

With a small fortune on her back, she traipsed after her mother.

* * *

Rachel hadn't seen so many shoppers in the farmers' market before. Only the annual carnival drew *this* many people into town. Now, surely, Ms Harlequin, the town's reigning busybody and long-term spinster, would have told her mother of *any* important events that were going on in Upper Inkcome. Ms Vivian Harlequin seemed to know other peoples' business even before they did.

Hot on her mother's heels, she weaved her way through the throng of shoppers who were milling about like ants.

The queue outside Bumble's Beehive stall dribbled along at a snail's pace. On a bright, sunny day such as this, the glistening yellow facade of Bumble's Beehive stall shone like a beacon. Atop its reinforced roof, a huge sign advertised the most popular wares available to purchase and directly above it, a couple of mechanical bees crawled tirelessly back and forth – buzzing as they went about their business.

Rachel glanced behind her. The backend of Bumble's queue snaked its way around *The Chilly Cornet* ice cream van. With the sun breaking out from the clouds, Fabio Faramundo wasted no time in capitalising on his good fortune. His customers cursed under their breath and dug deep into

their pockets, as he had just put his ice cream prices up. In fact, Fabio's customers always paid over the top for his ice cream, and his homemade Cornish wafer creams were the talk of the town. The competition was fierce, and the stalls fought tooth and nail for every customer, luring the unwary and the gullible into their greedy clutches.

However, one such stall faced closure due to lacklustre sales, but Bill and Bella Bumble had turned their business around by handing out free candyflosses. The intoxicating sweet honey candyfloss brought many a customer back to their stall.

Rachel eyed the numerous jars of dripping honeycomb longingly. (Bumble's homemade honey always took centre stage on the Cook's bustling breakfast table.) Her mother shuffled closer to the stall and let out a disheartening groan. Rachel grinned as Ms Harlequin's keen eyes had her mother in her sights. Vivian barged through the crowd and took Lorraine's arm, drawing her close as she unleashed her latest gossip.

Rachel's eyes wandered. Everyone around her seemed to have places to go and people to see – well, all apart from the man and boy who were leaning against Growler's hot dog van, chewing on their invisible grub.

Not quite believing the spectacle in front of her, she narrowed her eyes and focused on their food, which, to the naked eye, wasn't there at all. Nevertheless, the trilby-hatted man carried on regardless as did his young dining companion. They munched on the air and stared straight ahead, occasionally pointing at something or someone in the crowd.

(Bobby Growler hadn't taken a blind bit of notice of his bizarre customers as he bellowed at the radio as if his losing football team could actually hear his ranting about their utter lack of skill and their feckless manager. Distracted from the task in hand, the smouldering cigarette on his lower lip fell into the frying pan, and his sausages began to blacken and sizzle as the ash and white stub mingled with the greasy fat.)

Rachel had only one thing on her mind and pondered the question: *who were these peculiar munching patrons?*

However, that thought ended abruptly as her eyes grew as wide as saucers, and she gulped as the trilby-hatted man now stared at her. He had caught her gawping at them – gawping at their bizarre behaviour, but that moment came and went. The trilby-hatted man averted his gaze and spoke to the boy. In unison, they turned their backs on her, and their long shadowy bodies vanished all at once.

Rachel blinked, and she blinked again, but it was no use. '*How the devil did they do that?*' she said under her breath then someone sniggered.

'You know – talking to oneself is a sign of madness,' a squeaky voice chuckled. 'Well, unless you're talking to the daisies?'

Taken by surprise, she spun around and peered at the person whose camouflaged face lay behind a curtain of yellow candyflosses.

'Hiya, Rachel – I haven't seen those pale legs of yours in quite a while,' smirked the young boy who offered her a candyfloss, unable to brush his spiky blond hair out of his eyes as it bobbed about in the breeze.

Rachel accepted his candyfloss and gave him a suitable reply. 'Like the rest of my body, Stew – my legs have been stuck indoors for the past week,' she retorted. 'I've been given stacks of homework to do over the holiday,' she added gloomily and chomped down on her candyfloss.

'Well, I s'ppose we're pretty lucky at Gravelings. The teachers rarely hand out homework over the holidays,' gloated Stewart gleefully, his angular face sandwiched between his two remaining candyflosses.

Rachel fixed Stewart with a beady stare. 'No wonder you were always getting into trouble – you've got too much time on your hands,' she said.

However, he knew her all too well and gave her a playful grin. 'Trouble's my middle name,' Stewart told her with a smouldering smirk, but a smile raced across his face. 'Anyway, if I hadn't stolen those apples that day, we wouldn't have crossed paths.'

Rachel beamed and said warmly, 'It's our anniversary this Friday. Perhaps my dad will bake us an apple pie to celebrate?'

They both chuckled and chatted about the day in question.

* * *

Bored with nothing to do that day, Stewart had decided to go scrumping for apples. Unfortunately, he had picked the wrong place and time to steal them: her father had caught him red-handed in his orchard.

Stewart's trouser, coat pockets and jacket were so full to bursting with Bramley apples, he had tried but failed to make his wobbly escape.

Taking pity on the boy, Rachel had lied to her father and told him the boy was, in fact, a friend, and she had asked him around for dinner.

With nothing to lose, Stewart went along with her blatant white lie – and the offer of free food.

With delicious dinner smells wafting up his nose, Stewart had called his mother and told her where he was and not to worry. He had sat down at the dining table and marvelled at the spread of food in front of him.

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