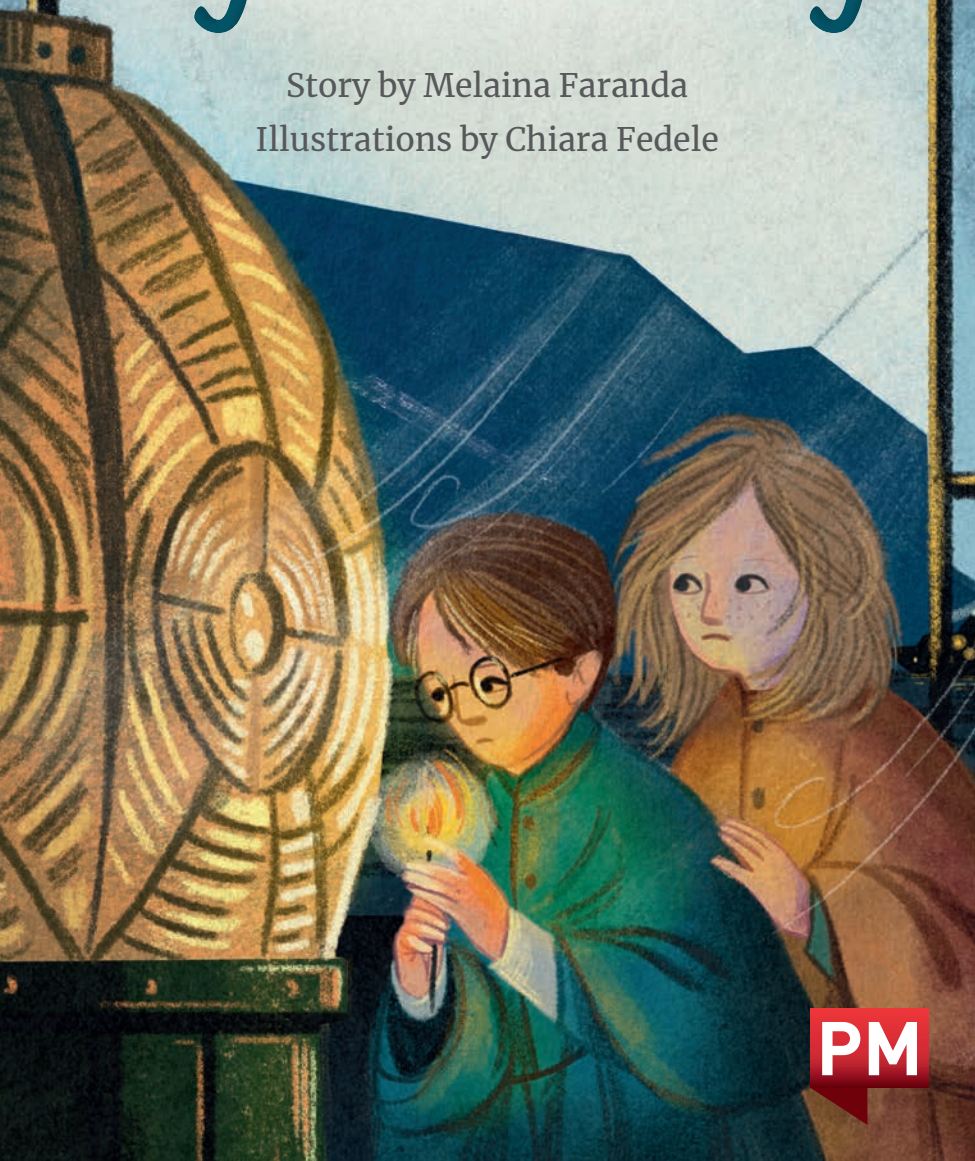


Keep the Light Burning

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Author's Note

This story is set on Tasman Island, an isolated island off the south-eastern coast of Tasmania, Australia. The events take place in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. This was a time when banks around the world failed, many people became unemployed and many farmers were at risk of losing their farms.



Chapter 1

What's Around the Corner?

“For goodness’ sake, children, sit still!” Mother hissed as she cradled the baby who, after hours of grizzling, had finally fallen asleep. She glanced to where Father brooded against the boat rail. “Robert?”

Father reluctantly unstuck his gaze from the ocean and frowned at Henry and Annabelle, who were darting about between teetering piles of boxes, crates, caged chickens, and two confused-looking milking goats. But the children could tell that Father didn’t have the heart to scold them.

For all their lives they had only known flat, endless fields, crumbled to dirt by a punishing sun. Even though Henry was eleven and Annabelle twelve, the biggest body of water they had ever seen was their farm’s own muddy dam, ringed by parched sheep. Being on a boat, surrounded by the shifting blues and greens of the sea, was thrilling.

They had learnt about the ocean through books, of course, as well as Father’s stories about serving in the navy during the Great War, from 1914 to 1918.

The reality of the sea was different from any story, though.

The sea was even more incredible than the first fat drops of rain that had greeted them on the other side of the long train journey from the farm. Rain that had turned into hissing, spitting needles that left both of the children gaping at the sky, too amazed to take cover.

For Henry and Annabelle, rain seemed like showers of precious coins being tossed away. On the farm, they had measured out water drop by drop. Water that had been pumped up from underground and had trickled thin and brown even before each member of the family had taken their turn with a sponge at the wash basin.



Yet Father still hadn't wanted to leave the farm. It was Mother who had warned that if they were not careful, their debt would grow even worse and the bank would take the farm from them. Then Father would have to join the long lines of wandering men with bulky sacks swung over their shoulders, looking for work.

Henry had once been given a sharp scolding for calling these men "hoboes". Their numbers had grown ever since the Great Depression started in 1929. The men's strange bulky shapes, laden down with the sacks they carried, would occasionally appear against the shimmering heat haze of the horizon back at the farm.

Mother had always treated these travellers kindly at the farm gate, inviting them in for tea and quietly explaining to the children that these men had lost everything – their jobs, homes and even their families. She always finished with, "You never know what might come around the corner."

As it turned out, good things could come around the corner, too. Only three weeks ago, Mother had triumphantly waved a letter that said Father's application had been successful. He was to be a lighthouse keeper on a distant island!

“What have you done?” Father had demanded, shaking his head at Mother’s story of having seen the advertisement in the newspaper and applying on his behalf. She had calmly explained that the position was for three years and there was no knowing how long the drought would last. This way, they could pay off the bank and save the farm. In a time when so many were suffering, he was fortunate to have been given the job.



It was Mother who had overseen the sale of the last of their dwindling flock of sheep, and the packing of anything and everything that could be useful on an island. Father would be able to teach the children how to swim and fish, and they would all have amazing adventures in a place where they would never run short of water!

Chapter 2

Welcome to Paradise

The ship’s horn blared, causing a flock of gulls to rise and shriek irritably as the boat chugged out from the fishing port, across open sea to the lighthouse island.

For Annabelle and Henry, the grand adventure of days on a train, then helping to load the boat, was replaced by the green-faced awfulness of trying not to lose their morning’s porridge to the heaving sea.

A crew mate staggered over and offered Father a thin coil of rope. “It’s best you tie the children to the boat, so they don’t get washed overboard. Skipper says the swell’s only going to get worse.”

It was rough sailing, and the children clung to their mother as the boat pitched and lurched in the angry grey ocean, until finally a dim mass began to take shape in the distance.

As they drew closer, the island loomed above them through rearing waves and seething white froth. Gulls soared overhead, piercing the sea’s booming with their melancholy cries. There were no coves or beaches or trees on the island. There was a jagged

platform of rock, strewn with seals, and dark sheer cliffs rising into white cloud so thick that it was impossible to see the lighthouse.

Part-way up the cliff, on a narrow wedge of bright emerald grass, a man in an oilskin coat operated a winch for a flying fox: a big basket hanging from a long cable. Already, two of the men from the boat had taken a smaller dinghy over to retrieve the line.

The boat bobbed close to the treacherous rocks as the enormous square basket was winched down.

“Women and children first,” one of the crew barked over the wind, motioning to the basket. He gave the children a wink as Mother’s face turned white.

“I’ll go,” Annabelle bravely volunteered.

Father smiled grimly. “We’ll all go together. And the goats.”

