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The Lighthouse Code

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Battered Trunk
- **Chapter 2** Off-Hour Signal
- **Chapter 3** Harbor Lights and Promises
- **Chapter 4** The Historian's Lantern
- **Chapter 5** Anomalous Manifest
- **Chapter 6** Night Visitor
- **Chapter 7** Waypoint in the Fog
- **Chapter 8** The Stakeout
- **Chapter 9** Questions in Uniform
- **Chapter 10** The Mission That Followed Her
- **Chapter 11** Lines Crossed
- **Chapter 12** The Benefactor's Smile
- **Chapter 13** Notes in the Stacks
- **Chapter 14** Iron Whispers
- **Chapter 15** The Public Charge
- **Chapter 16** Collateral
- **Chapter 17** The Ledger's Clock
- **Chapter 18** Watchers and Warnings
- **Chapter 19** Debt and a Key
- **Chapter 20** The Trunk Opens
- **Chapter 21** False Lights
- **Chapter 22** The Escape Clause
- **Chapter 23** Storm at the Light
- **Chapter 24** Salted Reckoning
- **Chapter 25** Brighter Bearings

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Introduction

By the time the fog rolled in over Winthrop Cove, the gulls had already gone quiet. The town lay in a shallow crescent around a tired harbor, its clapboard storefronts flaking paint the color of weathered bone. Nets sagged on rusted cleats. A buoy bell counted the slow seconds, and high on the black rock, the lighthouse stood with its glass eye clouded by salt and years. People still called it a beacon, a reminder of safer days, but it had become something else—a monument to what the town had been, and a question about what it would be when the last working boat finally left.

Mara Keene returned under a low ceiling of cloud, the ocean the same slate shade as the road that carried her back. She told herself she had come to settle an estate and leave again, nothing more. The Navy had taught her to keep her steps measured and her feelings in check, and the last year had pared her life down to essentials: a duffel, a stack of papers, a ring-shaped mark on her finger that the sun hadn't yet forgiven. Winthrop Cove had not forgiven much either. Her father, Lila Keene, was gone—an absence that felt like a locked door still visible from the street. He had left behind a house that smelled of old coffee and salt, and a town that remembered more than Mara wanted it to.

On the final bend before the harbor, she pulled off at the turnout where the cliff path begins. Wind pressed against the car. Out past the knife of the breakwater, the lighthouse should have been only light—automated now, its beam sweeping its appointed arc. But a different hum threaded the air, low and insect-clean, the kind of sound you feel in your teeth if you've spent enough nights with your hand on a dial. The Navy had issued her better gear once, but the small receiver stowed in her glove box was enough. She turned it on, tuned past music into the narrow bands where voices blur into static, and found it: a repeating sequence, too regular to be accident, too wrong to be a standard beacon. Short groups. Timed gaps. A cadence that was trying not to be noticed.

Winthrop Cove had always been a place that braided past and present so tightly you could cut your fingers on it. Jonah Reyes, once the kid who chased her down the wharf with a slingshot and a dare, now kept the harbor's books and its peace as best he could. Dr. Evelyn Price, who used to give lectures at the county museum about ship-to-shore radios and the last days of the Morse foghorn, still posted flyers in the diner window for talks few attended. Sheriff Colman Briggs wore the town like a heavy coat—useful in bad weather, burdensome in fair. And on election posters stapled to telephone poles, Thomas Hale's smile promised renewal, a sleek future for a place that preferred things built of wood and will.

Mara told herself the signal could wait until morning. There would be keys to find and papers to sign, closets to inventory, and the sifting of a lifetime into boxes labeled keep, donate, discard. There would be the familiar ache of rooms where voices had once collided and fallen silent. But the pattern in her ear would not let go. It was not quite Morse and not quite noise, the intervals notched into a rhythm that felt like an old habit wearing a new coat. Whoever was sending it counted on the night to blur its edges, on the fog to muffle curiosity. They had not counted on her.

She stood on the path and watched the lighthouse cut its arc through the mist, each sweep flattening the fog into a momentary pane of glass. The town exhaled below her: diesel, fish, coffee gone bitter on a burner. She could have turned the receiver off and walked away. Instead she listened, mapping the repeats, hearing the shape of something behind the sound. Her father had loved this headland and kept his silences here. He had left her questions, and perhaps a way to answer them. A message needs a listener. A code wants to be solved.

Before Mara saw the inside of her father's battered trunk, before the first knock arrived at the door of the old house on Backshore Road, she understood this much: the lighthouse was not only a symbol. It was speaking, and it had chosen a language she could not ignore.

CHAPTER ONE: The Battered Trunk

The house had a heartbeat of dust. Mara Keene stood in the front hall, duffel heavy in one hand, and listened to the floorboards settle around a silence that felt practiced. Her father had lived alone for years, and the house wore that solitude the way an old coat collects the shape of its owner. Everything was where she remembered except for the wear, which had deepened: the divot in the newel post, the scuffed baseboard where the dog used to bang his tail, the thin crack in the kitchen plaster that had crept another inch toward the ceiling like a slow lightning bolt. She dropped her keys in the chipped dish by the door. They sounded too loud, as if the house wanted to hear only one person's keys and hers were wrong.

She had promised herself a methodical week. Sort the house, sign the papers, keep to the schedule. The divorce had taught her that a clean break is mostly a fiction, but you can still pack what matters in neat boxes and label them. Lila Keene left a narrow life: a closet half full, a freezer with three blocks of frozen fish, a shelf of paperbacks with cracked spines. On the refrigerator, a note in her father's blocky hand still held a magnet: *Call the harbor if the light fails*. It was dated four months back, the ink faded, the paper soft as cloth. Mara took it down and turned it over. Nothing else. The refrigerator hummed and clicked, as if to apologize for the emptiness inside.

Upstairs, his office was more museum than workspace. Maps of the bay and the shoals lined the walls, pinned at the corners with mismatched tacks. A ham radio sat on a plywood desk, its face a constellation of dials and sliders. Mara brushed her thumb over the microphone's worn grain. It was a hobby, he had told her years ago, something to do with his hands when the boats were in. She had learned Morse in the Navy, on long nights when the ocean turned the ship into a metal ear. He had learned it out here for different reasons, maybe to feel the town's pulse through its old bones. The radio was off now, but the room held the faint smell of hot dust and cold metal.

She opened the closet and found a battered trunk shoved deep under a rod of work shirts. It was old olive-drab metal, reinforced at the corners, with a faded stencil on the lid that she could just make out as U.S. ARMY. The latch had a heavy padlock, the kind that comes off with a key and not a polite request. She tugged at it once, felt the stubborn give of a well-made thing, and squatted to get a better look. There were scratches around the keyhole, bright against the pitted steel, as if someone had been in a hurry recently. The trunk didn't belong with the rest of his tidy disarray. It looked like a secret that had been hiding in plain sight.

She left the trunk where it was and moved through the other rooms with a notepad, making lists she could pretend to trust. Three stacks: keep, donate, discard. The keep

pile was small. In a drawer by the sink she found a stack of envelopes rubber-banded together, all addressed to her in a hand she knew and had avoided for too long. Unopened. Her breath caught in a familiar tug-of-war between guilt and stubbornness. She slid them back and shut the drawer, telling herself later. Later for the hard things. Later for the words he had written when she wasn't ready to read them.

Under the desk in the office, her boot nudged something that skittered. A notebook, spiral-bound and grease-stained, slid partway out. She picked it up, and a single folded page slipped free. The page was typed, not handwritten, with a faint ribbon ghost from an old typewriter. It held a block of characters that looked random at first glance but weren't. There were short groupings of capital letters and numbers, spaces between them like careful breaths, and a pattern that made the muscles at the back of her neck tighten. It wasn't random. Random didn't have rhythm. This did. The first line read:

ZCQ 24 KPR 99 VMX 03 RLT 18

Under it, in pencil, a single phrase: *When the light speaks, listen*. The handwriting was his. She turned the page over. Blank. She held it up to the window, letting gray light through the thin stock. Nothing hidden. She refolded it and tucked it into her pocket, suddenly aware that the house's quiet wasn't only the absence of sound but the presence of a pause, like the held breath before a decision.

She went back to the trunk and crouched, testing the lock again with her fingers. The metal was cold and somehow final. A locked trunk and a coded page. The old army stencil. The note on the fridge. It all pointed to something he had held separate from the rest of his life. She had come home to close out his accounts, not to pick at the seam of a past he preferred sealed. The Navy had taught her where some doors should stay shut. It had also taught her that the people who put locks on things usually had reasons, sometimes bad ones. She stood and walked away, telling herself to start upstairs, to start with the easy closets.

The duffel by the front door tipped over with a soft thud. She crossed to right it and noticed the envelope lying beneath it, fat with something that wasn't paper alone. Her name was on the front in that same blocky hand, this time in pen that had dug into the fibers. It had been tucked under the strap of her bag when she set it down. He must have left it there, the last time she visited three years ago, a joke between them about how she never unpacked. She slid the flap open. Inside was a single brass key, heavy and old, and a note with two words: *Trust the voice*. She held the key up to the light. It looked like it fit the trunk.

The house was colder than it should be, or maybe it was just the way old rooms hold the draft of the people who left them. Mara pocketed the key. She could hear the sea but couldn't see it yet; it was a low drag and hiss, the sound of a rope being pulled

across stone. The window in the hallway framed nothing but fog and the wet shine of the road. In the distance, the buoy bell began its regular complaint. She checked her watch. Almost seven. The timing felt off. She had been in the house less than an hour and already the place was doing its best to pull her back into habits she had trained herself to drop.

On the way to the office she passed the front window and saw a man standing at the end of the short driveway. He wore a county sheriff's uniform and a windbreaker, hat tipped down against the damp. He wasn't doing anything, just standing there with a hand on his belt and his eyes on the house. She could not make out his face clearly, but the stance was familiar: patient, weighted, waiting. After a moment he raised a hand in a gesture that could have been a wave or a signal to stay put, then turned and walked to his truck parked up the road. She didn't wave back. It wasn't the first time a cop had watched her father's house, but it was the first time she had caught him at it.

She left the window and went back to the trunk. The key fit. The lock turned with a soft, gritty click that sounded like a secret giving up. Inside, the smell of oil and old canvas rose to meet her. On top lay a folded work shirt and a bundle of letters tied with twine. Under them was a hardcover book with a battered dust jacket: *The Mariner's Signal Manual, Third Edition*. The spine had been broken and repaired with silver tape. She opened it. The inside cover had been carefully cut away to form a shallow hollow. Inside the hollow lay a small black notebook, the kind used for logbooks, and a folded strip of photographic negatives.

Mara thumbed through the notebook. The pages were filled with columns of numbers and letters, written in a tight, precise hand. It looked like a ledger of sorts, but not for money. Every third line had a word circled in pencil. The negative strip was too dark to read by the weak hallway light. She took it to the desk, held it under the anglepoise lamp, and clicked it on. The bulb sputtered, flared, and held. The strip showed three images: a small dock she did not recognize, the stern of a rusting freighter with faded paint, and a close-up of what looked like a page from an old book. She squinted at the last one. It was a page of text, blocks of it, the kind of dense paragraphing that might be a poem or a code. She had seen pages like that before, the ones that hide instructions in plain sight.

She was about to flip the notebook back to the first page when she heard it again. The same hum she had caught on the receiver in the car, only now it was closer, or the air was clearer, or both. It vibrated through the window glass with a persistence that made her teeth ache. It wasn't the lighthouse's normal blink. The Coast Guard had taken the old rotating lamps out years ago, replacing them with LEDs and remote monitoring. The light itself would be silent. This was a carrier, low and steady, with something riding it. She opened the window and leaned out into the fog, straining to hear. The hum was broken into short bursts. Three short, three long, three short. She felt the pattern land in her spine like a remembered cold.

SOS. Not an accident. Not a distress call as the world understood it, but a frame around a different message. The Navy had trained her to look for the shape beneath the sound. She closed the window and went back to the desk, pulling a blank sheet of paper from the printer tray. On it she wrote the sequence as she had heard it, marking the gaps with slashes. Then she looked at the typed page again. The groups of characters were in blocks of three. She started to separate them, listening to the rhythm in her head. It was a book cipher, she thought, but a lazy one, the kind that relied on the assumption that no one would be listening in the right place. She had spent years listening in the wrong places, and the habit stuck.

The notebook had no date on the cover. She flipped to the middle. A line caught her eye: *W-43, V-12, C-9*. She matched the letters to the typed page. ZCQ, KPR, VMX. The numbers were coordinates in a grid that might be the book's pages and lines. She tried the first pair: ZCQ, page 24, line? The typed page didn't indicate line number. Maybe it was character count. Maybe it was nonsense meant to throw off someone who didn't know the key book. She frowned and looked at the manual on the desk. The title glinted in the lamplight. If he had used this book, then the key was in the house. If he hadn't, it was somewhere else, and this was a breadcrumb.

She took the trunk's lid off and set it carefully on the floor. Beneath the false bottom, she found a rolled chart, brittle at the edges. It was a navigational map of the local waters, but with unusual markings—small triangles and circles in red pencil that didn't correspond to any known buoys or markers. One triangle sat near the old cannery dock. Another in a cove north of the breakwater where the water was supposed to be too shallow for anything bigger than a skiff. She traced the lines with her finger. They were not random. They were pathways, connected by faint arcs like invisible bridges. It looked like a route, hidden in the familiar geography.

The radio in the corner blinked, as if remembering she was there. She crossed to it and turned the power knob. The set warmed, a low hiss filling the room. She dialed through the bands, slow, careful, letting the needle glide. Near the bottom of the HF range, she found the hum again, only now it was clearer, a steady carrier with a rhythmic tick that was almost a voice. She pulled the microphone close and switched to receive. The pattern repeated every two minutes. Three short, three long, three short. Then a pause. Then a block of characters, spoken in a clipped, mechanical cadence. She wrote them down as they came:

NTH-88, R-22, W-42

The numbers matched the notebook. NTH could be North, or it could be a code for a waypoint. The R-22 and W-42 could be coordinates, or they could be references to something else entirely. The Navy would have called this low-grade, almost lazy, the sort of thing you used when you trusted the fog and the indifference of the people who

lived under it. But it was clever in its way. It hid in the noise of the sea and the town's own background hum. It dressed itself as the past.

She sat with the pages spread on the desk, the notebook, the chart, the typed list, the faint crackle of the radio. The house settled again, the boards giving their soft groan. Outside, a car slowed on the road, then accelerated away. Mara could feel the old pull—the curiosity that had made her join the Navy, the precision that had kept her in the quiet rooms where messages became something you could hold. She didn't want to be here, didn't want to be the person who saw patterns where others saw noise. She had come to close the books on her father's life, not to open new ones. The trunk had other ideas.

She tucked the notebook into the inside pocket of her jacket. The negative strip went into her wallet. The chart she rolled carefully and slid back under the trunk's false bottom, then closed the trunk and locked it again. The key went into her pocket next to the others. She took the typed page and folded it into quarters, then smaller still, until it was a thick square that fit into the watch pocket of her jeans. The radio was still whispering its sequence when she turned it off, as if it had more to say and was disappointed to be cut short.

In the kitchen, she filled the kettle and set it on the stove. She needed a plan, not a plunge. Tomorrow she would go to the lighthouse and see what she could see. She would find Dr. Evelyn Price at the museum and ask about old signal practices, the kind that had faded from the books. She would track down Jonah and see if the harbor had been logging anything that didn't fit the schedule. She would make the quiet work for her. But as the kettle began its slow climb toward steam, the receiver in her car chirped again, a short burst that leaked through the house's thin walls. It wasn't a repeat. It was a change in the rhythm, a punctuated command. A train leaving the station, a plane rolling toward the runway.

She stood at the window with her hands wrapped around a mug she hadn't yet filled. The fog had thickened, pressing against the glass like a living thing. High on the rock, the lighthouse blinked. She waited for the hum to return, and when it did, she felt the same steadiness she had felt on missions where the wrong sound could mean the wrong everything. The light would speak again soon. She was already listening.

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