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The Lighthouse Cipher

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Return to the White Beam
- **Chapter 2** Rocks and Warnings
- **Chapter 3** Keeper of Stories
- **Chapter 4** An Official Visit
- **Chapter 5** First Cipher Break
- **Chapter 6** Paper Ghosts at the Maritime Museum
- **Chapter 7** The Developer's Offer
- **Chapter 8** Beneath the Inlet
- **Chapter 9** Eyes on the Lighthouse
- **Chapter 10** Names in the Ledger
- **Chapter 11** The Night the Storm Breathed
- **Chapter 12** The Banker's Quiet Accounts
- **Chapter 13** Lines Crossed at the Station
- **Chapter 14** The Map in the Wall
- **Chapter 15** The Ally Who Blinked
- **Chapter 16** Coordinates to Nowhere
- **Chapter 17** Squall Line
- **Chapter 18** The Box at Sea
- **Chapter 19** Turning the Spotlight
- **Chapter 20** The Shattered Lamp
- **Chapter 21** The Crew's Last Signal
- **Chapter 22** A Choice and a Warrant
- **Chapter 23** The Lamp Room Reckoning
- **Chapter 24** The Ledger's Last Page
- **Chapter 25** New Light

Introduction

The fog rolled in like an old habit, low and salt-heavy, smudging the horizon until sea and sky agreed to keep each other's secrets. Claire Mercer killed the rental's engine at the end of the rutted access road and sat for a moment, fingers still curled around the wheel. Beyond the windshield, the lighthouse rose from the granite like a bone left by a larger creature—pale, stubborn, and familiar in the way a childhood scar is familiar: you don't always look at it, but you always know where it is. The beam swept, a tired white arc cutting through the gray, and the horn complained at intervals, as if the coast resented having to speak at all.

Late autumn had emptied the town of its summer bravado. Windows on Main Street wore paper turkeys and CLOSED signs; bait buckets leaned like punctuation against doorframes. The air had that medicinal chill of November, a clean cold that got under even a good coat. Claire had driven past the harbor where the lobster boats rode low, ropes creaking, and past a new billboard strung with promises: HAINES COASTAL—REVITALIZING OUR SHORELINE. The smiling renderings of glass-front condos looked obscene against the granite and scrub. She'd taken notes by reflex, then laughed at herself. No one was paying her to take notes anymore.

At Caldwell & Reed, Attorneys at Law, the will had been a thin folder in a thinner man's hands. Her father, Robert Mercer, had left her the lighthouse and the attached keeper's cottage, the surrounding acre of unbuildable rock, and a debt that was mostly in the form of deferred maintenance. The lamp and lens were technically under Coast Guard purview; the land, stubbornly, belonged to the Mercers. "He kept everything," the lawyer had said in an apologetic tone, as if keeping a lighthouse was a social faux pas. Claire signed papers, initialed more papers, and tried not to read the lines that said next of kin. By the time she had the brass key warm in her pocket, the light had already started to thin.

Inside, the cottage smelled the way her father always had: of oil and damp wool and a kind of clean metal tang that clung to tools. Dust lay the way a quiet argument lies, settled on surfaces and waiting for a breath to stir it. A row of hooks by the door still held his work jacket; a ceramic mug with a chipped handle sat upside down on the counter to dry. Claire opened windows, unlatched the door to the tower, and climbed. The iron steps were narrow and intimate with her calves, their spiral forcing her to circle the same view from higher and higher until she reached the lens room and its ghostly geometry of glass.

Back down in the small office off the kitchen, she found the keeper's log where she'd known she would—a thick ledger bound in weathered black, its pages fat with years.

Her father's handwriting marched pragmatically across line after line: wind direction, visibility, maintenance notes, the occasional comment about sea state. She turned pages and found, between two entries separated by a month, an envelope that wasn't addressed to anyone. Something heavy had been tucked inside. When she poured it into her palm, a metal disk clinked against her skin.

It was the size of a silver dollar but rougher, edges nicked, face engraved with letters and tiny hash marks Claire recognized as compass points. Not letters, exactly—some were letters and some were symbols, familiar in the way half-remembered songs are familiar. Around the rim ran a string of characters that didn't quite resolve into sense. Beneath the disk, folded once and then again, lay a note in her father's clean block print: If you found this, it's because I couldn't finish. The light doesn't just warn; sometimes it points. Start with the book we read—page numbers, lines, words. The rest is in the marks. I was not the only one keeping watch.

The room seemed to tilt, the way it does when an elevator stops too quickly. Claire had coded and decoded for sport once, back when she was new to the newsroom and stayed late for the fun of fitting odd pieces together. Book ciphers. Vigenère. Newspapers under red-stringed lines on corkboards. She blinked, and the years folded: her father reading to her by lamplight from a dog-eared copy of Moby-Dick, his voice gravel-smooth, his stories always turning at the edge of what he would say. Start with the book we read. Which one? She walked to the cramped shelf above the desk and scanned spines. There it was: Moby-Dick, spine cracked white, a grocery receipt tucked like a bookmark at chapter thirty-two.

She didn't hear the first footstep on the cottage porch so much as feel a change in the air as the door shadow shifted. When she turned, the porch was empty, only the wind worrying the bell she'd forgotten was there, the bell her father had hung from a bracket fashioned from an old oarlock. Beyond the window, a figure moved along the rocks, then stopped to look up. A man in a dark jacket, head bare to the cold, his posture relaxed in the way of someone who belonged to weather. Claire held still until he lifted a hand in easy recognition and called over the distance, "Thought I saw a car up here." Jonah Ruiz, older, beard heavier, same quick smile that could be read as complicity or comfort depending on what you needed. She returned the wave and felt the old reflex to keep people out, then fought it. She was here to untangle, not retreat.

When Jonah had gone, promising to check the moorings at the inlet and bring a proper thermos next time, she returned to the desk. She spread the log, the disk, the note, and the book until the old wood looked like a reporter's desk again: evidence laid out, a story teasing its own shape. The beam swung over the windows and made everything briefly silver, then left it the color of paper and late-day shadow. Claire's phone vibrated once with a local number she didn't recognize and then stopped. No message. When she stepped outside to clear her head, she noticed a new sign staked at the turn-off where the road met the main: PRIVATE PROPERTY—NO

TRESPASSING—BY ORDER OF THE TOWN. Someone had underlined the last four words in thick black marker.

She took the disk back up the tower at dusk, wanting to see what it would look like in the light it was born under. On the gallery, the wind pulled at her hair and the sea spread cold and indifferent. She held the metal up to the beam and watched the engravings catch. Not random at all, she thought, not if you were used to aligning letters to headings, not if your life had been measured in degrees and seconds. She could almost hear her father clearing his throat behind her, about to explain the trick of something simple made useful. The beam swept, and the disk flashed once, and for the first time since she had put the city behind her, Claire felt the old engine inside her turn over.

By the time true dark arrived, she had found a sequence of numbers scribbled in the margin of a log entry from twenty-five years ago that didn't match the tidy rows of weather data. She traced them with a finger and felt the impatience that always came with the first piece of a secret: the urge to run to the ending. Instead, she closed the book, set the disk on top of it like a seal, and listened to the sea and the horn and her own breath. "Start with the book we read," she said aloud to the empty room, to the ghost of a voice that had taught her to love questions. Somewhere beyond the gray, a light moved where no channel ran, steady and deliberate. Claire watched it until it winked out and then reached for the first page.

CHAPTER ONE: Return to the White Beam

The next morning, the fog had burned off, revealing a sky scrubbed clean and a sea that glittered with cold, hard light. Claire woke to the sound of gulls and the insistent rhythmic sweep of the lamp above. She'd slept on the small cot in her father's office, the disk and the crumpled note from his log still on the desk beside her. The coffee, bitter and strong, tasted like a necessary evil. Her first task, she decided, was to make the cottage habitable, or at least less like a museum of quiet grief.

She started with the kitchen, scrubbing at layers of grease and grime that spoke of years of solitary meals. Her father hadn't been a fastidious man, but there was an order to his neglect. Tools were neatly arrayed, spices lined up by date, albeit well past their prime. It was in a forgotten drawer beneath a pile of ancient instruction manuals for maritime radios that she found it: a small, leather-bound notebook, its pages brittle with age. It wasn't the keeper's log, but something more personal. Robert Mercer's familiar hand filled the first few pages with observations on weather, boat repairs, and local gossip. Then, the entries changed.

Instead of prosaic notes, there were sketches of constellations, simplified diagrams of sailing knots, and lists of what looked like ship components: "sternpost," "keel," "masthead." More intriguing were the scattered numbers and letters that appeared in the margins, sometimes circled, sometimes underlined. They didn't seem to follow any discernible pattern, not like a cipher she immediately recognized. This was something different, something perhaps even more personal than the disk. She tucked the notebook into her pocket, a new piece added to the growing puzzle.

After a few hours of cleaning, the cottage felt less like a tomb and more like a space she could eventually inhabit. The air smelled of lemon cleaner and the faint, enduring scent of the sea. She carried a bucket of soapy water and a stiff brush out to the small, weathered deck, intending to tackle the grime clinging to the railings. The view from there was expansive, stretching from the rocky inlet to the distant, hazy line where the Atlantic truly began. Below, the rocks were still slick from the receding tide, covered in a mosaic of barnacles and dark seaweed.

As she worked, a flash of metallic glint caught her eye, nestled precariously in a crevice far below. It was too small to be natural, too regular in shape. Curiosity, that old, familiar itch, got the better of her. She navigated the treacherous descent, picking her way carefully down the moss-slicked granite, her sensible boots finding purchase where her city shoes would have failed. The salty air bit at her cheeks, and the roar of the surf filled her ears.

Reaching the crevice, she knelt, stretching her arm into the cold, damp space. Her fingers closed around a small, smooth object. It was a Zippo lighter, tarnished and encrusted with salt, but undeniably a Zippo. With a grunt, she pulled it free. The metal was cold against her palm, and she rubbed at it with her thumb. Faintly, beneath the grime, she could make out a crudely etched anchor and, beneath it, a series of initials: "J.R." Jonah Ruiz. A ripple of unease ran through her. Had Jonah been down here recently? Or had this lighter been here for years, a relic from a time when he and her father might have shared a smoke on the rocks?

She pocketed the lighter, its weight a new presence. Back in the cottage, she tried to light it, but it was dry and the flint was seized. The initials, however, were clear. J.R. What was Jonah doing on her father's property, not just yesterday, but perhaps for years? It was a small detail, but in her line of work, small details often led to larger revelations. She remembered his casual wave, his knowing smile, and a flicker of suspicion sparked. Was his appearance yesterday truly coincidental?

The afternoon sun, now lower in the sky, cast long shadows across the floorboards. She decided to focus on the cipher. Her father's note: "Start with the book we read—page numbers, lines, words. The rest is in the marks." The copy of *Moby-Dick* was still open to chapter thirty-two, the grocery receipt a makeshift bookmark. She pulled the heavy book onto the desk, aligning it with the chipped metal disk.

The book cipher was a common, if somewhat archaic, method. Each number or mark would correspond to a specific word in a text. Page, line, word. The sequence of numbers in the margin of the log entry from twenty-five years ago became her starting point. She carefully transcribed them onto a fresh pad of paper.

The first set of numbers read: 32-14-7. Page 32. Line 14. Seventh word.

She found page 32 easily enough, its edges softened from countless turns. Her finger traced down the page, past dense paragraphs describing the whalers' world. Line 14. "Thus, in the soul of man there is a *higher* harbor than the earth can show." The seventh word. *Higher*. Claire wrote it down.

The next sequence: 41-23-12. Page 41. Line 23. Twelfth word. "Call me Ishmael." The iconic opening. She flipped forward. Line 23. "A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard." The twelfth word. *Harvard*.

Claire continued, each word a slow, methodical extraction from the sprawling text. The words accumulated on her pad: *Higher, Harvard, Storm, Vessel, Anchor, Neptune, Black, Tide, Hidden*. It felt like a bizarre poem, a series of disconnected images that hinted at something maritime, something dangerous. Neptune. Black. Tide. Hidden. The phrases were tantalizing, but they didn't form a coherent message.

She reread her father's note. "The rest is in the marks." The disk. She picked it up again, turning it over in her hand. The engraved symbols, the compass points. Were these coordinates? A directional guide? She knew her father had often used obscure maritime charts and ancient navigational methods, almost as a hobby. He loved the old ways.

As she stared at the disk, a pattern began to emerge in the hash marks around its rim. They weren't just decorative. They were grouped, tiny clusters separated by slightly larger gaps. And within each cluster, some marks were deeper, more prominent, than others. It was subtle, but a lifetime of looking for patterns in data had sharpened her eye. This wasn't a simple substitution cipher, nor was it a straightforward numerical code. This was multi-layered, just as her father's mind had always been.

The phone vibrated again on the desk, startling her. It was the same local number. She hesitated, then answered. "Mercer," she said, her voice betraying a slight edge.

"Claire? It's Theo. Theo Hargreeves." The voice was familiar, a ghost from childhood, deeper now, but still carrying the same thoughtful cadence. "Heard you were back in town. And... about your father. I'm sorry."

"Theo," Claire replied, a strange mix of emotions swirling. Theo Hargreeves, her childhood friend, now Detective Hargreeves, enforcer of the law in a town that probably didn't have much law to enforce beyond parking tickets and occasional bar fights. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Just calling to check in," he said. "Officially. You know, making sure everything's alright. We don't get many city folk staying in the lighthouse anymore." There was a pause, a beat of unsaid things. "Old Robert was... a character. Always tinkering with something out there. Sometimes he'd call us for the strangest things."

"Oh?" Claire asked, her reporter's antennae twitching. "Like what?"

"Nothing specific," Theo demurred, a little too quickly. "Just... odd requests. Wanted us to check on some derelict buoys once. Said they were flashing the wrong sequence. Turned out to be nothing." He chuckled, but the sound felt forced. "Anyway, just wanted to say hi. And offer any help you might need while you're settling in."

"I'm fine, Theo," she said, though the words felt hollow. "Just getting things organized." She wanted to ask him about the missing vessels, about old conspiracy theories her father had hinted at. But this wasn't the time, or the context. She still didn't know how much Theo, as a local cop, might already know, or how much he was willing to tell.

"Alright, Claire. Well, give me a call if you need anything. Seriously." His tone

softened, the official mask slipping slightly. "It's good to have you back, even if it's under these circumstances."

After he hung up, Claire sat for a long moment, the phone still in her hand. Theo's call, though ostensibly friendly, felt like an official reconnaissance mission. His evasiveness about her father's "odd requests" didn't sit right. Her father wasn't one to waste the police's time on trivialities, especially not about flashing buoys. There was more to that story, she was sure of it.

She pushed the thought aside for a moment, returning to the disk and the list of words. *Higher, Harvard, Storm, Vessel, Anchor, Neptune, Black, Tide, Hidden*. If this was indeed a message, it needed another layer of translation. The "marks" on the disk. They looked like an encoding key, perhaps for a Vigenère cipher, or a simple substitution based on directional shifts.

She picked up the disk again, running her thumb over the engraved symbols and compass points. It looked almost like a simplified astrolabe. And then it hit her: the compass points. North, South, East, West. And the small hash marks. Degrees. Bearings.

What if the words she'd just extracted from *Moby-Dick* weren't the final message, but the key itself? A series of words that, when applied to the compass points and hash marks on the disk, would yield a new set of characters? It was a leap, but her father had always loved the complexity of interlocking puzzles.

She spread out the words. *Higher, Harvard, Storm, Vessel, Anchor, Neptune, Black, Tide, Hidden*. Nine words. Nine symbols on the disk that were clearly not compass points, but something else—perhaps nine letters of an alphabet, or nine numerical values.

She took a deep breath, the investigative thrill surging through her veins. This wasn't just about her father's peculiar hobbies anymore. This was a message, hidden for decades, and she was on the verge of cracking its first true layer. It felt like finding a thread in a vast tapestry, knowing that pulling it would unravel a much larger picture.

With renewed focus, she meticulously examined the symbols on the disk that weren't compass points. There were nine of them, each unique, almost like pictograms. She matched each word from her *Moby-Dick* translation to one of these symbols, her mind racing, forming a hypothesis about the system. The words *Higher* and *Harvard* seemed to suggest a theme of elevation, perhaps implying upward movement on the disk's face, while *Anchor* and *Tide* might suggest downward or lateral movements.

As she played with the possibilities, aligning the first word, *Higher*, with the most prominent, almost arrow-like symbol on the disk, a faint, almost invisible etching on

the disk's surface caught the light. It was a tiny, barely discernible letter 'S'. And beside it, just as small, an 'S' was carved into the wooden desk itself, right where the disk usually sat. Not just an 'S', but a stylized 'S' – like a serpent. Her father's private mark, something he'd put on special tools, on the underside of a shelf in her childhood bedroom.

The 'S' was her father's cipher key. The book, the disk, the note. He had left her a breadcrumb trail, intricate and deliberate. Her father hadn't just been keeping watch; he had been building a case, a legacy of truth. And she, Claire Mercer, was now the inheritor of that legacy.

She looked at the first symbol, then back at the word *Higher*. The 'S' mark on the disk aligned with a particular segment of the compass rose. If the words dictated movement or selection based on that 'S', what then? She tested a theory, using *Higher* to move 'up' the letters arrayed around the rim of the disk, starting from the 'S'.

Slowly, painfully, letter by letter, a new word began to form: *SERAPH*.

Claire froze. Seraph. The name of a ship. A fishing trawler that had vanished twenty-five years ago, taking with it a crew of six men and leaving behind a cold case that haunted the town's older residents. It was the maritime legend whispered in hushed tones over coffee and beer, the one her father would occasionally mention, his voice quiet, almost regretful.

The full weight of what she had just uncovered settled over her. Her father hadn't been deciphering forgotten log entries. He had been chasing ghosts, and now, she was too. The *Seraph*. What had her father found out about its disappearance? And why had he gone to such lengths to hide it? The truth, she suspected, was far more complicated, and far more dangerous, than a simple accident at sea.

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