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The Lighthouse Key to Hidden Seas

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Homecoming to Breakwater Cove
- **Chapter 2** The Lamp Room's Whisper
- **Chapter 3** Tides and Promises
- **Chapter 4** The Broken Lock
- **Chapter 5** The Hidden Panel
- **Chapter 6** Soundings and Suspicions
- **Chapter 7** The Tidal Archive
- **Chapter 8** Eyes on the Water
- **Chapter 9** Breath Held Too Long
- **Chapter 10** Torn from the Log
- **Chapter 11** The Preservationist's Oath
- **Chapter 12** Fault Lines
- **Chapter 13** The Tide Cipher
- **Chapter 14** The Letter in Lamp Oil
- **Chapter 15** Waiting in the Deep
- **Chapter 16** Storm Warning
- **Chapter 17** The Cliffside Run
- **Chapter 18** Night Dive
- **Chapter 19** The Flooded Room
- **Chapter 20** Taking the Light
- **Chapter 21** Spring Tide Reckoning
- **Chapter 22** The Lighthouse Key
- **Chapter 23** Exposed to Daylight
- **Chapter 24** Keeper of the Coast
- **Chapter 25** After the Storm

Introduction

They rang the bell twice for Eamon Calder, and the sound went out over Breakwater Cove like a blunt measure of weather—low and heavy, carrying across the harbor where the gulls wheeled and the masts ticked in the wind. Ava stood at the back of the church because the front pews felt like a dare she had no right to accept. She hadn't come home in years. Not for the summer festivals, not for the winter storms that made the lighthouse sing like a thing alive, not even when the town sent word about her brother and she'd chosen a job in a windowless archive over the tidal pull of grief. When the old priest lifted his hands and spoke Eamon's name, it landed on her like salt on a healed wound—clean, familiar, and stinging even so.

After the service they spilled onto the steps into a day that couldn't make up its mind, fog thinning and thickening as if someone kept lifting and lowering a veil. Maeve O'Connell, her hair pinned back with the same careless clips she'd worn in high school, pressed a paper cup of coffee into Ava's hand and squeezed her arm. "He loved that light more than his lungs," Maeve said, voice hoarse. "And more than his stubbornness, which is saying something." She hesitated, eyes searching. "If you need anything—the life-saving station's records, old surveys, the boys at the docks—say the word."

Ava nodded, grateful for something simple to hold like a plan. "Thanks, Maeve. I'll be in touch." She didn't say I don't even know where to start, or I left you all to carry him. She didn't say I promised him I'd come back, and then I didn't.

Jonah Reyes hovered a step away, a man you could pick out of a crowd for his stillness. Ex-Coast Guard, she'd heard, and he wore it in his posture, hands quiet, eyes scanning as if tides could turn mean without warning. He had the kind of steady presence that made you think of green markers and good anchors. "Calder," he said, a nod for hello and for sorry both. "If the generator at the light gives you trouble, call me." His voice was low, practical, leaving no room for pity.

"Thank you," she said, and meant it. He didn't hold her gaze long—maybe he'd learned not to linger where grief had made a whirlpool. Not every man in uniform wore patience like that. She remembered him from a night years ago when the fog had eaten the horizon and a boat engine had sputtered where it shouldn't. He'd been a silhouette in a floodlight then, a steadying shout in the dark. She'd turned away from the coast not long after.

Damien Crowe was all wrong for the day, too polished, his coat too fine, his apology practiced and efficient. He offered a card with a designer logo that had nothing to do

with salt or wind or maintenance logs. “We were saddened to hear of Keeper Calder’s passing,” he said, the “we” vague and crowded with money. “There’s been talk about the property. If you’d prefer to move through the legalities quickly, we can make that painless.” His smile didn’t touch his eyes.

Ava slid the card into her pocket without looking at it. “I haven’t decided anything,” she said, which was true, and turned away before his cologne could drown out the clean cut of cold air. Behind him, a lean man with a careful haircut watched her with a neutral face and a mouth that didn’t know how to smile. A fixer, she thought—or her days in archives had taught her the look of men who annotated the world in pencil and pressure.

The path to the lighthouse ran along the edge of the headland, lichen-greened and slick where waves threw themselves tantrums below. The tower rose from the rock like it had grown there—Calder Light, her uncle had always insisted, not the official name painted on maps. The glass of the lantern room was clouded with damp, and the ironcat walk groaned in a way that made her think of tired bones. Ava paused with the key in the keeper’s door, breathing in the smell of lamp oil ground into wood, of salt and iron and the faint whisper of old rope. A memory arrived uninvited: her brother sprinting up those stairs, his laughter catching in the glass, Eamon’s bellowed warning about wet steps. She had told Eamon she’d keep him close that summer. She had not.

Inside, the kitchen had the abraded coziness of a good tool: enamel mugs chipped to the same place along their rims, a kettle with a dent in its side, a frayed chart tacked above the table. A brown envelope sat on the tabletop where the estate lawyer had promised to leave it, her name in Eamon’s careful block letters that looked like they should have outlasted him. She sat in his chair—the wood knew him; it complained under her differently—and slit the packet open with her thumbnail.

Inside were two things. The first was a torn page from an older logbook, oiled edges translucent and smelling faintly of whale fat and smoke—the way old ship papers could, even decades later. The second was a narrow strip of vellum, stiff and pale, with faint gridlines and the ghost of a compass rose at one end. The log page had been torn away mid-sentence. On the back, in her uncle’s hand, a line that made something in her chest forget to beat: The Key opens the sea’s memory.

She touched the words with the side of her finger, like they’d burn her if she met them head on. The holidays had pulled her into archives where ink had lived longer than its writers, and she’d come to believe in what paper could keep. Memory was just a kind of storage, she’d always told Eamon when he teased her for loving boxes and tags more than bonfires and wakes. But Eamon had laughed and said that the sea kept its own archives if you knew where to look, and that sometimes the tide filed things exactly where it wanted. The Key opens the sea’s memory. What key? She swallowed, and the smell of old oil made the back of her throat taste of pennies.

Ava laid the vellum strip across the torn log page. The gridlines matched nothing at first. Then she saw—faint pencil marks, columns of short numbers like fenceposts, spacing irregular and patient. Old keepers separated their personal notes from the official logs, she knew, and Eamon had taught her to read the margin as much as the clean center. She went to the wall and took down the current tide timetable. Low tide near midnight, with the spring tide less than a week away. Her uncle had always loved the spring tides, proud of his forecasts of the extra reach and the extra danger. He'd say the sea was an honest thief when the moon told it to.

She climbed the tower for the lamp room, the iron steps spiraling around a shaft where over the years they'd hung ropes, spare mantles, a child's kite once—bright red—swallowed by the draft and pinwheeling up into the lens until Eamon had laughed so hard he nearly cried. The lantern glass was cool and beaded with moisture. Beyond, the water went silver where the fog thinned, then back to pewter when it thickened, and the rocks below grabbed the waves like knuckles. The Fresnel lens stood like an improbable cathedral thing, all prisms and logic, a machine for making light behave.

In the lantern room, Eamon's private log lay where the law couldn't complain about how he kept it—beneath a panel loose enough if you knew the trick. She eased it free. The binding had swollen with salt air, and the paper's edges had frilled, but the ink was firm: neat columns of dates and wind notes, wind entirely a language in his hands. Tucked between two entries—a scrap of the same vellum as in the envelope. She unfolded it carefully. A diagram sketched in ink: the headland from above, the shoals like teeth, a line arcing from the base of the tower to a cluster of rocks marked with three little crosses. Next to it, a single phrase: Sea remembers what land buries.

Ava felt that phrase work on her like a tide. She remembered Eamon telling her in the kitchen once that secrets and shorelines had the same bad habit of shifting, that they didn't stay where you left them, but that didn't mean you couldn't find them again. He'd never been a poetic man. He'd been practical as rope. But he'd also loved riddles the sea could solve if you watched long enough. Perhaps this was that. Perhaps in the end he had circled back to his riddles because he knew she'd come looking.

She took the log and the envelope back down to the keeper's desk, a piece of furniture built to survive generations, scarred by mugs and elbows and once, a dropped wrench. Her own elbow found the spot where Eamon's always had, and the familiarity tightened her throat. She laid out the pieces, the torn page beside the vellum strip, the strip beside the map sketch, and her mind did what it had been trained to do in archives and museum basements: it looked for patterns. The short numbers on the log page—fathoms? Minutes? They stepped in a sequence that felt like speech. She slid the vellum across the torn edge. The compass rose's missing points seemed to want something—completion, a key to overlay and make the empty spokes make sense. But if there was an instrument to match it, it wasn't here. Not yet.

When dusk leaned in against the windows, the lighthouse had its mood about it, a slow exhale that made every board sound like it had a story. Ava put water on to boil and reached for the kettle without looking. The generator coughed once, then steadied. Outside, the foghorn down the coast made a sound like a cow in a canyon. She stood at the counter watching the kettle begin to tremble just as a shadow moved across the window over the sink—quick, low, gone. Her body did its own old thing before her mind caught up: she froze, then crossed to the switch and killed the light.

The kitchen went from shadowed to dark, and in the sudden quiet she could hear the sea flexing at the rocks, the small clinks of glass in the lantern room expanding as the evening cooled. She stepped to the side of the window, keeping her profile low. Another movement, this time at the base of the tower—the quick white flash of a handheld beam caught on a metal bracket and then whisked away. Not fishermen. No boat light on the water. Not kids either, not in this weather and at this hour. She pulled her phone from her pocket out of habit more than strategy and saw a voicemail bubble she hadn't noticed earlier. No caller ID. She didn't press play. She was suddenly fourteen again and too proud to admit she was scared. She clicked the lock on the door halfway without making it clack.

Footsteps on the outside stairs. Two, then three, then a pause. The kind of pause of someone listening for her breathing. The kettle decided to go mad, shrieking. She clapped a hand over the handle, lifted it off the flame, and set it down on the cold ring with a softer clatter than she'd thought she could manage with shaking fingers. Another beam of light slid over the seams of the keeper's door, lazy like a tongue. She thought of Jonah's card. She thought of Maeve's warning about people who visited lighthouses without wanting to talk history.

The footsteps retreated. She waited, counting her breaths, counting the time between the swells slamming into the rocks. When she slipped to the door and looked through the narrow pane, the yard was empty—just a coil of rope leaching dark on the ground and the path back to town a smudge. She opened the door an inch and felt the cold reach in, insistent. Something had been slipped under the frame. She stooped, fingers touching paper that was damp along one edge from the stone. Not paper. Oilskin. Smart. She pulled it inside and closed the door with the same care she would have used not to wake a sleeping child.

The oilskin parcel was the size of her palm, tied with red thread. She cut the thread with a paring knife and unfolded the square. Inside: a photocopy of the same log page she had in Eamon's envelope, the torn edge matching perfectly, as if someone had handled both halves. Below the printed phrases, in thick black marker: WE KNOW WHAT HE LEFT YOU. RETURN IT, AND YOU KEEP THE LIGHT.

Ava felt anger arrive like a hot thing under her breastbone, surprising and clean. The

lighthouse wasn't a thing you could own like a shirt. Even the government hadn't owned it properly; it had been stewarded, and then Eamon had kept it with the kind of stubborn love that made a person ridiculous and admirable in one breath. Return it to who? Why now? She looked again at the words on the log, at The Key opens the sea's memory, and knew with a kind of marrow-deep certainty that "it" wasn't anything Crowe had a right to.

Her phone buzzed in her hand. A message, unknown number: LOW TIDE. MIDNIGHT. NORTH STEPS. COME ALONE. The tide chart on the wall showed the dip in the curve at 12:14. She had spent her adulthood pretending she'd outgrown the pull of those charts, that she had traded tide tables for index cards and humidity controls and donors with gentle money. But the truth was her hands knew how to pull a wetsuit on in the dark. Her mind knew how to count heartbeats underwater. She had spent years reading the sea's palimpsest in photographs and logbooks. She had never stopped wanting to hear what it would say if she asked it the right question.

She lifted the kettle, poured water over a tea bag like that was a decision a person would make when an anonymous ultimatum lay on her table, and stared at the steam rising. Fear threaded itself through her, yes. But beneath it was something else, something that felt a lot like relief, like the familiar click of a lock accepting the right key. Eamon had left her a torn page and a sentence and a problem, because he knew she would understand the language of it. He had asked her to come home, one last time, in the way he believed she would hear.

Outside, a boat engine turned over and then cut abruptly, the kind of stutter that meant someone close to shore. Ava turned off the burner and set her mug aside untouched. She went to the wall where Eamon had kept his old gear and pulled down a headlamp, a length of line, and a battered waterproof case he used for charts. She folded the log page into the case along with the vellum strip. She paused, then added a sharpie and a roll of red thread, an archivist's instinct asserting itself in a place that smelled like weather, not glue.

On her way out, she reached for the switch that powered the lens and hesitated. It wasn't hers to light, not tonight. Not until she knew who else was watching for the sweep. She killed the remaining lights, locked the keeper's door behind her, and stood for a breath in air that bit the inside of her nose. The path to the north steps ran along a section of cliff where the sea chewed its way into the headland in a slow, relentless argument. She glanced once toward the harbor. The town glowed there—the church lit like an open book, the docks pricked with sodium lamps, the life-saving station a low line against the water. Somewhere down in that light Jonah Reyes might be checking ropes, or sleeping, or waiting for the weather to turn honest again.

Ava tightened her scarf and started toward the north steps, the oilskin note folded hard in her pocket, Eamon's sentence pressed against her thigh like a heartbeat. Low

tide was creeping. The sea was making room. Whatever the Key was, whatever memory the water kept, she was going to stand on the rock and see if it would show her.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming to Breakwater Cove

The north steps were less a set of stairs and more an argument between stone and seawater. They were cut directly into the basalt face of the headland, leading down toward a jagged platform that disappeared entirely at high tide. Ava descended carefully, placing her weight on the outer edges of the steps where the granite hadn't worn slick with algae and spray. The air here was colder, denser, smelling of iodine and the metallic tang of deeply stirred silt. Above her, the lighthouse stood dark—a sudden absence that felt monumental in a town defined by its beam.

She carried nothing but the waterproof case slung cross-body, her hands free. If someone had come to rob her, she wanted to be able to move. If someone had come to talk, she wanted to look ready to walk away. The threat delivered in oilskin had been blunt, but the meeting place—low tide, midnight—was pure Eamon. He'd always believed the best secrets were revealed when the earth exposed its ribs, when the sea receded to its lowest point.

The descent was about thirty feet, ending on a narrow shelf of rock called the Priest's Chin—a local name referring to the way the rock jutted out stubbornly, often the last piece of land to succumb to the rising water. She reached the bottom, her boots crunching on dry shells and grit. The moon, partially veiled by scudding clouds, offered just enough light to sketch the outlines of the scene: a sweep of dark sand, tidal pools reflecting the sky like broken mirrors, and beyond them, the slow, rhythmic inhalation and exhalation of the deep sea.

There was no one there. No silhouette waiting by the tide line, no boat tucked into the shadow of the cliffs. Just the vast, indifferent sound of the ocean working on the shore.

Ava stopped, letting her eyes adjust fully. She was early—five minutes before the 12:14 low mark, according to the wristwatch Eamon had given her the year she turned twelve. She pressed her back against the cold, damp cliff face, blending into the deeper shadow. She knew this cove. She knew the way the wind bent the sound here, how a whisper could carry further than a shout.

If this was a trap, it was a subtle one. The tide wouldn't wait. Whoever had left the note under her door knew the timing mattered. They wanted her here now, at the moment of maximal exposure—when the water was lowest and the path of retreat longest.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice absorbed instantly by the space. It sounded weak, hesitant. She tried again, louder, adopting the firm cadence she used when

demanding access to restricted documents. "I received your message. I'm here."

A moment of silence, and then a faint movement caught her attention. It wasn't on the rocks in front of her. It was above.

She looked up, heart seizing. A figure was perched maybe twenty feet above the Priest's Chin, tucked into a notch in the cliff face that was only accessible via a precarious traverse from the main path. The person was leaning out, watching her. They wore dark, functional clothing—the kind that absorbed light—and a hood that hid their face entirely. They looked less like a corporate fixer and more like someone who climbed things professionally.

"You're alone," the figure said, the voice flat, electronically altered, or muffled. It was impossible to tell if it was male or female, young or old.

"As requested," Ava said, her voice steady now, the adrenaline clearing the last of her nerves. "The note said return it. Return what?"

The figure remained motionless, a shadow carved into the rock. "The Key. What Eamon Calder left you."

"My uncle left me his lighthouse and his debts. He didn't leave me a key, unless you mean the one to the front door," Ava lied, the waterproof case feeling suddenly heavier against her ribs. She needed to know what they were looking for before she revealed the fragment of log or the map sketch.

"Don't waste my time, Calder," the voice clipped back. "The instrument. The thing that lets you read the Archive. We know you have it. Eamon spoke of it for years, a piece of a map, a relic of the old society. Give it to us now, and you can stay in your little tower."

The instrument. Not just a log page, then. Not just a piece of vellum. Something physical that Eamon had clearly kept hidden, something his cryptic log entry—*The Key opens the sea's memory*—referred to. The idea that this "Key" was an instrument suggested something technical, perhaps an old navigational tool or a sounding device.

"I haven't found anything like that," she insisted, keeping her hands relaxed at her sides. "If he left something of value, it's probably locked up in his safe deposit box with his old war medals."

The shadow shifted slightly, and a small, smooth stone dropped from the ledge, hitting the rock shelf ten feet from her with a sharp crack. It was a warning shot, silent and effective.

"Eamon Calder didn't believe in banks. He believed in tides and stone. And we know he broke the lock. We know he trusted you. We've been watching the light since the funeral." The shadow paused. "We saw the car that dropped you off."

Ava felt a cold dread settle in. That meant they had seen Damien Crowe's fixer, the lean man with the careful haircut. This confrontation wasn't just about the key; it was about the territory, a race between competing interests. And they had been watching for days, maybe longer.

"If you knew he broke the lock, why didn't you just take it?" Ava challenged, trying to peel back the anonymity of the hood.

"Because we respect Eamon's legacy," the figure said, a line so loaded with irony it was practically sarcasm. "We want to secure the preservation of the assets. Crowe wants to monetize the ruins. We are offering you a clean trade: the Key for safe passage and the deed to the light. Crowe offers a lawsuit and a bulldozer."

This was a classic choice: the devil she knew versus the one she didn't. Damien Crowe was a developer known for buying up coastal relics, stripping them, and turning them into luxury condominiums or high-end tourist traps. This unknown entity, speaking of 'preservation' and 'legacy,' might just be a slightly more sophisticated version of the same predator, perhaps a well-funded private collector or a rival academic institution with dubious ethics.

"If you represent a preservation group, why the ski mask and the midnight appointment?" Ava asked.

"Because preservation is expensive, and sometimes it requires discretion," the shadow countered. "Your uncle's research wasn't meant for public display. It was meant to be protected. The Key opens the sea, Calder. And the sea holds secrets that could ruin a lot of powerful people—people who would hire men far less subtle than me."

A bluff? Or the truth. Eamon had always been secretive about his long-running research, dismissing it to her as just "old maritime history." But he had been fiercely protective of the local environment and its history. The idea of him uncovering evidence that could compromise powerful figures felt plausible.

The moon decided to help, pulling free of the cloud cover for a few seconds. The sudden silver wash revealed something more about the figure above: a harness, the sheen of specialized climbing gear, and the way the light glinted on a small, dark object held in their hand. Not a gun. It looked like a short-wave radio or perhaps a portable depth sounder.

"I'll make a deal," Ava said, her mind racing. "I need proof that you are who you say you are, that you care about preservation. Tell me what the Tidal Archive actually is."

The shadow laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "You know exactly what it is. It's what Eamon spent the last ten years rebuilding. It's the vault. And we need the Key to finish the work. The spring tide is coming. We don't have time."

The spring tide. Eamon had often mentioned the extra reach of the spring tide. If the Key was indeed a cipher or an instrument, perhaps it needed the lowest water mark or the strongest current to function.

"I only have a piece of his log," Ava admitted, deciding to offer a crumb of truth to buy time. She unzipped the case and held up the vellum strip and the torn log page. "This is what I found. It points to something, but it's incomplete."

The shadow leaned forward, visibly interested. "Show me the log entry."

Ava hesitated, then used the headlamp she was wearing, angling the beam away from the figure and onto the paper. The light caught the words: *The Key opens the sea's memory.* And the sketch of the three crosses.

"That's the cipher fragment," the figure said, sounding almost disappointed. "Where is the main piece? The navigation instrument. It's brass, Calder. About eight inches long. Looks like a telescope that folds oddly."

A description. That meant this wasn't pure speculation. They had seen it, or Eamon had described it to them.

"I haven't found a piece of brass. But I will. And when I do, I will only hand it over if I know it's safe. You said the sea remembers what land buries. Is the Archive a wreck?"

"No," the figure said, the voice regaining its cold edge. "It's a structure. Sealed. Old. Eamon and his society found it forty years ago, a piece of wartime history, or maybe older—a coastal depot that was flooded, then forgotten, until the last few storms shifted the sands and exposed the entrance. We need the Key to bypass the seal. The lock mechanism is tied to the tidal cycle, an old hydro-latch."

A hydro-latch. Now that was a technical detail that felt real. Eamon had been fascinated by old pneumatic and hydraulic engineering.

"And you think the developer, Crowe, knows about this Archive?"

"Crowe knows that Eamon suddenly became very protective of the headland three

months ago. He knows Eamon had something valuable. His fixer, that weasel, has been in town since September, asking questions about the Calder family history and the old navigation charts. Crowe doesn't care about history; he cares about what he can sell from the site to fund his next development. The artifacts in that Archive—they belong here. With Eamon's legacy."

A sudden noise ripped through the silence: the aggressive, throbbing sound of a powerful outboard motor, cutting hard through the waves around the headland. It was close, too fast for a fishing trawler, and running without lights.

The figure above Ava stiffened. "Someone else is coming. Not my crew."

"Crowe," Ava muttered, folding the log fragment away instantly.

The figure cursed, a sharp, unmasked sound that revealed a deeper register. "Get out of here, Calder. Go back up the steps. If they catch you with that fragment, they'll break you before they break the stone."

The engine roared again, now circling the base of the headland, the sound echoing unnervingly against the cliff walls. A faint, focused beam of light swept the water near the Priest's Chin. They were searching the low-tide mark.

"I can't climb the steps fast enough," Ava said, looking back up the sheer rock face. She was exposed. The boat was closing in, its powerful engine dropping to a low, predatory idle.

"The tide pools," the figure ordered quickly. "Run along the beach line toward the old jetty. It's marshy there, but you'll be out of the direct light. You'll find a low crevice under the main path—it leads to a small, hidden cave where Eamon used to moor his dinghy. Wait there."

"And you?"

"I'm leaving the way I came. I'll make sure they follow the wrong trail."

Before Ava could reply, the shadow was gone, scrambling away with unnerving speed along the dark traverse, melting back toward the path above.

Ava didn't wait. She bolted across the rock shelf, ignoring the sting of spray and the precarious footing of the algae-slick stones. She ran into the low-tide expanse of the beach, the sand squelching under her boots. The light from the approaching boat was getting closer, bouncing off the wet surface, searching. She could hear voices now—muffled shouts carried on the wind. They weren't polite or subtle.

She kept low, using the darker shadows of the tide pools and the scattered debris of the high-tide line for cover. The "old jetty" the figure had mentioned was a half-rotted timber structure about two hundred yards down the beach, mostly derelict, used now only by gulls.

The engine noise was deafening now; the boat was practically on the shallows. A blinding spotlight snapped on, raking the cliff face, then sweeping down to the beach.

"There!" a voice boomed from the water. "By the rocks!"

Ava threw herself behind a large pile of storm-tossed kelp and wood, pressing her body into the cold, wet sand. She heard the boat's keel grind slightly on the sand, the engine cutting again. She risked a glance.

Three figures, all in dark jackets, were disembarking quickly onto the wet sand. Two held powerful lights. The third—lean, careful haircut, and a face of polished steel—was Crowe's fixer, the man she'd seen at the funeral. He was holding a short length of something that looked heavy and purposeful.

"Search the low water line, check the steps," the fixer commanded, his voice sharp and utterly devoid of local accent. "She couldn't have gotten far."

Ava scrambled on her hands and knees, dragging herself through the sticky, low marsh grass that bordered the sand near the jetty. She was almost to the thick, shadowy pilings of the structure. The "crevice" the mysterious figure had mentioned had to be here.

The spot where the old jetty met the headland was a chaotic mess of rock, rotting concrete, and high-tide garbage. Ava found the promised opening—a tight, low space where decades of tidal action had hollowed out a small chamber beneath a concrete slab of the old retaining wall. It was small, dark, and smelled overpoweringly of brackish water and diesel. She squeezed in, pulling the wet grass over the entrance as best she could.

She was not safe. She was merely hidden.

She waited, breathing shallowly, listening to the sounds of the search. Boots on the wet sand, the rapid *thwump* of the boat against the waves, the sweep of the lights.

"Nothing by the steps," one of the men reported, close enough that Ava could hear his heavy breathing.

"She's a local girl; she knows the beach. She'll head for the trail," the fixer said. "She

was here. She wouldn't have come for no reason. Where's the contact?"

"We checked the trail, boss. No one there."

The fixer cursed again, a cold, smooth sound that carried menace. "She's playing games. The Lighthouse Key is here, or the information leading to it. Check the jetty. If she's under here, pull her out."

Ava flattened herself against the cold, rough wall of the small cavern. She could feel the vibrations of their heavy boots above her, testing the stability of the rotting wood and concrete. If they scanned the ground, they might miss the subtle depression of the entrance, but if they were systematic, they would find her.

She closed her eyes, trying to regulate her heart rate, trying to think like an archivist under pressure. Eamon's log page, tucked into the waterproof case, was the only thing connecting her to the Archive. If they found her, they would take it, and she would lose her only leverage.

A sudden, jarring sound made her jump—a loud clang of metal on stone, followed by a shouted curse. The boots stopped.

"What was that?" the fixer demanded.

"Something just rolled down the trail, boss," the man reported, his voice laced with confusion. "Looks like a small buoy, painted red. It's tangled in the high-tide trash."

The fixer sounded skeptical. "A buoy? Why would she throw a buoy?"

"Wait—it's moving. It's got a line attached, and the line is leading out over the water, toward the breakwater."

A deliberate distraction. The shadow figure had not simply fled; they had set a small trap. Ava realized the figure was trying to lure Crowe's men out onto the water, away from her hiding spot. She was grateful for the unexpected aid.

"The line is taut," the first man said. "Looks like someone pulled it from the water just before we arrived. She must have had a contact boat waiting, signaled them with the buoy."

"Damn it. We missed the boat," the fixer snapped. "Get back to the launch. We'll follow the current toward the breakwater. She won't outrun the *Predator*."

The sound of their retreat was immediate and noisy. Boots running across the sand, the boat engine roaring back to life, the propeller chewing the water as they pulled

away from the shallows. The powerful light swept across the cove one last time, cutting the darkness, before receding entirely.

Ava remained tucked inside the cramped space for another five minutes, just to be sure. The silence that returned was deeper than before, broken only by the tide. She crawled out finally, tasting the salt air with relief.

She stood up, brushing the clinging marsh grass from her jeans. The night had turned cold. The immediate threat was gone, but the situation had been clarified: Eamon's death had started a race for something called the Lighthouse Key, which unlocked a sealed site known as the Tidal Archive. And two powerful, unseen entities—Crowe's group and the masked 'preservationist'—believed she possessed it.

She pulled the oilskin note from her pocket, the one that had been slipped under her door. *Return it, and you keep the light.* The offer sounded generous, but it was hollow. If she gave them the Key, she'd be giving away Eamon's life work, and the Archive would be exposed to whoever took it.

Ava looked back toward the dark, silent sentinel of the lighthouse high on the headland. She hadn't come back to Breakwater Cove to live in fear, or to surrender what her uncle had spent his life protecting. She had come home, and the sea, or whatever was hidden beneath it, was calling.

She pulled out her phone and scrolled past the unknown number's voicemail. She knew one person in this town who valued pragmatism over profit and might understand the language of danger at sea. She typed a quick text message.

To: Jonah Reyes. *Need that generator check now. And bring your charts. Something's turning in the water.*

She knew what she had to do next. If the Lighthouse Key was an instrument tied to the headland, it was still in the light, hidden somewhere Eamon thought was safer than a bank. And if the Key opened the sea's memory, she needed to find the Key before anyone else did. She started the long, cold walk back up the path toward the lighthouse, now fully committed to the search. The game was no longer a question of inheritance, but survival.

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