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The Lighthouse Keeper's Last Signal

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Introduction

The first scent that reached Claire Avery was brine—the raw, ferric breath of the Atlantic curling up the cliffs of Gull’s Head Point. Spray feathered the air. Kelp slapped rock. Above the breaker line, the lighthouse rose out of the fog like a rib of old bone, its iron gallery ringed with rust and salt, its glass a faceted eye that, in her childhood, had seemed to watch over everything. It looked smaller now, or perhaps she had grown into a person who no longer believed in sentinels.

She parked beneath the lee of the keeper’s cottage and let the engine tick down. The wind carried gull cries from the harbor and the dull thrum of a diesel trawler turning in its berth. The cottage paint had blistered in flakes, exposing gray wood that drank up the damp. The yard held a scatter of lobster pots and a coil of hemp line gone stiff with age. She knew the smell of this place the way she knew the bruised knuckles of a deadline: oil, wet rope, old coffee that no one ever finished. It was her father’s world—measured in tides and weather bulletins and the slow revolution of a lens.

Henry Avery had chosen this outpost over most things, including his daughter. It wasn’t as simple as that, she told herself; it never had been. He had been a careful man with a meticulous hand, a keeper who logged wind directions to the quarter-degree and lamp maintenance to the minute. He had been a difficult man too—closed as a clenched fist, hard on silence, stingy with praise. After her mother left, Claire learned to read him the way he read the sea: by changes of texture, small shifts in pressure. When she finally left for the city at eighteen, she told herself it was for work, for air; in truth, she had been running from a house where the only thing that spoke freely was the foghorn.

Gull’s Head town lay in the fold of the bay, a scatter of clapboard and shingle hunkered against wind. The bait shop still leaned under its hand-painted sign, and the diner on the corner—The Boathouse—hadn’t changed its chalkboard script in a decade. People glanced up as Claire walked by later with a rented room key in her pocket, their eyes curious in that compact way small towns have: they inventory a person as quickly as they count the day’s catch. She recognized a few faces and a few looked past her, choosing amnesia. She understood. Memory out here was currency, and people guarded their accounts.

What settled in her chest, heavier than the weather, was the reason she’d come back. She was not here to write; she had told herself that twice, three times, every time her reporter’s mind pivoted toward angle and source. She was here to bury a man and sweep out a cottage and decide, in the clean light after a funeral, what to do with a life measured in tide tables and bulb invoices. The death certificate said accidental fall

from the gallery. The talk in town—shy, sideways—said the keeper had been tired. She bristled at the word. Tired was not a cause of death.

That evening she climbed the path toward the tower and paused at the service door, her hand on flaking paint. The sea mist beaded on her jacket and on the brass plate stamped with the station's name. Beyond the door, stairs would corkscrew up past the service landings to the lantern room where the Fresnel lens stood like a crystal hive. She could picture the apparatus as if it were inside her own bones: the bull's-eye prisms bending light into a blade; the rotation driven now by an electric motor that replaced the old clockwork weights; the automatic lamp changer that should, by design, swing a secondary bulb into place if the primary ever failed. There were redundancies upon redundancies. That had been one of Henry's refrains: the light does not go dark.

But it had. On the night he died, the beacon over Gull's Head Point was out. She had read the Coast Guard outage note logged at 02:11 and felt an old anger salt her tongue. Protocol said a keeper radios an immediate report on loss of illumination. Protocol said the sector light should have been tested within the week before. Protocol and Henry had always been on speaking terms. For the light to fail and for Henry to fall—for both to happen in the same hour—felt like a knot tied by someone else's hands.

At dusk the fog came down in folds, heavier and higher than she remembered, softening the horizon until sea and sky made a single, bruised sheet. Far offshore, thunder grumbled like a trawler's belly. The horn—rewired years ago but still claiming the name foghorn—let out its lowing note, a sound you felt in ribs more than ears. From the cottage, through the open window of Henry's cramped radio room, a faint wash of static drifted, that ever-present coastal whisper where Channel 16 carried hails and warnings and the sea spoke in clipped phonetics. Henry had taught her the cadence young: vessel name, position, nature of distress. Even now, after years of city noise, she could pick the difference between a bad squelch and a voice trying not to tremble.

She stood in the doorway a long time, letting the damp find its way into her sleeves, and told herself she would be gone by week's end. The service was tomorrow. She would endure the condolences of men who'd called her father a friend and never once asked about his daughter. She would box the logs, stack the charts, leave the keys with the harbor master. But the place was already working under her skin. The town looked away too quickly. The light had failed when it should not have. The sea, for all its noise, felt like it was holding its breath.

Claire had made a career of not believing in omens. Yet as the last gray lifted off the water and darkness pooled around the tower, she felt the shape of a story forming—one with rust on its edges and salt in its flaws, a story that didn't care what

she had promised herself. Somewhere out there, across the rocks and the slick weed and the cold black channel, a signal had waited. She did not yet know its timing or its code, only that it existed, as sure as the turn of the lens and the pull of the tide. Before morning, she would start listening.

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CHAPTER ONE: Funeral and First Doubts

The funeral for Henry Avery was a study in quiet omissions. The sky was the color of unwashed slate, and a thin, persistent drizzle slicked the gravestones in the small, windswept cemetery overlooking the harbor. Claire stood a little apart from the small cluster of mourners, her black coat absorbing the damp. The minister, a man she didn't recognize, spoke of Henry's dedication to service, his steadfastness, his silent vigil. He used words like "pillar of the community" and "guardian of the coast," words that felt borrowed, ill-fitting. Claire knew her father had been steadfast, yes, but more like a rock against a storm than a comforting presence.

Jonah Reyes, her childhood friend, stood closest to the grave, his broad shoulders hunched against the rain. He'd driven her from the cottage, his silence a familiar comfort. He was a fisheries officer now, still possessed of that quiet intensity she remembered, though his face carried the etched lines of responsibility and bad weather. He caught her eye across the open grave, offering a small, sympathetic nod. She felt a flicker of warmth, a rare thing in the chill air.

Mayor Evelyn Kitteridge was there too, a striking figure in a tailored black suit, her hair perfectly coiffed despite the weather. She offered Claire a practiced smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, a gesture of civic duty rather than genuine grief. "Such a tragedy, Claire," she murmured, her voice smooth as polished stone. "Your father was a good man. This town will miss him." Claire nodded, noncommittal. The mayor's hand lingered a moment too long on her arm, a proprietorial touch that irritated her.

The ceremony was mercifully brief. The handful of lighthouse enthusiasts, local fishermen, and a few retirees dispersed quickly, eager to escape the cold. Claire stayed until the last shovel of earth had been turned, watching the mound grow. It felt impossibly final. She had expected to feel a sense of closure, perhaps even relief. Instead, there was only a hollow ache, and the nagging sense that something essential had been left unsaid, undone.

Later, in the cramped office of the town hall, Claire reviewed the coroner's report. The details were stark, bureaucratic. Henry Avery. Age 68. Cause of death: blunt force trauma consistent with a fall. Time of death: estimated between 1:00 AM and 3:00 AM. No foul play indicated. Accidental. The word sat heavy, refusing to settle. An accidental fall from the lighthouse gallery in pitch darkness, the very light he was sworn to keep burning mysteriously out. It didn't square with the meticulous, risk-averse man she knew. Henry Avery didn't make mistakes like that.

She signed the necessary papers, the pen feeling alien in her hand. The clerk, a

pinched-faced woman named Brenda with an air of knowing everything and saying nothing, eyed her over the rim of her spectacles. "Anything else, dear?" she asked, her voice dry as old parchment.

"His personal effects," Claire said, trying to keep her voice even. "Have they been returned?"

"Oh, yes. They're at the cottage. Delivered by Mr. Reyes himself, just this morning." Brenda paused, then added, "Such a good boy, Jonah. Always looking out for the town." Claire simply nodded, already turning to leave. The small-town gossip felt like a sticky web.

Back at the cottage, the air hung heavy with Henry's scent: a mix of salt, old books, and pipe tobacco he'd given up years ago but whose ghost lingered. His coat, a thick woolen oilskin, still hung on a peg by the door. Claire reached for it, a sudden impulse, a need for a tactile connection to him. As she pulled it down, something crinkled in the breast pocket. She fumbled inside and pulled out a single sheet of paper, folded roughly.

It was a page from one of his logbooks, she recognized the precise script. But this page was different. It was singed along one edge, the paper brittle and discolored, as if it had been exposed to extreme heat. The text was mostly legible, a jumble of entries about lamp maintenance and weather, but one section was heavily underlined, almost gouged, and then abruptly ended where the burn damage was worst. She could make out a few fragmented words: "...signal... midnight... channel... not random..." The rest was charred illegibility. Why would a page from his logbook be burned? And why was it tucked, almost hidden, in his coat pocket?

A sudden memory surfaced: Henry, always so particular about his logs, keeping them in their leather-bound volumes on the desk, never out of place. The idea of him tearing a page, let alone burning it, was utterly foreign. It was like finding a crack in a perfectly cast bell.

She spent the rest of the afternoon sorting through his sparse belongings, a pilgrimage through the relics of a life she'd never fully understood. The books were mostly nautical charts and navigation guides, interspersed with a surprising number of literary classics. The kitchen held exactly what a solitary man needed: a single-serving coffee maker, a stack of sturdy plates, a worn teapot. Every item was practical, devoid of sentiment.

As evening drew in, the fog rolled back, thicker than ever, pressing against the windows like a silent, white beast. The foghorn began its mournful, three-second blast, a sound that had been the soundtrack to her childhood. She found herself drifting towards the radio room, the small, cluttered space with its array of dials and antennas.

Henry's presence felt strongest here, among the crackle of static and the hum of unseen currents.

She sat in his worn armchair, the fabric still bearing the impression of his weight, and picked up a heavy, leather-bound logbook from the desk. It was open to a recent entry, dated two days before his death. His script was as precise as ever. She read about lamp tests, atmospheric pressure readings, and then, almost hidden at the bottom, a cryptic entry: "00:12. Traces." Just those two words, followed by a series of numbers that looked like coordinates, but not quite. They were too short, too specific.

The lighthouse tower loomed outside, a dark silhouette against the swirling mist. Its beam, which should have been a steady rhythm of light, was absent. It remained dark, a silent testament to her father's absence. The wind picked up, rattling the windows, and the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

She put the logbook down, the burned page from his jacket still clutched in her hand. "Signal... midnight... not random." The words echoed in her mind. She glanced at her watch. It was nearing eleven-thirty.

A strange tension began to build inside her, a familiar journalistic instinct rising from beneath the layers of grief and numbness. It was the feeling she got when a source was holding back, when a story wasn't quite what it seemed. Her father, the lighthouse keeper, the man of meticulous logs and unflinching protocol, had died with his light out, and a burned, cryptic message in his pocket. It didn't add up.

She stood by the window, peering out at the impenetrable fog, the world beyond the pane a blur of white and gray. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and salt. The only sound was the incessant moan of the foghorn, and the distant, almost imperceptible rumble of the sea.

As the minute hand on her watch crept toward midnight, a faint, almost imperceptible whine cut through the general static from the radio. It was a high, thin tone, insistent and rhythmic. Not the random crackle of the airwaves, but something deliberate, repeating. It was coming from the lighthouse tower itself, a ghost of a sound carried on the night wind. Her heart gave a sudden, hard thump against her ribs. The signal.

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