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The Lighthouse on Blackwater Island

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Introduction

Fog closed around the ferry like a fist, and Blackwater Island rose out of it in fragments—first the black ribs of the jetty, then a ragged line of rooftops beaded with gulls, and finally the lighthouse on its granite knuckle, pale and watchful. Mara Kline stood at the rail with salt grit drying on her lips, fingers tight around a ring of brass keys that didn't feel like they belonged to her. The diesel thrum bled through her bones. She had sworn she'd never come back, and yet the island had found a way to call her home—not with sentiment, but with paperwork and probate and a courier envelope stamped with her father's name.

On the dock, the air smelled of creosote and kelp and the faint, sweet rot of old bait. Locals moved like dark commas in the gray, pausing mid-sentence when they recognized her. A woman at the bait shop window lowered her eyes. Two men in oilskins conferred and didn't wave. Mara tucked her hair under her hood and stepped onto the slick planks, her soles remembering which boards complained, which nails sat proud. Somewhere beyond the harbor sheds, a bell buoy tolled a patient, hollow note. She told herself this would be quick: sign forms, inventory the lighthouse and the papers her father left, hand the rest to an attorney, and be gone before the fog could name her.

The lighthouse door resisted, swollen with weather, then gave with a sigh that smelled of old varnish and cold iron. Inside, the spiral steps climbed, tight and steep, the central column freckled with rust blooms. Her breath echoed in the well, mingling with a soft drip and the distant slap of tide against the rocks. At the top, the lantern room waited in a hushed circle of glass, its Fresnel lens a great faceted eye. Even dormant, the prisms caught a gray smear of daylight and sliced it into thin coins that slid across her hands. She had spent childhood afternoons counting those coins, listening to her father's low voice draw constellations out of fog.

His papers were where the attorney said they would be: in a weathered trunk tucked beneath a canvas tarp in the service room below, its corners dented, its leather gone to suede. Mara knelt, the concrete cold through her jeans, and wiped a crescent of grime from the lid. Inside lay bundles of log sheets tied with cotton string, a tin of spare mantle wicks, a chipped mug, and, wrapped in oilskin and sealed with brittle red wax, a logbook with her father's name and the lighthouse's call sign stamped on the cover. The seal had been pressed with something that left a faint starburst—familiar, yet not one of the station marks she knew. She ran her thumb over it and felt a small, unreasonable tremor of heat in her chest, as if the past could still burn.

She didn't see the letter until she rose and the draft stirred it from where it had been

wedged under the threshold. No envelope, just thick paper folded twice and creased from damp. The ink had bled at the edges of each letter, the hand careful and unadorned. Mara read the single page once, then again, until the words would not arrange themselves any other way: Your father kept the light, but not the truth. The signal wasn't just for ships. If you want answers, watch the water on the nights they don't. Third long, two short. Don't trust anyone who says to leave it alone.

Outside, a skiff engine coughed and settled, a gull ratcheted its complaint across the harbor, and the fog pressed closer to the glass. Mara folded the letter and slipped it into her pocket, suddenly aware of her own pulse, loud in the quiet tower. She had come prepared to be an archivist, to number and box the past until it behaved. But the letter's cadence scratched at old lessons—her father's voice tapping out Morse with a butter knife on the kitchen table, the way he would cut the lantern early on fogless midnights and stand at the gallery rail, listening for something the sea might say back.

She told herself it was nothing more than island theatrics, a prank or a shakedown meant to pry into an inheritance. Yet when she held the sealed logbook to the light, she could see, ghosted through the thick paper, a scatter of notations that didn't look like tides or wind speeds. Columns and repetitions. A careful hand pacing itself. It was the kind of puzzle that lived comfortably in her mind, neat and bounded—until the island, with its blunt edges and long memory, tried to take it away.

As she secured the door for the night, the brass latch clicked like a metronome, steadying. She stood a moment at the gallery rail, the salt lifting to her face, and looked toward town. Through the fog, a few windows glowed low and golden. Farther along the pier, a figure paused beside a coil of line and did not move until she looked away. Mara breathed in diesel and algae and creaking wood and tasted the old ache of being both known and unwelcome. Settle the lighthouse. Settle the papers. That was the plan. But the beam that should have been sweeping the harbor lay dark against the gray, and the letter's words were a hook set deep.

When she finally descended, the keys cold against her palm, the sea bell tolled again—three long, two short—as if mocking the line she had just read. It was only a pattern borne of wind and water and chance, she told herself. Still, she paused on the bottom step and listened, skin prickling, while the island breathed around her and the unseen waters shifted their weight. The light would have to come back on. Something would need to be answered. And whether she was ready or not, Blackwater had already begun to signal.

CHAPTER ONE: ARRIVAL

The lighthouse keeper's cottage smelled of salt and absence. Mara stood in the doorway, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom, listening to the house settle around her like an old man in a chair. The fog had thickened with evening, pressing against the windows like cotton wadding, muffling the world. She set her single bag on the floor—she hadn't intended to stay long enough to need more—and ran a finger along the peeling paint of the doorframe. Beneath the grime, she could just make out the pencil marks from her childhood, a ladder of ascending dates and heights. Her father's blocky numerals, her own spiky script. The last mark was from the summer she turned sixteen, the summer she'd left and not looked back.

The cottage was a two-room afterthought tacked onto the base of the tower, functional rather than comfortable. A cast-iron stove squatted in one corner, its pipe vanishing into a wall darkened with soot. A narrow bed, stripped to its mattress, hugged the far wall beneath a window that looked toward the town. A sink, a pump, a dry sink with chipped enamel. The attorney had mentioned power was still connected, but the single bulb overhead gave a weary, yellowish sigh when she flipped the switch, casting more shadow than light. On the small table, someone—probably the attorney's clerk—had left a stack of official-looking envelopes and a set of fresh linens, still wrapped in plastic. A gesture of practical pity, perhaps.

Mara ignored the envelopes for now. She went back to the door, secured the deadbolt and the chain, the mechanisms loud in the quiet. The brass keys from the introduction felt redundant; the island's memory of her was likely a stronger lock. She lit the stove, more for the company of its ticking metal than for warmth, and put a kettle on. As it heated, she stood by the window, cupping her hands to the glass to peer out. The harbor lights were just visible, blurred pinpricks in the fog. She couldn't see the pier where the figure had stood, but the memory of that still shape made the skin between her shoulder blades tighten.

The whistle of the kettle made her jump. She made tea with a tea bag she found in a tin marked 'SPARE'—it tasted of dust and tannic acid—and sat at the table with the oilskin-wrapped logbook and the anonymous letter before her. Under the stark light, the letter's paper looked older, its fibers coarse. The ink was a deep blue-black, the kind used in fountain pens. No signature. No return to address. Just that stark, unpunctuated message. *Your father kept the light, but not the truth. The signal wasn't just for ships. If you want answers, watch the water on the nights they don't. Third long, two short. Don't trust anyone who says to leave it alone.*

Mara traced the phrase 'third long, two short.' It was a Morse code pattern. Her father

had taught her Morse as soon as she could hold a spoon, tapping it out on tabletops, foghorns, the backs of her hands. *S* was three dots. *O* was three dashes. But ‘third long, two short’ wasn’t standard prosign language. It felt like a fragment, a piece of a longer conversation. She pulled a notepad from her bag—a habit from the archive—and wrote it down, then circled it twice. The author of the note assumed she’d recognize the reference. That felt like a test.

She turned to the logbook. The wax seal, with its starburst impression, was brittle. It crumbled rather than yielded, leaving a fine red dust on her fingers. Inside, the cover page was as the attorney had described: her father’s name, Arthur Kline, and the lighthouse’s official call sign—BLK-7—in stark black letterpress. Below that, in his hand, the dates. It covered the last three years before his disappearance. That was longer than she’d thought; the public records suggested he’d retired from active keeper duties a year earlier. Why keep a private log for an inactive station?

Mara opened it to the first page. The entries were not weather logs. They were dated, yes, and sometimes noted wind or visibility, but they read more like a diary crossed with a ship’s log written by a man who had no ship. Paragraphs of dense, small handwriting described the movement of vessels—some by name, some by description (“green-hulled trawler, high stern”)—and their patterns. He noted the times they passed the light, their headings, their speeds. He noted the phases of the moon, the neap and spring tides. He noted, in a cryptic shorthand she’d have to decipher, meetings or events in town: “Council vote - docks. EH spoke. Unanimous. No discussion.” EH. Elise Harrow, even then.

But threaded through these mundane observations were the odd repetitions. A symbol—like a lowercase ‘t’ with a curl at its base—appeared in the margin next to certain entries. And sequences of numbers: 7-14-33, 11-22-41, 19-8-57. Coordinates? Dates? Page numbers from some other source? They didn’t align with any nautical chart scale she could recall. Mara’s archivist mind, trained to find order in chaos, began to hum. This wasn’t just record-keeping; it was a system. Her father had been documenting something specific, and he’d built a code to keep it private.

A knock at the cottage door was so sudden and sharp it felt like a gunshot in the quiet. Mara’s heart lurched. She closed the logbook with a snap, placed the letter beneath it, and stood. The knock came again, heavier this time. Through the thick, wavy glass of the door’s upper pane, she saw the silhouette of a man. Broad shoulders. A hat.

“Mara?” The voice was male, roughened by weather, but with a familiar timbre that unlocked a drawer in her memory. “It’s Tom. Tom Mercer.”

Tom. The name landed with a weight that was part comfort, part old ache. She unfastened the chain and opened the door. The fog swirled in around him, carrying the smell of wet wool and cedar. He stood on the threshold, taller and thicker than she

remembered, his sandy hair cut short under a police chief's cap. His face had lost its youthful softness, etched now with the kind of lines that come from squinting into sun and worry. He held a heavy-duty flashlight in one hand, its beam pointed at the ground.

"Saw the light on," he said. His eyes, a pale, clear blue, scanned her face quickly, then looked past her into the cottage. "Wanted to make sure you were settled. And that the stove wasn't trying to kill you."

"The stove seems peaceful," Mara said, stepping back. "For now."

He entered, ducking slightly out of habit under the low doorframe, and the small room shrank. He glanced at the logbook on the table, then away. "Power's on?"

"Seems to be. The attorney's office left linens."

Tom nodded, shifting his weight. The silence stretched, filled by the drip from the eaves and the stove's metallic tick. He'd been her first boyfriend, a summer romance at seventeen, all fumbling hands and shared secrets on the shingle beach. Then she'd left for college and a life elsewhere, and he'd stayed, weaving himself into the island's fabric until he wore the uniform. The last time she'd seen him was at her mother's funeral, five years ago, a brief, stiff handshake in a mainland cemetery.

"Town knows you're here," he said finally. It wasn't an accusation, but it wasn't a warm welcome either. "Word travels faster than the ferry."

"I noticed the welcoming committee at the dock."

Tom sighed, a sound that seemed to carry the weight of the island itself. "It's not personal. Mostly. It's... complicated. Your dad was complicated. And his leaving... people don't forget."

"He didn't *leave*," Mara said, the old defensive edge sharp in her voice. "He disappeared."

"I know. I was here. I helped search." He met her eyes, and for a second, the old Tom was there—the boy who'd listened, who'd believed her when she said the island felt like a trap. Then the cop face returned. "The investigation is still open, technically. Cold, but open."

"You're here in an official capacity?"

He hesitated. "Partly. Also as someone who knew him. And you." He nodded toward the logbook. "The attorney mentioned the trunk. Anything useful in there for settling

the property?"

It was a cop question, she realized. Casual, but pointed. "I've just started. It's mostly personal logs. Weather notes."

Tom's gaze lingered on the logbook's cover, on the stamped call sign. "He kept meticulous records. To a fault." He paused, choosing his next words with visible care. "Mara, some people would be happier if you just signed the papers, put the lighthouse on the market, and let things be. There's a developer interested in the harbor area. Big plans. It means jobs, money. Stirring up the past about Arthur... it won't make you popular."

"Is that a warning, Tom?"

"It's a fact." He straightened, his duty apparently done. "Lock up tight. The fog's supposed to hold till morning. Call the station if you need anything. The number's the same." He moved to the door, then stopped, his hand on the frame. His voice lowered. "He was a good man, your dad. He just carried a lot of water for this town. More than most knew." With that, he stepped back into the fog, his flashlight beam cutting a brief, pale swath before being swallowed.

Mara closed the door, locked it, and leaned against the wood. *Carried a lot of water.* An island idiom. It meant bearing burdens, shouldering blame. What burdens had Arthur Kline carried? And for whom?

She returned to the table. Tom's visit had crystallized something. The logbook wasn't just a puzzle; it was a potential landmine. His careful question about its contents, the developer he'd mentioned—the pieces were aligning in a pattern she didn't like. She turned back to the first page, this time with her notepad beside her. Methodically, she began to transcribe the odd entries, the symbols, the number sequences. She noted the dates of entries marked with the curl-t symbol. She counted the repetitions.

Near the back, the entries grew more sparse, the handwriting tighter, more urgent. One, dated three days before his disappearance, read: *Bad weather coming. More than storm. Signal agreement must hold. E.H. pushing for final commitment. The light cannot be used for this. Cannot.* The final 'cannot' was underlined three times, the pen nearly tearing the paper. Below it, in a different ink, a single line had been added later, the hand hurried: *They know I'm watching. The trunk is safe. The truth is in the pattern.*

The truth is in the pattern. Mara looked at the scattered symbols and numbers on her notepad. A pattern. Her father had been an archivist of a different kind, documenting a secret history of Blackwater. And someone had wanted him to stop. She thought of the figure on the pier, of Tom's veiled warning, of the anonymous letter's urgent plea. The

island wasn't just unwelcoming; it was actively defending its secrets.

She made a decision. She would not be signing papers tomorrow. She would not be putting the lighthouse on the market. She would do what she was trained to do: she would catalogue, analyze, and preserve the record. She would find the pattern. And if the pattern led to the truth about her father, then the island and its powerful residents, this Elise Harrow and her 'big plans,' would have to deal with an archivist who understood that some things are not meant to be buried.

Mara brewed a second, stronger cup of tea. She pulled the chain on the overhead light, plunging the cottage into near darkness save for the focused beam of a small desk lamp she found in a drawer. The fog outside was absolute, a soundless, sightless blanket. The world had shrunk to this circle of light, this table, this book. She opened the logbook again, this time starting from the very first page, reading every word. The hunt had begun.

The hours bled away. Mara's eyes grew gritty, her back stiff. The stove ticked as it cooled. Outside, the fog began its slow, silent retreat, not lifting but thinning, until the black water of the harbor became visible as a darker stripe against the land. The tide was going out, leaving the rocks around the lighthouse base slick and gleaming. Mara copied the last of the number sequences onto her notepad. Seven-14-33. Eleven-22-41. Nineteen-8-57. She stared at them, willing them to resolve into something recognizable. Dates? No, the months didn't align. Coordinates? The seconds values were too high for standard notation. Maybe they referenced something else—a book, a code table, a previous log.

Her gaze fell on the logbook's binding. It was a quality leather cover, the kind that would last. She ran her fingers along the spine. The stitching was tight, professional. But near the top, there was a slight irregularity, a bulge where the leather didn't lie flat. She pressed it. Something shifted inside the cover. Heart quickening, Mara took the thin letter opener from her bag—another archivist's tool—and carefully worked it into the seam. The leather gave with a soft tear. Inside the spine, tucked into a narrow pocket created by the binding, was a small, flat packet wrapped in waxed paper.

With trembling fingers, she unwrapped it. Inside was a photograph, old and faded. It showed a group of men on a dock, standing beside crates marked with military insignia. In the center, grinning, was a much younger version of her father. To his right stood a man Mara recognized from island history: Silas Harrow, Elise's grandfather, the man who'd founded the shipping business that had built half the town. On the back of the photo, in pencil, was a date—1943—and a list of initials. A.H. S.H. E.K. And one circled: *The Agreement*.

Below the photograph lay a single, thin brass key. It was old, the head shaped like an anchor. It matched no lock Mara knew. She held it up to the light. It felt warm in her

palm, as if it had been waiting. The pattern was beginning to emerge, and it led not just to a secret, but to a legacy. A wartime agreement. A family. A lighthouse that was more than a beacon. Mara closed her hand around the key, the metal edges biting into her skin. The fog was gone. The first gray light of dawn was touching the eastern sky. And in the harbor below, a single light on a moored boat blinked off, as if someone had been watching the lighthouse all night, and had just seen her find what they were looking for.

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