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The Silent Signal at Midnight

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CHAPTER ONE: The Flickering Ghost

Detective Miles Corbin squinted through the salt-laced spray, the beam from his flashlight a weak sword against the encroaching gloom. The old Blackwood Point lighthouse, a skeletal finger against the bruised twilight sky, stood silent and stoic, long abandoned save for the gulls that nested in its upper reaches. Yet, for the past week, residents of the sleepy coastal town of Port Blossom had reported strange, intermittent flashes of light emanating from its derelict lantern room. Not the steady, rhythmic pulse of a working lighthouse, but erratic, almost frantic blinks. A ghost, some whispered, of the old keeper, Silas Croft.

Miles, however, dealt in facts, not phantoms. Ghosts didn't leave behind a lingering scent of ozone and copper, nor did they cause sudden, inexplicable power surges that had twice plunged half of Port Blossom into darkness. The local constabulary, a three-man operation including Miles, Chief Miller, and Officer Jenkins, had initially dismissed the reports as adolescent pranks or overactive imaginations fueled by too much cheap whiskey. But the power surges were a different matter entirely, and Chief Miller, a man whose patience was as thin as his hairline, had finally authorized a proper investigation.

Tonight was Miles's turn. He'd drawn the short straw, or perhaps the long one, depending on your appetite for nocturnal coastal climbs. The path leading to the lighthouse was less a path and more a suggestion, a treacherous ascent of loose shale and stubborn gorse, made even more challenging by the strengthening wind. The air tasted metallic, a premonition of the storm brewing on the horizon, though the meteorologists were still stubbornly clinging to their "partly cloudy" forecast. They were wrong, as usual.

He reached the base of the lighthouse, a hulking cylinder of weathered stone, its iron door groaning on rusted hinges. The interior was a damp, echoing void, the air thick with the smell of decay and something else... something chemical. He clicked on his more powerful tactical flashlight, its beam cutting through the inky blackness, illuminating spirals of dust motes dancing in the cold air. The winding staircase, once a pristine ascent of polished oak, was now a precarious climb of splintered wood and corroded iron. Each step sent a creak of protest through the ancient structure.

Midway up, he paused, his gaze sweeping the shadowy corners. There was no sign of forced entry, no obvious vandalism. Just the slow, inexorable march of time and neglect. Yet, the reports weren't just about lights. One fisherman, Old Man Hemlock, a man whose sanity was often debated but whose eyesight was legendary, claimed to have seen "figures" moving within the lantern room, distorted by the aged glass. Miles

had humored him, but now, a prickle of unease started to crawl up his spine.

As he neared the top, the air grew colder, and the faint, metallic tang intensified. He pushed open the heavy trapdoor leading into the lantern room. A blast of wind whistled through the broken panes of glass, stirring up a flurry of dust and what looked like fine, metallic particles. He swept his flashlight around the circular room, its beam playing over the empty pedestals where the massive Fresnel lens once sat. It had been removed decades ago, salvaged by a maritime museum in the city.

The room was surprisingly bare, devoid of the usual debris one might expect in a derelict building. No empty beer cans, no graffiti. But then his light caught something. On the dusty floor, amidst the fine metallic dust, were distinct scuff marks, as if heavy equipment had been dragged across the stone. And then, he saw it. Tucked away in a dark corner, half-hidden beneath a sagging piece of canvas, was a tangle of wires, glowing faintly with a residual charge.

Miles knelt, carefully pushing aside the canvas. Beneath it lay a collection of electronic components: circuit boards, capacitors, what looked like a custom-built power supply. And attached to a makeshift antenna, a cluster of high-intensity LED lights. Not the old, incandescent bulbs of a traditional lighthouse, but modern, powerful LEDs. Someone wasn't just playing pranks; they were actively operating a sophisticated piece of equipment in an abandoned lighthouse.

He touched one of the wires. It was still warm. The source of the flickering ghost, then. And the power surges. This setup, whatever its purpose, was drawing significant power. But from where? The lighthouse's power grid had been disconnected years ago. He followed the thicker cables, tracing them across the floor and down a narrow, previously unnoticed conduit drilled into the stone wall. This wasn't a casual setup. This was professional, deliberate.

He pulled out his phone, the signal predictably weak. He managed to send a garbled text to Chief Miller: "Found something. Looks like serious tech. Request backup." He doubted it would go through clearly, but it was worth a shot. He then started documenting everything with his phone camera, his detective's instinct kicking into high gear. This was no prank. This was something far more intricate, and potentially, far more dangerous.

As he finished photographing the equipment, a sudden, sharp crack echoed from below, followed by a metallic scrape. Miles froze, his hand instinctively going to the Glock holstered at his hip. He wasn't alone. He clicked off his flashlight, plunging the lantern room into near total darkness, save for the faint glow of the city lights shimmering on the distant horizon. He held his breath, straining to hear over the howl of the wind.

Another scrape, closer this time, followed by the distinctive creak of the old staircase. Someone was coming up. And they weren't trying to be quiet. Or perhaps, they didn't care if they were heard. A cold dread settled in his gut. He hadn't expected company, certainly not after dark in this remote location. He pressed himself against the curved wall, his heart thumping against his ribs. The beam of a flashlight cut through the trapdoor opening.

A figure emerged, tall and broad, silhouetted against the dim light from below. They carried what looked like a large, metallic case. Miles remained absolutely still, a shadow among shadows. The figure didn't immediately notice him. They moved towards the equipment, their flashlight beam sweeping across the custom-built circuitry. A low murmur escaped their lips, too indistinct to make out any words.

Then, the figure moved suddenly, their hand reaching for the tangle of wires. Miles knew he couldn't let them take or destroy the evidence. He lunged forward, shouting, "Police! Don't move!"

The figure spun around, startled, dropping the metallic case with a resounding clatter. A glint of metal flashed in their hand. Not a gun, Miles realized with a jolt, but a heavy wrench. The figure swung it wildly, catching Miles on the shoulder. A searing pain shot through him, but he held his ground, tackling the assailant.

They crashed to the floor, the wind knocked out of both of them. The flashlight skittered away, its beam bouncing erratically off the walls and ceiling. Miles grappled with the figure, a desperate struggle in the semi-darkness. He tried to pin their arms, but they were surprisingly strong, twisting and turning with a frantic energy. He could feel the rough fabric of their jacket, the unmistakable scent of stale tobacco and the sea.

His hand found a loose piece of iron from the broken window frame. He swung it, connecting with a dull thud against the figure's side. They grunted in pain, their grip momentarily loosening. Miles seized the opportunity, rolling over and scrambling to his feet, pulling his Glock from its holster. He pointed it at the struggling figure, who was now clutching their side.

"Stay down!" Miles commanded, his voice hoarse. "Don't move, or I will fire!"

The figure slowly rose to their knees, their back to Miles. They were breathing heavily, their shoulders heaving. Miles could see the outline of their head, covered by a thick hood. He kept the gun steady, his finger resting on the trigger guard. He needed to see their face, identify them.

"Turn around, slowly," Miles ordered. "Hands where I can see them."

The figure hesitated, then slowly began to turn. As they did, their hand shot out, not towards Miles, but towards a dark corner of the room. A small, dark object flew through the air, disappearing through a broken pane of glass. Miles fired a warning shot into the ceiling, the deafening blast echoing through the confined space. The figure flinched, but didn't stop.

With surprising speed, they lunged towards the trapdoor, scrambling down the narrow opening. Miles cursed, holstering his weapon and rushing to the edge. He could hear their heavy footsteps clattering down the spiral staircase, a frantic descent. He knew he couldn't risk a pursuit down the rickety stairs in the dark, not without knowing what he was chasing or who else might be waiting below.

He pulled out his phone again, hoping the signal had improved. He needed to get a full team out here, seal off the area. The "flickering ghost" had just become a very real, very dangerous adversary. He knelt beside the abandoned electronic equipment, its wires still faintly glowing. Whatever these signals were, they were important enough for someone to risk life and limb to protect them. And Miles Corbin had just become a witness, and a target.

CHAPTER TWO: Echoes in the Mist

The descent from the Blackwood Point lighthouse was a blurred montage of burning lungs and precarious footwork. Miles didn't chase the intruder all the way to the bottom; he knew the structural integrity of those stairs was a gamble he'd likely lose in a footrace. Instead, he reached the ground level just in time to hear the roar of a powerful marine engine cutting through the rhythmic thrum of the surf. By the time he sprinted out onto the jagged cliffside, the tail-lights of a small, fast-moving craft were being swallowed by a wall of fog that had rolled in with predatory speed. The "partly cloudy" forecast had officially transitioned into a soup-thick maritime mist.

He stood on the shore, the salt spray stinging the fresh bruise on his shoulder where the wrench had connected. His breath came in ragged plumes of white. The silence that followed the boat's departure was heavier than before, punctuated only by the mournful groan of a distant bell buoy. He pulled out his radio, clicking the receiver. The static was a violent, screeching wall of noise. He frowned, shaking the device. Even in a dead zone, the interference was unusually aggressive, sounding less like atmospheric disturbance and more like a deliberate broadcast of white noise.

Miles began the trek back toward his parked cruiser, his mind whirring faster than the electronic gizmos he'd found upstairs. Port Blossom was a town where the most exciting event of the month was usually a dispute over a property line or a runaway golden retriever. This level of technical sophistication suggested something far beyond local mischief. The metallic dust he'd seen—likely aluminum or iron filings—indicated some kind of high-frequency transmission or perhaps a primitive heat sink for the LED array. As he reached his car, the interior dome light flickered weakly before dying, a grim reminder of the power surges that had plagued the town.

The drive back to the station was a slow crawl through the gray void. The mist clung to the windshield like wet wool. Every few miles, Miles noticed the streetlights of the coastal road pulsating. They didn't just dim; they throbbed in a rhythmic pattern, three short pulses followed by a long pause. He pulled over near the Old Stone Bridge to observe. It wasn't a malfunction of the power grid—it was a reaction. Something was bleeding into the town's electrical infrastructure, using the wiring of Port Blossom as a giant, makeshift antenna.

When he finally pulled into the gravel lot of the station, Chief Miller was already there, pacing the porch with a thermos of coffee that smelled more like burnt chicory than beans. Miller was a man built like a fire hydrant, sturdy and difficult to move once he'd set his mind on something. He looked at Miles's torn jacket and the grime on his face, his bushy eyebrows knitting together in a silent demand for an explanation. Miles

didn't wait for the question; he started detailing the electronic setup, the assault, and the escaping boat.

"Electronic components? In Silas Croft's old tower?" Miller grunted, lead-stepping into the small office. "The place hasn't had a legal copper wire in it since the seventies. You're telling me someone rigged a pirate broadcast station over the Atlantic?" Miller sat behind his desk, which was piled high with folders and a half-eaten donut that looked like it had seen better days. He didn't look convinced, but he also didn't look like he was going to ignore a direct assault on one of his officers.

Miles leaned against the doorframe, gingerly rubbing his shoulder. "It wasn't just a broadcast, Chief. The scale of the power draw is what's bothering me. To make those LEDs flash that bright and cause the surges we've seen, they aren't just tapping a battery. They're leaching. I think they've tapped into the old underwater cables—the ones the Navy abandoned after the war. If they've spliced into those, they have a direct line to the regional substation."

The Chief sighed, a long, weary sound. "The Navy cables are supposed to be dead, Miles. Encased in concrete and buried under six feet of silt. You're talking about a diving operation, heavy engineering, and a working knowledge of forty-year-old encrypted grids. Who in Port Blossom has that kind of time or money? Old Man Hemlock? He can barely navigate his way to the pub without a compass."

"It's not a local," Miles insisted. "The guy I tackled... he was strong, professional. He didn't panic. He threw something out the window before he bolted. A drive, maybe, or a key. And then there's the boat. That wasn't a fishing dory. That was a high-performance hull, likely carbon fiber. You don't see those around here unless someone's lost on their way to the Hamptons." He pulled out his phone to show the photos, but his heart sank. The screen was a kaleidoscope of corrupted pixels. Every image he'd taken in the lantern room was a digital graveyard of neon streaks.

The electromagnetic pulse or whatever field had been active in that room had fried his hardware. He cursed under his breath, sliding the useless device onto the desk. Miller picked it up, turning it over as if he could see the ghost of the evidence through the glass. The fact that the phone was ruined seemed to hold more weight with the Chief than Miles's verbal report. It was physical proof of an invisible force, a technological footprint left by a very sophisticated ghost.

"Alright," Miller said, his voice dropping an octave. "I'll call the Harbor Master. If there's a fancy boat lurking in the mist, Ben will know about it. But Miles, keep this quiet. If the town hears there's some kind of high-tech saboteur in the lighthouse, we'll have a lynch mob of paranoid retirees or, worse, a swarm of 'ghost hunters' from the city clogging up the roads. We treat this as a trespassing and assault case for now. No mention of secret signals or Navy cables."

Miles nodded, though he knew the "keep it quiet" ship had likely sailed. In a town like Port Blossom, a police cruiser speeding toward Blackwood Point was enough to set the phone trees on fire. He left the office and headed for the small evidence locker in the back, grabbing a fresh flashlight and a handheld radio that predated the digital age. If the high-tech stuff was failing, he'd go back to the basics. Analog didn't care about electromagnetic interference quite as much as the modern toys did.

He stepped back out into the night, the mist having turned into a fine, freezing drizzle. He didn't head home. Instead, he drove toward the harbor. He wanted to speak to Old Man Hemlock. The fisherman might be eccentric, but he spent more time watching the horizon than anyone else in the county. If there were echoes in the mist, Hemlock would have heard them first. The docks were a maze of creaking timber and clinking rigging, the masts of the moored boats swaying like metronomes in the dark.

He found Hemlock in his usual spot, a dilapidated shack at the end of Pier 7 that smelled of fish guts and kerosene. The old man was sitting on a crate, mending a net by the light of a single oil lamp. He didn't look up when Miles approached. He just pointed a gnarled finger toward the mouth of the bay. "She's singing again tonight, isn't she, Detective? The big iron lady on the hill. She's got a lot to say for a girl who's been mute for thirty years."

Miles sat on a neighboring crate, ignoring the dampness. "You saw the lights again tonight, Silas? Before the fog rolled in?" He used the old man's first name, a rare sign of familiarity. Hemlock looked up, his eyes milky with cataracts but sharp with an inner focus. "Not just lights, boy. Sounds. Not sounds you hear with your ears, but sounds you feel in your teeth. Like a hum. A low, vibrating hum that makes the crabs crawl right out of the pots. They don't like it. I don't like it."

"Did you see a boat?" Miles asked, leaning in. "A fast one. Dark hull, maybe twenty-five feet." Hemlock nodded slowly, his hands never stopping their rhythmic weaving of the net. "Came out of the cove near the Devil's Throat. No lights, no transponder. Moving like a shark in the shallows. It didn't head for the open sea, though. It tucked back in toward the old cannery. People think the cannery is empty, but I see the trucks. Late at night, when the moon is down. Big, unmarked vans."

This was new information. The cannery had been closed since the late nineties, a rusted hulk of corrugated iron on the north end of the beach. It was a place for teenagers to drink and for shadows to grow long. If there were trucks moving in and out, it meant the lighthouse wasn't an isolated incident. It was part of a circuit. Miles thanked the old man, leaving him to his nets and his ghosts. The pieces were starting to form a pattern, but it was a pattern written in a language Miles didn't yet understand.

As he walked back to his car, he heard a faint sound—a rhythmic clicking coming from the speakers of the moored boats. One by one, the electronic navigation systems on the luxury yachts began to beep in unison. It was a haunting, electronic chorus in the dark. The signal wasn't silent anymore; it was screaming through every speaker, every wire, and every circuit in the harbor. The echoes in the mist were no longer just whispers of the past; they were a countdown to something Miles could feel in his very bones. He looked back toward Blackwood Point, but the lighthouse was gone, buried deep in the white shroud of the fog.

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