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The Lighthouse Keeper's Secret

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Introduction

The road wound through the trees, twisting ever closer to the ragged coastline, each mile drawing Elise Maddox further from the life she had known—and the heartbreak she wished to leave behind. Salt-streaked winds rattled the windows of her battered car, carrying with them the scents of brine and seaweed, as if the Atlantic itself was intent on marking her arrival in this strange, wild corner of Maine. The divorce papers nestled in the glove compartment felt both impossibly distant and painfully fresh; a silent passenger on her journey into the unknown.

It was hardly comfort she came seeking, but perhaps solace—a pause from the relentless questions and unsolicited advice of friends in the city. The inheritance had arrived as a shock: an imposing letter sealed in thick cream, announcing she was the unexpected heir of the Tern Point Lighthouse, bequeathed to her by a great-uncle she'd never met, whose existence her family had barely mentioned. With no job to tie her down and nothing more pressing but her own battered pride, Elise set her sights on Tern Point, planning to survey, renovate, and sell the aged property as quickly as possible.

From the moment the lighthouse came into view—rising stark and solitary above the crashing waves, its weatherworn stones standing sentinel against the brooding sky—Elise felt a shiver of something she couldn't name. The structure was beautiful, yes, but touched by an unmistakable air of melancholy, as though it mourned with the sea each time the tides pulled away. Windows glinted like watchful eyes. The locals she passed in the town square watched her too, their guarded greetings and wary glances suggesting that a stranger's arrival was an event in itself.

Her first night was marked by restless sleep and the mournful call of foghorns drifting in from the water. The old lighthouse was full of echoes—a faint scraping behind the walls, a door that refused to stay closed, the chill of decades' solitude pressed into every surface. Elise pressed her palm to the cool glass of the lantern room, gazing out over a wild landscape where waves battered rocks with ceaseless fury. The keepers' logbooks, cracked and dusty on the bookshelves, hinted at routines and secrets stretching back to years she could barely imagine.

Yet, beneath Elise's hesitation grew a wellspring of curiosity and determination. Her instincts as a journalist stirred at the subtle oddities: the cryptic warning in the lawyer's letter, the knowing hush in the townsfolk's responses when she asked about the property's history. Even as she intended to keep her heart guarded and her stay short, the mystery threaded through the lighthouse called to her, promising both danger and revelation with every hidden creak of the floorboards.

As the first days faded into stormy, uncertain nights, Elise found herself standing between past and present, her own battered heart echoing the lighthouse's silent vigil. She had come to let go—but already, she sensed that the coast held secrets that refused to be washed away with the tide. And as dusk gathered and the wind picked up, Elise realized her journey was only just beginning.

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CHAPTER ONE: Arrival on the Edge of the World

The last gasp of a dying summer clung to the air, thick with the scent of pine and impending rain as Elise's dusty sedan finally rattled into Tern Point. The town wasn't so much a town as a collection of weather-beaten shacks and a handful of sturdy clapboard houses clustered around a small, working harbor. Fishing boats, their paint peeling like sun-scorched skin, bobbed rhythmically in the grey water, their masts a skeletal forest against the brooding sky. A lone lobster buoy, bright orange against the muted palette of the coast, drifted lazily past a decaying pier.

She parked in front of the Tern Point General Store, its faded red paint a cheerful defiance against the bleakness. A bell above the door jingled as she stepped inside, a sound that seemed to echo in the sudden quiet. The air was a comforting blend of coffee, old wood, and something indefinable, like sea salt mixed with secrets. An elderly woman, her face a roadmap of wrinkles etched by sun and wind, looked up from behind the counter, her eyes, as blue and sharp as glass shards, fixed on Elise.

"Can I help you, dear?" the woman asked, her voice raspy but not unkind. A thick, knitted shawl was draped over her shoulders, despite the relative warmth inside.

"I'm Elise Maddox," Elise said, trying to project a confidence she didn't feel. "I'm here about the lighthouse. The Oakhaven property."

A flicker of something—recognition? Wariness?—crossed the woman's face. "Ah. The Oakhaven. Expected you sooner. Been quite the talk, that inheritance." She paused, as if weighing her next words. "I'm Agnes. Agnes Perkins. Run this place. And most of the gossip, if you ask around." A thin smile touched her lips, a brief flash of humor.

"It's a surprise," Elise admitted, clutching the strap of her handbag. "I didn't even know I had a great-uncle named Silas Oakhaven."

Agnes hummed, her eyes still assessing. "Silas was a private man. Kept to himself. More than most, even for a lighthouse keeper." She pushed a small, battered ledger across the counter. "He stocked up here, mostly. Good man, for all his peculiarities. Paid his tabs on time."

Elise felt a prickle of unease. Peculiarities? What did that even mean? She wanted to ask, but Agnes had already turned, reaching for a jar of pickled eggs on a high shelf. The bell above the door jingled again, and a burly man, smelling faintly of fish and diesel, entered. He nodded curtly to Agnes, then his gaze, just as sharp as hers, settled on Elise.

"This here's Elise Maddox, Ben," Agnes announced, without preamble. "The new lighthouse owner."

Ben, a man whose frame seemed as sturdy and unyielding as the granite cliffs outside, simply grunted. His eyes, though, were unreadable as they swept over Elise, a mix of curiosity and something akin to disapproval. He didn't offer a hand, nor a greeting, merely retrieved a small bag of bait from a cooler and left as silently as he'd arrived. The bell jangled a second time, leaving a heavy silence in its wake.

"Don't mind Ben," Agnes said, as if reading Elise's thoughts. "Folks around here are... set in their ways. Silas kept that light for fifty years. Hard to imagine anyone else there." She leaned closer, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "Especially after what happened."

Elise's journalistic instincts, long dormant under the weight of her personal troubles, sparked to life. "What happened?"

Agnes straightened, a strange look on her face. "Best you talk to Sheriff Brody about that. Or the lawyer, Mr. Finch. Not my place to be spreading old tales. Just know that lighthouse holds more than just a light, dear. It holds history." She paused, then added, "And some of it, folks around here would prefer stayed buried."

The conversation ended abruptly as another customer entered, and Agnes turned her attention to them, a polite but firm dismissal in her manner. Elise bought a coffee and a bag of local blueberry muffins, her mind churning. *History. Buried secrets.* It was more than she'd bargained for, more than she wanted, yet a nagging curiosity had taken root.

Armed with directions from Agnes—a series of winding turns down narrow, unpaved roads—Elise set off again. The landscape grew wilder with each mile, the trees giving way to stunted, salt-blasted pines clinging stubbornly to rocky outcrops. The air grew colder, heavier, charged with the promise of a coming storm. The ocean, a vast, restless presence, grew louder, its roar a constant, primal sound.

And then, she saw it.

Rising from a jagged promontory, silhouetted against a sky the color of bruised plums, was Tern Point Lighthouse. It was larger, more imposing than any picture had conveyed. The stone tower, once pristine, was now streaked with dark damp patches, its beacon room a skeletal cage against the clouds. A keeper's cottage, attached to the base, looked as if it had sagged under the weight of generations of Atlantic gales, its windows vacant eyes staring out at the turbulent sea. The paint on the railings was peeling, the small fence around the property broken in places, as if something had

tried, and failed, to contain the wildness.

A shiver traced its way down Elise's spine, unrelated to the sudden drop in temperature. It was a feeling of profound isolation, of being utterly alone on the edge of the world. The ocean crashed against the rocks below with an almost violent energy, sending plumes of spray high into the air. This wasn't solace; it was a challenge. A beautiful, formidable challenge.

She killed the engine, the sudden silence inside the car replaced by the symphony of the sea and the cry of gulls. Stepping out, the wind immediately assaulted her, whipping her hair around her face and tugging at her clothes. The air tasted sharp, of salt and decaying seaweed. She walked slowly, hesitantly, towards the cottage door, each step crunching on the gravel drive.

The front door, thick and made of dark wood, groaned as she pushed it open. The interior was shrouded in gloom, the windows obscured by grime and sea salt. The air inside was still and heavy, smelling faintly of mildew and something else, something metallic and old, like forgotten iron. Dust motes danced in the sparse beams of light that pierced the gloom.

The house was cold, a deep, pervasive chill that seemed to emanate from the very stones themselves. Furniture, draped in white sheets like ghostly figures, stood silent witness to decades of solitude. A grandfather clock in the corner had long since stopped, its hands frozen at half past three. Elise pulled her lightweight jacket tighter around her, feeling utterly dwarfed by the space and its history.

She moved through the living room, into a small, functional kitchen, and then up a creaking staircase to the second floor. A bedroom, clearly Silas's, held a narrow cot and a worn wooden dresser. On the bedside table lay a single, tattered paperback novel, its pages yellowed and brittle. Beyond the bedroom was a short, enclosed walkway that led directly into the base of the lighthouse tower itself.

The tower was a spiraling climb of worn iron steps, the air within it even colder and denser. As she ascended, the circular walls seemed to close in, the sound of the wind outside intensifying, a mournful howl through unseen cracks. She reached the lantern room, the glass panes streaked with salt and rain, but offering an unparalleled view of the roiling Atlantic. The massive Fresnel lens, a masterpiece of prisms and brass, stood silent and dark, its light extinguished.

Elise placed her hand on the cold glass, gazing out at the furious expanse of ocean. The waves crashed endlessly against the rocks below, a relentless assault on the ancient land. This place wasn't just a structure; it was a living, breathing entity, shaped by the elements, holding its breath against the storms, and whispering secrets to those who dared to listen.

She spent the remainder of the afternoon making tentative explorations, finding a bathroom that surprisingly had running, if cold, water, and noting the boxes of Silas's personal effects stacked neatly in a small study off the living room. Everything was orderly, almost obsessively so, as if Silas Oakhaven had meticulously prepared for his own quiet departure. But a peculiar tension still hummed in the air, a sense of something unfinished, something waiting.

As dusk began to paint the sky in hues of bruised purple and angry orange, Elise realized she hadn't even bothered to unpack. The thought of spending the night in this echoing, desolate place, alone with the ghosts of its past, was both daunting and strangely compelling. The wind picked up, rattling the windows of the cottage, a prelude to the storm that Agnes had hinted at. The lighthouse stood defiant, a silent sentry against the encroaching darkness. And as the first fat drops of rain splattered against the glass, Elise knew, with a certainty that chilled her to the bone, that her plan to simply renovate and sell this place was already dissolving, like sea foam on the tide. The lighthouse, and its secrets, had already laid claim to her.

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