

LEGACY
of the
LIGHT

By
Todd A. Gipstein

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*Dedicated to Ed, Fuzz and Rick, my foundation,
and to Marcia, my light.*

Prologue

Millions of years ago, in a steaming prehistoric jungle, a tiny spider makes its way down the trunk of an enormous tree. He stops to explore something on the bark. Behind him, a bead of thick golden resin trickles down, moving very slowly because it is so viscous and sticky. Its path is random, constantly altered by the rough texture of the bark.

The spider continues to probe and nudge what he's found. He dallies too long: the resin catches up to him. It touches the spider's rear leg. He turns to see what is there. In the time it has taken him to react, the resin has oozed a bit further. It clings to his leg and is touching a second. The spider pulls away, but the liquid is far too sticky, too thick. It holds him in a grip that he can't escape. The resin continues down, pooling around the spider like a miniature ocean wave. He struggles desperately, but in a few moments the resin has engulfed the spider's body completely.

Inside his sticky prison, the spider cannot move, cannot breath. He dies, not the victim of a predator, but of staying too long in one place, oblivious to the approaching danger. The bead continues down the tree, carrying the dead spider along in a golden tomb. The resin oozes into a patch of sun. The heat dries it a bit, slowing its descent even more. It finally stops. In a few hours, the bead has hardened into a tiny glowing sphere that is impervious to rain and heat and ice and time. The spider is perfectly preserved. It will not rot. It will forever be as it is now, a tiny speck entombed in a jewel-like bead of amber.

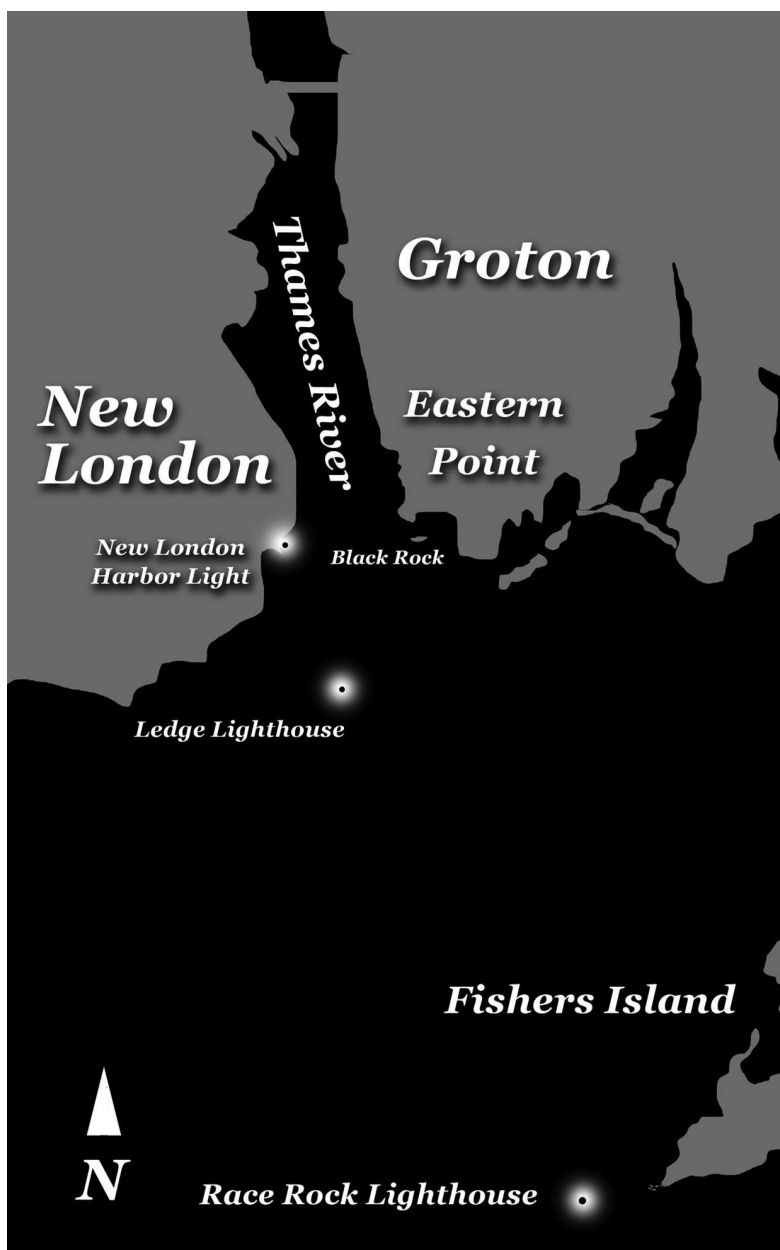
Over time, the jungle will die. The amber itself will be entombed in the ground. There it will rest, hidden in the darkness for millions of years. Eventually humans will find the bit of

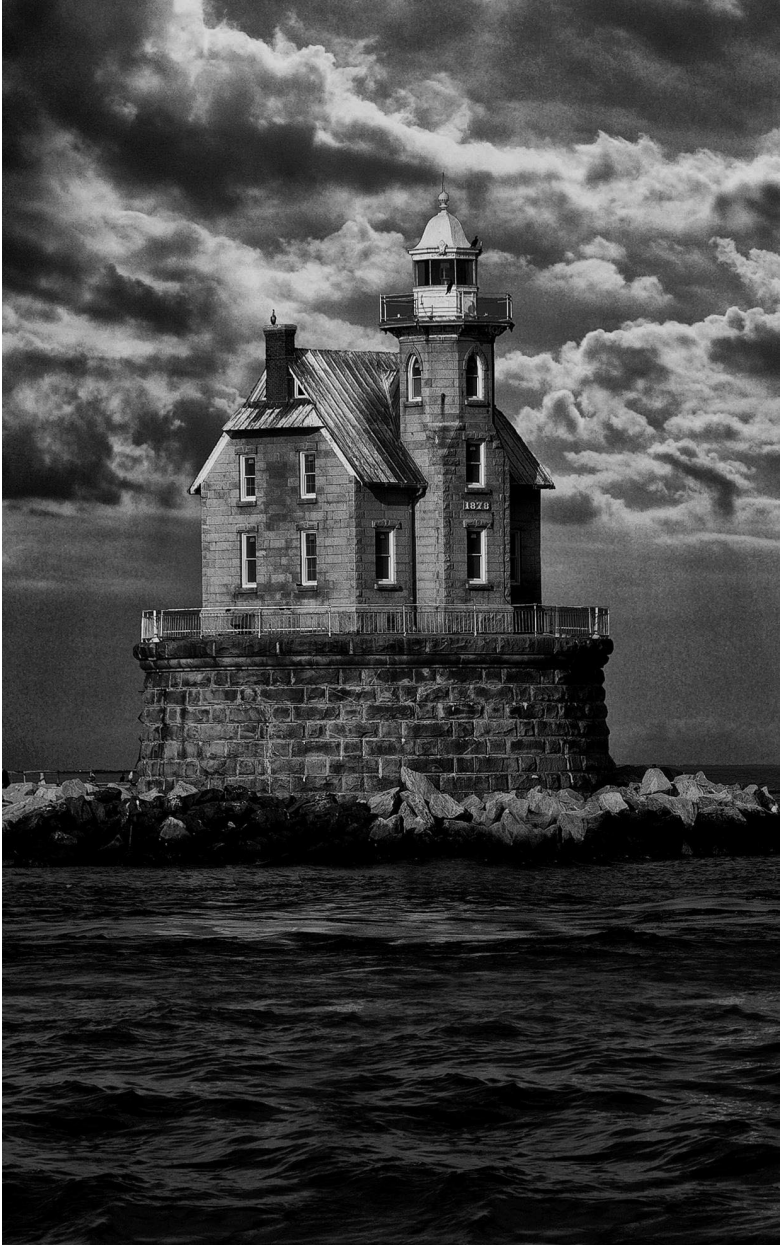
amber. It will be prized for its beauty and the evocative power of the ancient life it holds within. They will fashion the amber into a piece of jewelry—a ring. Like so many things, it will journey far, touch many lives. Its exact drift through history is not documented and cannot be known.

People will be fascinated by the amber and the tiny prehistoric spider, whose fatal moment of inattention is captured, as if in a photograph. And like an old photograph, the bead of amber has captured a moment in time and preserved it forever. It is haunting and mysterious. It invites us to shine the light of our imaginations into it. In the glow of that light, the spider lives again and its story is given new meaning.

PART 1

1907







1

“Another goddamned storm!”

Race Rock lighthouse stood alone in the storm, its own little island, surrounded by an angry sea that was willfully trying to destroy it. Or so it seemed to the keeper of the light, locked inside, assaulted by the roar of the waves and the rattle of rain against the windowpanes.

“Another goddamned storm!”

Nathaniel Bowen cursed the weather again, and poured himself another whiskey. It was a late afternoon in February, 1907. The sky was beginning to darken. He should light the light soon. The whiskey was only to ward off the chill, or so he told himself. The chill he was really feeling could not be so easily warmed. It came from within—a deep, cold sadness that swept through his heart like the winter wind.

He poured the whiskey into a small glass and stared into it, as if it held the secret to his happiness. Though he knew it didn't, it dulled the pain, and that was enough. He was not much of a drinker, but he gulped the glass down in one swallow. Earlier, the first few drinks had burned as he'd sipped them. Now the liquor was just a pleasant warmth as he tossed back the shots. He sighed. He was feeling a little better.

The icy wind blew a spray of seawater against the windowpane. The drops hit the glass like buckshot. Nathaniel slowly turned to look at the window. It was encrusted with ice. The howling wind rattled the casement and whistled through a tiny crack. Something to be fixed. There was always something to fix on the lighthouse. Besides lighting the light, his main job was to fix the lighthouse. To maintain the building and its

mechanical systems. To try to slow the relentless deterioration of the man-made presence in the middle of the sea. The lighthouse was besieged by a harsh and unforgiving nature. Wind, rain, ice, waves and salt spray all took a heavy toll on metal, wood and stone. So he fixed things.

This cold, stormy winter afternoon, repairing the window was a distant abstraction to him. He noted it somewhere in the back of his mind, his thinking dulled by the whiskey. He raised the glass and toasted the window and the raging sea beyond it.

“To fixin’ what’s broken,” he said.

The nearest land—the nearest human—was a mile away. He had lived for several years with this isolation, yet for some reason it had gotten to him today. Made him take a drink. Why? He had to think. Nothing was coming quickly to him. He sorted through the day. He remembered. It was the boy. His son. Caleb. He twirled the glass and watched the liquor ride up on the edge like a wave striking shore. He shook his head. His son. When had he last seen him? How long had it been? He mulled it over. Two years? Three? Caleb would be a teenager now. He would have changed. His son would be a stranger to him. Thoughts of his missing son had made Nathaniel sad this stormy winter day. The sadness had made him seek solace in a bottle. Something he had never done before.

The waves crashed outside, roaring like an angry mob attacking his castle. Race Rock *was* like a castle. The keeper was its king; the surrounding sea his kingdom. The enemy was the wind and sea.

A gust rattled the window. Nathaniel was tired of the storms. The winter of 1906 and 1907 had been a rough one. The wind, the cold, the icy dampness of his world were relentless and depressing. Now this sadness. Colder than the winter. Bleaker than the sky. More numbing than all the wet wind that swirled around him. He could contend with the winter weather. He could seal the drafts, turn up the furnace, bundle himself in more sweaters. But this inner storm: there was no way to protect himself from it. He knew the liquor was a flimsy refuge even as he sought its temporary shelter.

Why today? Why had the sadness washed into his soul like a piece of driftwood today? Driftwood: now he remembered. It was the piece of driftwood. He had found it in a drawer this morning. It lay on the table now, ghostly white in the encroaching gloom.

Nathaniel picked up the small piece of wood. It had naturally weathered to look like a bird, with a pointed end like a beak and a flared end like tail feathers. Two little pieces on the sides looked like wings. He'd carved in some eyes, daubed a little yellow paint on the beak and had a passable sculpture of a seagull. He had given it to Caleb on his seventh birthday. His son had loved it. Nathaniel twirled it in his hands, examining it from different angles. A piece of driftwood. A gift. A memory. He put it down with a heavy sigh.

It was a little thing, but it reminded him of how much he missed his son. How much he missed doing things for and with Caleb. It had triggered his sadness. Usually, he was good at keeping his loneliness suppressed. But sometimes it popped up, like a Jack-in-the-box. Nathaniel would suffer a while then push it down into the deep dark box of his heart and secure the latch. He never knew what might trigger it. Today it was the little driftwood bird.

Without even realizing it, he had been brooding all afternoon, and as the sullen skies had turned darker, so had his mood. It soured into melancholy, then deepened to regret and anger as he remembered that awful day when his wife had left with his son. The day his world had started to crumble.

Nathaniel poured himself another drink. The glass of whiskey caught the candlelight and glowed. He gazed into the amber liquid, seeing in it the images of a summer morning two years earlier.

2

The day began as countless others had. Nathaniel dressed in his crisp Lighthouse Board uniform. It was heavy for summer wear, but he didn't mind. The Board required the uniform, and Nathaniel found it gave him a sense of pride to wear it. He checked the buttons were polished and gleaming, that everything was neat and tidy. He was a man of an era that valued formality and obedience, that prized a deep sense of duty. His little island home was surrounded by the ocean, and the ocean was a place of chaos. In the face of nature's uncertainty, he sought and found predictability in the daily routine of a lighthouse keeper.

As he did every day, he picked up a small daguerreotype picture. It was a portrait of him and his wife, Carla. He looked at it and quietly whispered "Love, luck and longevity." It was a kind of morning prayer for him, a way to start the day on a hopeful note. His gaze lingered for a moment on the photograph, on their smiles, on an instant of happiness preserved forever. He smiled.

Nathaniel went down to the kitchen and found his wife and son there. Two satchels were on the floor beside them. Caleb looked scared. Carla looked agitated.

"Are you going somewhere?" he asked, surprised to see them with the two suitcases at the ready.

Carla sighed. Looked down. Her small fists clenched. She looked up at him and held his gaze for a moment.

"I ... we're leaving," she blurted out. "We're leaving."

Caleb fidgeted and looked away, unable to meet his father's eyes. Nathaniel was stunned. Leaving?

“What? Why?”

Carla’s face was anguished, her green eyes moist. Her words tumbled out with a desperate urgency.

“Nathaniel, I’ve tried to talk to you about it. You know I have. And I’ve tried to make this work. But it’s like being in a prison out here. This is no place to raise a child. Caleb has no friends. He has no place to play. He can’t be a child.”

Nathaniel was not completely surprised by what she said. They *had* talked about this before. It seemed to come up every so often. They had never resolved the matter. Their conversations about it always seemed to end with a “we’ll see.” He began the defense he always used when Carla complained about their son’s life on Race Rock.

“He’s learning about all sorts of things, Carla. He helps me here. We fish. We get ashore...”

She shook her head. She didn’t want to hear this again. He didn’t understand. He never had. Maybe never could. She cut him off.

“That’s not a childhood, Nathaniel. Learning to grease gears and fill tanks, to polish brass and mend ropes. That’s man’s work. That’s *your* work. This is *your* world. Our son is ten and he’s never done the things a boy his age should do. He’s never ridden a bicycle or flown a kite. He’s never been to a circus or played baseball. He’s never even been to school for God’s sake!”

Caleb stood there watching his parents. Though they kept glancing over at him, it seemed as if they were talking about someone else.

“He may not do those things, Carla, but he gets to do things a lot of boys don’t. And as far as schooling, well, we read to him,” said Nathaniel. “We have a wonderful library courtesy of the Lighthouse Board. Better than the school’s I bet. You help him write. I teach him mathematics. He learns. He’ll learn what he needs to know.” Nathaniel sounded small and desperate.

Carla glared at Nathaniel, anger building in her. “You teach him what you think he needs to know. To be a lighthouse keeper. But maybe that’s not what he wants to be. Did you ever

think of that? Maybe he wants to do something else with his life. If we stay here he'll have no choice, will he? He won't know any other life. He'll be trapped."

"I would be proud if my son were a lighthouse keeper."

"But what about Caleb, Nathaniel—would *he* be happy? Or would he just follow in your footsteps because that's the only path he knows? Why do fathers always think their sons have to carry on their lives? Finish their unfinished business? Why can't they be something different? *Somebody* different?"

"I could leave him worse legacies," said Nathaniel.

"Or better," Carla shot back.

Silence. Nathaniel had never really thought this through. They'd had the child and just started rearing him. The years had passed. He looked at his son. How he'd grown! Caleb looked like his mother, though he had Nathaniel's deep brown eyes.

A thought bubbled up in Nathaniel's mind, unexpected. Unbidden. Unremembered for a long time. It was a hot, dry afternoon. He was maybe eight or ten. About Caleb's age. He remembered standing in a field and watching a train approach from a great distance, roar by, then slowly shrink until it vanished. He remembered that as the train had passed, he had longed to get on it. To go wherever it was going. To get away. But he didn't. He couldn't. He was left behind, fixed to the spot.

His life was spent being fixed to a spot. Then. Now. That was the very definition of a lighthouse, after all. A fixed point, a precise coordinate on a chart. It marked a place that was dangerous and best kept away from. Was that what Race Rock was saying to Carla? He looked at his son. He looked at his wife. Was this about Caleb, or was this really about her? Was she so unhappy? Did she really hate their life?

Nathaniel could think the questions, but could not voice them. He was not good at confrontation. He merely croaked out a beseeching "Carla...."

Carla had enough determination for the two of them. "I'm taking him ashore. We'll stay with my cousin in New London a few days. Then we're taking the train to Virginia, to my mother's." Carla had her course charted.

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Nathaniel could not leave Race Rock. His commission was to be the lighthouse keeper. It's all he had done for years. Mariners depended on him. He was dedicated to the light.

"You can see Caleb. You can visit us in Virginia. Or maybe we'll come visit here. I don't know." Carla was on the verge of tears. But she had made up her mind. She would not be deterred. He wondered how long she had been planning this, how long she had bottled up her emotions. He wondered why Carla hadn't asked him to leave with them. Had she come to hate him? It hurt him to realize he didn't know. Really didn't know how his wife felt. She was leaving and taking his son with her. He would be alone. With a stunning suddenness, his life was changing.

Carla picked up one of the satchels. "You have your work to do. I'll take the dinghy and row us to Fishers Island. We'll take the ferry to New London later. You can have Chester bring you the dinghy tomorrow when he makes his supply run."

Caleb looked at his father.

"Caleb," said Nathaniel, "do you want to leave here?" It was all Nathaniel could do. In desperation, he would try to let his young son make the decision. The boy looked at his mother. At his father. He looked down at the floor.

"Caleb?" Nathaniel repeated.

"I guess," was the boy's quiet reply.

So there it was. There was silence in the small kitchen.

"And you, Carla. Will you miss me?"

Carla dropped the bag and put her hands over her eyes. She began to cry. Her crying was loud in the small room. Caleb fidgeted, frightened by the emotions swirling about him. He was too young to understand any of it. Through her sobs, Carla finally spoke.

"Yes, I will miss you Nathaniel. You're a good man. You've been a good husband. But you don't have room for him—for us—in your life. This lighthouse, this godforsaken rock: this is your life. But it's not for me anymore. And not for Caleb. We can't live out here. It's so isolated, Nathaniel. It's a prison. Caleb needs to get away. Needs to be a boy. And I ... I ... just ... can't..." She could go on no more.

Carla's sobs filled the kitchen. Caleb looked down at the floor, distressed at his mother's crying. At what she was saying. Nathaniel said nothing. He'd been stunned into silence, and he was never good at expressing his emotions anyway. It was a burden of his time that men remained stoic. They believed they showed great strength in their reserve, even when it cost them dearly.

Pulling herself together, Carla wiped away her tears. She approached Nathaniel and rose up to give him a quick kiss. "We will see you again soon," she said. She urged Caleb forward and he gave his father a quick hug. Knowing that if she did not act quickly and decisively she would not act at all, Carla picked up their two suitcases and nudged Caleb toward the door of the kitchen. Nathaniel stood still. He should go with them, row them the mile to shore. But the suddenness of it, Carla's words, and his helplessness had paralyzed him. He was fixed in place, as he had been that day when the train passed him by.

Carla threw back the bolt on the front door. She opened it and for a moment bright daylight flooded the room. She ushered Caleb through it and followed. They seemed to dissolve into the light. Then the door swung shut behind them and Nathaniel was left alone in the lighthouse.

Carla and Caleb crossed the short porch on top of the cylindrical caisson that was the foundation of the lighthouse. They climbed down the iron ladder, somehow getting the suitcases to the stone pier at the bottom. They moved to the small rowboat that lay moored there. As if watching himself in a dream, Nathaniel crossed over to the window and looked out. It was a heavy, humid, foggy July day. Fishers Island, a mile to the East, was just a dark shape. Everything was wrapped in a gentle blue gauze of fog. He realized he had been holding his breath.

He looked down and saw Carla and Caleb in the tiny boat. She pulled the oars smoothly and strongly, accustomed to rowing the mile to the island. The water was dead calm. Caleb sat with his back to Race Rock, a small hunched figure in the stern of the boat. Nathaniel picked up a telescope from a table and walked outside to the porch railing. He sighted the scope on the

rowboat in the fog and looked into the eyepiece. His wife's anguished face was clear. It was dreamlike, as looking through a scope always is. He was up close to them, but there was no sound. It didn't seem real. None of it seemed real.

As Carla and Caleb rowed away, they seemed to slowly dissolve into the fog. They were becoming phantoms, as insubstantial as dreams. Soon they would be only memories. Just as the fog obscured them from view, his son turned on the little bench at the rear of the boat and looked back at Race Rock, back to his father, the lighthouse keeper. Nathaniel watched through the telescope as his son said something. It was easy to read his lips. Nathaniel smiled—the only time he would smile on that painful, grim morning and for many mornings thereafter.

Then they were gone. Swallowed by the fog.

Nathaniel was alone.

He stared at where they had been, trying to will them back. In a daze, he went inside. He wandered over to a mirror and straightened his uniform coat. Brushed a bit of dirt off his shoulder. The brass buttons gleamed brightly, as they should on a well-kept uniform. He found a stray thread hanging from a button, wrapped it around his finger and gave it a hard yank. It snapped off. He watched as it drifted to the floor.

He should turn on the foghorn. He'd have to light the boiler to get the steam up to power it.

He lit a lantern and descended into the gloomy basement. He crouched by the foghorn's boiler, pumped some fuel and lit it. It would take a few minutes for it to build the steam. He waited, replaying the scene in the kitchen in his mind. Maybe Carla would change her mind in an hour or two. Or in a day or two. Maybe she would come back with Caleb. They could sit down and talk this through. They'd figure out what to do.

The steam valve hissed. Nathaniel threw a small lever that directed it into the pipes for the horn, a third class Daboll trumpet. It bleated for three seconds. Then a three second pause. Then another cry. Another three second pause. A final three second sounding before a forty-five second pause. A secondary pipe stole away a little of the steam to run the mecha-

nism that timed the horn's sounding. Above him and outside he heard the horn.

Nathaniel went back to the main floor. He opened a small closet and removed a few rags and a bottle of cleaner. He opened the fire doors and started a slow climb to the lantern room, sixty-eight steps up and around the metal spiral staircase that wound its way up the tower. His footsteps echoed off the heavy masonry walls. The foghorn sounded its cry, echoing his own sad mood. Up and around he climbed, up and around, a spiral that seemed to go nowhere but gradually brought him to his destination.

He reached the top of the stairway and opened the metal door that led to the lantern room. He went in. Falling to his knees before the glittering glass Fresnel lens, he took a rag, poured some cleaning fluid on it, and carefully wiped one of the glass prisms that made up the complex array of concentric circles. He touched it with great care and respect. Though it was already spotless, he nonetheless cleaned it, as he did every day.

Nathaniel looked out the lantern room to the surrounding sky, thick and dull with fog. He was sixty-eight feet above the water and couldn't see it through the fog. The featureless sky was a blank canvas onto which he could project his thoughts.

Those thoughts were memories. Memories of life with Carla and Caleb. Little moments. Happy moments. Sad moments. Images from a life that was suddenly without a tomorrow. It scared him.

Damn Carla. Why did she have to go? Why couldn't she sit down and talk about this reasonably? What had she told the boy? When would he see them again?

For a moment, just a moment, he did not want to be on Race Rock. He wanted to be ... where? He didn't know. With his son, certainly. Perhaps walking in the woods or at a parade. Maybe Carla was right.

Nathaniel turned his gaze to his reflection in the lens. He could see the sadness in his eyes. He stared a long while, thinking about what Carla had said, conjuring up images of Caleb and trying to fix them in his mind.

He thought of things he wished he'd said but hadn't. Too

late now. There was an ache in him that was like a hard knot in his chest, as if all his emotions had solidified and come to rest there. Alone at the top of the lighthouse, he felt adrift, alone in the middle of nowhere, a disembodied spirit suspended in the air.

Nathaniel Bowen sat there for a long while. Thoughts drifted by like clouds. Carla had made a choice. *He* had made a choice. Could he change anything? He had been here too long to go anyplace else. He was trapped in a web of his own making.

He looked down at the rag in his hand. He remembered his chores. He leaned towards the light and began polishing another sparkling glass prism. Nathaniel took comfort in his daily routine, in the repetitive chores that gave his life meaning.

* * *

Nathaniel's memories lost their focus, and the images in his mind's eye blurred and evaporated. He found himself staring into an amber glass of whiskey, lit by a candle, on a cold February afternoon. He had been so lost in memories the storm had faded away. He was surprised to find himself where he was, as groggy as a man wakened from a sleep heavy with dark dreams.

A clap of thunder boomed. He turned his head slowly and looked out the rain-streaked window. The drops were backlit by another flash of lightning. They looked like tears. He picked up the little wooden seagull again, turning it over in his hand. Carla had left, taking Caleb with her. He had never seen them again. His dedication to the light had proved costly. Nathaniel was overwhelmed by a profound melancholy.

He shook his head and poured another drink.

3

While Nathaniel was struggling with his memories, the steamship *City of Lawrence* was struggling to make its way across Long Island Sound. The storm had worsened since the light at Montauk Point had disappeared into the night an hour ago. Captain Smith was holding his boat on a course of 348 degrees NNW, but the heavy currents were pushing him east. The wind was howling, the sleet unrelenting, the seas high—maybe fifteen to twenty feet—the ragged waves layered on top of large swells. The slow, heavy steamer—234 feet long, powered by steam-driven side-wheels—was plowing through the waves, and her decks were often awash. Ice had begun to form on those decks, but it was far too rough to send men out to try to chip it off. It was not a good situation. The ship's roll in the heavy seas was sickening.

He had no time to tend to the passengers. Many were sick. All of them were frightened. He'd sent what crew he could spare to comfort them. There was little any of them could do but ride out the storm. He could feel the boat getting sluggish in its response to the helm. The ice was adding weight and the weight was bogging them down. The storm clouds obscured the moon and stars. They were steaming through a deep and impenetrable darkness. On the bridge, Smith and two officers peered into that darkness searching for the light at Race Rock. He prayed it would show itself so they could steer by it. But they were only halfway across the Sound. Race Rock was still at least six miles away. As he had figured, in this severe weather, they would be lucky to spot it a mile or two before they were upon it. Smith lit up another cigarette. Its tip was an orange glow in the bridge, traveling an arc back and forth from his

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mouth to the ashtray by the wheel. He smoked it nervously, stubbed it out, lit another. He was earning his keep tonight.

* * *

On Race Rock, Nathaniel Bowen awoke with a start. A very large wave had slammed into the lighthouse with an echoing boom. He must have dozed off. On the table in front of him were the empty whiskey bottle, a shot glass, and the little piece of white driftwood carved into a seagull.

He had not bothered to light a lantern. He had not lit the light yet, either. The room was dark. He wasn't sure what time it was. He was confused. He pulled out his pocket watch and flicked open the cover. 6:30! He really should go light the light. The storm raged even worse than before. He must have dozed off. He felt cotton-headed. He stood up and felt dizzy. He stumbled towards the door to the spiral staircase and opened it. The shadowy, cold, dank stairwell was like a cave. The thought of winding his way up three flights to the lantern room was not appealing, especially in the dark. It smelled of fuel and that made his stomach churn. He needed to lie down for a minute to let the nausea pass. He shouldn't have drunk so much. He seldom drank more than a single beer, and had no tolerance for hard liquor. He needed to lie down. For just a few minutes.

He shuffled back into the room. It was lit by a flash of lighting. Everything was etched clear, as if illuminated by a photographer's flash powder. The afterimage lingered—strange, blue shapes that drifted like ghosts.

He needed to find a lantern. He needed to light the light. The room seemed to tilt. No, he needed to lie down. He headed across the room, bumping into furniture on the way. He collapsed onto a couch. He'd rest for just a few minutes. Then he'd get back to work.

He was asleep again almost as soon as he stretched out on the cushions. Waves crashed against the rocks below. Salt spray rattled against the windows. The keeper of the light slept.

The *City of Lawrence* pushed on, slowly making its way towards Race Rock, a dark presence in the dark night.