

Lighthouse

“Something’s not right...a foreboding...a darkness lurks here. I can’t quite put my finger on it, there’s something threatening, like thunder,” a wide eyed, pale-faced Misa observed, scanning the old lighthouse. “I don’t like it one bit! I won’t leave you here alone.”

“Misa Kuranaga, my precious psychic, woman of my heart, it’s been a long trip and an even longer day. It’s just nerves of a weary traveler, nothing more,” Toby Spencer reassured as he embraced her. “I know that you believe in your visions, but I’m afraid that you missed the mark this time.”

“What a terrible, dreary place,” Misa continued. “You mustn’t stay here.”

“We’ve been over this,” Toby looked into her eyes. “This lighthouse is my home. I was raised and suffered here. I will always be adrift and never free if I don’t confront my demons. You do want me to get better, to regain my bearings so that I can write again?”

“There’s so much that we don’t understand. What did your grandfather mean in his suicide note? Who was after him? You made it clear that your grandfather felt cursed, that the family was in danger. What about the terrible things he told you? I can’t get those stories out of my mind.”

“Why, why are you torturing yourself. You mustn’t worry so much. Grandfather was a senile, old sailor. He was a crazed curmudgeon. Sailors are a superstitious lot. You must admit, it’s a combination that doesn’t inspire much confidence. If I believed everything that grandpa said, I would still be standing in the corner with a shark’s tooth

and a whale bone waiting for my mother to return. You're getting yourself worked up over the accounts of a lunatic. As you recall, in the rest of the note he scribbled some nonsense about ghosts and skeletons."

"What about your father's death. It doesn't make sense. You bragged that he could have been blind and still know his way around the lighthouse. How does someone with his skill fall like that. When you last spoke with him, he seemed so sure that his life was in danger, that someone was coming for him. In the end, he too believed your grandfather."

"Yeah and how loaded was he. I mean there was never a day when that bastard wasn't sauced. Even from the grave, I can still smell the stench of him."

"Look, no matter what the reason. Something about this place scared your father and grandfather," Misa shuddered, trembling in the brisk air. "I can't shake this feeling. Death is here. You mustn't stay."

"Why did I ever tell you those stories," Toby rolled his eyes. "We've been over this. There's nothing to fear. Besides, I need to clear my head. The publisher won't give me another extension."

"What about this letter? Your father wanted you to open it after his death. You never even looked at it." Misa pulled away and handed him the envelope.

"As usual, I see you took the liberty of opening it for me," Toby smiled as he retrieved the luggage from the trunk.

"This isn't a joke, Toby. His message is clear. He wrote do not return to the lighthouse of Alexandria. I can no longer protect you," Misa grabbed his arm. "He's warning you to stay away, at least consider that he had a good reason."

“That man never had a good reason for anything,” Toby responded. “For too long, I lived in fear, fear of failure, loss, a cold, distant father and it all started at this humble seaside resort, a simple lighthouse.”

“More like a coffin by the sea. No wonder your father was haunted living here. I shiver just standing in the shadows.”

“There were never any ghosts or damning spirits here, no wretched curse from the sea, just cruelty, absence.” Toby faced Misa. “My father was a drunk and a bully. My mother fled from this place. My beloved stepmother, God rest her soul, drowned in the cove trying to rescue me. Grandfather hung himself in the tower. Dear old dad jumped to his death and left me to clean up the mess. Don’t you see? I need to sort things out. I must do this alone.”

“I’m trying to understand, I know you’re a restless spirit, but I feel very uneasy. I’m afraid of a distance that can never be crossed, that we may be lost to one another forever.” Misa bowed her head. “Just promise me you will consider my marriage proposal after you tire of chasing your family’s ghosts. It has been five years too long.”

“A storm is coming. If the weather takes a nasty turn, this dirt road will turn into a mess of sludge. It could be days before either of us could get out of here.” Toby gently brushed the hair from her face. “To catch the ferry, you need to leave now. Ahab Brody has a lobster boat. He’ll give me a lift back to the mainland in a few days. No matter how late or early, call me when you arrive at your parents’ home in Kamakura.”

“My love, you always want to change the subject,” Misa leaned forward and kissed him. “I’ll leave you to your demons for now. Goodbye, I love you. Till we meet again, I’ll be waiting.”

From the roadside, Toby watched the trail of Misa's car. Tears welled in his eyes. The bright red Porsche raced like a beam of light among the barren trees. Even in the early New England winter, the peninsula was beautiful. Soon, her automobile disappeared along the narrow path threading through the rugged snow-dusted hills.

With Misa out of sight, Toby walked the cobblestone path towards the lighthouse. His eyes blurred as he surveyed the wreckage of the grounds. Against a blackening sky, the lighthouse loomed like an alabaster fortress. A dilapidated structure replaced the once beautiful bed and breakfast. Shoddy shingles clung to a makeshift roof. Long ago, many years of Nor' Easters broke and blew away most of the shutters from the rusted hinges. Flanking cracked windows, the remaining barely latched to their attachments.

At the front door, Toby dropped his belongings. Above the entrance, the stern face of a winged guardian pointed towards the sea. Charcoal eyes scowled as talons clasped the crooked mast of a ship. Toby embraced the possibility of a shape-shifting secret. For a moment, the enigmatic gargoyle possessed a fantastic form. Toby envisioned that a supernatural breath would bring life to the stone persona. The bizarre creature would swoop him up and take him away.

A chill shook Toby. Suddenly, the imagined presence dissolved. Reality replaced the ghastly daydream. Secured above the door, the frozen figure remained. Its sneer of cold warning blackened in the fading daylight. Toby stood stoically before his childhood home.

"Maybe Misa was right," he whispered.

Lightning lit the sky above and sleet began to fall. Shaking his head, Toby sighed and opened the door. Straining and aching, his large hands pulled the heavy luggage from the

ground. Quickly, he passed into the dark hallway of the lighthouse.

Toby placed the bags in the cloak room. A painting of his beloved stepmother, Ruth, hung in the hall. A rush of emotion flooded his body.

“After all these years, it’s wonderful to see your pleasant face again, I still miss you everyday,” Toby touched her face and closed his eyes.

In a fiery flash, a memory crossed his mind. He recalled the fateful event that took Ruth away from him. During a fierce rainstorm, a young, weak Toby struggled to row his boat ashore. The small craft capsized. Toby’s body submerged. Beneath the surface, a drowning Toby saw a frightful sight. A skeleton crew of demonic faces and florescent bones emerged from the dark depths. A mist of spirit tentacles snaked around him. A bony hand grabbed his foot and pulled him from the light. Toby kicked, but could not break free.

From above, he was embraced and lifted from the water. Ruth hoisted him against the rocky side of the cove. She slipped and fell into the water. Coughing and gasping for breath, Toby scrambled to the safety of a stone shelf. He turned to see Ruth struggling. Toby reached out to help her. The distance was too far. Pulled into the strange mist, she emerged only twice before disappearing completely. The waves calmed to ripples in the shadow of the lighthouse.

“How strange. My memory must be playing tricks on me,” a puzzled Toby remarked.

“That can’t be right...but it’s almost as if it really happened that way. Come on, Toby Spencer, pull yourself together. It’s not real. Don’t let this place spook you.”

Frozen in a twilight time warp, the lobby of the bed and breakfast remained unchanged. For years no occupants dined, relaxed or convened in this dusty parlor.

Forgotten fragments of memorabilia were strewn about. A newspaper dated October 12, 1947 lay on the oak coffee table. Before a great window, a rotted rocking chair faced the cove of the Alexandria peninsula. As the clouds crossed the moon, beams of light gleamed through the frail, worn curtains of the quaint lobby. Clutter was everywhere, beer mugs, pens, pencils, a tattered shawl and two pairs of weathered boots. Portraits of faces from years long gone hung in the shadows. Caked with dust and lint, the brown pages of a ledger were curled to reveal a final entry. It seemed everyone had unexpectedly vanished.

This was no enigma. A simple explanation sufficed. This place received its last visitors decades ago. People no longer came here to share their memories and vacations. Occasionally, the inspired solitude of the cliffs plunging into the bay of Alexandria lured artists to the peninsula. The backdrop of these divine surroundings sparked creativity. Many traveled here to capture the colorful collages and changing landscapes with vibrant words or a skillful brush. However, they never remained overnight. Only Toby's father and local drunks with tales of the sea slept here.

In an attempt to brighten the room, Toby reached behind the counter and flicked the light switch. The lights did not come on. He tried again. Nothing happened. Toby noticed a lantern on the counter. He took a lighter from his pocket and lit it. That was when he saw a peculiar picture. The faded image of a group of shady-looking sailors and a man who appeared to be their captain hung in a rotten wood frame. It was not a formal picture, probably taken during the hustle and bustle of an awkward moment. They were a rugged ensemble of rough, weathered faces. No one smiled. Those leering eyes staring blankly at the sea captivated him.

There was an inscription on a brass plate on the frame. It read: Captain T.P. Spencer and the crew of The Dandridge, 1863. The faint silhouette of a woman hovered above the faces. He remembered the picture from childhood but never gave it much thought. It had always hung in his father's bedroom, a place that was always off limits. Curious, Toby took it from the wall and flipped it over. Scribbled in his father's handwriting was: "Lorelei, a mythical siren from the Rhine river near Koblenz, Germany followed these men home. It was hopeless. Her songs lured all but one to their deaths."

"How drunk was dad when he wrote this garbage?" Toby mumbled and turned the picture over. The cold eyes, angry expression and stocky build of Captain Spencer bore an uncanny resemblance to his father. Beneath the man's thick brows and grey burnsides, the haunting familiarity intrigued him. With a striking look, the captain's eyes appeared to beckon him.

"Who is this? A relative?" Toby asked.

He broke his gaze from this odd encounter to look at the others. The sailor's builds ranged from wiry to burly frames. The men appeared to have aged far beyond their true years. Uncombed tresses and matted beards fell from wrinkled foreheads and sunken cheeks lined with creases. The ocean voyages and seaport life had not been kind to them.

"What a motley crew," Toby remarked. He tossed the picture under the bar. To his surprise, there was a case of Old Irish Whiskey on the floor. Toby took the lantern, a suitcase, a bottle and lumbered up the winding staircase to his childhood room.

Toby drank a glass of whiskey, bathed and dressed for bed. After a few minutes of reading, he pulled out a picture of Misa. Toby admired her in the light of the lantern.

"Well, babe, here I am, still intact. Just me and the old lighthouse. No ghouls. Lots of

scary memories but no monsters going boo in the night. See you soon my love,” Toby kissed the picture. The curtains flowing in the breeze recalled the fluid motion of Misa’s wavy black hair. Her passionate, brown eyes reassured and comforted him. Nature’s music filled his stark surroundings.

He thought about Misa’s concerns. Despite begging to be believed, her apprehension could not prevent his return to the lighthouse of Alexandria. She had been haunted by nightmares in which angry and distorted spirits rose from the depths. In her account of this recurring tragedy, a strange abyss swallowed Toby. Ever the skeptic, Toby easily dismissed Misa’s imagination. Accustomed to her dramatics, he accepted Misa’s intensity but rejected the validity of her convictions.

Toby closed his eyes. He relaxed in comfort as the old mattress gave in to the weight and form of his body. Lost in dreaming, Toby could feel Misa’s soft skin and taste her sweet kiss. The wind whistled through the barren branches. Rhythmically, wanton waves crashed against the rocks of the peninsula. Toby drifted to sleep.

Booming reverberations of thunder jolted Toby awake. Disoriented, he sat up in the dark room. Whirling winds whipped the bay waters into a flurry of splashing. The lighthouse swayed in response to the pressures of the rising storm. Contracting and expanding, the lighthouse possessed a foreign life. It breathed, inhaling and exhaling.

An excruciating scream rose above the fray. Agonizing cries and high-pitched shouts followed. Toby rose, ran to the window and looked out. An astonishing sight startled him. The circular beam of the lighthouse lantern flashed and faded as it crossed the peninsula.

“How can it be? Who’s up there? I didn’t turn on the lantern!” Toby yelled. “What

the hell is going on?”

Watching from the window, he gasped. A blanket of black birds completely covered the property from the door to the grounds beyond. The menacing, feathered tyrants appeared to strategize. Their poking, pacing and screeching filled the night air with relentless commotion. In the distance, the white pallor of a murky mist crossed the moonlit bay. The union of ocean and rock disappeared. The surrounding cove and cliffs dissolved into the creeping fog. Sporadic rays of moonlight briefly broke through the bizarre advancement. The ghoulish presence moved towards the lighthouse.

A loud crash sounded in the empty lobby below. Quickly, Toby lit the lantern and headed down the staircase. Scattered behind the bar lay jagged pieces of the mirrored wall. Cold wind blew through the room. The light of the lantern was extinguished. The operatic screeching of the black birds ceased. A feeling of dread came over Toby. Creaking sounds broke the sudden silence. Outside, large planks of wood cracked and collided against the rocks of the peninsula. Toby rushed to the window.

Cascading rays of soft light fell on the bay of Alexandria. Stunned and amazed, Toby watched The Dandridge sinking beneath the cold, black water. With piercing clarity, the screams of her drowning crew echoed in the air. The wreckage crumbled.

“How can it be possible? The 19th century ship?” Toby shook his head in disbelief. The misty poltergeist floated and approached. The image of the sinking Dandridge disintegrated. For a moment the light from the fogbow blinded Toby. When he returned attention to the sea, the cloudy presence enveloped the lighthouse.

There were knocks at the door. Breathless, Toby stood still, quiet and cautious. The persistent pounding escalated to loud banging. On the opposite side, a force pushed

against the door. The hinges bulged. Toby bolted the door. Suddenly, the windows exploded. Bony hands reached through the broken panes. The fog entered the room. At that moment, Toby understood his father's torment. A terrible truth washed over him. The phantoms had been real. The demons who tormented his father had returned. A deep, hoarse voice spoke from the shadowy mist.

“Your family owes us a debt. You are the last one, the last descendant of the sole survivor of The Dandridge. Now, we can all rest. Your ship and crew are here. We have waited a long time for you to join us, Captain Spencer.”

Two sets of skeleton arms embraced Toby. He was lifted into the grey cloud as it returned to the ocean. In a hypnotic trance, Toby sailed with the caustic current. He and his assailants descended. Salt water filled Toby's lungs and took his breath away. Light faded to darkness.

The troubled air of Alexandria dispersed. The storm retreated. Crackling lightning ceased. Rushing winds stopped. Bay waters calmed. The lighthouse lantern flashed once more and never again.