

The Light in Whale Cove

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Dan Retsler ripped the packing tape from the tape gun and tossed the thing aside. Useless. Completely useless. He was better off using fingers and teeth to put tape on his boxes. The tape gun jammed and twisted every time he tried to use it.

He sealed the box on his desk, got his finger wrapped in tape, and finally reached across the box to grab the scissors. He managed to cut himself free, then he cursed and tossed the tape in the same direction as the tape gun.

Outside his office, in the front reception area, Lucy swiveled her seat so that she could look at him through the glass window. The police station had once been a retail store and still looked like it. The only office had a large window so that the retail manager could keep an eye on the stock. The last thing Retsler, Whale Rock's police chief for another three weeks, wanted was his staff laughing at his attempts to pack. He stepped over a pile of boxes, walked to the window, and pulled the blinds closed.

Then he sank onto the pile, hearing the cardboard groan beneath his weight. He hated packing almost as much as he hated moving. But he had been excited about the new job and still was, despite the pain-in-the-ass transition.

He was going to be police chief in a Montana town not much bigger than Whale Rock. Only his new police station had a view of the Bitterroot Mountains, not Highway 101, and the police logs were filled with nothing more severe than shoplifting. It would be a relief to go to a place where the dispatcher hadn't known him since he was in diapers, where the only people who came to town were the occasional hunter instead of hoards of tourists determined to see the Pacific Ocean, and where there were no supernatural occurrences.

Retsler sighed and scanned his office. Maybe he didn't need all this junk. Maybe he'd just leave it for his successor. Jaclyn Tadero was an extremely capable woman who had been hired over his protests. The female city council members had accused him of sexism, but he hadn't opposed Tadero because she was a woman.

He had opposed her because she had never lived in a small town. She had never worked on a small force. She didn't understand the politics or the dynamics, and no matter what the city council said, it was politics and dynamics that made this job work, not experience with high-powered murder investigations.

Outside, the dispatch rang and Lucy answered. He could hear her voice but not what she was saying. Still he strained to catch a word or two. Old habits died hard.

When the murmur of her voice stopped, he stood. He didn't want Lucy to catch him moping. He walked over to the corner to pick up the tape gun. He was trying to shove the tape roll back on it as Lucy pushed open his door.

She had looked the same since he was a little boy, her curly gray hair worn in a short cap over her grandmotherly face. Despite her all-American cuteness, she was ex-military and tough, with a voice so deep that it growled.

"Where's Jaclyn?" she asked.

Retsler shrugged. "Eddie was going to take her to the outlying areas, but that was hours ago. I have no idea where they are now. Why?"

"We just got a call. We got a dead body at the lighthouse."

Retsler set down his tape gun. "I'll take it."

"She needs to go."

He glared at Lucy. "I still have three weeks on the payroll. No matter what anyone says, I haven't lost my abilities to do the job."

"I wasn't questioning your abilities. You just need to take her with you."

This was why he had to leave. Technically Lucy worked for him, but it never turned out that way. She still had an adult's authority over him, as if he were a child instead a middle-aged man.

"Why do I need to take her along?" Retsler asked.

"Because she has to learn this part of her job now."

"What part?" he asked.

Lucy raised her eyebrows. "You don't know?"

"Obviously not," he said, straining to keep his frustration under control.

"Whale Cove Lighthouse is haunted."

* * * *

The first winter storm of the season was blowing in. Retsler's car was old and heavy, but not up to the gale force winds cutting across the highway. Rain came down in horizontal sheets and his windshield wipers, set on high, barely cleared the water enough for him to see. It was midday but the sky was black.

He hadn't seen a storm like this since the Dee flooded eleven months ago. He had hoped to be gone before the storm season hit, but he had promised to stay and train Tadero, and she hadn't been able to leave the Chicago force until the middle of November. She had driven across the country alone and arrived here on Thanksgiving.

The car slid sideways on the road, and he twisted the wheel to return to his lane. He slowed down. He hadn't been paying enough attention. There was at least three inches of water on the road. At the speed he'd been going, he was probably hydroplaning.

He wondered what Tadero thought of the storm. She had said nothing could be worse than a Chicago cold snap, but she'd never experienced a winter on the Oregon Coast. Winters here usually drove people back to where they had come from, vowing they would never return.

The road dipped. Waves crested over the guardrail, covering his windshield with spray. He slowed down even more. With the spray, the darkness, and the driving rain, he couldn't even see the headland, jutting out into the Pacific. Usually, Evergreen Cliff was the most prominent feature of this part of the coast, and the old lighthouse on top of it looked like a beacon, even though its beacon had been dark for nearly half a century.

On a day like this, the light would actually be a blessing.

With some difficulty -- surprising considering he'd grown up here -- , he found the road that led to the lighthouse. The road had been rebuilt during the summer so that the construction crews would have no

trouble getting their heavy vehicles onto Evergreen Cliff.

The lighthouse, which was on the National Register of Historic Places, was being put back into service. After the dedication ceremony on December 15th, its light would once again steer ships safely into Whale Rock's harbor.

Apparently it had taken a lot of internal work to get the lighthouse functioning again. And the work wasn't done yet. There was some talk among council members that the light wouldn't be ready for the ceremony, which was only two short weeks away.

Lighthouse Road was even more treacherous than the highway had been. The new asphalt was black and almost impossible to see. He hugged the cliffside as he drove, trying to stay as far away from the guardrail on his left as possible.

It was with great relief that he finally reached the Visitor's Center on the south side of the hill. But the Center was dark and obviously empty. A van was parked behind the dumpster, obviously in employee parking. A decrepit one-ton pick-up, covered with rust and missing its back fender, was parked haphazardly near the path.

Apparently, the coroner, Hamilton Denne, had already arrived.

Retsler pulled up next to the pick-up and got out of his car, yanking his dark green rain slicker hood over his head. The rain pelted him, big thick drops made lethal by the wind. His slicker flapped around him and his face was raw within seconds.

He glanced at the path, which wound around the mountainside, and shook his head slightly. He knew the state had paved the path and put a stone railing along the side, but it still didn't look safe, especially in this weather. But he couldn't turn back now, not after snapping at Lucy and telling her he could still do his job.

The asphalt path looked like wet tar. He stepped on it, clutching the railing attached to the stone side, his hand slipping on the cold metal surface. The wind howled around him, and the surf exploded against the rocks below. The path shook beneath him.

The first storm of the season and he had to be on a headland, heading toward the lighthouse. He'd rather be walking through a Montana blizzard right now than be this close to the sea.

Over the whistle of the wind, he thought he heard a voice and a car door. He turned, saw Eddie's police car parked near his and dark shapes at the head of the path. An arm waved at him, probably asking him to wait, but he turned away.

Jaclyn Tadero could learn her business the same way he learned his -- through experience. He wasn't going to coddle her. He didn't want her to get used to him. He was leaving no matter how she felt about storms or the Oregon Coast or haunted lighthouses.

Damn that Lucy, putting that idea in his head.

He rounded the corner and saw the lighthouse ahead. It was an old building -- one of the oldest on the Central Coast. It had been a working lighthouse until the 1920s, when the state finally shut it down. They'd let it rot for years, then the feds declared it an historical site and someone got the bright idea of making the lighthouse a working lighthouse once again.

He made his way up the stone steps to the lighthouse proper, noting a newly built ramp on the side. As if someone in a wheelchair was going to come to this desolate place. But regulations were regulations were

regulations and the Lighthouse Board had been assiduous in following them.

He ran the last few steps to the main door, and pushed it open, resisting the urge to shaking himself off like a dog. Water dripping off his slicker might destroy the potential crime scene. He pulled off the slicker and set it near Denne's, on a metal chair near the door. Denne's shoes were also there -- loafers, their shine still evident despite the mud and water beading on the leather surface.

Retsler removed his own shoes, a battered pair of tennies, and set them beside Denne's. Then Retsler wiped his hands on his thighs and headed inside.

The base of the lighthouse was wide. Windows facing the sea let in some light, although not enough on a gray day like this one. The entry had flyers and brochures, as well as the standard tourist information. Two tables and a chair were pushed off to the side, as well as a small booth with a phone and emergency equipment.

Farther inside were the stairs, reinforced metal now, but curving like they had been in the original plans, disappearing toward the lighthouse's narrow top.

Voices echoed down them, speaking softly, the words indistinguishable thanks to the overlap of the echo. It almost sounded as if dozens of people were whispering all at once.

A shiver ran down Retsler's back and he concentrated on the one voice he recognized -- Denne's. Retsler went to the base of the stairs and looked up. They curved all the way to the top, but the state had built several landings so that the tourists who visited this place could rest. The light was at the very top on a level all its own. He couldn't see that, only the white painted metal protecting it.

An arm hung off one of the landings. Shadows indicated Denne's presence and possibly that of one other person.

Then the door blew open and a woman stepped in. Jaelyn Tadero, slight, muscular, her hair plastered to her face. Her raincoat was soaked through as were her jeans and tennis shoes. Her dark eyes met his, daring him to comment.

He looked away.

Eddie staggered in, his rainslicker almost an obscene yellow. He had to push hard to get the door to close, and when it did, he leaned against it.

"Why can't people die on sunny days?" he said.

Tadero glared at him, but Retsler nodded. The levity was necessary, especially given the tension inherent in the situation.

"Where's the body?" Her voice was a rich soprano. It would have been beautiful if it weren't for her accent. Hers was a thick Chicago accent, a mixture of Norwegian consonants and Polish vowels, flat and almost nasal.

It grated on Retsler as much as her glare had.

"Don't know," he said, working at nonchalance. "Just got here myself."

She started forward and he held out a hand to stop her.

"You'll drip on the crime scene."

She cursed and stopped moving. "What do you suggest? I'm soaked."

"Give me a minute," he said. "Let's see how far down the scene extends."

"I thought your crime scene unit was already here. They probably have everything they need."

"The crime scene unit," he said as patiently as he could, "is composed of you, me, Eddie, and the coroner who is upstairs now. We don't have enough people on the force to do all that fancy work."

He had explained that to her during her interview and he had thought she understood. But apparently she hadn't.

"I thought we had use of the state's criminologists."

"We do," he said, "if we request them in time. We have no idea what we're facing here, so I haven't requested anyone. Have you?"

That last was more sarcastic than he wanted it to be. She frowned at him and turned away, wiping at her face with the back of her hand. Eddie was pulling off his rain slicker. He was dry underneath.

Retsler didn't wait for them. He mounted the metal stairs, examining each one before he put his foot down, so that he didn't contaminate more than necessary.

"I hope to God that's you, Dan." Denne's voice, stronger this time, floated down to him.

"It's me," Retsler said. "Have you done the stairs?"

"No," Denne said. "I just got here a few minutes ago."

Retsler sighed softly and continued to curve up the circular staircase. As he got closer to Denne's voice, he saw more of the arm, pale and limp, hanging over the edge as if it were reaching for something below.

"You alone?" Retsler asked.

"Clay Emory is with me. He was here when it happened." Denne sounded as unflappable as usual. The man could view anything and remain unshaken. Even last year, during the worst disaster Retsler ever experienced, Denne remained calm.

Retsler rounded the last corner in the stairway before reaching the landing. Emory sat on the next set of stairs going up, his elbows resting on his thighs. He was a big man who had lived in the area all of his life. He wore a Coast Electrics cap over his balding head, and light brown work coveralls, stained with grease. His face, normally tan from the western sun, was unnaturally pale.

He didn't even acknowledge Retsler's arrival. Instead, he stared at the body on the landing as if he could will it away.

Retsler looked at the body too. It belonged to a woman. Her face was turned away from him. She had long brown hair which trailed through the diamond shaped metal pattern that made up the landing. Her arm was extended, just as he had noticed from below. The rest of her body was twisted away from the arm, curled in a partial fetal position.

He couldn't immediately tell what killed her.

Denne was crouched by her head, his back to Emory, his camera on the step near his left hand. His bag was open against the wall. He looked dapper as always, even though he had been trying to dress down

since he separated from his wife. His sweatshirt, with its Harvard logo, looked pressed, and the white collar of a shirt stuck out from beneath it. His jeans were damp from the storm, but they too looked pressed. Even his bare feet looked manicured.

Retsler's were merely cold.

He stepped on the edge of the landing, not willing to go farther -- at least not yet. "What'd you find?"

Denne gave Retsler a quick unreadable glance, then looked down. "I'd say she tripped and fell down the stairs."

After all these years, Retsler was familiar with Denne's way of making a point. "Except?"

With a slight movement of his right hand, Denne beckoned Retsler forward. He nodded toward the face.

Retsler caught his breath. It was Pippa Gage. Her features were slack in death, but there were long black markings on each cheek, as if someone had taken a charcoal pencil and drawn lines across her face.

"What's that?" Retsler asked as he crouched beside Denne.

Denne pointed to her clothes. They too were stained with black.

"So what is it?" Retsler asked.

Denne shrugged and was about to answer when someone else spoke.

"I don't think you should be discussing this in front of the witness."

Retsler didn't have to look up to recognize that voice. Jaclyn Tadero had finally made it up the stairs. Still, when he did look up, he made certain his expression was cool. This was his investigation. She was just here to learn.

He would remind her of that when they returned to the station.

She was standing on the top step, hanging tightly to the railing with her left hand. She had pulled her hair away from her face and tucked it into the back of her shirt so that the strands wouldn't drip on the crime scene. She too had removed her shoes. Her mascara had run, making her look like a tired raccoon.

Denne was the one who answered her. "We don't have much of a choice. Even if we asked Clay to go upstairs or down, he'd still hear everything. In case you hadn't noticed, this place has a hell of an echo."

"You know this man?" Her voice was harsh.

Retsler gave her a small smile. "This is a small town, Jaclyn. You'll have to get used to that."

She glared at him. She knew that he had opposed her hire, and she knew he had opposed it because he thought she couldn't handle small town life.

"Clay Emory," Retsler said, "meet Whale Rock's new police chief as of the first of the year. This is Jaclyn Tadero."

Emory raised his head and touched the bill of his cap, then refocused his attention on Gage.

"He been like that the whole time?" Retsler asked Denne quietly.

Denne nodded.

"You about done here?"

"Yeah." Denne reached for his camera. "I have the scene photos to shoot, and then I'll be ready to take her to the morgue."

"Your crew is going to have to be very careful," Tadero said. "That storm will wash away a lot of evidence if you don't have the bag sealed right."

Denne's eyes narrowed as he studied her. He didn't seem to like her much either. He watched her as he shouted, "Eddie! You think you can get the bag and gurney from my truck all by yourself?"

Retsler suppressed a smile. Tadero was certainly getting her education this afternoon.

"Not in this wind, Hamilton," Eddie said. "It's going to take at least two of us. And we might be better off without the gurney. A shoulder carry might work better."

Denne tested the body's arm. Rigor hadn't set in yet. "Okay. I'll do a few things before you get to that. If you don't mind bringing the bag."

"If I'd thought of it, I'd've brought it with me," Eddie said. "I don't relish going out there again."

Retsler thought of the steep edge and the slick asphalt. None of them were safe in this kind of storm.

"Go with him," he said to Tadero.

"You heard him," she said. "He can do this."

"I know. But I don't want any of us alone on this headland."

"Why?" she asked. "What do you think happened?"

She was thinking about the body. She had no idea how dangerous these storms were, how the coast killed dozens of tourists every year because they weren't cautious enough when they faced Mother Nature's wrath.

"I think the storm's too severe for anyone to be alone," he said.

She glanced at the window. The wind wasn't even audible. He could feel her reluctance. She was ready to do the hands-on police work. Hell, she'd had five times as much experience with dead bodies as he'd had. He might actually have let her do the work if it weren't for Lucy's comment about the lighthouse being haunted.

He'd ignored comments like that from Lucy twice in the past. The first time it might have gotten a friend killed. The second time, it had cost two people their lives and destroyed most of the trailers along the Dee.

"How long will this storm last?" Tadero asked.

"A day, maybe two. Why?"

She shrugged. "I thought maybe we could wait it out, but it doesn't sound like we can."

"No, we can't," Retsler said.

"Then make sure you get all the evidence you can while you're here." She said that last to Denne, as if he

had never worked a crime scene before, and then thumped down the stairs.

Denne rolled his eyes. "Remind me to sit on more committees."

"Wouldn't have made any difference," Retsler said. "Then there would have been two of us who disapproved. Not a majority by a long shot."

Denne nodded and continued his work. Retsler turned his attention to the corpse of an old friend.

What had she been doing here? Pippa Gage had hated heights. The views out of these windows would have paralyzed her. Even if she could have ignored those, the open banisters would have made it impossible for her to miss the distance to the floor below.

He wished dead faces registered their last emotions, like they did in detective novels. He wanted to know how Pippa had been feeling when she died. Or maybe he didn't. Pippa had been a gentle soul who didn't deserve to die in fear.

Retsler looked up at Clay Emory. Emory was still staring at her body, his expression so full of regret that Retsler could almost feel it himself.

"Clay," he said, "you want to tell me what happened?"

Emory didn't move.

"Clay," Denne said.

Then Emory raised his head, like a man who had just come out of a very deep sleep.

"The chief asked you a question."

"Sorry." Emory's voice was deep and slow. Raspier than usual, as if he had a cold or as if he had been talking a lot.

Retsler wasn't going to get anything out of him up here, not with Pippa's body so close. "Come on downstairs. You can tell me what you saw."

Emory's head shook just slightly. Retsler couldn't tell if he didn't want to talk or if he were already answering an unspoken question.

"Come on," Denne said softly. "I'll help you around."

Emory reached behind himself for the banister, hand shaking. He pulled himself up, looking back down on Pippa. This time his head shake was noticeable. "She really is dead, isn't she?"

Retsler realized what he'd heard as hoarseness was actually withheld tears. "Yes," he said.

Denne shot Retsler an uncomfortable glance, then walked over to Emory. Denne extended his gloved hand.

"Come on, Clay," he said. "Let's get you downstairs."

Emory gripped Denne's hand the way a child would grip a parent's. He let Denne lead him around the body, and then, when they reached Retsler, Emory finally moved on his own.

His eyes were swimming with tears. "You know, it's so weird. One minute you're talking to somebody.

You can feel them. You know they're there. Then the next minute -- "

His voice broke.

Denne still stood behind him, blocking him from the body. Retsler stepped aside so that Emory could start down the stairs. Emory grabbed the banister and started down, his knuckles white against the metal. Retsler followed and Denne returned to the crime scene to finish the small details he had left.

The light at the base of the stairs seemed dimmer. It took a moment for Retsler to realize that was because the storm was directly overhead. The natural light which came in through the windows above was fading. The artificial light had a greenish gray quality to it, like institution lighting -- the kind found in big city police stations and the waiting rooms of prisons.

His coat still dripped near the door, his shoes getting soaked beneath it. There were footprints near the exit, probably from Eddie and Tadero.

Retsler grabbed one of the old wooden captains chairs leaning against the wall and set it in the small alcove behind the stairs. He helped Emory into that chair, then grabbed another for himself.

"What happened up there, Clay?" he asked.

Emory tilted his head back as if he could make the tears recede into his eyes. He sighed, then swiped at his face with the back of his hand.

"I was working," he said after a moment. "Finishing the light. They've all updated everything. It's computerized now. Inside a casing, ready to go. Won't need anyone to baby-sit it any more. Kinda strange, huh?"

Retsler made a sympathetic sound, but didn't say anything more. Clay Emory was not a talkative man under the best of circumstances. Interrupting him now could possibly stop him permanently.

"We were gonna test it before it got dark because no one's supposed to see the light before the grand opening on the 15th. But we had to make sure it worked. The storm was rolling in and Pippa wanted me to hurry. She was afraid when the clouds hit, the entire county would see the light shining off the waves."

Retsler nodded, waiting. He still found it surprising that Pippa was here.

"Pippa, she didn't like the idea of being in the lighthouse when the storm hit." Emory's voice broke again and he brought his head forward, wiping at his eyes some more. "Ah, shit, Dan. I can't do this. I -- "

"Take your time," Retsler said.

"But she wouldn't've been here if I hadn't asked her to come. I thought maybe she and me -- we were -- ." Emory stopped all by himself, put his face in his hands, his shoulders shuddering.

Retsler watched him, coming to the realization all on his own. They were having an affair. Amazing how much he knew about this town and yet how little.

He put his hand on Emory's back, felt shudders run through the man. "Just tell me what happened."

"You're not gonna tell Paula, are you?" Paula was Emory's wife.

"Not if I don't have to," Retsler said. "But she might wonder what Pippa was doing here. Everyone knew she was afraid of heights."

"I did that." Emory sat up. He was calm now, as if he'd reached a different state. "I told her she could get past the fears if she just confronted them. We'd been working on it. The stairs first, then places like the path to the lighthouse. She was going to help me finish the light, and then as a reward for staying so high, we were going to...."

His voice trailed off, but the implication was clear.

"Something got in the way?" Retsler asked.

Emory nodded. "Damn light."

"What happened with the light?"

Emory looked at him, eyes flat. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

A shiver ran through Retsler. Maybe he wouldn't have five years ago. But he believed most things now. That was one reason he had to leave Whale Rock.

"Try me," Retsler said.

Emory lowered his head and stared at his callused hands. He spoke slowly, measuring his words. "We turned on the light, and for a moment, it was glorious. It worked right. It turned like it was supposed to. It made that little electric hum which meant everything was working properly..."

He brought his hands to his face. Retsler didn't move. He figured he had only one chance at this.

"Then -- things -- swarmed toward us from the ocean. I saw them coming, under the clouds. Pippa, she said the air had gotten sharp, charged, like it did before a lightning strike. She begged me to turn the light off, and just as I did, the door banged open -- "

A bang echoed through the lighthouse, and Retsler jumped. Emory rose out of his chair, his hands before him, as if he were protecting himself.

Retsler turned. It was just Eddie and Tadero, coming back with the bag. They struggled with the door in the wind, pushing it shut. They set the bag on the floor near Retsler's shoes, then pulled off their wet coats. The bag wasn't as wet as they were; someone must have covered it.

"This is normal weather?" Tadero asked, wringing out her hair.

"Welcome to winter," Eddie said.

Retsler watched them, arms crossed. Tadero glanced his way, saw that he was talking with Emory, and her lips thinned. Emory was still standing, his hands before him like a shield.

Eddie called up the stairs, "You ready for the bag, Hamilton?"

"Ready as I can be," Denne said.

"C'mon," Eddie said to Tadero. They hurried past Retsler and started up the stairs.

"It's all right," Retsler said softly, hoping that Emory would take his cue and lower his voice as well.

"What happened next?"

"I-I don't know."

"What do you mean?" Retsler asked.

"The door banged open, and Pippa laughed, you know, nervous, like people do. She said it must have been the wind, and she went down to close it. I told her not to, but she really wanted to go down those stairs, away from being so high, if you know what I mean."

Retsler did. Being startled had probably made Pippa's fear of heights worse.

"She started down the stairs, and then she screamed and then...." Emory shook his head.

"And then?" Retsler prompted.

"There was this big crash." Emory was whispering now. "I went down the stairs and I found her. There was nothing I could do. I finally sat on the steps and got my phone out of my pocket and I called -- "

His voice broke and the tears swam in his eyes again. "How am I gonna tell Paula. And everybody. What am I going to say?"

Retsler hated this part of his job. "I don't know, Clay."

There was clanging above them as Denne bagged the body. Emory closed his eyes, as if that would shut out the sound.

"Come on, Clay," Retsler said. "Let me drive you home."

"I need my van."

"You can come back for it. You're not in any shape to drive."

Emory nodded. Retsler glanced at the stairs. He was surprised to find Tadero looking at him.

"You're not going to let him go, are you?" she asked.

Retsler decided he wasn't even going to dignify her question with an answer. "Meet me at the False Colors. Make sure Eddie and Hamilton come."

"This is not the time to go to a bar."

"Jaclyn," he said, "you're not in Chicago any more. For the next few weeks, you're doing things my way or you're not participating at all. Is that clear?"

"Unfortunately," she said, and watched, disapproval evident, as he led Emory to the door.

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It was clear from the moment Tadero entered the False Colors that she had never been inside the restaurant before. Retsler leaned back in his wooden captain's chair and watched her. She ran her hands over the rope banister, and looked up at the skulls above the bar.

The sea chantey on the sound system was something about death and rum. Tadero stopped in front of the black and white photographs of wrecked ships lining the walls, made a face, and then looked for Retsler.

He was sitting at their usual table, Lucy studying the menu beside him. Eddie had already arrived, saying that Denne would come as soon as he finished preparing the body.

Tadero had changed out of her wet clothes into a cable knit sweater and a pair of tight jeans. Her hair was down, curving around her face, softening the angles. From this distance she looked younger than she was, younger and less sure of herself.

For the first time, Retsler wondered why a career detective on the promotion path decided to leave Chicago. He hadn't really thought about how unusual it was before.

She finally saw them and came down the worn wooden steps, walking past the huge fireplace as if it didn't exist. Retsler was amazed. Both he and Eddie had stopped to warm their hands before coming to the table.

"Charming place," Tadero said as she slipped into an empty chair.

"Tourists hate it." Lucy pulled a cigar from her pocket. "So we feel safe here."

Tadero shot her a strange glance. Lucy put the cigar in her mouth and Eddie lit it for her.

"Is this the smoking section?" Tadero asked pointedly.

"It is now," Lucy said.

June, the waitress, handed Tadero a menu, then, behind Tadero's back, raised her eyes in question. Retsler gave her a half smile. "Junie, meet our new police chief as of January."

Tadero looked up in surprise, obviously not used to conversing with waitresses. They gave each other an uncomfortable hello, and then Tadero studied the menu, clearly dismissing June.

"All right, Lucy," Retsler said. "I don't want to wait for Hamilton. Tell me now so I know what the hell I'm dealing with."

"You really should know the history of Whale Rock by now," Lucy said.

"I'm trying to put it out of my mind," Retsler said.

"So he has more room for the history of Buttfuck, Montana," Eddie said, holding his long neck between his index and middle fingers.

Retsler didn't even try to correct him. Eddie knew the name of Retsler's new town, and still insisted on his crude version. Eddie had made it clear from the very beginning that he was opposed to Retsler's move.

Tadero set her menu down. "What are we talking about?"

"The lighthouse." Lucy puffed her cigar. It had a foul odor. Retsler made a mental note to buy her an expensive box before he left.

"Why would its history be important?" Tadero asked.

"You didn't tell her, did you?" Lucy said.

Retsler shrugged. "Not my place."

Lucy set the cigar on the ashtray shaped like a skull and crossbones. "It is your place. You have to give her the tools to work around here."

"Tools?" Tadero said.

"She'll learn fast enough." Retsler smiled at June, who had returned with his shrimp cocktail. June set the appetizer down, took the other orders, and then left. She knew better than to hang around when the entire police department showed up to talk shop.

"The lighthouse," Lucy said, "is one of the oldest structures on this part of the coast. There've been problems from the beginning."

"What has this to do with Pippa Gage?" Tadero asked.

"You probably shouldn't have told her to come here," Eddie said to Retsler, then took a swig of his beer.

"She has to learn sometime," Retsler said. "May as well be now."

"Learn what?"

Denne had arrived. He too had changed clothes. He was wearing pressed jeans with a corduroy jacket over a buttoned down shirt. As he passed the bar, he stopped to order a drink.

"The first lighthouse keeper," Lucy said as if she hadn't been interrupted, "started a fire his first winter there. It burned the stairs and the interior pretty badly. He died, of course -- at least everyone assumes it was him. The body was unrecognizable. His wife saw the flames and smoke pouring out of the lighthouse, but she couldn't do anything. In those days, they were too far away from anywhere."

"So it has a bad history," Tadero said.

"Just listen," Retsler said, even though he doubted she would.

Lucy took a shrimp off Retsler's plate. "About 1890, a group of spiritualists settled Whale Rock. They were told by one of their ghostly guides that this place had a special power."

"No shit," Eddie said.

"They held seances, and mapped out Whale Rock. They used the lighthouse as their base, since no one else would work there, not after that hideous death. They rebuilt the stairs and the light, and kept the ships safe out at sea."

"Spiritualists?" Retsler asked. "I thought that was an East Coast phenomena."

"Technically, it was," Lucy said. "But there were some all over the country."

"And remember," Denne said as he sat down, "Astoria was named after John Jacob Astor. He sent a lot of people here to look after his interests. In those days, there was a strong Eastern contingent on this coast."

"You know this story?" Retsler asked, but without surprise. Denne seemed to know the entire history of the coast.

"Having only heard that last part, I'm not sure," Denne said. "But I have heard that the lighthouse is haunted. At the closed door meetings about the reopenings, there was a lot of discussion about that."

"Excuse me," Tadero said. "People believe in that crap?"

Everyone at the table stared at her. Retsler remembered what such disbelief felt like, but dispassionately, the way he remembered what it felt like to learn his multiplication tables. But with all the group had been through -- the January storm sparked by a curse placed on the town by a selkie, a curse Retsler could

have prevented; the mermaids that still haunted the beaches; the seventy-year old bodies that the sea still regurgitated from time to time -- , they had little tolerance for someone who didn't believe.

At that moment, June brought their meals. She set the plates down as if they weren't hot at all.

"Come on," Tadero said, breaking the code that no one spoke about business before June. "You're not telling me you think ghosts killed her."

"You guys talking about Pippa?" June asked.

News traveled fast in a small town. Only Tadero seemed surprised that June knew about the death.

"After what happened to those hippies, I'm amazed anyone's allowed in the lighthouse. I've thought they were crazy to reopen it. I was with the committee that wanted to tear the whole thing down and start from scratch."

"Hippies?" Retsler looked at Lucy.

"You should remember that, Dan. You were living here then."

"I was a little boy. My mother sheltered me from all bad things," he said. "Unless this was somewhat recent?"

"No," June said. "1970-something. Pretty ugly. I don't remember the details, just that people couldn't believe no one warned them."

"Warned them about what?" Eddie asked. He was too young to remember anything that happened in 1970-something.

"Not to have a seance up there," June said. At that moment, a bell dinged in the back and she left.

"You people are crazy," Tadero said.

"Certifiable," Denne said agreeably, and Retsler got a sense of how the man had survived in that awful marriage for so long.

"You expect me to believe that a woman died because of ghosts?" Tadero asked.

"No," Denne said. "We expect you to believe she died because she fell down a flight of stairs."

"Because she was pushed," Tadero said. "And what about those marks on her face?"

"What did they look like?" Retsler couldn't resist asking her. He slid the shrimp plate to Lucy and then started in on his crab-stuffed halibut.

"Scorch -- ." Tadero cut herself off and, to Retsler's surprise, she flushed.

"Go ahead," Eddie said. "It's okay to say scorch marks."

"But that's not possible," Tadero said.

"Wasn't it Sherlock Holmes who said when you eliminate the possible, that leaves only the impossible?" Denne asked.

"Right," Tadero said, taking a bite from her salmon burger. "We should base this entire investigation on our belief in ghosts and the advice of a fictional character."

"We're so refreshingly small town, aren't we?" Lucy asked, without a smile on her face. "You can look down your nose so easily at us because we don't have the benefit of your big city education. Did you ever think that maybe we know Whale Rock better than you do?"

"Did you ever think that crime scene analysis should be about science, not superstition?" Tadero asked.

"The first rule of any investigation," Denne said with an edge in his voice, "is to examine the evidence without preconceptions. You're assuming that a crime has been committed."

Retsler's halibut was sweet and fresh. He was content to eat it and let the others argue with Tadero for a change.

"The man was alone with her in the lighthouse. They were having an affair, if what Eddie tells me is true. They fight, he gets rough, pushes her, and that's the end of it," Tadero said. "Open and shut."

"Except for the fact that you have no evidence of that," Denne said.

"I haven't looked through the evidence yet," Tadero said. "First rule of investigation: the eyewitness should be your first suspect."

"If there's something to suspect," Denne said.

"She's young and she's dead, isn't she?" Tadero said. "That's a suspicious death."

Retsler finished the halibut and started on his plank potatoes. He glanced around the restaurant. No one sat close enough to hear the conversation.

"Okay," Denne said. "Let's pretend we like your theory. How'd she get the -- what did you call them? -- scorch marks?"

"You tell me," Tadero said. "You're the coroner."

"It's your theory," Denne said.

"Well, I can tell you that they weren't caused by a ghostly presence," Tadero said.

"You're sure?" Lucy asked.

"Positive," Tadero said.

"You want to lay some money down on that?" Lucy asked.

Retsler set his fork down. Eddie gave him a small secret grin. Lucy never made a bet she wasn't certain of winning.

Tadero looked at Lucy. "You've got a bet."

"How much?" Lucy asked.

"How much can you afford to lose?"

Lucy grinned. "A lot more than you can."

"I can't believe I'm going to bet on this," Tadero said, almost to herself.

"Neither can I," Retsler said.

She glared at him. "Fifty bucks."

Eddie whistled. Lucy said, "You want to make that a hundred?"

Tadero frowned. "No. I'll have enough trouble taking your money as it is."

"Have you thought about how you're going to prove this?" Denne asked her.

"I'm going to solve this crime using science," Tadero said. "Then there won't be any more talk about ghosts on my watch."

Lucy laughed. "I love it when they're young and idealistic," she said and picked up her cigar.

* * * *

After Tadero left, Denne ordered a second Alaskan Amber. "She's going to be a problem," he said.

"Nonsense." Lucy had put out her cigar. "Dan didn't believe for years and he grew up here. He's done all right."

Retsler said nothing. Now he believed that there were supernatural things that gathered in Whale Rock, he was leaving. His lack of belief, his unwillingness to look at the supernatural -- even after he learned of its existence -- had caused him to make some of the bigger mistakes of his career.

He waved off June's offer of dessert, ordered a cup of decaf, and leaned back in his chair. The room had a chill.

"So," he said to Lucy, "give me the short version of the lighthouse's history."

She sighed. "Near as anyone can figure, the lighthouse itself acts as a type of lightning rod. It draws spirits to it, but only when the light is on."

Retsler felt the threads of disbelief again. "Why when the light is on? Why not all the time?"

"The theory is that it brings souls out of the darkness. They think they're heading toward the light -- you know that death light? -- when instead, they're coming for the lighthouse."

"So they're angry when they get here?" Retsler asked.

Lucy shook her head. "They're just lost and confused. The only angry ghost is the lighthouse keeper. He apparently attacks, but in panic, one of the hippies said. Like he was still surrounded by flame and smoke and trying to escape."

"What about those hippies?" Retsler asked.

"They held a seance up there, long after the lighthouse had closed."

"So the light wasn't working?"

"They brought one of their own," Lucy said. "It was a big old oil lamp, like the kind they thought the lighthouse keeper would have used."

Retsler felt his stomach clench. "Then what? A fire?"

"The survivors claimed there was a fire," Lucy said. "They claimed the entire lighthouse was going up in smoke and flames, only there was no evidence of it. Everything was normal inside when investigators

came."

"Except..." Eddie intoned in a deep radio announcer voice.

"Except the hippies who died were burned to death."

Retsler wrapped his hands around his mug. The ceramic was hot against his palms.

"The survivors say they tried to call the spirits of the dead from the area. They claimed they saw a lot of lost and sad sailors, and a few other folk they didn't recognize. It was the lighthouse keeper who chased the others away."

"The guy who burned to death."

"Right," Lucy said. "He gave them a warning, which they didn't listen too, and scorched one boy's face. He didn't go back, that boy. The others did, determined to put the lighthouse keeper's soul to rest."

"And they all died?"

"All but two girls who made it out. They were treated for severe smoke inhalation."

Retsler frowned. "Surely someone thought that was odd."

"Well," Lucy waved, caught June's attention, and mimed drinking a beer. "They might have if it weren't for a few things."

"Like what?" Retsler asked.

June brought Lucy a Rogue Ale.

"Like," Lucy said, "the hippies were all tourists, and they had some drugs stashed in their van."

"LSD?" Retsler asked.

"Who knows?" Lucy said.

"Pot mostly." Denne spoke for the first time since Lucy started reciting the story. "And the girls' systems were clean. I had the toxicology tests in my office for the longest time."

"This one interests you?" Retsler asked.

"This one scares me," Denne said. "We're reopening that lighthouse."

Retsler set his chair down on all four of its legs. How had he missed this argument? Probably because he had been spending all spring and summer finding a way out of Whale Rock. Probably because he felt any part of Whale Rock's future had nothing to do with him.

"So, doc," he said to Denne, "what's your professional opinion? Was Pippa pushed down those stairs?"

"It's kind of hard to tell without a witness, unless there's two large handprints outlined squarely in her back." Denne set his amber down. "I haven't done the autopsy yet, but I do know that she died of a broken neck. So her injury is consistent with a fall down the stairs."

"Bruising? Any sign of a fight?" Retsler asked.

"Just what you'd expect from a fall," Denne said.

"I went to school with Clay Emory," Eddie said. He was still nursing the same long neck he'd started with, hours ago. "There's no way he would hurt anyone."

"He was having an affair with her," Retsler said. "And that was news to me. People can surprise you."

"Not Clay. She wasn't his first and she won't be his last. Paula's a -- ." Eddie lowered his voice so that no one around them would overhear. " -- Grade A Number One bitch."

"Eddie," Denne said.

"It's true. She's a real ball-buster, and Clay's had trouble keeping it in his pants since high school."

"But you don't think he killed Pippa."

"Hell, man, have you ever seen Clay in a fight?" Eddie asked.

Retsler shook his head.

"That's my point. He wouldn't hit anyone, not even when we were doing a boxing unit in school. If someone got violent around him, he'd hide his face in his hands and cringe. If someone starts yelling, he leaves the room. I've even seen him take spiders outside instead of smashing them. This is not a man who gets angry and pushes someone down a flight of stairs."

Eddie directed this last toward Denne, as if it were Denne's fault that the accusation was even being made.

"All I said was that the bruises and the neck injury were consistent with a fall," Denne said. "I didn't say he pushed her."

"I hear a 'but' in that sentence," Retsler said.

"I haven't done the official tests yet," Denne said, "but I did some preliminary work. The streaks on Pippa's face are consistent with streaks a person gets when they're in a lot of smoke."

"What does that mean?" Retsler said.

"Think about it," Denne said. "Someone's lit a fire so close to your face that you're feeling the heat. What do you do?"

"Try to put it out," Lucy said.

"And she was panicked because of her fear of heights," Denne said. "She probably waved it away, or pushed it away, and tumbled forward."

Retsler downed the last of his decaf. "Interesting theory, but what are the odds that Clay Emory knows the lighthouse's history?"

"And went to all that trouble to make it look like ghosts killed Pippa?" Lucy asked, her voice rising incredulously.

Retsler shrugged. "He was alone with her all afternoon. He had time."

Denne shook his head. "There was no ash residue, no smell of sulfur, no signs of fire anywhere in that lighthouse. I checked. Besides, the time of death is consistent with Clay's story. The body was still warm when I arrived. You remember, Dan. Rigor hadn't even really started yet."

Retsler did remember the arm hanging limply over the landing. "What about Paula? Anyway she could have been there?"

Eddie shook his head. "She had a shift at Safeway this afternoon. A lot of people saw her."

"We can't just close this one up," Retsler said. "Tadero won't let it ride."

"You can't prove the existence of ghosts," Denne said.

"Why not?" Retsler asked. "All it takes is a scientific method."

"And an open mind." Denne sipped his amber. "She's missing the second part."

"I missed it once too," Retsler said.

"What are you going to do?" Lucy asked.

Retsler smiled at her. "Rely on you," he said.

* * * *

Storm clouds gathered on the horizon, black against a gray sky. The line between the clouds and the ocean was blurred -- it was pouring not three miles away.

Retsler stood in front of the lighthouse, the wind tugging at his coat. It had gotten cooler in the last few minutes and he could smell rain in the air.

"I got a call from the state crime lab this morning." Denne was standing beside him, hands clasped behind his back, staring up at the lighthouse as if he'd never seen it before. "They wanted to know why someone they'd never heard of had requested an autopsy on a case I hadn't even listed as a suspicious death."

"Tadero?" Retsler asked.

Denne nodded. His hair blew across his face, and he pushed at the strands as if they annoyed him.

"Are you sending the body?"

"She has no authority yet," Denne said.

"What did you tell them?"

"That she's new and hungry and won't be chief until January." A strand of hair caught on the edge of his mouth. He didn't seem to notice. "They understood. They're turning down the request."

Lucy came up beside them, a large bag over her shoulder. She looked small and frail in the wind.

"Where's Eddie?"

"Getting Emory," Retsler said.

"Do you really think we should do this?" Denne asked. "They did all sorts of cleansings once the reopening was approved."

"Of the lighthouse." Lucy was standing in the same position Denne had been in, her head tilted back, staring at the top of the massive building before them. "Anyone with a brain can tell the problem comes when the light is lit."

The clouds were swirling in the distance, and the chill had gotten deeper. Retsler pulled his coat tighter.

"Besides," Lucy said, "this place is going to be a spirit magnet for the rest of its days."

"So what are we doing here?" Denne asked.

"That's what I'd like to know." Tadero had come up behind Retsler. Even though he had been expecting her, he jumped.

"You're observing."

"Like hell. You guys are messing with a crime scene."

Retsler smiled. "We're the police, Jaclyn. We're allowed."

At that moment, Eddie and Emory crested the hill. Eddie had one hand on Emory's back, as if propelling him forward.

"What is this?" Tadero asked.

"He's going to show us what he was doing when Pippa died," Retsler said.

"He already gave a statement," Tadero said.

"I still fail to see what we can do that the others haven't," Denne said, referring not to Emory, but the other cleansings.

"The way I see it," Lucy said, "the light will be automated. There will rarely be anyone here when it comes on."

"What are we talking about?" Tadero asked. No one answered her.

"The lighthouse will be open to the public during on summer days, but for safety reasons will close anytime the light has to go on. So we're only concerned with a few interactions and only one that could possibly be dangerous."

She didn't have to say which one. Retsler and Denne both knew she was referring to the lighthouse keeper.

"So are we making the same mistake those hippies made?" Denne asked.

"Goodness, no. We're not holding a seance. No one here is that reckless, are we?" Lucy looked at Tadero as if this had all been her idea.

"You people are really and truly crazy," Tadero said.

At that moment, Eddie and Emory reached them. Emory's face was ashen. He looked at Tadero, and Retsler thought he saw fear in Emory's eyes.

"What's she doing here, Dan? You gonna charge me with something?"

So Emory had heard about Tadero's theory of Pippa's death.

"No, Clay," Retsler said. "And even if I did, any good lawyer would throw this afternoon's proceedings out of court."

Tadero sighed and shook her head.

"So what're we doing here?"

"You're going to turn the light on for us."

Emory shook his head. "I quit, didn't you hear? I don't want to go inside this place ever again."

"I know," Retsler said.

"I don't got permission to turn on the light," Emory said. "This is state property. I could get in trouble."

"We have permission," Retsler said.

"To have me do it?"

"They wanted a certified electrician here. The work's not completely done, Clay. We need to be safe."

Emory continued shaking his head. He was backing away. Eddie caught his arm. "I told you what happened. You can't -- "

"It's all right," Retsler said. "It'll take ten minutes."

Emory blinked hard. "You don't know what you're risking."

"I think we do, Clay," Lucy said. "Come on."

He looked at her and all the strength seemed to leave him. Apparently Clay Emory, like the rest of Whale Rock, trusted Lucy.

Eddie led Emory inside, followed by Denne and Lucy. As Retsler headed for the door, Tadero kept pace with him.

"Very melodramatic," she said. "Is this show for me?"

"Actually, the others didn't want you here," Retsler said, stating only part of the objection his crew had to the afternoon's proceedings. "Consider your presence to be professional courtesy."

She raised her eyebrows, but followed him inside.

Weak sunlight came through the thick glass windows and the skylight, reflecting off the newly painted white walls. The light made the interior of the lighthouse a completely different place than it had been during the storm.

Emory and Eddie were already past the landing where Pippa's body had been found. The sound of footsteps on metal stairs echoed in the small space.

Retsler followed. Through the windows on the landing, he could see the clouds, black in the distance. They had gotten a lot closer.

When he and Tadero reached the top, the others were already gathered around the light. Emory stood to one side, near the control box.

"They haven't got it automated yet," he said. "That won't happen until the day after the dedication ceremony."

Lucy had reached inside her bag. She held it against her, one hand inside, the other clutching the bag tightly. The lines on her face seemed deeper than they ever had, and she had lost all of her grandmother-cute.

Denne had slipped his hands into his back pockets and was staring out at the storm clouds. Eddie was standing beside Emory as if he didn't trust him to go through with this. Tadero had stopped beside Retsler. He could feel the tension in her body.

"I-I don't think this is smart, Dan," Emory said again.

"Let's just do it," Retsler said. "The way you did the day Pippa died. Keep the timing the same."

Emory took a deep breath and hit a switch. The light, in the center of the round room, hummed. The bulbs lit up and then the light began to rotate, just like it was supposed to. Retsler could feel the vibration through the floor.

The air did feel charged. He glanced at Tadero and saw that strands of her hair had risen as if they were covered with static electricity.

"Dan," Denne said. There was an urgency in his voice.

Retsler followed Denne's gaze and so did Tadero. Shapes had formed over the ocean, small wisps, like fog, all of them scuttling forward. Retsler turned. He saw more wisps coming up the beach from the south.

"What is that?" Tadero asked.

Then the lighthouse door banged open.

"Oh, Jesus," Emory said. He fumbled with the box, punching the switch trying to shut it off.

"One of us should go down the stairs," Lucy said. She had dropped her bag and was now holding a small vial in her left hand.

"I'll go," Retsler said. "You want me to take that?"

"No." Lucy came up beside him. She held the vial before her as if it were a shield.

Tadero's eyes were wide. "What the hell is this?"

"Don't know yet," Retsler said, but he smelled smoke. Tadero did too -- he could tell from the way her nostrils moved.

"Oh, for god's sake," she said, rolling her eyes. "Let's scare the new recruit."

She started down the stairs without them.

"Jaclyn!" Denne called, but she didn't stop.

Retsler hurried down after Tadero, Lucy beside him.

Flames had formed on the landing. As Tadero got close, the flames rose up in the shape of a man. He reached toward her, fire blazing off his fingers.

"What the...?" Tadero stopped.

"Back off," Lucy said, but Retsler didn't know if she was talking to Tadero or the fiery shape.

Black smoke filled the air around them. In the space of a few seconds, it got so thick that Retsler could barely see.

"Shut off the damn light!" Denne yelled from upstairs. Eddie cursed.

"I can't get close, Dan," Lucy said.

Tadero backed up the stairs, fumbling for her gun.

Retsler grabbed the vial from Lucy. His eyes stung and he was coughing. "What do I do?"

"Dump it on the flames," she said.

He pulled the cork. The burning man was coming after Tadero, the only light in the smoke.

Retsler tossed the contents at the wall of fire.

"We're helping! We're helping! We're putting you out!" Lucy called.

The liquid hit the flames and they rose up, sparking. Tadero let out a small cry and crouched, protecting her face. Then the flames sucked inward, and the smoke vanished. All that was left was a man in severe black clothing, wearing muttonchop whiskers and a confused expression.

"Rest now," Lucy said. "You're free. Go home."

He looked upward and his body lost definition, becoming fog. It floated through the ceiling and disappeared through the roof.

"Shut off the damn light!" Denne yelled again.

"Move," Eddie said, and Retsler heard clanging. There was a loud click and then the humming stopped.

The door banged again. Closed, Retsler guessed, and somehow that relieved him. The feeling of electricity had left the air.

Retsler handed the vial back to Lucy. "What the hell was in here?"

"Holy water," she said.

Retsler started in surprise. "You knew that would work?"

"No," she said and smiled. Her face was streaked with soot. He supposed his was too. "I hoped it would, though."

Retsler shook his head. He hated to think what would have happened if the holy water hadn't worked. The spirit might have vanished anyway, as it had when Emory shut off the light the first time. Or it might have stayed.

He shuddered. He heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs behind him, but didn't turn, knowing it was Denne, Eddie and Emory.

Tadero was sitting on the stairs. She was covered in black, and clutching her gun. Retsler climbed down to her.

"What the hell was that?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"What Pippa Gage saw before she fell down the stairs."

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

Retsler shrugged. "Believe what you want."

Tadero looked at him. Her eyes were wide, her confidence gone. She seemed as shaken as a rookie at her first arrest.

Retsler took pity on her. He sat down beside her. "You never asked me why I was getting out of here."

"Because the lighthouse is haunted?" The usual bravado was not in her voice.

"Because this isn't the first strange and hard-to-believe thing I've seen in Whale Rock," he said. "Believe it or not, I used to be more skeptical than you are."

"You're leaving because you're afraid of ghosts?" she asked.

Retsler shook his head. "Because I don't handle them well. Because they disturb me on a level that makes me ineffective at my job."

"You don't seem ineffective," she said, and he realized that was the first time she had complimented him.

"Yet," he said.

She nodded, holstered her gun and looked out the window. The storm clouds had gotten closer, and the waves were large and tipped with white.

"Like ten-year-old crack dealers with guns," she said.

"What?" Retsler asked.

"You never asked me why I gave up a career-track position in Chicago to come here," she said.

"Ten-year-old crack addicts?" he asked.

"With guns," she said. "They disturb me on a level that made me ineffective at my job."

Retsler wasn't sure he knew what to say to that. He'd never seen a crack addict, let alone a ten-year-old brandishing a weapon. "So you'd rather face ghosts?"

She looked at her hands, smudged with black from the smoke. "I'd rather believe this was a prank that you all pulled, but Pippa Gage is dead. To believe this is a prank, I have to believe that you took her death lightly, and I see no evidence of that."

"You called the state crime lab," Denne said, and Retsler heard suppressed fury in his tones.

Tadero nodded. "I was going to prove to you that science was better than superstition."

"But?" Lucy asked.

"My eyes sting from smoke that's not here," Tadero said.

"What are you going to do about the lighthouse?" Emory asked Retsler. "You can't let it open."

Retsler sighed and stood. "It'll be all right, Clay."

"But -- "

"But nothing. We got rid of the hostile spirit."

"That won't stop more from coming," Emory said.

"The lighthouse will be empty when the light's on," Retsler said.

"Except if some poor electrician has to fix it." Emory's voice was shaking.

Eddie put his hand on Emory's shoulder. Denne shoved his hands in his pocket, ruining the lines of his pants. He looked more uncomfortable than Retsler had ever seen him.

"I'll talk to some people," Denne said, "and see what we can do."

"You know better," Emory said. "They should have stopped this thing from the beginning, but they didn't. And now Pippa's dead. More people are going to die here, Dan, you know that."

Retsler did know that, but it wasn't his problem any more. It was Tadero's.

He reached a hand down to help her up. She took it reluctantly.

"Still willing to stay?" he asked her softly.

"Still planning to leave?" she asked with a touch of the old toughness.

He gazed at the storm clouds which were hovering just off-shore. The storm made him less nervous than the last one had. He was, apparently, coming to terms with the past -- and that meant he was ready to move on.

He had needed the experience in the lighthouse to prove to himself that no matter what came his way, he could handle it. He might not be able to solve it, any more than Tadero could stop kids from getting crack or guns, but he could survive whatever was thrown at him.

"Dan?" Denne asked, as if he were waiting for Retsler to respond. "Still plan to leave?"

"Yeah," Retsler said softly, feeling relief for the first time in nearly a year. "Now that I know my successor is up to the job."