

The Lighthouse

T. James Reese



Veritas et Virtute
Media Production

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Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0615742533

First Edition

Stacy...there are more reasons than anyone could ever imagine as to why this book is for you, so I'll simply say *because* you are *my everything*...I love you.

“All my life I have tried to pluck a thistle and plant a flower wherever the flower would grow in thought and mind.”

Abraham Lincoln

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Ashley couldn't help but smile as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. She'd only just finished applying the final coat of vibrant blue paint on the recently remodeled walls of her now nautical themed bathroom. But it wasn't the color that moved her. She looked adorable, her hair pulled up into a short pony tail, her white tank top marked with paint spatter in seemingly just the right places. But that wasn't the reason either. Her emotions clashed as both happiness and angst flooded her thoughts.

She looked down at her hands, the corners of her mouth curling into a quirky little grin. Slowly, she slid her finger under the side flap of the small pink box that she held in front of her and took a deep breath. The seal broke free easily. Ashley did her best to ignore her jitters and pulled the pregnancy test from the package, sorted through the contents, and began reading over the directions.

-Knock, knock-

Ashley nearly jumped out of her skin, the unfolded paper in her hand falling to the floor and settling next to her flip flop clad feet. Her focus was drawn to the whitewashed door reflecting behind her in the mirror as she heard the knob begin to jiggle. Frantically, she stuffed the pregnancy test and all of its miscellaneous wrappings into the top drawer of the bathroom

counter, grabbed her still blue paintbrush from where she'd set it, and reached for the door, a look of forced calm creeping across her pretty face.

"You Ok?" Gavin asked as the door popped open.

"Yeah, baby, the knob sticks sometimes."

"I know, just add it to the list," he grinned.

"You bet," she said with an awkward smile.

"What's that?" he asked, noticing the creased paper on the floor.

"Oh, um," Ashley thought, grasping for anything that would make sense, "it's instructions for the paint."

Stupid! she yelled at herself, her teeth clenched as she continued to smile.

Gavin blinked and then laughed, "The paint came with instructions? Who needs instructions for painting?"

"I don't know," she replied, "some people, I guess?"

"Anyway," Gavin said, her cell phone in his hand, "it's for you."

She took the phone and let out a relieved sigh as he turned and clomped off down the stairs. Ashley headed into the bedroom and flopped down on the unmade bed.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Ash."

"Kayla! How are you?"

"I'm good, you?"

"Fine, just a little...*distracted.*"

"Ok," Kayla laughed in a motherly voice, "I just hadn't heard from you in a couple of days and I wanted to see how things are going."

"A couple of days, huh? I'm surprised you didn't put out a missing persons report."

"Yeah, yeah," Kayla laughed sing-songily.

“So how’s Ethan?”

“He’s good, last night he discovered sweet potatoes, you should have seen his eyes.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, he was amazed!”

“Is he walking yet?” Ashley grinned.

“He pulls himself up on the couch, then stumbles between it and the chair, but Jamie thinks...”

A raucous, burbly rumble cut Kayla off. Ashley looked up at the wall. One of her paintings was slowly inching its way off kilter as the noise vibrated the whole house.

“Kay, can I call you back?”

“Yeah. I’d better go. Marley and I were baking cookies and it looks like, yep, all over her face, flour, ok, bye.”

Ashley ended the call, then made her way downstairs, through the kitchen, and out the door to the driveway. All she could do was shake her head. Gavin looked up at her, the biggest grin she’d ever seen. His arms were covered in grease; she could hardly make out his tattoos.

“WOO HOO!” he yelled, revving the throttle on his old, black motorcycle.

“I see you finally got it running.”

“What?”

“I said, it’s finally running.”

Gavin motioned that he couldn’t hear her, then let out the clutch, and turned off the engine, “It’s finally running!”

“I hardly noticed,” Ashley teased, her ears still ringing. “Do you think it’s loud enough?”

“Nope,” Gavin replied as he climbed off the bike and pulled a dirty rag from his tool box.

“I’ve honestly never heard a motorcycle that loud.”

“Thanks,” he winked.

With a smirk, Ashley smacked his backside and headed into the kitchen. Gavin cleaned up the mess of tools he’d been using, dropped them off on his workbench in the garage, then stopped to admire his handiwork one more time before chasing after her. The bike still needed a paint job and a little more tuning, but it was officially *among the living*, as he liked to say.

The backdoor clicked shut behind him as he stepped into the kitchen and flipped open a white cupboard door, then reached for a glass. Ashley stared blankly at the sink full of dishes.

“Everything OK?” he asked, pressing the glass into the water dispenser on the front of the refrigerator.

“Just thinking,” she smiled

“Beautiful weather today, isn’t it?”

“This is Los Angeles, it’s always beautiful.”

“Only in the movies, my friend.”

Two men stood shoulder to shoulder, speaking just loud enough for each other to hear and engaging in unassuming small talk whenever there was the off chance that someone may walk by and overhear. They stared out from one of the terminal windows at LAX airport and watched as a British Airways 777 touched down on the tarmac.

“Is this man as good as you say he is?”

“Better.”

“You just seem, distant,” Gavin frowned, stepping up behind her, wrapping his dirty arms tightly around her.

“I don’t mean to be,” Ashley shrugged, “and you need a shower.”

Gavin stepped back and raised his arm. Ashley’s nose wrinkled as she watched him sniff at the air.

“Maybe.”

She smirked at him as he headed upstairs, then turned and looked again at the sink. Ashley wasn’t against having a baby and Gavin had hinted at starting a family; besides, they’d been married for five years now. Maybe it was time.

Oh, boy! she smiled.

The doors to the tunnel opened as a flight attendant stepped through, slowly leading the passengers out of the corridor. The men watched till there was no one left.

“This was his flight, right?” one of them scoffed.

Before the other could answer, a man appeared at the exit, a long black trench coat hung over one arm, the other wrapped around the waste of a pretty stewardess. They watched as he whispered something in her ear, followed by a kiss that sent her blushing back into the tunnel.

“Mr. Nelson?” he asked, his hand extended in greeting as he approached the men.

“Yes,” the man on the right answered curtly, “and this is my associate...”

“Call me Franklin,” the second man interrupted, “at least for now.”

The man nodded, shaking Franklin’s hand as well, then flicked his trench coat, sending it into a swirling blur as it fanned out around him, his arms suavely slipping into the sleeves. It settled across his shoulders, his new acquaintances staring in amazement.

“Shall we go then?” he smiled coyly, his British accent all the more beguiling.

Steam from the shower coated the mirror with condensation. Ashley closed the bathroom door behind her. Gavin sang to himself, his off-key melody echoing off the tub surround. Quietly, she undressed and slipped into the shower, resting her head on her husband's shoulder as she pulled the curtain shut.

The men worked their way through the crowded airport, stopping at the baggage return to pick up his luggage.

“So what do I call you?” Franklin asked, scratching at his receding hairline.

“The solution to your problem.”

“And what is my problem?” Franklin grinned.

“Mr. Nelson contacted my employer who informed me that you required a consultation,” the Brit answered smugly. “And in exchange for that service, my employer requested a certain form of remuneration, one that he believes only you have. Therefore, I *am* the solution to your problem.”

Gavin dried off. Ashley gave him a quick kiss followed by a mischievous smirk as she wrapped her towel around herself. Sitting down on the edge of the tub, she grabbed a bottle of moisturizer, squeezed some into her hand, then rubbed it onto her legs as the smell of strawberries filled the room.

“I need to call Kayla back,” she said, wiping excess lotion on her towel. “Love you.”

“Love you too, baby,” he grinned.

Ashley headed for the bedroom and opened her chest of drawers to pick out a pair of underwear, then slipped into her favorite jeans and pulled on a t-shirt, her hair still wet from the shower. Gavin stood in the bathroom, cleaning his ears with a q-tip. Picking up her cell from where she'd left it lying

on the bed, she dialed Kayla.

“Hey, it’s me,” she said as Kayla answered.

“Ash,” she said curiously, sensing the uneasiness in her sister’s voice, “what’s up?”

Ashley sat down on the edge of the bed, “Well...”

“Well what, Ash?”

“I *think* I’m pregnant,” she blurted.

Kayla didn’t speak for a moment. Ashley squirmed nervously.

“Have you taken a pregnancy test yet?” Kayla wondered, the phone in one hand, a baby bottle in the other.

“Almost.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m working on it,” Ashley sighed.

“So what does Gavin think?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“You haven’t, hold on,” Kayla paused, “Jamie, get her down from there, Jamie...”

Ashley shook her head, a smile on her face.

“Ok, sorry Ash, I’m back.”

“No problem,” she said, still smiling. “That’s quite a little zoo you have there.”

“Yeah, it’s Marley,” Kayla laughed, “my invincible four-year-old. So what was I saying?”

“Something along the line of asking why I haven’t told Gavin.”

“Oh yeah,” Kayla continued. “So why didn’t you talk to him yet?”

“He’s got a lot on his plate; work is really stressing him out.”

“How’s that going anyway?”

“Good. He makes a great supervisor. The toy store has never done so well. All the employees love him.”

Kayla held Ethan in her arms, feeding him the bottle, coaxing him into a nap, the phone held between her chin and shoulder. Jamie ran through the living room, a makeshift blanket-turned-cape tied around his neck, Marley giggling, hot on his heels, her curly hair bouncing as she chased after him.

“How long has he been there,” Kayla asked, “three years?”

“Yeah, almost four. He really wants to move up, but the company is dragging their feet. The last manager they hired was from outside the company, which is stupid. Gavin isn’t the only supervisor there capable of moving up. They practically run the store for the managers anyway.”

“It must be tough for him,” Kayla said, Ethan’s eyes growing heavy.

“Yeah, he has so much potential.”

“I mean giving up a life of freedom and excitement, the danger of being a demon hunter, and now trying to live a normal life with a normal job. Moving from the big city to a small town is a severe change of pace, Ash.”

“He’s doing his best. I know he’s frustrated, but this was his choice. He’s trying, you know?”

“Sounds like it. And how about you, how’s the museum?”

Ashley smiled, she, on the other hand, loved her job.

“I’m teaching a painting class for kids at the art museum. It’s great. Plus, I’m still doing restorations on the side. I’m working on a Rembrandt now for the Cleveland Museum of Art, very nice.”

“So big museums send you pieces and you fix them up?”

“Yeah, museums, private collectors, investors...well, they don’t send them to me actually, they ship them to Cleveland and I go up there, it’s more secure than shipping a million dollar painting to a house, you know?”

“Sounds good,” Kayla smiled proudly, knowing that her little sister was all grown up. “Well, no matter what, pregnant or not, it’s all in God’s hands.”

“I know,” Ashley sighed, “I know.”

A large black sedan pulled to a stop at the curb. Mr. Nelson opened the rear door as Franklin and their guest slid into the leather seats. The heavy door closed with a solid *thunk*.

“We’ve set up an apartment for you, downtown,” he explained settling into the passenger seat. “You can use it as a base of operations for as long as you like.”

The car lurched forward as the driver merged into the exit lane. Franklin fastened his safety belt.

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Welcome to Los Angeles,” Mr. Nelson smiled.

“Honey, have you seen my wallet?” Jamie asked, his face red from playing.

Kayla glanced from the living room to the dining room. Marley sat at the table, the wallet flipped open. His credit cards, driver’s license, and other miscellaneous clutter were all spread out in front of her.

“Come play store, daddy!”

“Not now, sweetie,” Kayla said, picking up the wallet and sorting its contents. “Daddy has to get back to work. Lunchtime is over. Go play dolls.”

Marley slumped down off the chair and ran for the family room. Jamie gave Kayla a kiss as she handed him the wallet.

“Was that your sister on the phone?” he asked, slipping the wallet into his pocket and adjusting his tie.

“Yeah,” Kayla smiled wistfully, “and, ready for this?”

“What’s up?”

“She might be pregnant.”

The sedan stopped in front of a tall building. The Englishman stepped from the car and looked up approvingly at the luxury high rise.

“Your suite is on the tenth floor,” Franklin informed, handing him a set of keys on a fancy ring. “You’ll also find a car in the underground garage. The valet can retrieve it for you.”

“Thank you, Franklin.”

“We’ll be in touch.” Mr. Nelson added firmly.

The man gave them a nod as the car pulled away from the curb.

“Home sweet home,” he smiled, raising his cell phone to his ear.

Gavin, his face covered in shaving cream, watched in the mirror as Ashley stepped into the bathroom and readied to dry her hair.

“So what did you want to do tonight?” he asked, shaving his right check, then rinsing the blade under the tap.

“Well,” she thought, “we could see a movie? That new wizard one is in the theaters.”

“*Harry what’s-his-name?*”

“No,” she laughed, “it’s been years since those movies were new.”

“Ok then, little miss know-it-all, how about food, then?”

“I don’t care. You pick.”

The man slipped off his trench coat and laid it delicately over the

back of a very modern brown leather chair. A large picture window at the far end of the living room immediately caught his interest. From there, he looked out at the city. Sunlight poured in.

Methodically, he emptied his suitcase, sorting the mundane contents onto the coffee table where he made a neat pile of perfectly folded undershirts and boxer shorts on one side, then organizing his dress socks on the other, then finally pulling out a travel grooming kit and a small zippered bag. He unzipped the bag and checked its contents. Satisfied, he closed it back up and set it aside as well. For a moment, he paused, staring at the empty suitcase, then leaned in close, carefully running his finger across the inner seam till he heard a click. Expressionless, he pulled away the bottom to reveal a hidden compartment. A brief smile swept across his face as he looked over the components, all resting safely in the foam-lined case. He began removing the parts, carefully assembling them piece by piece.

As he finished, he relaxed into the soft cushioning, admiring his handiwork. He stood and walked to the window, then raised the rifle and peered through the scope. He panned the street below, watching people pass in his crosshairs. With a smug look of satisfaction, he turned and rested the gun on the couch, then headed for the bedroom to lie down.

Gavin took Ashley's hand as they headed out the theater doors, "It's later than I thought it would be."

The sun had set. Fireflies flickered in the parking lot as they headed for their car.

"I love summer," Ashley grinned.

They stepped up to an age-worn 1971 MG B convertible. Gavin unlocked the doors, then started folding back the manual roof. Ashley leaned against the side, glancing at the roadster's lack of rear seats.

"Maybe we should trade this in?" she asked, trying to sound completely innocent.

"Why? You love this car."

"I know. I guess I was just thinking, since I drive it to work every day, it might be nice to have something a bit...bigger?"

“Ash,” he protested, “I put off my motorcycle project for three years so that you could have this car instead of the old van. It gets great gas mileage *and* it’s fun to drive.”

“The van wasn’t even running?”

“Don’t argue semantics,” he grinned.

“Well then maybe we could get a second car, something not-too-expensive, but nice; something a little better suited for Ohio winters?”

Gavin sat down in the driver’s seat and turned the ignition. Nothing happened.

“This car is a classic,” he grunted, trying to start it again, “and besides, it is just the two of us.”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling as it finally sputtered to life.

The man woke with a start from his nap, his eyes fiery, the Sig Sauer 9mm in his hand trained at the door. He calmed himself and stood, undoing the buttons on the cuffs of his dress shirt, then loosening his tie.

“Hello,” he smirked, opening the door, the stewardess he’d left at the airport now standing in the hall.

She stepped into the apartment, her heels clicking on the hardwood floor. Turning back to him, she let her hair down from the bun she wore on her head, her golden blonde locks sweeping across her shoulders. With a smile, he kissed her neck, his hand gently sliding up her thigh, disappearing beneath the hem of her skirt.

“Mr. Killion...”

“Please, love, call me Terry.”

Ashley laid down next to Gavin. He’d already fallen asleep. She looked at his arms, his tattoos, remembering when they’d first met, how

heroic he was. Rolling onto her back, she stared at the ceiling. Her mind was racing with every last detail concerning a baby. She pictured which room they could turn into a nursery, the color of the walls, the furniture. Diapers, onesies, and teddy bears: nothing escaped her.

Slowly, her eyes grew heavy, her thoughts drifting into the darkness. Gavin stirred, turning, wrapping his arm around her. She snuggled in close to him, pulling the covers up under her chin, safe, at peace.

