

After running for her life in northern Michigan, Autumn Frayley finds herself living in a lighthouse on an island in Lake Michigan. The story tells of her deepening friendship with the old lighthouse keeper who rescues her. Mysterious events begin to take place on the bluff where the lighthouse stands and the two must work to find the culprit.

LIGHTHOUSE

by Cyndi Whitfield

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Lighthouse

Cyndi Whitfield

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Chapter One

1925

The rain came down sideways, high winds turning it into a wall of relentless pounding against her face. The woman struggled to see anything and only when lightning lit the sky could she make out trees in her path. Thunder roared.

Normally, the young woman would have been frightened in weather like this. It seemed like a nightmare, running through a forest in a drenching thunderstorm, lightning blazing eerily all around. But what the woman ran *from* was far more frightening than a storm. Her slight frame had on only a long, white nightgown, buttoned just below the chin. Through her heightened state, sharp branches and stones could be felt tearing at the bottoms of her bare feet.

Stopping for a moment, the young woman hid behind a large tree to catch her breath, then peeked out, staring frantically at the path she'd just traveled. The sky lit up at that moment and relief flooded through her. Even in this cold, drenched state, the woman relaxed against the tree, resting her head against its uneven bark.

What now? She'd been running for what seemed like hours without stopping, unless you counted the three times her feet slipped in mud, causing her to land on her stomach. The last time, it almost seemed easier to just stay there and wait for

him to catch up with her, wait to hear the click of the chamber in his rifle. She'd lain there for several minutes, until the enormity of what she'd done sunk in. The realization brought her upright again and the woman took off running once more, knowing if he ever caught up, there would be no running ever again.

Keep moving, even if you're only walking! Forcing herself forward, glancing back constantly, the woman continued on. Another hour went by. Hope was fading fast of ever finding somewhere warm and dry to find refuge. Would the sky never lighten with the grey of dawn? Her energy was spent and despair almost took over when the cover of trees she'd followed abruptly came to an end. The young woman found herself in an open, grassy area and saw a series of small buildings off to the left. Having nowhere else to go, she ran toward them, glancing once again to the path she'd come down; only the sounds of slowing rain and muffled thunder followed her and an occasional burst of lightning from the ink black sky. The storm was almost over.

Coming up from behind one of the buildings, the young woman crouched for a few minutes, then slowly crept around the front of the structure and looked around. There were a number of buildings exactly like it and the bedraggled figure in white crept through the dark, silent street. Hearing a strange sound, she stopped. It reminded her of a day trip her family had once taken to Lake Michigan; it was the sound of waves lapping at a sandy shore.

Curious, the young woman walked toward the sound and found herself staring at a large body of black water. *Could this be Lake Michigan? The same place she'd visited as a child?*

Looking around once again to be sure no one followed, the figure walked out onto a long dock, stepping carefully on

the splintered wood. Her feet were aching now from the battering they'd gotten on the twigs and stones she'd run over.

I need a place to hide until morning. Somewhere to rest and take off this wet, muddy nightgown.

The rain had finally stopped, but dampness remained and a cold shivering began. Tucking arms around her middle for warmth, the slight figure moved further down the dock.

Several boats were moored there and she wondered which would be the best for hiding out. The thought of closing her eyes for a few hours and then disappearing before the owner returned sounded wonderful.

The young woman chose an old, worn, fishing boat that stood docked near the end of the walkway and carefully lifted the nightgown to her knees to climb aboard. The only illumination available came from intermittent lightning and the girl waited for flashes to see what hiding place might be offered.

The cabin looked about six by six feet, and she climbed inside, waiting for another flash. There was a built-in bench with a thin cushion on it in the very back and an old musty blanket. They both looked like Heaven.

Pulling the wet, filthy nightgown over her head, the shivering woman hung it on a hook she found on the wall in hopes it would dry a little before sun-up. Then, crawling naked onto the bench, the lonely figure gathered the blanket around her and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Two

She came slowly awake to the sound of an engine, the feel of something shifting beneath her.

The boat was moving!

Her eyes flew open and the young woman sat upright, glancing around. The cabin still lay in darkness, but a brightly lit lantern hung near the open back of the boat, swinging side to side with the movement of the vessel. She couldn't see anyone, but obviously someone was driving the boat. *Now what?* Would it be best to reveal herself? Or stay put and hope that when they pulled into wherever they were going it would be possible to get away before being seen? The woman decided on the latter.

Her nightgown still hung damp and muddy on the boat wall and her hands clenched the blanket more tightly. What a predicament! If only there were dry clothes to put on.

The boat continued on its journey into the night and another thought occurred to her. Maybe this was the answer. Wherever they were headed was taking her further from home and what she'd escaped from. Once the boat docked, the driver would surely leave and then it would be simple to just disappear.

The hum of the engine and the rhythmic rocking of the boat relaxed her and the exhausted woman dozed off once again.

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Awakening to a loud noise, the woman pitched abruptly forward on the bench. A man stood there, a look of dismay on his face, jaw dropped open.

“What the devil?” he demanded, staring at her. He held the lantern in one hand, holding it high to see her more clearly.

The blanket had dropped to her waist and the woman quickly pulled it up, not answering.

At that moment, she realized the boat was no longer moving and the engine had quieted.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded. “Who are ya?”

The young girl in front of him was quite a sight. Obviously naked under the blanket, her long brown hair hung wet and stuck out from her head oddly. There were streaks of mud on her face and arms. The young stowaway had a very thin frame and couldn’t be much more than a teenager.

Drawing herself up straight, still holding the blanket to her breasts, she tried to keep her voice even.

“My name is Autumn Frayley,” she answered defiantly.

The man continued to eyeball her. “Where did ya come from?” he said bluntly.

Autumn hesitated, not knowing if the man could be trusted. Then his face and tone softened a little.

“I’m Mampy,” he said gruffly. “You keep that blanket wrapped around ya and come on out here with me.”

He turned around and went to the rear of the boat, hung the lantern back in its place and sat down outside in the stern. Not knowing what else to do, the shaken woman stood up, holding the blanket firmly around her with both hands and followed him.

Upon leaving the cabin, she glanced around as the view opened before her. The boat was moored at a dock and she could make out hills and sand and tall grass in the immediate

area. But what really caught her eye was the lighthouse just off to their left. Its beam burned brightly against the dark sky. It looked to be painted white and stood several stories high. The young woman wished she could see it more clearly, but the sky had not yet begun to lighten.

“A lighthouse!” Autumn breathed.

The old man put out a hand and gestured for her to take a seat across from him. The young woman did so, still holding tightly to the musty blanket. The night had become chilly and it was her only protection. She began to shiver again.

“Now, I want ya to tell me when ya got on this boat,” Mampy ordered brusquely.

In the light from the lantern, she could see that the man wore a jacket and work pants and had short, white hair and a close beard. He had a weathered look about him and his face appeared craggy and heavily lined and topped with bushy, white eyebrows. She guessed him to be in his early seventies.

“In that little village,” the woman answered. “I heard water lapping at the shore. Is this Lake Michigan?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “You were in Leland when ya decided to stow away on my fishin’ boat.”

Autumn looked down at the floor of the boat. What would he do now? Would he insist on returning her to Nobs Cove? The girl’s shivering became more pronounced at the thought of it.

Mampy stared at the waif as though wondering what to do with her. Then he looked out at the water, and when his gaze returned to hers a moment later, his face had softened.

“How old are ya, Autumn?”

“Twenty one.”

He sat silently for a moment. “Now I’m thinkin’ there had to be some trouble for ya back in Leland. Am I right?”

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Autumn sighed, a resigned look on her face. "There was trouble, but not in Leland." The young woman pulled the blanket tighter.

Mampy's eyebrows went up questioningly.

"Look, I had to get away. He would have killed me."

"Who would have killed you?"

"My husband." She answered so softly, he thought he'd misheard.

"Did you say 'husband'?"

Autumn nodded.

Mampy looked out again over the water and ran a hand down both cheeks, exhaling deeply.

"Okay, it's pretty chilly out here. Let's get you to my house and into some warm clothes."

"Do you live far?"

"No," he said pointing to the lighthouse. "I live right there. You need to stay here for a few minutes, though. I'll be right back."

He easily climbed from the boat to the dock and began walking toward the uprising of land that led to the lighthouse. He looked back once, maybe checking to be sure she was still there, then followed a long set of wooden steps and disappeared.

Autumn continued to look around. The lighthouse stood perched on a tall cliff to her left. A strong beam of light emitted from it and reached far out across the water. The little inlet the boat sat in lay calm, waves lapping gently at the sand near the dock.

Shivering in earnest now, she hoped Mampy would come back soon. What if he forgot about her? She considered going back into the cabin when there was movement at the top of the cliff. Two men were exiting the lighthouse, one walking away from the dock. He never glanced in her direction. Mampy

headed back and descended the same stairway, returning for her. The shivering woman sighed in relief.

The old man stepped onto the dock and stretched a hand out, helping her from the boat. She was clumsy with the blanket as they walked down the dock together. She followed him across soft sand, and the walking became more difficult until they reached the wooden stairs. Just a few minutes later, they were ascending more steps near the back of the lighthouse where a small building stood attached to it.

Mampy opened a door and ushered her in, closing it quickly behind them. They were in a small home, standing in the living room. The old man stood still for a few seconds, obviously thinking about what to do next. Making up his mind, he pointed down a short hallway to their right.

"There are two bedrooms down there. Go into the one at the back and wait for me. I have to check on the light and then I'll find you some clothes. In the meantime, there's a pump in the kitchen. You can clean yourself up there."

He took in the muddied hair and face when he spoke.

"You have electricity," Autumn commented.

"Yes, I do. Just had it put in about a year ago through the Lighthouse service." He coughed. "Still trying to get indoor plumbing, though."

It didn't really matter to her. She'd never had either.

"Go ahead now. Get yourself cleaned up. There are cloths in the top drawer on the left."

He headed toward another door at the far end of the living room and disappeared through it.

Autumn went into the kitchen and, after a short search, found a cloth and large bowl. The woman scrubbed her face and arms and feet and finally ended up putting her entire head under the pump to get rid of the drying mud in her hair. The

coldness of the water was a shock and her shuddering began again.

Finally feeling clean enough, Autumn washed the bowl and put it away. Pulling the blanket more tightly around her, she headed to the hall Mampy had pointed out. Passing a bedroom on her right, the woman glanced quickly inside. There was a small bed, a dresser and some personal belongings here and there with a fireplace on the back wall. This must be Mampy's room. Continuing down the hall, Autumn found another room; this one had five beds placed around it, a dresser and fireplace. There were two windows, each on a different wall, and she wondered idly if the sun ever streamed in through them.

Thoughts came back of being a little girl. Her mother loved sunshine and always opened windows wide during warm weather to let in the light and fresh air. Thinking about her mother now brought a dull ache to her chest.

Returning to the present, Autumn closed the door to the little room and sat on the bed. It had clean sheets and a blanket and the woman was suddenly more exhausted than she'd ever been. Dropping the musty blanket, she climbed into bed, got between the crisp sheets and fell to sleep in an instant.

It took Mampy longer than expected to check the light and record information, then use his telescope to look for trouble out on the waters of Lake Michigan. All seemed quiet considering the storm, and he finally went to his bedroom and hauled out an old trunk stored on the floor of his closet. He hadn't looked inside it in almost seven years. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he lifted the lid, steeling himself for the pain it would bring.

There were skirts and blouses, nightgowns, shoes, stockings and more. Every item touched brought back another memory, causing his eyes to fill with tears. Mampy finally refolded the clothing and returned it to the trunk, stacked the shoes inside and decided to move it and all its contents to the other bedroom. Autumn could choose what to wear.

The chest was heavy and Mampy ended up pushing it across the wooden floor to just outside the other bedroom. He gave a quick tap on the door but heard nothing. Then knocked again, louder this time. Still no answer.

"I'm comin' in," he called through the door in warning. But in opening it, he found Autumn sound asleep in the bed, long brown hair spread across the pillow, mouth slightly open.

He quietly closed the door, leaving the trunk of clothes in the hall outside.

Autumn opened her eyes and immediately sat up in bed.

Where was she?

Memories quickly flooded back of awakening on Mampy's boat and coming into his lighthouse home with him. Now, the room lay bright in sunshine and Autumn wondered what time it was. Glancing out both windows, there was nothing but grass and trees. Where had the lighthouse keeper brought her? Wherever it might be, it took a boat to get here, which meant she was out of harm's way. He would never find her here.

The wonderful smell of coffee and fried bacon hit her nostrils and the young woman placed a hand over her growling stomach.

The blanket she'd arrived in last night looked a mess, but there was nothing else to wear. Her eyes rested on the blanket covering the bed and Autumn took it up, wrapped it around

herself and headed out to locate Mampy. She found him in the kitchen, standing over the stove. He turned to place several strips of bacon onto a plate and, seeing her there, paused.

“Hungry?”

Autumn nodded.

“There’s a trunk in the hall. It’s filled with ladies’ clothes. Take what ya want and get dressed. I’ll have a plate ready for ya when ya get back.”

Autumn didn’t hesitate. *Clothes!*

It had seemed highly unlikely Mampy would have clothing for a lady, but unbelievably, he did.

She shuffled through the trunk and found a long grey skirt, almost to her ankles, and a white blouse and went back into the bedroom to put them on. The skirt hung loose around her waist, but it would do. The blouse looked too large, but after tucking it in, the young woman felt immensely better. Shoes could come later. Right now, she just wanted to eat.

On returning to the kitchen, Mampy was pouring coffee into a chipped cup and looked up when she came in. A strange expression came over his face as his gaze took in her appearance. The man recovered quickly and placed the filled cup on the table in front of him. Autumn saw bacon, eggs and buttered bread on two plates already set out, and her stomach growled again.

“Sit down,” he invited. “D’ya like coffee?”

She nodded enthusiastically and another chipped cup came out from a cupboard behind him. Autumn took a seat and glanced around. There were red and white gingham curtains at the windows and the bright, cheerful kitchen was painted white. It had a woman’s touch right down to the centerpiece of artificial flowers on the table. The hominess of the room didn’t match the gruffness of its owner, and the woman wondered if he had a wife.

Mampy sat down himself. "Dig in," he told her and began to quickly devour the meal in front of him.

Autumn began to eat, but at a slower rate.

A lady eats slowly and doesn't pile food into her mouth, even if she's very hungry.

How many times had her mother spoken those words? Even in the backwater where they'd lived, Grace Frayley taught her daughter manners and tried to bring her up correctly. It was an uphill battle, however, because her husband was a drinker and when he got drunk he got mean.

Autumn once questioned her mother on why she'd married her dad and Grace had looked at her daughter sharply.

"Your father has many good attributes," she told her defensively. But then her shoulders slumped and she sighed. It was hard keeping up pretenses when your husband used you as a punching bag.

Grace Frayley met her husband, Vince, when they were just eighteen. They'd both lived in Detroit, Grace in the affluent area of Palmer Park and Vince on the other side of the tracks. A mutual friend introduced them and they were immediately attracted to each other. Vince found her beautiful and graceful and thought her an aristocrat. Grace thought Vince interesting in that his father owned a small bakery near Six mile and Woodward and his family of seven lived in a small apartment above it. They lived frugally and every child was expected to quit school by the age of 14 to go to work. All money earned was given to their mother to help pay rent and keep food on the table. It was such a different way of life, and intrigued Grace.

Her parents, needless to say, were alarmed when she brought him home one day. It was obvious he was beneath them, both in his dress and in his speech. Jacob and Martha Tomlin, Grace soon realized, looked down on the working

class citizens of Detroit. Arguments ensued and the Tomlin's managed to push their daughter further into the arms of her newfound love.

They ran off to get married one night, he with a knapsack and she a small suitcase, and headed north. Weeks later, they found an old, run-down little shack in the woods and made it their home.

Now, as Autumn ate the delicious meal before her and sipped the strong coffee, she grew curious about who lived here. Mampy hadn't mentioned a wife.

"Are you married?" Autumn blurted out.

The old man stopped chewing and looked up from his plate, staring intently at her. She noticed for the first time his piercing blue eyes. She'd never seen any that color before, like the sky on a beautiful summer's day.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"

His head dropped back down. Sighing heavily, he glanced toward the window in the living room and swallowed his food.

"*Was* married," he said after a time. "She's been gone seven years now. Just... got sick..." He trailed off.

"I'm sorry," Autumn whispered across the table. "What was her name?"

"Annabelle." He smiled.

"What a beautiful name!"

Autumn took another sip of coffee, felt its warmth spreading through her.

"She was a beautiful lady," Mampy said quietly. Then he picked up his fork and continued eating, changing the subject.

"After that big storm we had, I need to check the shoreline for debris, make sure everything's in place." Mampy glanced at her. "Will you be okay here while I'm gone?"

"Sure," Autumn said cheerily. "I'll get the kitchen cleaned up."

She was so relieved to be out of her situation back home, it didn't matter *what* she had to do.

The lighthouse keeper took another swig of coffee and stood up. Heading to the door, he stopped, his hand on the knob, and turned back.

"We need to talk later. I want to hear what happened to you and figure out where we go from here."

Autumn just nodded and he went out, pulling the door closed behind him.

Chapter Three

Autumn couldn't help humming while washing dishes. There was such a beautiful view through the kitchen window of trees and blue sky, it was difficult to take her eyes away to concentrate on the task at hand.

A quick peek in the ice box showed the makings for a pot of stew. Pulling the ingredients out, she began chopping vegetables and meat. Stoking up the fire in the pot belly stove, she placed the pot on top to begin cooking.

Who knew how long Mampy would let her stay? The young woman felt safe for the first time in a long while. Maybe.....maybe she could convince him to let her stay a short time. After that, well, maybe another opportunity would present itself.

Memories of the night before came surging back, making her shudder.

Calm down. You'll never have to see Joe again.

When the stew was simmering on the stove, Autumn took a closer look around. The living room had a sofa and two chairs and a fireplace that would warm both it and the kitchen. Most of the front wall of the living room was glass and from it could be seen the lighthouse itself to the left and Lake Michigan far below the bluff they were on.

There was a small glass panel in the door Mampy had gone through and the young woman stood on tiptoe to peer through it. Inside was a small room with a rounded stairway to the left that looked like it led up into the lighthouse. It would be fun to climb those steps to the top and see what the view would be like, but it wouldn't be good to upset Mampy. The man might load her into his boat and return to Leland. And that would mean the end of feeling safe.

The keeper hadn't told her to stay inside, so she ventured out the door they'd come in the night before. The sun shone brightly, making the temperature comfortable, although windy. Having never lived anywhere but Nobs Cove, it felt exciting to be here with the wind and sky and a real lighthouse!

Autumn remembered her mother reading to her when she was little. Any opportunity Grace had to teach her daughter to read had been taken. One of the books they'd read together was about a young boy that lived in a lighthouse. The story told how he took charge to be sure no boats went on the rocks below, no lives lost in shipwrecks. There were colorful illustrations that brought the words to life.

Her young imagination had gone wild, thinking about what it would be like to live in such a place. The idea of it keeping sailors safe was a comforting one, but the thought of the storms they endured made her shiver. And now she stood here, in a lighthouse, just like the boy in the book. Well, for a short time, anyway.....and, oh, if only her mother knew!

But Grace had died almost ten years ago now. Autumn swallowed the lump that formed in her throat and walked toward the edge of the bluff.

I'm not going to think of sad things right now so I can enjoy the beautiful day. And I'll hope that Mampy doesn't send me away too soon....

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Autumn walked around the bluff and it soon became evident that the lighthouse stood on a piece of property that was far removed from the rest of the world.

Just behind the house was a large fenced-in area and she wondered if Mampy had a horse. She saw a chicken coop, as well, something she was familiar with from Nobs Cove. Heading away from the water, her eye caught sight of a dirt road leading from the bluff that went into a fairly steep descent and then continued on. Wanting to explore further, the young woman turned left, following the path through a wood.

Away from the water, the air felt still and hot. Her clothes became damp and she turned around to get back to the lake breeze. About a quarter mile from the lighthouse, facing the water, stood a small cabin nestled between the trees. Autumn wondered idly who lived there.

She'd been gone longer than planned and when nearing the lighthouse again, saw Mampy standing at the edge of the bluff, his back to her. He was a tall man, broad shouldered, and a little on the heavyset side. He dwarfed Autumn, a mere five foot two and one hundred pounds.

The girl walked over to him and he glanced around at her approach. Together, they stood quietly at the edge of the bluff and peered out over Lake Michigan. After a few minutes, Mampy spoke, his eyes still on the view in front of him.

"I lived in this place when I was a boy," he told her, a smile playing at the edges of his mouth. "My father was lighthouse keeper. When he died, I had just turned thirteen and my ma and I took over. We kept the light going for years. I left for a while but came back when she died. That lady ended up being one of the few women ever to run a lighthouse." He made the statement proudly.

Autumn thought again of the lighthouse book and the boy who kept the light, just like Mampy.

“Where are we? Is this still Michigan?”

The keeper drew his eyes away from the water and looked at her in surprise. “Well, sure it is. This is Little Bear Island.”

“We’re on an island?” she said incredulously.

“We’re north of North Manitou Island. Ever hear of that?”

Autumn shook her head.

“There are three islands out here: North Manitou, South Manitou and Little Bear. We’re the northernmost island, but they’re all in Michigan. You’re familiar with the Sleeping Bear Dunes?”

“Well, sure. Nobs Cove is there.”

“Little Bear Island got its name for being the smallest of the three islands within the Sleeping Bear Dunes region.”

“So how big is this island?”

“Only two miles long by about a mile wide,” Mampy answered.

The man raised a hand, pointing a finger straight ahead, out over the mass of water.

“The state of Wisconsin is directly across there, on the other side of Lake Michigan.”

Autumn looked where he pointed, straining her eyes, seeing nothing but blue water.

Mampy threw his head back and laughed. It sounded so carefree and lighthearted, she couldn’t help joining in.

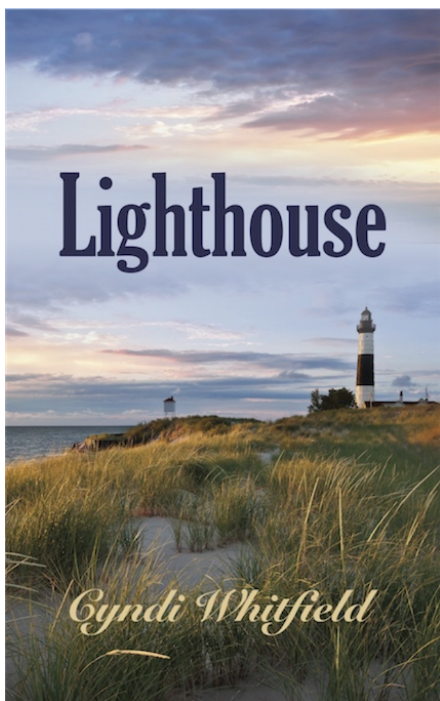
Then, sobering up, he explained. “It’s too far to see from here, Peanut.”

She looked quickly up at him, her expression turning serious at the endearment.

The old man cleared his throat. “Come on. Let’s go inside and start that talk we were goin’ to have.”

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He motioned for her to lead the way and they ventured slowly back to the house. This would probably be the end of her stay here. But maybe she could talk him into leaving her off somewhere other than Leland. Somewhere far enough away from Joe....



After running for her life in northern Michigan, Autumn Frayley finds herself living in a lighthouse on an island in Lake Michigan. The story tells of her deepening friendship with the old lighthouse keeper who rescues her. Mysterious events begin to take place on the bluff where the lighthouse stands and the two must work to find the culprit.

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