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The Bellman's Code

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Introduction

The city kept its own time. Bells nested in stone towers struck the hours with a steadiness that outlasted mayors, budgets, and scandals. From the newsroom window of the alt-weekly, Nora Hale watched the glow of the courthouse clock smear against a low marine sky and felt the familiar tug of countdowns—print deadlines, public-comment periods, sixteen minutes until the last train, ten years since her sister’s face vanished from a family photograph and became a flyer no one looked at anymore. She preferred the newsroom after ten, when the interns went home and the phones stopped performing their polite ring. In the hush, the fluorescent hum turned into a kind of metronome, and Nora could hear her own questions clearly.

Her desk had the look of someone building a raft out of paper. Requests for records fanned under a cold cup of coffee; a city procurement ledger bled pink highlighter across margins; a column draft glowed on her screen, its cursor blinking like a heartbeat. On the wall, a single snapshot of Mira—freckled, upside down on a swing, hair static-stuck to the sky—held the place where Nora’s attention always returned. It didn’t matter that the official case file had cooled into clichés years ago. For Nora, every missing page, every typo, every unexplained delay in an old investigation was present tense. The day Mira didn’t come home had rewired Nora’s clocks.

She had learned to listen to the city the way a locksmith learns to listen to tumblers. Plaques on granite told one story, minutes from zoning boards told another, and the gap between them was where the truth got quiet. Nora’s days were built around those gaps: riding buses with a pocket notebook, trolling archives for microfilm, tracing signatures across decades of contracts, following small civic oddities no one else bothered to notice. She liked the habits of investigation—the way patterns declared themselves if you gave them enough patient attention. She didn’t think of herself as brave. She thought of herself as stubborn.

The alt-weekly paid on time when it could and kept the lights on with ads for bike shops and basement concerts. Her editor had the permanent squint of a man trying to read the future through bad glass. He liked her for what she brought back from the bureaucratic deep, less so for the heat that sometimes followed. They had the same argument in different clothes: he wanted stories that jabbed without drawing blood; she wanted to name the blade. “Pick battles,” he’d say. “Pick locks,” she’d think. That afternoon, a city council aide had hung up on her mid-question, then called her editor to complain about “harassment.” It didn’t stick, but it rattled the windows.

Outside, a mist had started that wasn’t brave enough to be rain. Nora packed her bag with reporter’s reflex—recorder, spare pens, backup battery, the dog-eared map she

refused to replace with an app. She walked home by habit and design, sticking to streets with light and late-night grocers. The bells counted off the quarter hour and sent their sound down the bricks. At the corner, she paused to read the old dedicatory plaque on the library façade—a reflexive act, like touching a scar—then moved on. Somewhere above her, the clock hands slid toward the top of the hour.

She was key in the lock when she heard the soft scrape at the bottom of her door. Not the skitter of junk mail. A deliberate slide, then the assured click of someone’s weight leaving. Nora opened to a dark hallway and the faint echo of boot steps turning the stair well. No one waited. On her mat sat a parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine, neat enough to feel old-fashioned, heavy enough to feel serious. No return address. The paper carried a smell she recognized from the archive stacks: dust, glue, a suggestion of damp. Tucked under the twine, a single white card lay face up.

She lifted it. The handwriting was printed in block letters, black ink pressed hard enough to bite the fibers. No signature, no greeting, no threat. Just two words, as plain and impossible as a bell strike in fog: keep reading.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Packet

Nora propped the door with her hip and nudged the package inside with her foot, as if the hallway linoleum might be listening. Her apartment was the size of a storage unit with opinions, every surface layered with the artifacts of a life lived in pursuit of the unshared fact. Stacks of newspapers held the place of art books. A fisheye mirror gave a rubbery view of the room from above the door, turning chairs into commas. The radiator ticked itself awake in the corner, a metronome for nights when the city felt too big to measure.

She set her bag on the counter, locked the deadbolt, slid the chain, then stood over the parcel. Twine tied in a knot she didn't know the name of. No address. No postmark. Whoever delivered it had done so by hand. She tried to remember if she'd heard a car door or a cough in the stairwell, a slice of conversation, anything to put a witness inside the moment. She came up empty. The building made its usual argument against silence—pipes, wind, the low electric murmur of the old wiring. It would not give her a face.

She sliced the twine with the blade of a box cutter and unwrapped the brown paper in slow, deliberate layers. The dust smell bloomed. The paper underneath was not cardboard but a soft, stiff folder, gray with age, its edges whiter where fingers had worried it over years. It closed with a metal clasp, the kind that had been fashionable before chrome. Someone had treated this packet like a book they were afraid to break the spine on. The handwriting on the tab, in that same black block, read simply: correspondence.

Nora slid the clasp and fanned the contents onto the kitchen table. Letters. Dozens of them, small and rectangular, the kind sold in boxes with matching envelopes for weddings and apologies. The stamps were vintage and the postmarks local, all from the same city, all from twenty years ago. The edges of the envelopes were softened with handling. No names appeared anywhere visible. The absence of a name felt deliberate, like a pause before a punchline.

She pulled on the latex gloves she kept in a drawer for handling old paper that might have been moldy or treated with chemicals, a habit from library days. The first envelope was addressed only to a street number she did not recognize in a part of town she rarely visited. The letter inside had no salutation, no signature, and was written in the same sharp block as the package note, the ink faded to a blue-gray. She read it once, then again. It opened mid-thought and ended without conclusion, as if the writer had been interrupted by a bell.

"The bell at midnight is the only honest clock," it read. "He keeps time with his hands. Seven strikes for the seven he holds in his head. Don't look up at the tower. Look under the names that paid for it. Remember the scaffolding. Remember the date on the plaque where the old theater used to be. When the hour finds you, make the change and show me what you see."

Nora let the sheet rest on her palm. The words lay there, unblinking. The instruction meant nothing without context and was too specific to be a prank. She looked down at the other letters, then up at the wall where she kept a small corkboard of public records and notes, the city's face pinned in grids. Her reporter's mind went first to procedure: authenticate, cross-reference, verify. Her sister's absence made it personal in an instant; every piece of hidden text became a candidate for an answer she needed. She took a breath she didn't let out.

She pulled a small notebook and turned to a clean page. As she translated the letter into shorthand, a line near the bottom snagged. The phrase "seven he holds in his head" triggered a memory of a binder she'd once photocopied at the Public Safety Building. It had been thick with cold cases, the ink damp from the copier, the plastic sheet warm in her hands. She had been looking for anything on Mira, scanning for a detail no one had bothered to link, and had stopped at a list of seven names. The list had felt wrong at the time, too small for the weight it carried, a sliver of bone in the municipal meat grinder.

She closed her eyes and saw the page: seven victims, all from the same corridor of the city, all strangled, all posed near civic landmarks. A task force had formed, then dissolved like salt. The press had called the killer the Bellman in a rare moment of agreeing on a nickname, because each victim had been found near a bell tower or a clock. When the months passed without another body, the city declared the danger dormant and moved its attention to budget deficits and sports arenas. Nora had kept a copy, a reflex, and somewhere in her files that list still existed, a ghost that might not know it was dead.

She spun her desk chair toward the laptop and woke it with a tap. The screen's light cut a square on the table and made the letters' edges look sharper. Her fingers went to the keyboard with their own muscle memory. Public Safety archives were not truly public in any meaningful sense, but she had learned the side doors—the digitized reports buried on a municipal server that was never supposed to be searchable, the scanner logs indexed by date rather than by intention. She typed the phrase "bell at midnight" in quotes and waited through the slow blink of the search engine's compromise.

Nothing. She tried variations, stripping quotes, adding the city's name, swapping "midnight" for "12:00" and "00:00." Still nothing useful. She stared at the letter again.

“Remember the date on the plaque where the old theater used to be.” That was a location she knew. The Belfry Theater had gone dark before she was old enough to go to shows there, its marquee stripped of bulbs, its lobby turned into a boutique with a name too clever to remember. Nora had written about its failed renovation three summers ago, a story about tax abatements gone rancid. She still had the photographs.

She turned to her corkboard and found a thumbtacked contact sheet from that assignment. There, a shot of the lobby doors, and above them, the dedicatory plaque installed when the building was originally opened. She didn’t remember the date, only the donor list—a string of corporate names that had seemed dull and civic at the time. She pulled the sheet from the board and held it close, squinting at the magnified image. The plaque’s inscription was too small to read in the photograph. She would need to go.

A check of the clock said midnight had come and gone while she read. The city would be quieter now, its rhythms reduced to the essentials: the rumble of the train, the siren far away, the slow drip from a faucet she kept meaning to fix. Nora stacked the letters into order by postmark and slid them back into the gray folder. She thought about calling someone—her editor, a source, a cop she trusted with the small stuff—but the package’s warning had left her suspicious of every ear. Whoever had delivered it didn’t want company. She would honor that, at least for now.

The folder slid into her messenger bag beside a notebook and a half-eaten protein bar. She hesitated, then took the small frame off the wall and slipped the photo of Mira into an interior pocket where it wouldn’t scratch the letters. If there was a map in this, it might be one Mira had walked. She turned off the lamp, watched the city’s night-light bleed through the blinds, then unlocked the chain and opened the door. The hallway smelled like old carpet and dinner, nothing new. She locked up and went down the stairs.

The street was damp but not wet, the kind of night that held a mist in suspension. Nora walked with her head up, counting cross streets by habit, noting the time the stoplight at 14th held cars too long. Two blocks over, a group of kids on skateboards snapped their wheels over sidewalk seams. She bought coffee from the only place still open and asked the clerk if he’d seen anyone unusual in the hour before, a delivery, a messenger. He shrugged and told her the city was all unusual. She left with the coffee, tasting metal and burnt sugar.

The Belfry was three more blocks, sitting like a black wedge between newer buildings that had tried to swallow it with reflective glass. The marquee was dark, the boutique’s windows papered over. The lobby doors were locked tight with a fresh padlock that looked municipal. Nora stood on the sidewalk and tilted her phone’s light across the plaque above the doors. The bronze had gone green in the crevices and shiny on the

raised letters where hands had touched it. She read the date once, then again. She whispered it like a password she didn't understand.

September 17. Same date as the fourth victim on that old list, the one whose body had been found near the clock at Whitaker Park. She felt a small shiver pass through her, like a bell's vibration in a rib cage. She took a picture of the plaque, then of the street, and turned to go.

A man stood across the street under a broken streetlight, half in shadow, half in the kind of dark that had edges. He was still in the way that meant he was watching. Nora froze without meaning to, then made herself move, a small adjustment of weight that broke the line between them. He mirrored it, lifting his chin. She couldn't see a face, only the shape of a hat and the way a coat hung on a frame too thin to carry it comfortably. He didn't raise a phone. He didn't raise a hand. He just stood. Nora did the only thing she could: she crossed in the opposite direction and took the long way home, checking over her shoulder every half block.

Her apartment door was as she had left it, but the air inside felt disturbed. She stood in the doorway and listened. The radiator hissed and clicked. The refrigerator hummed a low note. The fisheye mirror showed a room that looked unchanged, but she knew. The stack of newspapers had been nudged a fraction. Her laptop was closed when she had left it open. The gray folder had been moved, its corner aligned with the edge of the table in a way she did not remember.

She stepped inside, heart tight, and checked the window. The latch was still set, the screen intact. Nothing had come through there. Someone had used the lock, or picked it, or had a key she didn't know about. She moved fast, checking behind the door, in the closet, under the bed. No one. She lifted the folder again. Nothing missing. Nothing added. It had been a violation for the sake of violation, a message: we know where you are.

Nora's first instinct was to call the police. Her second was to reconsider who the police would send and what they would write down. The package had arrived without a chain of custody; it would be dusted, bagged, and set on a shelf where it would grow a name like "unsub." She slid the bolt, wedged a chair under the knob, and took a kitchen knife to the closet, feeling foolish and precise at once. Then she spread the letters on the table again and looked at each envelope for any mark that might have been missed.

In the sixth envelope, she found it. A small slip of lined paper folded twice, nested between two letters that otherwise matched the set. The paper was fresh, not aged. The handwriting on it was different, still block letters but hurried, the ink slightly smeared. It read: "Municipal Plaza, south corner, by the fountain. Base of the Roosevelt statue. There's a plaque there, too. Read the dates. Count the names. Make

the change.”

Roosevelt’s statue was on the list, too. The fifth victim had been found there, in the small hours, close enough to the fountain that the water would have washed away prints if it had rained. Nora felt the puzzle lock into place, not the whole mechanism, but the first tumbler. She stood in the middle of her apartment with the city breathing its steady breath outside and understood that whoever had sent the packet was waiting for her to show up at the statue the way a fisherman waits for a tide. She did not plan to disappoint them, but she also did not plan to be the fish.

She walked to the window and opened the blinds a crack. The street below showed the usual late-night traffic, one taxi, two kids with a dog, a man in a hat glancing up at her building before turning the corner. She let the blind fall. The city kept its time; so would she. She gathered the letters, put them in a new envelope, sealed it with tape, and wrote nothing on the outside. Then she turned off the light and stood in the dark until the next bell struck, counting the seconds to keep herself honest.

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