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The Lighthouse Manuscript

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Introduction

Fog pressed against the glass like a hand that didn't want to let go. From the lantern room of Gull Cove Lighthouse, the beam swept in slow, patient arcs, cutting a white path through the gray. The horn sounded at intervals, a low animal groan that vibrated the ribs. Gulls wheeled as silhouettes and vanished into the mist. The iron stairwell below sang with each gust—the pitch shifting in the wind so it sounded like a thin voice calling up an old name.

Claire Maddox stood with one palm against the cool brass rail, breathing in the mix of salt, rust, and old oil that no fresh paint could hide. It had been ten years since she'd last set foot on this rock, and some part of her had expected the lighthouse to feel smaller. It didn't. The place still carried that old, weighty watchfulness—the sense of being looked through rather than looking out. In town, they'd said the beacon had been automated since the late nineties, but automation hadn't drained the air of its story. If anything, in abandonment the details endured: the scuffed floorboards, the monogram etched into a window with a knife point, the way condensation beaded along the metal seams and dripped like a steady clock.

The keys had been pressed into her hand that afternoon by a caretaker whose name she'd immediately forgotten, his eyes sliding off hers as if contact might oblige him to say more than was safe. "Condolences," he'd murmured, and set a sealed canvas-wrapped trunk beside her suitcase. "This was stored here when they turned the light over. Comes with the deed." He'd mentioned her father like a tide chart—flat, factual, inevitable. Her estranged father was an inventory to be settled: truck, debts, a lease above the bait shop that smelled like the harbor in August, and, unexpectedly, the lighthouse that had watched over her childhood and resented her leaving.

She hadn't come back for nostalgia. She had come because death required a signature and the attorney in town had a stack of forms that didn't mail themselves. Her father's absence sat in her like a cold stone—no grief she knew how to hold, just a long, steady ache that had been there even before he was gone. From this height, the town on the bluffs was a scatter of dim house lights, the marina a line of dull pearls along the water. Somewhere behind that curve of shore was Main Street, and the bar where Marina Lowe would be wiping down counters and pretending not to notice who paused the conversation when Claire's name came up. Somewhere out past the breakwater were the shoals where her father's skiff had gotten into trouble more times than anyone would admit. In every direction, the place kept a record.

She'd carried the trunk up one flight at a time, resting it on the landings where the narrow windows slit the fog with a view of the inlet. It was heavy in a way that

suggested paper, not tools—dense with words and years. The canvas was stained a tired brown, edges frayed to fringe, the seams dark with salt. A brittle ribbon of wax sealed the flap over a loop of wire, stamped with a gull in flight. Her thumb had hovered over the seal for a long breath while the horn moaned and the beam turned and the quiet made itself known.

The watch room just below the lantern was a small space meant for waiting. A wooden stool, a coil of rope, a faded logbook that had survived on a shelf because it fit there and nowhere else. Claire set the trunk on the floor by the stool and crouched. Everything she had left unfinished seemed to crowd in, a chorus of other places tugging at her sleeve: the unread emails from a magazine editor who'd stopped calling, the bank balance she'd stared at on the ferry, the message from Noah Ruiz she hadn't answered yet because she couldn't decide if she wanted a friendly face or a clean slate. She brushed grit off the trunk, felt the give of the canvas under her palm, and told herself this was simply due diligence. Inventory. One more thing to open and log and shelve.

The wax gave with a soft crack, flakes sticking to her skin. The wire rasped out of its grommet, the canvas yawned, and a draft of old air breathed into the room—paper and mold and a fat note of paraffin. Inside, wrapped in oilcloth and tied with twine, lay a ledger-sized book, its leather swollen and salt-cracked. Tucked beside it were smaller packets: a sheaf of thin paper pierced at one corner with string, a folded map with a corner torn away, an envelope that had once been white and was now the color of tea. The book's spine bore no title. Its corners were blunted, the edges of some pages scalloped where they'd been caught by damp and dried again. Across the top page, through the cover where the leather had worn thin, faint strokes of ink had bled like veins.

Her fingertips were filthy already, as if the lighthouse wanted to mark her. She untied the twine and eased the oilcloth away. Chill from the floor bit into her knees. The wind lifted just enough to whine in the seam of the door. She found, absurdly, that she was smiling—an involuntary, low flicker of the mouth at the sheer strangeness of it, the way something secret announces itself by existing. She wasn't a romantic; she didn't believe in messages from the dead. She believed in paper, in records, in the way some people wrote because words were the only way to keep their lives from slipping off the edge.

She set the map aside with care, noting its pencil marks—crosses where a cove should have been empty, initials that meant nothing yet, a neat series of numbers along a shore. The envelope bore a name she didn't recognize. The smaller papers were different sizes and stocks, as if scavenged: receipt backs, memo pads cut down, a church bulletin repurposed as a page. But it was the book that held the weight of attention. On the cover, near the edge, someone had pressed a thumb hard enough to leave a crescent dent in the leather, and for an instant she could imagine that other

hand, calloused and smelling of lamp oil, setting the thing down with a decision.

She opened the book. The first page creaked at the stitched binding and then lay flat. Ink had feathered along the lines where salt lived in the paper. The script was practiced but careful, not elegant—letters made for use, not for show. At the top, a date: October 11, 1999. Beneath, a heading, then a left margin full of tiny marks that might have been symbols or might have been nothing until she learned their language. She thought of the town in that year, of who had been where, of what she had been doing—packing a bag, counting days until she could leave.

Her phone buzzed once in her pocket. She didn't look. The lighthouse breathed around her. The beam slid past, reflected in the glass of the lantern room above as a white curve that came and went, came and went. The horn sounded and fell away. In the hush that followed, Claire bent closer, the smell of the page rising, the ink's brown-black settling into words that were not hers but would, from now on, live in her mouth.

The first line wasn't neat. It was a scribble that ran a little uphill, as if the writer had pressed too hard at the start. It began not with a greeting or a name but with a time and a direction, a record that wanted to be a warning. And as Claire read, the lighthouse seemed to lean in with her, listening.

"After midnight, three without lanterns came up the north steps."

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The ferry's engine changed its pitch before the island was visible, a drop in tone that meant the captain was easing off the throttle into the calm pocket of water beyond the breakwater. Claire felt the change in her teeth. Around her, the handful of other passengers—two fishermen with creased hands, a woman with a grocery tote printed with a crab, a kid asleep against a duffel—began to gather their things. They had the quiet efficiency of people who had made this crossing more times than they could count. Claire's hands were empty except for her phone and a receipt she'd been twisting into a tight spiral. She hadn't decided if she would shake out the spiral or keep folding until it disappeared.

Gull Cove rose from the fog in layers: first the slate gray of the water, then the pale backs of houses clinging to the bluffs, then the spit of rock at the western edge, crowned with the tower. The lighthouse looked exactly as she remembered it and yet smaller, a trick of perspective and the way long absence makes landmarks recede in the mind. There were fewer trees than she recalled along the access road, and a new chain-link fence had eaten the edge of the public beach. Progress, or the kind of modest growth that makes people in small towns sit straighter at council meetings.

Her father's truck was parked in the gravel lot by the dock, biding its time under a skin of salt dust. It was an old Ford with a patient engine and a passenger door that required an argument before it gave. She tossed her suitcase in the bed, climbed behind the wheel, and didn't bother buckling until she had backed out and nosed toward the town proper. The smell inside the cab was him: coffee grounds, tobacco, the tinny ghost of Old Spice. She kept the windows down because the air on the island worked better as a tonic than any apology or explanation ever had.

Main Street had the same stubborn charm. Murmurs behind plate glass, a bakery sign swinging in the crosswind, a closed flower shop with the day's stems still bundled in their buckets. A few people glanced over, recognized, and quickly un-recognized. Claire told herself it was the truck that gave her away before she did. She turned onto Harbor Road, passed the bait shop with the For Lease sign she had read about in the attorney's email, and kept going toward the high, lonely finger of the lighthouse road.

The attorney's office was an upstairs room over a place that sold bait and beer, and the man himself was named Tom Merriam, which felt like a joke Claire was too tired to get. He was polite in the way of someone who wants to sign papers and go to lunch. He offered coffee, declined her own refusal, and slid a thin stack across the desk. He told her about the truck, the lease, the small debt against the property. Then he mentioned the lighthouse.

"It's yours, Claire. Deed says it goes with the land, and your father bought the land when they decommissioned. There's a token annual lease with the town for light and fog horn maintenance, but they've been paying him a dollar a year to keep the access open. He kept the place up. He liked it up there." Merriam hesitated. "He kept a storage trunk in the watch room. The caretaker asked me to ask you—when you go up, take it with you. He says it was your father's and belongs with the family."

Claire nodded because the conversation wanted a nod. Outside, the afternoon had thickened into a flat silver light. She asked if the caretaker had a name. Merriam said, "Rafe. He's around." That was all she got.

She ate a sandwich at a diner where the waitress called her honey without irony, and at four o'clock she pointed the truck toward the lighthouse. The road climbed in tight switchbacks, the sea to her left a steady presence behind a veil of scrub pine. There were no houses up here, just the fence and the gate and the old brick service building that had lost its roof in some storm and never quite found it again. The gate hung open on a single hinge. She eased the truck through and parked by the tower's base.

The door to the tower was heavy, pitted steel with a peephole at eye level. Inside, the air was cool and faintly lit by a row of narrow windows cut into the curved wall. The iron staircase spiraled up into shadow. She took her suitcase from the truck bed and left it by the door—no point hauling it up until she knew what she was dealing with. A man in a gray coverall came around the base of the tower wiping his hands on a rag. He had the geography of the island carved into his face and eyes that had learned to look just to the left of people.

"Rafe?" she asked.

"Rafe." He didn't offer a hand. "You're Claire. Condolences. I knew your father in passing."

"In passing" was the only way anyone knew him, she thought. Rafe's gaze slid from her cheek to the door and back. "The light is automated. Horn is on a timer, but the circuit sometimes trips in the fog. Your father kept a logbook. I've been keeping it since he—since. There's a trunk in the watch room, sealed. That's yours too. Keys." He held out a ring with two keys and a brass tag stamped 1-12. "One for the tower, one for the watch room. If you're staying, I'll need you to sign off on the horn checks if it storms."

"I'll be a couple of days," she said. "Just sorting."

He nodded as if sorting had a schedule and he kept it on a clipboard. "Watch your step on the third landing. The grate is loose. If you want to take the trunk now, I can help

carry.”

“Later,” she said. She wanted the climb first. The quiet first. He nodded again and went back to whatever he did in the service building, which from the look of it was mostly replacing gaskets and holding his tongue.

She started up. The stairs were open iron treads that rang softly under her boots. Sound carried here in a way that made conversation feel public even when you were alone. The windows were spaced at regular intervals, each one a thin rectangle of mist and water, the ocean changing character with every new height—more chop here, less color there. The third landing had a grating that shifted under her weight with a metallic sigh. She took it slower after that.

At the top was a narrow door. The watch room was small, crowded with the presence of the lantern room above it. There was a wooden stool, a coil of rope stiff with age, a shelf with a few paperbacks whose spines had faded into anonymity. The trunk sat by the far wall, wrapped in canvas and bound with a waxed seal. Claire crouched. It wasn't her father's handwriting on the tag looped around the wire—wasn't his anything, except in the sense that the trunk was here because he had placed it here and not removed it. She pressed the canvas. It yielded with a soft crunch, old salt shedding in a fine powder.

The wax seal cracked under her thumb with a sound like stepping on dry leaves. She unwound the wire and peeled back the canvas. Inside was a ledger-sized book in oilcloth, a folded map with a corner torn away, and a white envelope that had yellowed at the edges. The book's leather was swollen and salt-cracked, the corners blunted, the edges of some pages scalloped by damp and drying. Nothing was written on the cover. She lifted the oilcloth. It smelled of paraffin and the particular mineral tang of old ink.

She set the map aside for later and opened the ledger. The paper had the ghostly ridge of watermarks. The script was neat but not showy, the sort of handwriting that came from writing in low light. At the top of the first page: October 11, 1999. A date that made her chest go tight because she knew exactly where she was that October. She had been two states away and eighteen and pretending not to count the months she'd been gone. She remembered the phone call from her father, the way he'd said, You don't need to come back, as if she had offered.

Her thumb smudged the corner of the page. The words were not a story. They were a record, brief and cold. After midnight, three without lanterns came up the north steps.

She read the line again. The nautical part of her brain supplied context—the north steps were the maintenance stairs cut into the seaward face, rarely used. The tower's horn sounded then, a low roll that pressed through the brick and iron, vibrating up

through the soles of her boots. The beam slid past the window, a white bar that moved on without stopping, as if it had seen her and decided to keep moving.

She turned the page. A list of dates followed, each paired with short observations. November 2, a weather note. November 4, nothing. November 7, a line about a skiff tied to the mooring ring below the rocks. The handwriting was consistent, careful. She flipped ahead, scanning for names, and found none for the first dozen pages. Only descriptions: lights where lights shouldn't be, voices carried on the wind, a dark shape waiting on the path. It was a watchkeeper's log in the oldest sense: someone who recorded the quiet anomalies that no one else would notice.

She looked up. The watch room was a small place meant for waiting. It held her breath and the faint scent of the trunk. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She ignored it again. There was no reason to feel observed. Yet the weight of the place had changed, or she had. She was suddenly aware that the lighthouse had functioned for years without her, and that function meant attention. The beam, the horn, the iron singing in the wind. It was a machine that looked and listened.

She slid the map out of its folds. It was a section of coastline with hand-drawn depth lines and what looked like a small cove not labeled on the official charts she'd seen as a kid. Pencil marks in the margin: three crosses, one near the cove, one near a jagged rock that might be the Teeth, and one inland near what might have been a boathouse. Along the shore, neat numerals: 2:15, 3:00, 4:40. Times. The torn corner had left a gap, a missing piece. There was a single initial in the top right corner, small and unassuming: E.

She set the map next to the ledger and opened the envelope. Inside was a photograph. A girl with wind-tangled hair, smiling the particular way of someone who had been told not to be photographed but did it anyway. The background was the beach at the base of the lighthouse rock, the spray blown sideways. The date stamp on the back was October 9, 1999. The handwriting underneath was not the same as the ledger. It said: Mara's last good day.

The name landed without sound. Claire felt the shape of it in her head: Mara Keane. The girl who vanished from Gull Cove the same month Claire had left and never returned. She could see the posters that had gone up in town after that—Mara's face smiling out of flyers stapled to telephone poles. She remembered the church basement meetings, the search parties she hadn't been part of because she was already gone. A smallness in her stomach turned into something heavier. She turned the photograph over, then back, as if the date might change.

She looked down the stairwell. The light from the windows ran along the iron like water. She thought of Rafe's eyes sliding off her, of Merriam's careful distance. She thought of the two words that had started the ledger. Three without lanterns. She

closed the book with the envelope inside it and stood.

Below, the ocean fretted against the rocks. Somewhere in the town, someone had put out a light. The beam turned again, slow, patient. It had been watching for a long time. She had the sudden, ridiculous urge to call her father and ask if he had known. If this had been why the place mattered to him. If this had been part of the long, quiet argument that had kept them from talking for years. She pressed the heel of her hand against her eye and told herself to breathe.

The trunk was heavier than it looked. She got her arms around it and found the center of gravity. On the first step down, the watch room seemed to lean with her. The beam swept overhead, white and unblinking. She didn't know yet what she had, only that it was older than her father's death and more complicated than a lease. She knew that the date on the photograph was two days before a girl disappeared, and that the ledger was meant to be read. And she knew, standing with the smell of paraffin in her nose and the horn vibrating the bones of the tower, that she wouldn't leave it in the watch room for someone else to find.

She took the trunk down one flight at a time, resting on landings where the narrow windows offered slivers of the town. She told herself she would call Noah back. She told herself she would stop by Marina's bar. She told herself she would put the photograph in an envelope and mail it to the police and let the past stay past. But when she reached the bottom and stood in the damp air with the trunk in her arms and the sea breathing in and out beyond the door, she knew she would do none of those things yet.

She set the trunk in the bed of the truck and slammed the tailgate. The keys Rafe had given her were still in her pocket. She looked up at the tower. It was, in the end, just a building. It was also where someone had kept a record of what happened after midnight on nights when no one else was looking. Claire climbed into the truck, started the engine, and eased back down the narrow road toward town. The fog had thinned, but the lighthouse horn sounded once behind her anyway, as if in reminder.

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