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Glass Harbor

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Introduction

On mornings when the fog presses low and the town sounds dampen into a single hush, Nora Hale unlocks the municipal archive and waits for the air to settle. The door sticks on swollen wood, releasing the familiar breath of the room: paper and dust, a whisper of salt that sneaks in through old casement windows, the faint iron tang of the radiator. She stands a moment with her hand on the switch, listening to the harbor beyond the brick—bollards thumping, a gull's complaint, the distant metronome of a buoy bell—and then the lights flicker on and the shelves become aisles of quiet company. In here, the past is bound, numbered, and willing to wait.

She has learned to love the waiting. A year ago the waiting was for a call that never came, then for sleep that never arrived, then for grief to turn into something she could set down. Now, it is for the kettle to boil and the dehumidifier to tick on, for the spreadsheet to load and the scanner to warm. Ritual makes a shape to move through. She writes the date at the top of a fresh notepad page, circles the word intake, and underlines it twice. It feels like a promise to herself: one thing at a time.

Glass Harbor has always called itself practical. It's a town of cedar-shake roofs and salt-stiffened rope, of boats named after wives and saints, of families who have been here so long their names are part of the tide chart. The Pike family's shipyard anchors one end of the waterfront like a sentence that never needed finishing. Across from it, the old glassworks squats dark and elegant, its tall windows dulled, its brick chimney cut like a throat. The story every child learns is the story of the ship that didn't come back—an accident said with a sigh, a bad combination of fog and timing, workmen who did all they could. There is a granite plaque on the promenade with the names of the lost and a wreath on anniversaries that smells of wet fir.

Nora knows the story by heart the way she knows the municipal codes that govern where to store maps and how long to keep council minutes. She has a copy of the town's official account of the wreck in a blue binder on the shelf marked Shipyard: Oversight. She has read it twice, because order comforts and because she likes to know what she is expected to know. When the Historical Society committee chair asked last week if she could pull a small display for Harbor Day—nothing too heavy, just photographs and a timeline—Nora said yes, of course, happy to help, and wrote a note to herself to check the coastal surveys for something pretty to print in large format.

The coastal surveys arrive in a banker's box with a hand-lettered label that has bled in the humidity: SURVEYS—COASTAL ACCRETIONS 1970-1995. Someone has taped the lid three times over as if migration of sand can be stopped with a strip of plastic. Nora

eases it open with a butter knife she keeps in a mug of pens and begins the slow process she both dreads and craves: unfold, flatten, measure, note, scan. There are maps on onion-skin paper and vellum, pencil lines smudged, coffee rings faint as ghosts. At the bottom of the stack, tucked sideways where it shouldn't be, is a thick folio of a different sort—cloth-bound, buckram rubbed thin at the corners, the cover unmarked.

She pauses because things without labels are usually trash or treasure. The spine creaks when she opens it, a small noise like a floorboard settling. Inside: columns of figures in a careful hand, dates marching left to right, names she recognizes from mailboxes and storefronts and the plaque on the promenade. A ledger, not a survey. It smells faintly of oil and smoke. She glances at the box again, at the crooked smudge of the word COASTAL, and feels that old mix of irritation and curiosity that misfiling wakes in her. Someone put this here on purpose, or someone didn't care where it went. Both possibilities tug.

Outside, a horn moans and the fog answers, long and low. Nora makes herself catalog what she knows: the binder of the official account, the request for a Harbor Day display, the fact that the Pike archive—kept in their own building behind frosted glass—has never lent material to the municipal collection. She sits, draws the ledger closer, and closes it again. Procedure is a kind of kindness, she tells herself. If there's a reason this was hidden, it isn't her job to guess it. Not yet. She slides the misfiled coastal survey from beneath the ledger and lays it flat; a corner of the cloth cover snags her fingertip, and a dark page edge catches the light like a wink.

She writes a provisional accession number on a Post-it and sticks it to the front: temporary, pending, like so much of her life has been. Then, because she cannot not do it, she opens the ledger properly and scans the first page. The ink is brown with age, but the hand is steady, the habit of someone who expected their work to be checked. Her eye finds a date that aligns with the month the town prefers to talk around, and a word repeated in the margin that feels out of place in a book of sums: glass. The room seems to hold its breath with her.

Nora closes the book and lays her palm flat on the cover to feel the faint grit of dust. Through the window, the harbor is sealed white, as if someone had blown on it and turned it to frost. She thinks of how glass looks like water until you strike it, and how both can cut. There is a thrill in her chest that is not fear, not yet, but something like it. A ledger tucked where it doesn't belong. A misfiled survey with the quiet weight of a door left ajar. She reaches for the scanner and, without quite knowing why, slides the ledger behind the survey to shield it from view.

CHAPTER ONE: The Ledger and the Blueprint

Nora's fingers traced the unfamiliar texture of the ledger's cover, a faint, metallic tang on her skin. It felt older than anything else in the banker's box, imbued with a gravity that contradicted its casual misplacement. The phrase "glass keeps what it sees" echoed in her mind, an enigma that refused to settle. She opened the book again, this time with a deliberate slowness, letting her eyes drift over the spidery script, the precise columns, the dates that marched relentlessly towards a past the town preferred to keep undisturbed.

The ledger was not a simple accounting of debits and credits. Interspersed with what looked like material costs and labor hours were cryptic notations, often a single word or an initial tucked into the margin, accompanied by a small, almost imperceptible drawing—a wave, a stylized fish, a broken circle. One page in particular drew her attention, dated exactly one week before the fateful shipwreck. It listed an unusually large sum for "special provisions" and under the supplier column, a name that made her breath catch: Pike & Mercer Shipworks.

She knew the name, of course. It was etched into the town's very bedrock, the legacy of two founding families. The Pikes, with their polished charm and endless civic contributions, and the Mercers, known for their skilled hands and quiet resilience. But the fact that the ledger, clearly a private record, bore the name of the shipyard felt... wrong. The official narrative painted the wreck as a tragic act of God, a force majeure. Financial irregularities had no place in that story.

As she turned another page, a folded piece of thick, yellowed paper slipped from between the leaves and landed with a soft sigh on the archive desk. It wasn't just paper; it was a blueprint, intricate lines and annotations in an elegant, almost artistic hand. She recognized the familiar silhouette of a coastal schooner, a vessel of the type that once frequented Glass Harbor. But something was off. The ship depicted was undeniably the *Sea Serpent*, the very vessel lost in the wreck, yet there were modifications, structural additions that didn't align with the public records of its construction.

Nora leaned closer, her pragmatism warring with a growing sense of disquiet. This wasn't just a misfiled document; it was a deliberate concealment. Why would someone hide a detailed blueprint showing modifications to a ship that was supposed to have sunk due to an act of nature? Her gaze darted to the legend at the bottom of the blueprint, deciphering the tiny script: "Hull Reinforcement - Project Chimera." Project Chimera? The name conjured images of mythical beasts, of things stitched together from disparate parts.

Her mind, usually so methodical, began to race, connecting the dots of what she saw with what she knew of Glass Harbor's history. The Pike family had always been synonymous with the shipyard, their wealth and influence woven into the town's fabric. The Mercers, less overtly powerful, were nevertheless respected for their craftsmanship and deep roots in the maritime industry. What kind of secret could bind these two families to a ledger and a blueprint that contradicted the town's accepted tragedy?

She smoothed the blueprint, the paper crackling faintly, and noticed another anomaly: a small, almost invisible ink stain in the corner of one of the structural diagrams. It looked like a finger smudge, dark and distinct. As she examined it more closely, a small, faded photograph fluttered from inside the folds of the blueprint. It was an old snapshot, the kind developed with uneven borders and a sepia tone that spoke of bygone summers.

The photograph showed two young men, their arms slung casually over each other's shoulders, grinning into the camera. They stood in front of what was unmistakably the shipyard, stacks of lumber and the skeletal ribs of a nascent hull visible behind them. One of the men was tall and broad-shouldered, with a shock of dark hair falling over his forehead – Michael Pike, no doubt, even in his youth, with that same confident smirk she saw on his face at town meetings. But it was the other man who truly arrested Nora's attention.

Slightly shorter, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes and a strong, square jaw, he looked achingly familiar. His name, Nora realized with a jolt that sent a tremor through her, was Jonah Mercer. Not the weathered, slightly world-weary Jonah she knew now, the owner of Glass Harbor Marine Supplies, but a younger, more carefree version. A childhood friend, a boy she'd climbed barnacle-encrusted rocks with, whose laugh still resonated in the quieter corners of her memory. The photograph captured a moment of camaraderie, a shared history, before the weight of the world, and perhaps the town's secrets, had settled on their shoulders.

Seeing Jonah there, beside a young Michael Pike, smiling amidst the machinery of the shipyard, injected a new, intensely personal dimension into her discovery. It wasn't just a historical curiosity anymore. It was about people she knew, people who were still very much alive, and who might have knowledge of whatever secrets this ledger and blueprint held. The implications prickled at her skin. What was Jonah's connection to Project Chimera? What did he know about the *Sea Serpent* that the town didn't? And why had this photograph been hidden, almost deliberately, within the very documents that whispered of a different truth? The silence of the archive suddenly felt heavy, charged with unspoken narratives.

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