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The Vanished Ledger

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Introduction

The wind off Stoneport Harbor still carried the memory of flame. It threaded through the blackened ribs of the warehouse on Wharf Street, whisking ash into the morning fog, urging the smoke to blur with the gulls and the gray. Hoses hissed. The last stubborn tongues of orange had been beaten into a slick of steam hours ago, but the air tasted of copper and salt, as if the fire had peeled the city back to rust and brine.

Mara Reed stood just past the yellow tape, her press badge turned backward on its lanyard, a camera snug against her chest beneath her coat. Firefighters moved like weary silhouettes through the wreck, their boots squelching in pooled water, helmets smeared with soot. A paramedic adjusted a silver blanket around an old man who kept glancing toward the ruin as if he were expecting someone to walk out of it.

"Miss, you can't—" a young cop started toward her.

"I'm already not," she said, a bright, distracted smile she had practiced since she was twenty. "Mara Reed, Sentinel. We're just getting art."

"Keep behind the line," he said, but he sounded relieved to have something simple to enforce.

She did as told for three breaths. Then Captain Duarte—she recognized him by the broad shoulders and the way he stood, a man accustomed to command and to the sea's nastiness—turned to talk to a city inspector with a clipboard. The tape fluttered. Mara drifted along the edge, slipped through where fog swallowed the gap, and slid into the husk.

She felt the heat still living in the concrete. The warehouse—once a cannery, lately a bonded storage space used for "miscellaneous marine goods" according to property records—had been gutted from the inside. The roof had given up and collapsed toward the center. A scorched forklift lay on its side like a dead beetle. Office walls, the kind made of flimsy drywall and glass, were smudged into opaque panels. Everything stank of melted plastic.

"Two minutes," she told herself, the way she always did. It was not a promise she always kept.

The fire had a bite pattern. It had chewed its way through one particular corridor, licked the steel shelving there, and then rushed toward the office cluster at the back as if it knew what it wanted. Mara stepped over a fallen beam, her boots slipping on

slick paper pulp. Her notebook, a battered thing that had survived four hurricanes and a lawsuit, thumped against her hip. When she reached the office door, she pressed her palm to the scorched knob. Warm. She pushed.

Inside was a study in ruin: a metal desk bent by heat, a computer monitor gone to black glass, a filing cabinet popped like a can in a campfire. Above it, a wall safe had split, its door gaped open to display the black emptiness within. The smoke had a different taste here, chemical and sweet.

“Ma’am!” Duarte’s voice, sharp behind her. He was coming.

Mara turned, felt the floor shift under water and ash, and saw, half under the desk, what the fire had missed.

It was a book. Not a paperback, not the kind that folded under your hand and bled ink when you sweat on it. It was heavy and square, leather-bound with brass corners, the kind of ledger you found in old movies or in city archives where nothing ever left. The leather had blistered in patches. The edges of the pages had curled and blackened. But a thick canvas wrap—a kind of oilskin—had protected its heart. Water had seeped in. The pages swelled against one another like the rings of a drowned tree.

Duarte’s boots splashed in the hall. “Who’s in there?”

Mara crouched, slid her fingers under the book, and felt its weight torquing her wrist. She thought of chain-of-custody and evidence and the thousand lectures that lived in her editor’s voice. She thought of a man with a slow smile and a badge she used to polish with the hem of her shirt, the man who taught her to keep her hands where they couldn’t be mistaken.

She thought, then, of the way Stoneport swallowed things. It had taken her father and left his badge number. It had taken names and turned them into street signs and hospital wings. It had taken men who made money and given them marinas and gala photographs.

She set the book on her knee and pulled a spare tote from her bag—canvas, with a coffee stain across The Sentinel’s blue logo. “Thirty seconds,” she whispered, and pried the oilskin back.

The smell that came off the book was old glue and iodine and something faintly metallic. The first page was ruined. The second—she could see columns, faint lines in pencil, a careful hand in ink. Ledger numbers. Dates not like dates, the kind with slashes swapped for dots: 10.14C, 03.09B. Ship marks or registry notes noted in a crabbed shorthand she didn’t recognize, and beside them, neat figures—amounts as precise as church tithes.

Her heart thudded in her throat.

“Miss Reed!” Duarte again, closer, the hallway a small echo chamber for patience running out.

She could have left it. She could have pointed it out, backed away, done the respectable thing and written a tidy little daytime story about the fire at a warehouse and the kindness of donors and the way the fog made the city softer as the day wore on. But something about the hand on this page—the unapologetic neatness—made her fingers go cold.

At the bottom of the page, the ink had bled into the water damage, but the letters were still legible in the way of words you don’t want to see. A name. Not scrawled. Written as if the person recording it saw no need to hide.

WARDWELL M & T — Disb. 25,000 — Courtesy — HPD 417 — Pier 3

Her breath stopped. HPD was Harbor Police Department in any city with salt in its veins. 417 was a number that lived in her bones. Her father’s badge had been 417. She’d pressed the metal into silly putty when she was nine and kept the print inside a shoebox until the box went moldy in a damp closet after the funeral that had never happened.

Mara heard her own voice say, “No.”

She angled the book to the light. The entry around it made the name worse, not better. Above: 10.14C — Reg QP8921 — Drydock — 18,000 — EB. Below, the ink bubbled, but she could make out something like RE— then the burn. The rest was eaten away.

A shadow moved across the hall’s glass pane, and Duarte shouldered through the doorway. He didn’t curse—she liked that about him—but his face did a thing, the combination of annoyance and concern that men in charge learned early and never lost.

“You can’t be in here,” he said. His eyes flicked to the ledger and back. “And you can’t take that.”

Mara put a hand to the book as if it were a living thing about to bolt. “You know who owns this building?”

“Some trust,” he said, wary now. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Wardwell Marine & Trust,” she said. Her voice sounded steadier than she felt. “They’ll be here in an hour with a lawyer and a press kit. They’ll call it a tragic accident and donate new hoses to your station and pay the cleanup costs.”

He didn’t answer. Outside, a diesel engine revved. The gulls traded gossip on the roofline. In the distance, a siren went off and then quieted again, like a question that wasn’t getting an answer.

“Captain,” she said. “Let me get it out of the wet. Let me photograph it. Keep it in my possession until—”

“Until what?” he asked. His gaze slid to the deck, to her boots, back to the book. “This is a scene, Reed. I’m not your enemy, but you can’t make your own rules because you want a story.”

The truth stung because it wasn’t wrong. The Sentinel’s legal pad was paper-thin these days, and she had learned to walk the sharp line between getting something and keeping it. She had crossed it, too, when she was twenty-six and thought she could outwit everyone in a room full of men who wore suits badly and spoke in sentences that did not end. It hadn’t gone well. She still got Christmas cards from the lawyer they’d had on retainer that year.

Mara slid her camera from under her coat. “Then let me at least document it.”

He hesitated. “Two minutes.”

She nodded, gratitude small and genuine, and worked quickly. Her fingers were careful, the way her father’s had been when he spooled fishing line before dawn. She took shots of the ledger in situ, wide and then in detail, the entry she couldn’t stop seeing, the waterline marks, the texture of the paper like the skin of an old hand. She logged the time in her notebook, wrote down the address, noted the presence of the captain, the condition of the room, the smell. She did it because it was right and because it calmed the roaring in her head.

When she lifted her lens, Duarte was studying the page, not the numbers—he wasn’t that kind of man—but the certainty of whoever had kept this book. He said, as if to himself, “Courtesy.”

“It’s a polite way to say bribe,” Mara said, and the word felt like biting a coin to see if it was real. “Or hush money.”

Outside, a black SUV idled at the curb, its windows tinted in a way that made the state trooper parked behind it twitchy. A woman in a camel coat and soft leather gloves stood by the hood, talking into her phone with an attention that made conversation

around her skip. Elise Wardwell was not a person you had to recognize; she did the work of recognition for you. Behind her, men in jackets that had never been near a dock unloaded bottled water and boxes of blankets onto folding tables stamped with the Wardwell foundation's crest. A photographer from the morning paper—Mara's competition, if there was such a thing anymore—snapped a long lens at Elise's profile as if he were photographing a lighthouse.

Elise glanced toward the tape and the smudge of the office beyond as if she could feel the heat from here. Her gaze slid over the broken windows, paused—not long, not enough to count as a look—and then returned to her phone.

Mara took one more photo and felt Duarte's patience hit its edge. "Out," he said. He didn't touch her, and that mattered. "We'll secure it. I'll make sure it's logged. You want to view it later, bring a request through the inspector."

"Thank you," she said, because you thanked a man who didn't make a hard thing harder.

She closed the ledger and felt the oilskin cling to it like damp skin. For a second—one heartbeat stretched out thin—she considered what it would mean to slip the book into her bag and walk out. She saw it, step by step: the angle of her elbow, the weight against her hip, the suddenness with which everything that had been complicated would become simple. It would be theft. It would be a ruin. And it would be worth a story that didn't just live for a day and die with a correction the next morning.

She didn't do it.

She stepped away. Duarte lifted the ledger with both hands—respectful, the way men lifted weight they didn't yet understand—and passed it to the inspector with the clipboard and a face that said he understood nothing except that this would be paperwork. Mara followed them out, her throat tight.

On the street, the fog had thickened, the kind that made the cranes at the shipyard across the basin into ghosts. The old mills along the river had their windows on like a string of tired eyes. A storm was brewing east—it always was in January—and the wind came with a particulate sting that put taste in the mouth and impatience in the bones.

"Reed," a voice said behind her. She didn't have to turn to know it was Officer Neal—the young one from the tape. "Your editor called. Said your 'phone is going straight to hell.'"

She fished it out of her pocket, where it had been on silent and vibrating like a small trapped thing. Five missed calls from Rita Morales. Two from a number she did not recognize. One from Jonah Hayes that had come in before dawn and carried no

message.

Her thumb hovered. Jonah hadn't called her first in years. Usually it took three missed calls and an apology or three drinks to bring them to the same conversation.

She slid Rita's call open. "I've got something," she said before her editor could launch into the lecture. "A ledger, found in the fire at Wardwell's bonded warehouse. It's water-damaged, burned, but readable. It has disbursements. One of the entries—Rita, it says 'Courtesy—HPD 417—Pier 3.'"

There was a silence that had breath in it. "That's a number," Rita said. "Not a name."

"It's a number that belongs to a name," Mara said, and swallowed because her mouth had gone dry. "My father."

Rita didn't gasp. Rita's gift was that nothing surprised her out loud. "Photographs?"

"I have them. Heard of chain-of-custody, so I didn't walk with it."

"Good. Come back. We'll talk it through. Do not call anyone else. Do not twitter it, or whatever you do when you can't sit still."

"I don't twitch on Twitter," Mara said, because if she didn't, she would tell Rita the whole thing there on the sidewalk with the Wardwells' charity machine setting up five feet from her.

"Whatever it is you do," Rita said, a smile you could hear. Then it was gone. "Be safe getting back. Eyes open."

The call clicked off. Mara pocketed the phone and looked toward the waterfront again. Elise Wardwell smiled for a camera that had appeared, precisely on cue. A man in a hard hat took a bottle of water as if he had been waiting for this kindness all morning. The SUV idled. Behind its tinted glass, motion, a shape that might have been Victor Wardwell himself, or a driver adjusting a mirror, or no one at all.

She started toward her car. The gulls wheeled in a meanness of wind. Her boots made little splashes in puddles that smelled like a harbor do when the tide is turning: something up from the deep, something wet and old and capable of coming back no matter how often you burned it.

At the corner, she paused. The city lay spread out the way a body might, the river like a dark artery, the mill buildings the bones. She tried to picture herself at seventeen, pressed against the window of a cruiser, watching red and blue paint the fog as men she'd known by their first names spoke to her mother in the careful tones of people

who have learned to announce a disaster without saying the word. She tried to place the pier: Pier 3. The pigeon-stained concrete, the iron cleats, the stink of bait in the morning. Her father's laugh that last week, the way it had sounded like eggs hitting a hot pan, cheerful and pressured all at once.

The ledger's ink had bubbled and bled, and still the name had been there. Wardwell. Courtesy. HPD 417. She could feel the city's mechanisms clicking into motion already: lawyers at their desks drafting phrases like unfounded and irresponsible; a PR team reminding everyone how many scholarships Wardwell Marine & Trust had handed out last year; a councilman rehearsing his disappointed face in the mirror. There were men, always, who could make a mercy look like a punishment and a crime look like the price of doing business.

She felt the pinch of fear land above her breastbone, a bird that had found a perch. It was a familiar weight. It made the next breath sharpen. She thought of her father's hands, the way his knuckles had looked when he came home late, a line of red like he had held onto something that didn't want to be held. She thought of what it would take to pull a thread through decades of civic silk without being strangled by it.

A van bumped the curb behind her—city maintenance, late, paint flaking. The driver glanced at her, then away, then back again. Recognition rippled over his face. "You're Reed," he said. "From the paper."

"Some days," she said.

He lifted two fingers in a small salute and pulled away. The SUV's engine down the block ticked from idle to engaged and back again, a patient metronome. If there was a watcher in there, they had good glass and time to wait.

Mara cut across to her car. Her windshield was misted with fog and the smallest of ash flakes that had drifted and settled and made the city's mourning visible. She turned the wipers on. The ash streaked to gray water and slid away. For a second, with the glass clean, she could see straight through the fog to the docks where men in rubber boots hosed down decks and a boy in a Patriots hoodie stacked traps with a rhythm that would make his back hurt at thirty-five. Beyond that, the shape of Pier 3, a darker shadow in the gray.

Her phone buzzed again. A text, unknown number: Don't write about what you don't understand.

She stared at it, then at the ledger-shaped space conjured in her mind. It had a weight. It had a scent. It had a name she had been avoiding for half her life and the arch of a story she had been chasing since she learned to spell the word truth without flinching.

Mara started the car. The heater coughed and blew air that smelled like old coffee and damp, and the defroster carved laborious arcs in the condensation. She put the car in gear, checked her mirrors, and pulled into the slow, restless traffic that circled the harbor like a school of fish that couldn't decide which way to take.

As she turned up Wharf Street, past the Wardwells' good works and the city's old bones, she imagined the ledger's pages turning. She imagined the neat columns, the dates in their wrong clothes, the names written without apology. She imagined one page in particular, somewhere past the middle, where a line might not be bubbled or burned, where the letters could be read without squinting.

REED, the line might say. Not a number, not a courtesy, not a euphemism.

She didn't know yet if she wanted that to be true.

Her phone buzzed again. Jonah, this time, finally: Don't do anything stupid. Call me.

She almost laughed. She did not. She drove, and the harbor slid away on her left, and the storm gathered itself beyond the breakwater like a curtain that would rise whether anyone wanted to watch the show or not.

CHAPTER ONE: Cinders and Ink

The engine of Mara's old Ford coughed once, a wet, rattling sound that made the dashboard lights flicker, then settled into its usual complaint. She'd named the car The Reluctant Witness. It had the right kind of mileage for a city that didn't want to look too closely at its own odometer. The highway unspooled into Stoneport's industrial outskirts, a stretch of warehouses and chain-link fences that looked like the city's backbone laid bare. A billboard for Wardwell Marine & Trust flashed past, its blue-and-white logo serene above a slogan: *Building a Stronger Shoreline*. The irony tasted like the exhaust fumes leaking into the cabin. She drove past the exit for the old precinct, the building dark and foreboding under the sodium lights, a place where she'd spent too many nights waiting for a father who never came out the revolving doors.

Her apartment sat above a bakery that started its work at three a.m., ensuring she never had to worry about oversleeping. She parked in her usual spot, half in the shadows of the loading dock, and checked her mirrors. Nothing moved but a stray cat and the fog rolling in from the harbor, thick as wet cotton. The text message still burned on her screen: *Don't write about what you don't understand*. It wasn't a request. It was a warning shot. She pocketed the phone, grabbed her bag, and took the stairs two at a time, the ledger a dense, heavy square in the bottom of her tote, its presence more felt than seen.

Inside, she deadbolted the door and flipped on the overheads. The apartment was a single room that tried to be everything and mostly succeeded in being cluttered. An L-shaped desk buried in case files and old newspapers took up one wall; a kitchenette hummed against another; a sagging couch sat under the window that looked out over the rooftops to the water. The air smelled of coffee grounds and rain. She set the tote on the kitchen counter and stood back from it, hands on hips, breathing like she'd just run a race she hadn't meant to enter. The rain began—a soft, insistent tapping that made the windows sound like they were pleading.

"Alright," she said to the room, to the silence. "Let's see who you are."

She washed her hands at the sink, dried them carefully, and laid a clean towel on the counter. It felt surgical, ridiculous, but she did it anyway. She wore thin latex gloves she kept for handling old documents and tainted evidence—a habit born of a time she'd ruined a good shirt and a better lead with a careless fingerprint. The ledger came out of the bag with a whisper of canvas. The oilskin was stiff and smelled of brine and old smoke. She eased it back. The first page was a ruin of char and water-stain, the ink a ghost. The second and third pages were better. The paper was thick, creamy under the gloves, the lines ruled in faint blue. Columns: Date. Ledger number.

Ship registry. Amount. Notes.

She angled the desk lamp close and began to read. There were dates in a code she didn't immediately recognize: 10.14C, 03.09B. Later she would learn what the letters meant. For now, she saw patterns. A cadence to the entries, a kind of liturgical rhythm. She saw amounts that were too round to be invoices and too deliberate to be tips. And the notes: *Courtesy. Expedite. Resolve.* Words that meant nothing and everything. She flipped pages with the care of a bomb technician. The water damage increased toward the middle, a tide line that had soaked through the spine. Then she found it. The page that had been exposed to the least heat and the most water. The ink had bled but held.

Wardwell M & T — Disb. 25,000 — Courtesy — HPD 417 — Pier 3.

The letters wobbled, but the name stood straight. Her breath hitched. She said it out loud, testing the weight of it. "Wardwell." Not a rumor, not a whisper, not a question. A fact in ink. The word *Courtesy* was obscene in the context, a euphemism that made the crime sound polite. And the number—HPD 417—hit her like a door she'd forgotten was locked. Her father had worn that number. He'd clipped it to his uniform every morning with the kind of care reserved for things that might save your life, or get you killed. She remembered the sound of the metal against his belt, the way it rang when he tossed his keys in the bowl by the door. She remembered the day the bowl was empty and the key never came home.

She flipped past it, trying to see the pattern, not the pain. The entries before it were similar: other numbers, other docks. Pier 6. Pier 8. One for 18,000, one for 12,500. All tied to Wardwell M & T, all annotated with *Courtesy*. She found another entry near the bottom of the page, half-eaten by water: *Re—* The rest was gone, a smear of brown where letters had bled into each other. She stared at it, heart hammering, willing it to resolve. It didn't. But the shape of it was familiar. The shape of her own name.

Her phone buzzed on the counter. She ignored it. She took photos of each legible page, her hands steady only because she forced them to be. She logged the time and date and location in her notebook, the old one with the coffee stain, with the specific, almost obsessive detail Rita had taught her. *Chain of custody starts the moment you touch it*, Rita liked to say. *If you can't prove where it came from, it's just a story.* Mara wrote: *Found at 101 Wharf Street, warehouse fire. In my possession as of 0300. Photos taken. Intent to verify.*

When she was done, she poured herself a drink—whiskey, cheap, the kind that burns—and sat at the desk with the ledger open like a guest who wouldn't leave. The rain picked up. The wind came in off the water with a low, moaning sound that got into the old building's bones. She drank and read and tried to keep the two separate, but the whiskey made the ink swim, and the ink made the whiskey taste like the past. Her

father's face slid into her mind: the mustache he refused to trim, the laugh that embarrassed her when she was a teenager and impressed her when she was an adult. The last time she saw him, he was in the kitchen, making eggs. He'd been wearing a gray sweatshirt with a rip in the shoulder. The eggs burned. He'd looked at the pan like it had betrayed him personally. Then he went out the door with a kiss on the top of her head and never came back.

She shook herself out of it. The ledger wasn't a séance. It was evidence. She needed an expert, someone who could read the handwriting of a city that tried to forget itself. She thought of Dr. Lena Park at the Historical Society, a woman with a spine of steel and a love for old paper that bordered on the religious. She thought of Theo, the hacker kid she'd bailed out of a jam a year back, who owed her and liked the challenge of digital breadcrumbs. And she thought of Jonah. Of course she thought of Jonah. He was the kind of man who showed up when you didn't ask and left when you didn't want him to. She hadn't seen him in months, not since a funeral that had required them to stand side by side and pretend they hadn't once known each other's secrets.

She poured a second drink but didn't drink it. Instead, she spread a clean sheet on the desk and began to copy the entries by hand, the way journalists used to before scanners and fear made everything easier and less true. The act of writing slowed her down, forced her to see the details. The care of the handwriting. The absence of mistakes. The slight upward tilt at the end of a line, a flourish that suggested confidence and maybe a left hand. The use of the ampersand in *Wardwell M & T*, which she'd seen on official documents and stadium signage and donor plaques. It was the same ampersand, the same careful curve. This wasn't a copy. It was a source.

Outside, a car idled by the curb. She didn't notice it until the engine cut and the silence was sudden. She killed the desk lamp and went to the window, staying to the side. A dark sedan, the kind that blended into rain and bureaucracy. No markings. The kind that came with a driver who wore a suit that didn't rumple. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the interior light popped on, and a man looked up at the building, checking numbers, his face a blank slate. He wasn't looking for a bakery. He looked at her window, then back at his phone. The light went out. The car sat there, patient and solid, like a promise someone intended to keep.

Mara stepped back from the window, heart in her throat. She went to the door and checked the deadbolt. Solid. She listened. The rain. The wind. The distant moan of a ship's horn on the harbor. She thought about calling the police, then remembered the ledger's entry and laughed, a sharp, bitter sound that surprised her. She went back to the ledger, took one more photo—the page with the name—and then closed it. She wrapped the oilskin tight, slid the book into the tote, and hung the tote on a hook inside the closet, behind a row of jackets that didn't get worn enough.

She sat at the desk again, the copied page in front of her. The whiskey was warm in her stomach, the kind of warmth that promised to become a headache if she didn't respect it. She opened her email and drafted a message to Rita, subject line: *Fishing Trip*. It was code for something that smelled like a story but might be a trap. She wrote: *Found a ledger at the Wharf Street fire. Looks like bookkeeping for a Wardwell property. Disbursements noted as Courtesy. One entry ties to HPD 417. You know what that is. I'm copying pages. Going to verify. Call me when you're at your desk. Don't use your cell.*

She hit send and watched the little progress bar crawl across the screen. The internet in the building had the reliability of a drunk in a storm. It went through. She closed the laptop and went to the window again. The sedan was gone. The street was empty except for a pair of seagulls fighting over something slick and shiny in the gutter. The fog was thicker now, erasing the edges of buildings, softening the city's jawline. It made everything look less dangerous, which was exactly the kind of lie that got people hurt.

Her phone buzzed again. This time it was a call, a number she didn't recognize with a Stoneport area code. She answered on the third ring, the way her father had taught her. "Reed."

The voice was male, filtered, and careful. "You have something that doesn't belong to you."

She kept her own voice even. "I have a lot of things. You'll have to be more specific."

"Don't play games. You know what we mean." A pause. The sound of rain on a windshield, more insistent than hers. "Put it back. Or you'll lose more than a story."

"Who is this?" she asked, though she knew the answer would be a lie if it came at all.

"Someone who reads the city better than you do," the voice said. "You're chasing ghosts, Mara. Be careful you don't become one."

The line clicked. She stared at the phone, then at the closet where the ledger hid. She walked over and pressed her palm to the door, feeling the weight of it through the wood. It was just a book. Just paper and ink. But it felt like a fuse.

She went back to the desk and opened a new document. She wrote the first line of a story she wasn't yet sure she could publish: *A warehouse fire on Wharf Street revealed a ledger of disbursements that implicate Wardwell Marine & Trust in a pattern of payments labeled "Courtesy," one of which references a retired police badge number tied to a cold case.* She stopped there. The rest would be facts. The rest would be

proof. The rest would either clear a name or burn one down.

Outside, the wind shifted and the rain came harder, driving against the glass, washing the ash into the gutters where it would clog the drains and flood the basements. The city would complain. The Wardwells would write a check. And Mara Reed, thirty-four years old and tired in a way that sleep didn't fix, sat at her desk and began to do the work she was built to do. The ledger was not going back. The story was not going away. And the ghost at her window was not the only one watching.

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