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House of Echoes

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Introduction

The tide reached for Greybridge the way it always had: patient, insinuating, salted with the smell of old ropes and kelp. Nora Hale stood at the edge of her mother's porch and watched the harbor take on the slate of evening, lobster buoys bobbing like punctuation in a sentence no one had finished. The house—three stories of weathered clapboard and discolored shingles—leaned into the wind as if listening. Its windows had the dull, blank look of unblinking eyes. She had grown up with the groan of its stairs and the winter hiss through its seams; now, after years away, the sounds felt like a language she had once spoken and no longer trusted herself to understand.

She had come back because there were things you did when a parent died. You signed forms. You shook hands in church basements that smelled of coffee and lemon oil. You took the heavy, cold key they pressed into your palm and let it turn a lock that had waited. Miriam Hale's absence thinned the air inside the rooms. Her scarf was still hooked on the banister post; her grocery list was still magneted to the refrigerator, milk and salt and bulbs for the porch. Duties stacked themselves in sensible piles—estate papers, boxes to sort, decisions to make about peeling paint and a roof that let in the storm. It should have been straightforward. Grief rarely was. In Greybridge, nothing was.

Beyond the harbor, the town cupped the shoreline—a tidy crescent of clapboard shops and salt-streaked docks, the white steeple of First Congregational, the mayor's office with its neat brick and geraniums in window boxes. In summer the tourists came for chowder and antique stores; in winter they left the streets to the people who belonged, people who knew how to read the sky and the tides. Everyone knew everyone else's business, or thought they did. Nora had learned early that in Greybridge, privacy was something you negotiated. Secrets, though—those were tended like perennials, mulched and watered until they took on the permanence of landscape.

She had left after that last bad year, the one that had blurred at the edges, months of her twenties she could not entirely account for no matter how she pressed her mind against them. A girl had vanished that summer—Sadie Merritt, seventeen, a runner with a crooked smile and a habit of cutting across the Hale property on her way to the point. Search parties had combed the marsh grasses, their flashlights moving like will-o'-the-wisps in fog. For weeks, posters bleached on telephone poles, the inked hope in them paling to gray. The official line hardened, then cooled. The town adjusted, the way towns do, leaving the hole and building a fence around it. The fence was made of good intentions, gossip, and a tidy phrase: the past.

Nora earned her living in the years after by asking questions in places where she had no right to, her byline sending other people's secrets into circulation. It should have made her immune to the particular flavor of silence that met her in Greybridge, the kind that felt like a polite hand on the elbow, guiding you away from a room you weren't invited to enter. But memory was a fickle witness, and her own had its soft spots. There were gaps you could fall into. There were nights that came back in images—moth-brown lamplight on Miriam's face, the slap of a screen door, the salt-stiff curl of a photograph—without the connective tissue of cause and effect. In a town where respectability wore a clean shirt and a practiced smile, those gaps could be exploited.

Inside, the house breathed in drafts and faint, familiar odors: lemon polish, old paper, a strand of Miriam's perfume lingering in the hall like a benediction or a warning. In the parlor, the piano waited with its lid closed, the family photographs forming their small, curated gallery along the mantle—birthdays, school plays, fishing trips on glassy mornings. If you looked closely, you could see the seams in the wall where a previous owner had patched plaster, the slight rise in the rug where a floorboard swelled every September. The place had always been imperfect. It had always echoed. When Nora moved, the house answered: a creak, a thud, the whisper of something shifting inside the walls. Sound traveled oddly here, carrying the past forward in little, repeated fragments.

She told herself she would keep to a timetable. Two weeks to clear the attic. Two meetings with the lawyer. One visit with Lena, if Lena would still meet her at the diner by the rotary where they used to split a plate of fries and whisper about everyone who walked in. She told herself she would be polite to men like Ethan Crowe, who called her Nora-girl when she was twelve and whose money now underwrote half the town's festivals, men whose grip suggested they intended to steady you and keep you in place. She told herself she would nod at Detective Morales if she saw him on Main, because he had always been decent in a quiet, careful way. She told herself she would not go looking. People in Greybridge called that stirring up. And yet, the harbor had its own tide, and it pulled.

On the shelf by the door Miriam had kept a small glass bowl where she dropped other people's keys—neighbors, friends, tenants who rented the old carriage house in summer. The bowl sat empty now, a clean circle free of dust where it had rested. Nora's own keys felt too warm in her hand. She set them down, listened to the sound they made, and thought of how often sound can return without warning, a voice in a voicemail you forgot to delete, the click of a latch you were sure you'd fixed. There were things Greybridge wanted her to remember and things it preferred she did not. There were stories that had been told so often they calcified into truth, and others that had been told once and buried.

Outside, the bell at the end of the pier tolled, slow and measured, as the light thinned. Somewhere a gull cried and the sound bounced off the water, off the clapboard, off the glass of the Hale house, coming back altered, a little distorted, recognizable and not. Nora stood in the doorway and knew two things with the sour certainty grief can sharpen: she had returned to close a life; and nothing in Greybridge stayed closed for long. The past, like tide, found its way in. The house listened. And if she listened, too, it would speak.

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CHAPTER ONE: Arrival

The drive from Boston had been a meditation on monotony: Exit signs blurred, strip malls gave way to fewer strip malls, and eventually, the highway narrowed into state roads that wound through pine forests thick with the smell of damp earth and something vaguely medicinal. Nora had watched the odometer tick over, each mile a physical distance from the life she'd built, or at least curated, in the city. Her small apartment, with its towering stacks of research and the faint, permanent smell of takeout coffee, felt like another planet. Here, the air was sharp with salt and brine, a reminder that she was back in Greybridge, a town that felt less like a place and more like an old coat she'd outgrown but couldn't quite discard.

The turn onto Anchor Street was familiar, even after seven years. The houses were mostly the same—weather-beaten shingles, saggy porches, windows that squinted out at the bay. Mrs. Albright's prize-winning hydrangeas, a shocking blue, still spilled over her picket fence. Mr. Henderson's fishing boat, *The Salty Dog*, remained perpetually dry-docked in his yard, its paint peeling like sunburned skin. It was a tableau of arrested development, comforting in its steadfastness, unsettling in its resistance to change.

Miriam's house, however, had undergone a subtle but noticeable shift. It had always been grander than its neighbors, a three-story Victorian with a turret that overlooked the harbor. Now, though, the paint on the clapboard was more faded, a tired grey-blue that seemed to melt into the sky. A gutter hung precariously from the eaves on the west side, its rusty teeth threatening to let loose with the next heavy rain. Weeds had begun to creep up the stone path to the front door, defiant emerald tendrils against the grey. The house looked less like a home and more like a proud old woman who had finally decided to let herself go.

Nora parked her rented sedan, a nondescript silver blur in front of the house's quiet decay. The engine ticked as it cooled, the only sound breaking the afternoon quiet until the distant cry of a gull. She sat for a moment, her hands still gripping the steering wheel, and just breathed. The air smelled of salt and something else – woodsmoke, maybe, or the faint tang of diesel from the harbor. It was the smell of home, a truth she wasn't sure she liked.

Unlocking the front door felt like an archaeological dig. The old brass key, heavy and cold in her hand, resisted the tumblers for a long moment before finally yielding with a protesting groan. The sound echoed in the sudden silence of the entryway, a cavernous space that usually hummed with Miriam's presence. Now, it was just still. Nora stepped inside, the floorboards sighing beneath her weight, and the air hit her: a

blend of dust, stale flowers, and Miriam's expensive, floral perfume, faint but unmistakable.

She spent the first hour in a blur of motion, driven by a nervous energy. Windows were cranked open, letting in the cool sea air. Curtains were pulled back, chasing away the shadows that clung to the corners of every room. Dust covers, brittle and yellowed, were stripped from the furniture, revealing Miriam's eclectic taste: velvet armchairs, a mahogany desk laden with forgotten papers, a towering grandfather clock in the hall that had long since stopped telling time. It was a house frozen in amber, a testament to a life that had abruptly ended.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator hummed a lonely tune. Nora opened it, expecting to find it cleared out. Instead, a carton of milk, half-full, sat on the top shelf, alongside a jar of homemade blackberry jam, its label written in Miriam's elegant, looping script: "Summer '18." A small, withered lemon lay forgotten in the crisper. It was as if Miriam had simply stepped out for an errand and would be back any minute to make tea. The normalcy of it was a punch to the gut. Nora closed the door, the click echoing too loudly.

Upstairs, her old bedroom was exactly as she'd left it: the patchwork quilt on the bed, the faded posters of indie bands on the walls, a stack of worn paperbacks on the bedside table. A thin film of dust coated everything, but otherwise, it was preserved. She ran a hand over the rough texture of her old denim jacket, still slung over the back of a chair. It felt like touching a ghost.

As the afternoon bled into evening, Nora's initial burst of energy began to wane. The house, no longer filled with the frantic sounds of her opening and uncovering, settled back into its quiet vigil. She found herself drifting from room to room, the weight of grief pressing down. She'd come to Greybridge to sort through Miriam's things, to handle the estate, to put the practicalities of death in order. She hadn't anticipated the sheer emotional exhaustion of simply existing in her mother's absence.

She decided to start in the living room, where Miriam had kept her most treasured possessions. A sprawling bookshelf filled with classics and local history tomes stood against one wall. On another, a large antique secretary desk, its numerous drawers and cubbies always a source of fascination for Nora as a child. Miriam had been meticulous about her papers, organizing everything with a precision Nora had never inherited.

Nora opened the secretary's roll-top with a creak. Inside, neat stacks of bills, correspondence, and various civic documents were held together with paperclips and rubber bands. It was a testament to Miriam's orderly mind. Nora began to sift through them, half-listening to the distant mournful cry of a foghorn. She found utility bills, tax returns, letters from Miriam's book club. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just the quiet

administration of a well-lived life.

As she worked her way through the smaller compartments, her fingers brushed against something unexpected: a thick, square envelope tucked deep into a narrow slot, almost hidden by a stack of old postcards depicting Greybridge's lighthouse. It was heavier than the other papers, and oddly stiff. Her name, "Nora," was scrawled on the front in Miriam's handwriting, but with a slight tremor she didn't recognize. This wasn't the elegant, looping script of the jam label. This was hurried, almost desperate.

A flicker of unease went through her. Miriam had always been direct. If she'd wanted Nora to have something, she would have left it in plain sight, or told her directly. This felt... furtive. Nora tore open the envelope. Inside, nestled among a few loose sheets of yellowed notepaper, was a single photograph.

It was an old print, slightly faded at the edges, capturing a moment frozen in time. A group of teenagers, laughing, their arms around each other, standing on what looked like the rocky promontory near the old lighthouse. The sea stretched out behind them, a turbulent grey. They were dressed in late 90s fashion—baggy jeans, flannel shirts, oversized sweaters. Nora recognized some of them: Lena, her childhood friend, looking impossibly young and carefree; a few faces from her own high school yearbooks, now hazy memories. And then, there was Sadie Merritt, her crooked smile evident even in the grainy photo, her bright eyes fixed on someone just out of frame. Sadie, the girl who had vanished.

But it wasn't Sadie's presence that made Nora's breath catch. It was the detail that snagged her attention, the anomaly that made her stomach clench. Tucked into the front pocket of Sadie's oversized denim jacket, almost hidden by a loose fold of fabric, was a small, crudely drawn sketch. It was clearly visible: a distinctive, almost childlike rendering of the Hale house, complete with its turret and leaning porch. A drawing of *this* house.

Why would Sadie Merritt have a drawing of her house? And why, in all the photographs Nora had seen over the years, had she never noticed this detail before? It was too clear, too specific to be a coincidence. It seemed to defy the accepted narrative, the quiet understanding that Sadie's disappearance had nothing to do with the Hale family.

Nora turned the photograph over, her fingers tracing the faint lines of the image. The back was blank. No date, no names, nothing to contextualize it. Just the faint imprint of the photo paper. She stared at the image again, a growing chill spreading through her. Sadie Merritt, smiling, vibrant, holding a secret connection to the Hale house.

She reached for her phone, a sudden, desperate urge to call Lena, to ask her about it, to get some explanation. But her fingers hovered over the screen. No. This was

something she needed to process first. Something about the way it was hidden, the tremor in Miriam's handwriting, the sheer impossibility of it, suggested a deeper secret.

A soft thud echoed from the floor above, directly over the living room. Nora froze, her heart hammering against her ribs. The sound wasn't the groan of old wood, or the settling of the house. It was a distinct, heavy thud, like something being dropped. She stood very still, listening. The house was silent again, but the quiet now felt charged, expectant. Had the house always made sounds like that? Or was she just noticing them now, hypersensitive to every creak and whisper in her grief-stricken state?

She glanced at the photograph again, the image of Sadie Merritt suddenly less carefree, more enigmatic. The drawing of the house, like a tiny brand on the missing girl's pocket, seemed to accuse. Nora's gaze shifted to the hallway, where the faint scent of Miriam's perfume still lingered. The thud upstairs had definitely been real. Not imagination.

And then, she saw it. On the small, antique side table in the entryway, where Miriam had always kept a bowl for keys, sat a small, folded piece of paper. It hadn't been there when Nora arrived. Her keys, which she had deliberately placed on the table earlier, were now gone. In their place, the note. Her hand trembled as she reached for it. It was a simple, stark message, written in block letters on a plain white slip of paper: "Stop looking."

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