



From the MixCache.com library

SAMPLE COPY

The Last Lighthouse on Hollow Shore

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Funeral Without a Body
- **Chapter 2** Pulse in the Fog
- **Chapter 3** Keeper of Half-Memories
- **Chapter 4** Glass Smiles at the Facility
- **Chapter 5** The Workshop and the Watcher
- **Chapter 6** Metadata and the Kid
- **Chapter 7** The Forum and the Fed
- **Chapter 8** Manifests in the Margins
- **Chapter 9** Stormwatchers
- **Chapter 10** The Photograph and the Disappearance
- **Chapter 11** What Daniel Heard
- **Chapter 12** Doubt in a White Lab Coat
- **Chapter 13** Weapon in the Water
- **Chapter 14** Sick Tides
- **Chapter 15** The Attempt and the Tape
- **Chapter 16** Names on the List
- **Chapter 17** Terms of Immunity
- **Chapter 18** Night in the Lab
- **Chapter 19** The Compromised
- **Chapter 20** Smeared in Daylight
- **Chapter 21** The Plan for the Light
- **Chapter 22** Test Night
- **Chapter 23** The Director on the Stairs
- **Chapter 24** Broadcast
- **Chapter 25** After the Fog

Introduction

The fog crept in off Hollow Shore like a living thing, folding over the breakwater and swallowing the last orange rim of sunset. Gulls wheeled low, their cries thin and needling, and the old lighthouse answered with a mournful pulse that didn't match the tide tables Mara Cole remembered. Two long notes. A pause that felt a heartbeat too short. Then a stuttering short that made the hairs on her arms stand up beneath her damp jacket. The sound reached through her, a vibration more than a call, and she realized how long it had been since she'd let the sea speak to her like this.

The road to the point had narrowed since she'd left town, the asphalt split by salt and neglect. Wind shoved at her as she climbed the last dune path, the grit of blown sand in her teeth. Hollow Shore had a way of reintroducing itself without welcome: weather-beaten houses with their paint peeled back to gray bones, porch lights on timers that made empty rooms look occupied, and that lighthouse—white tower scabbed with rust, its gallery railing patched with mismatched metal. It had been a landmark when she was a kid, a place to dare each other to climb when the keeper wasn't looking. Tonight it was a metronome for something she didn't yet understand.

She told herself she was only here because of the message: the sheriff's office calling her by her full name to say her brother was missing, the phrase of record—presumed lost—sliding across the line like it meant nothing. Daniel's absence pressed against her ribs now, an ache that pulsed with each off-time blast of the horn. She had left Hollow Shore years ago to learn how to ask hard questions more than once and to outlast the silences that followed. Coming back felt like admitting that some answers still lived here in the cold and the damp, in the spaces between the creak of dock lines and the scrape of gull claws on corrugated tin.

The beach had shifted since her childhood, the winter storms carving a narrow shelf of pebbles between the dune grass and the slap of water. That was where she saw it: a tangle of cable and barnacle-white plastic, half-buried in weed and kelp like a sea creature had shed its skin. It wasn't a fisherman's gear. Too clean under the crust, too intentional in its shape. A disc the size of a dinner plate with a dead, glassy eye in the center; a frayed lead blinking a bead of brine that caught the last of the light. She crouched, fingertips cold as she brushed sand away. Letters ghosted under the salt. Not a brand she recognized. Not anything the lighthouse keeper she remembered would have allowed near his tower.

She listened. Beneath the erratic horn there was another rhythm, barely-there, a thrum that made her jaw ache. It might have been her imagination, or the wind engineer-whistling through broken siding somewhere downshore. It might have been

the undertow gnawing at the pilings. But it felt like a message sent in the wrong key. Mara straightened, the sea slicking her boots. She could have taken the thing then, could have tucked it in her trunk and driven straight to the one cheap motel still open in shoulder season. Instead she stood and watched the tower's lantern bleat through fog that had turned the world to a series of damp, diminishing circles.

The town behind her muttered its familiar sounds: a screen door snapping shut, the low cough of a truck that should have been retired a decade ago, distant laughter thinned by wind. Somewhere, she knew, the old keeper—if he was still alive—would be polishing a memory until it gleamed. Somewhere in those clapboard houses, Mayor Colin Ames would be looking at renderings of a future Hollow Shore with bright new angles and slogans about revitalization. Somewhere beyond the dunes, the research facility's windows would be throwing sterile light onto the marsh, their hum indifferent to the tide. Daniel had been working near there. Daniel had been worried enough to leave her a voicemail where he didn't say the thing he needed to say.

Guilt was a taste, copper on the back of her tongue. She should have come sooner. She should have called more. She should have read between lines that didn't exist. The sea didn't care about any of that. It rolled and breathed and carried things ashore that didn't belong to it. She slid her phone from her pocket, framing the odd disc in the rectangle of her screen, the image grainy in the fog-softened light. Evidence, half-formed. She had spent years teaching herself not to turn away from the first uncomfortable fact. The second blast of the horn came sooner than it should have, and behind it, a glitch of silence that felt deliberate.

She left the device where it lay and walked the last stretch to the base of the lighthouse. The door was locked and salted shut. She pressed her palm to the wood, feeling the cold come through. She could picture the stair inside, tight and steep, the iron warm in summer and slick in weather like this. She remembered Daniel at twelve, legs too long for his own good, scrambling up them two at a time while the keeper shouted after them to mind their steps. She remembered how the Fresnel lens had looked up close: a cathedral of glass where the world broke and recomposed itself. The lens now was cracked, a seam of damage mended with a strip of something that caught the horn's vibrations and sang them back, faintly, like a second voice.

When she turned away, the fog thinned for a breath and she could see the research complex beyond the marsh, a blocky geometry of light and shadow. Corporate glass in a place of splinter and salt. It didn't belong here any more than the disc on the beach did. The wind shifted and brought her the smell of iodine and diesel, and under it, the faintest trace of something chemical and sweet. She had smelled that note before in cities, in labs where air purifiers hummed and people spoke in confident acronyms. Here, it felt like an intrusion, a hand over the mouth of a town that had learned to speak in weather.

Mara took one last look at the tower, at the useless prediction of its next note, and started back toward the road. The gulls had settled on the railings like gray punctuation marks. The foghorn faltered, then steadied, and in the pocket of silence between blasts she heard her own breathing and the clack of shells under her boots. She thought of headlines that hadn't yet found their verbs and of the people she would have to face in the morning: a bartender who still kept her photo under a magnet, a retired keeper whose memory skipped like a scratched record, a mayor who smiled with all his teeth. She would ask for records and be told there were none. She would ask again.

Behind her, something small shifted in the weed—a tug of cable, a soft click as brine found metal. She didn't turn. Not yet. If she had learned anything in the cities, it was the discipline to wait until a pattern revealed itself. The sea kept its own ledger. Tonight it had given her a crooked line to follow and a sound that didn't fit the chart. She put her keys in her hand like she always did walking alone, teeth up, habit layered over memory, and let Hollow Shore close around her like weather.

SAMPLE COPY

CHAPTER ONE: Funeral Without a Body

The air in the old church hall smelled of damp wool and stale coffee, a scent Mara knew as intimately as the salt on the wind. Half-empty folding chairs faced a small, unadorned stage where an easel held a blown-up photograph of Daniel. He was smiling, his arm around a fishing net, eyes crinkling at the corners. It was a photo from before. Before the restlessness, before the tight-lipped calls, before the presumed lost. Mara felt a familiar, sharp pang of guilt. She'd always meant to ask him what was so funny in that moment. Now, the moment was a ghost.

A thin woman with brittle blonde hair and eyes too bright approached Mara, a teacup clutched in both hands. "Mara Cole, is that really you?" Carol Perkins, Daniel's high school sweetheart, though they hadn't spoken in years. Carol looked like the town itself—weathered but with a faint, stubborn gleam. "I heard you were back. It's... it's awful, isn't it?" Her voice hitched on the last word.

Mara managed a tight smile. "It is, Carol. Have you... has anyone heard anything new?" She knew the answer. The sheriff had been clear. No body, no crime. Just a boat washed ashore, empty, and a profound, echoing silence.

Carol shook her head, tears welling. "Just the same stories. He went out, the fog rolled in, his boat was found. No distress signal, no nothing. It's not like Daniel to be careless. He knew these waters better than anyone." She squeezed Mara's arm, her grip surprisingly strong. "He was talking about something, Mara. Something big. He seemed... agitated, the last time I saw him. Like he'd seen a ghost, or was about to see one."

Mara's reporter's instincts, honed over years, twitched. "Agitated about what? Did he say?"

Carol wrung her hands. "No, not really. Just vague things. The research facility. How they were messing with something they shouldn't be. Said it was bigger than the usual town gossip about environmental permits. He was always a bit of a conspiracy theorist, you know, but this felt different. Like he genuinely feared something." She paused, glancing around the sparsely populated hall. "He sent you that message, didn't he? The one everyone's talking about."

Mara's phone buzzed in her pocket, a nervous vibration against her thigh. She'd tried to ignore it, the constant digital hum of a life she'd fled. But Carol's words brought it to the forefront. Daniel's cryptic text message. *Meet me at the old lighthouse. Midnight. Urgent. Don't tell anyone.* It had arrived three days before the sheriff's call, and Mara,

caught up in a deadline, had dismissed it as another one of Daniel's dramatic pronouncements. Another reason to put off going back to Hollow Shore. Now, it tasted like ash in her mouth.

"He did," Mara admitted, her voice low. "I didn't... I didn't get here in time." The admission stung, raw and unvarnished.

Carol looked at her with understanding, a shared burden in her eyes. "He knew you'd come for him, Mara. He always did." She moved away, drawn by a group of older women clucking sympathetically.

Mara drifted towards the refreshment table, pouring herself a lukewarm cup of coffee she knew she wouldn't drink. Her gaze scanned the room, cataloging the faces. The usual suspects of Hollow Shore: fishermen with lines etched deep into their skin, tired mothers, men in work boots who looked uncomfortable in their Sunday best. And then there were the others. Two impeccably dressed men in dark suits stood near the back, looking conspicuously out of place, their eyes sweeping the room with an almost clinical detachment. Not townies. Mara had seen that look before in state capitol buildings and corporate boardrooms.

She also spotted Mayor Colin Ames, his silver hair immaculate, his smile a well-practiced curve that didn't quite reach his eyes. He was talking animatedly to a woman Mara didn't recognize, but whose expensive scarf and tailored coat screamed "city." Ames caught Mara's eye and offered a sympathetic nod, a gesture Mara instinctively distrusted. He approached her, his hand extended.

"Mara, so glad you could make it, despite the circumstances." His voice was smooth, a politician's purr. "Daniel was a good man, salt of the earth. This town will miss him terribly."

"Thank you, Mayor," Mara said, shaking his hand, noting the cool, firm grip. "I appreciate you holding this... gathering."

Ames's smile widened, a touch too bright. "It's the least we could do. Community support is vital in times like these. And of course, the town is fully cooperating with the authorities in the search efforts. A tragedy, truly." He paused, his gaze lingering on Mara. "I hope you're not planning to stay long. Hollow Shore isn't quite the bustling metropolis you're used to, I imagine."

The implication was clear: *don't meddle*. Mara met his gaze unflinchingly. "I'm here for my brother, Mayor. And I tend to stay until I find answers."

Ames's smile tightened almost imperceptibly. "Of course. Well, if there's anything the town can do to assist, don't hesitate to ask." He offered another polite nod and then

turned, excusing himself to greet a prominent local businesswoman. Mara watched him go, a knot forming in her stomach. The mayor was too smooth, too eager to dismiss her presence.

The phone vibrated again, a persistent hum. Mara slipped away from the polite condolences and found a quiet corner near a drafty window. She pulled out her phone. It wasn't a notification from her editor, or a news alert. It was a text message, from an unknown number. Just one word: *Investigate*. No sender ID, no time stamp, just the stark, anonymous command.

Her heart gave a little jump. Daniel's last text had been to meet. This one told her to dig. Was it connected? A friend of Daniel's, trying to help from the shadows? Or a warning? The anonymity of it felt like a cold hand on her neck.

Mara pocketed her phone, the buzzing silence a heavier presence now. She needed to go to Daniel's house. See what he left behind. His workshop, a ramshackle shed by the water, was where he spent most of his time. It was a chaotic mess of tools, wires, and half-finished projects, but it was *his*. And if Daniel had been worried enough to send that urgent text, he would have left clues. Daniel was meticulous in his own messy way. He'd leave breadcrumbs, not just for Mara, but for himself, to remember what he'd found.

As she made her way towards the exit, she felt a pair of eyes on her. She glanced back and saw one of the impeccably dressed men from the back of the hall observing her, his expression unreadable. He wasn't looking at her face, but at her hands, her movements, as if assessing a threat. When he realized she had noticed him, he turned smoothly, engaging his companion in quiet conversation.

Mara stepped out into the raw Hollow Shore afternoon. The sky was a bruised purple, promising rain, and the wind had picked up, carrying the scent of iodine and impending storm. The lighthouse horn sounded again, a mournful, drawn-out wail that seemed to carry the weight of all the town's unspoken griefs and hidden fears. But this time, Mara didn't just hear sorrow. She heard a challenge. And she had never been one to back down from a challenge.

She was no longer just here for Daniel's funeral, or rather, the absence of one. She was here because Daniel had asked for her. And she was here to investigate. The text message had confirmed it. And the strange device on the beach, the irregular lighthouse signal, and the mayor's carefully constructed dismissal—they were all pieces of a puzzle Daniel had stumbled upon. She was starting to put them together.

Her worn sedan was parked a block away, overlooking the choppy grey of the harbor. As she unlocked the door, her phone buzzed one last time. It was a news alert from a regional paper: *Hollow Shore Research Facility Announces Expansion, Promises*

Economic Boom. Mara stared at the headline, the words shimmering with a false promise. Economic boom. Daniel's warning about messing with something they shouldn't be. The pieces were starting to connect, forming a web, sticky and dangerous. She got into her car, the engine turning over with a familiar groan, and headed towards Daniel's place, the memory of her brother's worried voice a low thrum beneath the engine's rumble. This wasn't just about Daniel anymore. This was about Hollow Shore. And she had a feeling it was going to be messy.

SAMPLE COPY

This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.

Visit MixCache.com to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY