

# The Lighthouse at Hollow Bay

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
  - **Chapter 1** — Homecoming
  - **Chapter 2** — The Funeral
  - **Chapter 3** — The Cottage
  - **Chapter 4** — The First Clue
  - **Chapter 5** — A Threat in the Fog
  - **Chapter 6** — Old Records
  - **Chapter 7** — The Developer
  - **Chapter 8** — A Stranger's Memory
  - **Chapter 9** — The Journal's Missing Page
  - **Chapter 10** — A Hidden Cove
  - **Chapter 11** — Confrontation at the Docks
  - **Chapter 12** — A Confessional Memory
  - **Chapter 13** — A Threat Escalates
  - **Chapter 14** — The Ledger
  - **Chapter 15** — The Revelation
  - **Chapter 16** — Alliance with Ortega
  - **Chapter 17** — Secrets in the Sand
  - **Chapter 18** — The Mayor's Defense
  - **Chapter 19** — Blood and Betrayal
  - **Chapter 20** — Midnight Break-In
  - **Chapter 21** — Everything on the Line
  - **Chapter 22** — The Hidden Truth
  - **Chapter 23** — Collapse
  - **Chapter 24** — The Final Confrontation
  - **Chapter 25** — Afterlight
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## Introduction

Maeve Callahan hit Hollow Bay at dusk, when the fog climbed the bluffs like a living thing and gulls wrote crooked letters against a pewter sky. The highway narrowed to a ribbon of cracked asphalt and then to the old coast road, salt-streaked and familiar. She rolled down the window. Brine and kelp, engine oil from the harbor, the faint metallic tang of coming rain—scents she'd sworn off when she left but that rose now like a language she still understood. Ahead, the lighthouse's beam swept the gray in

patient arcs, a single, tireless heartbeat against the dark.

Her father's house sat where it always had, hunched behind a wind-bent spruce, the hull of a half-finished skiff propped on sawhorses out front. The place looked smaller, the paint more scabbed, the windows dulled by salt. Inside, Patrick Callahan's world had shrunk to the recliner by the picture window, a chipped mug, pill organizers, a walker he pretended not to need. He stared at the beam clawing through the fog and scowled when Maeve kissed his cheek. The stroke had left his speech intact but smudged his memory like rain on ink.

"You didn't have to come," he said, as if she was a solicitor at the door and not his daughter with a duffel and a tide of years between them.

"I wanted to," she lied, then softened. "I needed to."

They went through the rituals: weather, the doctor's orders Patrick had no intention of following, the argument over whether the walker made him look like a man who'd given up. He jabbed at the remote, turned the sound down on a fishing report. "Everyone's down at the wharf tonight," he muttered, not looking at her. "Harlan Pike's gone."

The name hung there, unexpected as thunder. Harlan Pike—keeper of the Hollow Bay Light since before Maeve could ride a bike, a man whose voice could cut through a gale and who smelled of diesel and rope. She pictured his hands, all scar and knuckle, teaching kids to tie a cleat hitch at summer fairs, telling stories with the weather in them. "Gone?" she said. "How?"

Patrick's mouth pressed into a boulder. "They're saying he slipped. Stairs in the tower. Fella his age, alone in the fog. That's what they'll say."

Maeve found the wharf on muscle memory, the truck nosing over worn planks, the neon from Maggie's bar bleeding into the mist. The town had gathered the way it always did when something larger than any one of them needed witnessing. Fishermen in rubber boots leaned against pilings. The schoolteacher Maeve remembered, older now, held a paper cup with both hands like a prayer. Someone had draped black bunting over the chalkboard menu. Out past the bait shack, a lantern jittered in the wind, a bright coin tossed and caught and tossed again.

The talk came in pieces, like shells clacking along the shore. Found at dawn, someone said. On the landing, another said, but with a look that meant Not there, not really. Jonas Mercer—Harlan's apprentice, the wiry kid who'd run errands and stood squinting at the horizon all summer—had been the one to find him. "Boy's a wreck," Maggie told Maeve, dragging a rag across the bar as if she could clean the night itself. "Won't talk to no one. Poor thing's got a look like he saw the sea take its own."

A uniform moved through the murmur, pausing, listening, pushing on. Detective Luis Ortega, his badge catching a stray blink of light. He clocked Maeve and changed course, politeness made of caution. "You're Patrick Callahan's daughter," he said, not as a question. "I've read your bylines." That caught her off balance. "This isn't the city," he added, and there was no censure in it, only a line drawn in the wet sand of jurisdiction. "Let us do our jobs."

"Of course," Maeve said, because she knew what to say to a man doing his. And yet the beam swung over them all, a steady punctuation mark, and she felt the hum she always had when a story's bones began to knit under the skin. A slip on the stairs in fog was the shape of a conclusion, neat and ordinary. Hollow Bay had never been either.

She stepped out into the wind and followed the harbor path toward the point until the yellow tape snapped against the scrub and the lighthouse rose like a ghost from a better time. Its bricks were leached of color, its glass a dark eye. She stood there a long minute, the foghorn working its grief, the surf gnawing at the rocks. Memories arrived uninvited: Harlan's laugh, the summer a storm tore a schooner loose, the night a little girl's face was tacked to telephone poles up and down the coast. Hollow Bay carried its history like a scar—visible, healed over, tender when weather rolled in.

Patrick was awake when she came back, the room gone to blue. "They'll make it tidy," he said without preface, as if he'd been talking to the window and she merely joined the conversation. "They always do."

"Who's they?" she asked, and watched him sort through the drawers of his mind and come up empty, or close them on purpose.

He lifted one shoulder, then winced. "People who like things quiet." His gaze snagged on her, sharp for a heartbeat. "Harlan kept a book. Old leather thing. Wrote everything down. Men like that—keepers—they think the light needs a witness."

Maeve lay awake later on a narrow bed that had been hers once, listening to the rain begin its slow tap on the roof. Out beyond the trees, the lighthouse turned and turned, throwing its fixed argument against the dark. She counted the seconds between sweeps and thought of a man who kept a book and of a town that liked its stories told a certain way. Somewhere in that fog was the edge of something sharp. She found herself reaching for it the way you reach for the railing halfway up a narrow, treacherous stair.

## CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The morning arrived with the sound of gulls arguing over scraps from the fishing boats. Maeve stood at her father's kitchen window, a chipped mug of black coffee warming her hands, and watched the fog thin to gauze over the harbor. The lighthouse was invisible now, swallowed by the day's gray breath, but its absence felt like a held breath in the town's chest. Sleep had been shallow, threaded with the beam's metronome and the old house's sighs. Patrick was still asleep in his room, the walker parked by the door like a silent sentinel he'd wheeled away from in the night.

She made eggs without asking, a peace offering he'd probably reject. The kitchen was unchanged: the same peeling linoleum, the radio stuck on the weather band, the faded nautical chart tacked to the wall with pins marking old storms. Her phone buzzed on the counter. A message from her editor, David, asking if she was okay, if she needed anything. She typed back a simple "On personal leave. Back in a few weeks." The lie felt easy. She wasn't sure if she was running toward a story or away from one.

Patrick emerged, leaning in the doorway. His left hand had a slight tremor, a new tremor she didn't remember from last night. He watched her flip the eggs. "You're using the wrong pan," he said, his voice gravelly with sleep and something thicker. "That one sticks."

"It's fine, Dad."

He shuffled to the table, using the backs of chairs for balance, a defiant negotiation with gravity. "Town meeting's at noon," he said, not looking at her. "At the hall. They'll be talking about Harlan. About what to do with the light."

"Are you going?"

He snorted. "What for? They'll say the same things they always say. Gotta keep the light running. Tradition. Tourism." He stabbed a piece of egg with his fork. "They won't say he was pushed."

Maeve turned from the stove. "Did someone say he was pushed?"

Patrick's eyes were cloudy, but for a moment they cleared, as if a wind had blown through the fog in his mind. "I'm saying it. Harlan Pike knew those stairs better than he knew his own face. He didn't slip." He took a bite, chewed slowly. "You going to Maggie's for the wake tonight?"

"I might."

“People will talk. You know how they are. They loved Harlan, but they love their quiet more.”

It was the most he'd said in one go since she'd arrived. She sat down across from him, the eggs forgotten. “Dad, what did you mean last night? About people who like things quiet?”

He looked out the window, toward where the lighthouse would be. “Just that some things get buried for a reason, Maeve. Not a good reason. Just a reason.” He pushed his plate away, half-eaten. “Your mother used to say that lighthouse was the town's conscience. Too bad a conscience doesn't pay the bills.”

The mention of her mother was a stone dropped into still water. He rarely spoke of her. Maeve felt the old, familiar ache—not grief, but the scar tissue of absence. Her mother had died when Maeve was twelve, a boating accident the summer the little girl, Lily Whitcombe, vanished. Two losses that had hollowed the town and, later, hollowed her father enough for her to leave.

She cleared the plates, washing them in the sink with a view of the spruce trees. “I might go for a walk. See the town.”

“Suit yourself,” Patrick said. He was already reaching for the remote, tuning back into the static of his own silent world.

Hollow Bay on a Tuesday morning was a quiet theater of routine. The bait shop was open, its windows fogged with condensation. A few trucks idled outside the hardware store, men in canvas jackets loading lumber. No one stared outright, but she felt the looks—the slight pause in conversation as she passed, the nod that was a fraction too slow. She was Patrick's girl, but she was also the one who'd left, who wrote for newspapers in the city, who asked questions the town had learned not to ask.

The harbor was alive with the clatter of masts and the slap of water against hulls. The fishing fleet was in, the boats named for wives and saints bobbing at their moorings. She saw the Whitcombe boat, the *Nora's Pride*, larger and sleeker than the others, its varnish gleaming even in the dull light. The Whitcombes owned the cannery and half the waterfront. Their money was the town's backbone, and their name was spoken with a mix of deference and unease.

Maggie's Bar & Grill was dark as a cave, even with the daylight spilling through the open door. The wake was already underway, a low murmur of voices and the smell of fried fish and stale beer. Maggie herself was behind the bar, her red hair tied up in a bandana, her face a map of hard years. She'd been a friend of her mother's, one of the few who'd written to Maeve after she left.

“Coffee, or something stronger?” Maggie asked, sliding a coaster across the scarred wood.

“Coffee’s fine. Thanks, Maggie.”

“It’s a bad business.” Maggie poured, her eyes on the cup. “Harlan was a good man. A real one. Not many of those left.” She leaned closer, her voice dropping. “The boy who found him, Jonas, he’s over there. Won’t eat, won’t talk. Just sits with his hands wrapped around a glass of water like it’s the only solid thing in the world.”

Maeve followed her gaze to a corner booth. Jonas Mercer was younger than she’d imagined—early twenties, with a sharp, anxious face and dark hair that fell over his eyes. He wore a faded flannel shirt, too big for his thin frame. He was staring at the table, his fingers tracing the rim of his water glass in a slow, repetitive circle.

“His parents?” Maeve asked.

“Gone years ago. Harlan took him on, gave him a place, a purpose. The light was his whole world.” Maggie wiped the counter, a gesture that seemed more about wiping away thought than spills. “Be careful with him, Maeve. He’s fragile right now. And he knows more than he’s saying.”

Before Maeve could respond, the bell over the door jangled. Detective Luis Ortega entered, his presence sucking some of the warmth from the room. He wore a tweed jacket over a collared shirt, looking more like a college professor than a small-town cop. His eyes scanned the room and landed on Maeve with a focused, unreadable intensity. He approached the bar, nodding to Maggie.

“Ms. Callahan,” he said. “A word?”

“Maeve is fine.”

“Maeve.” He gestured toward a small table near the dartboard, away from the main crowd. “I understand you’re a journalist.”

“I’m here for my father,” she said, taking a seat across from him. The chair wobbled on the uneven floor.

“I know. But you have a habit of noticing things. Asking questions.” He folded his hands on the table. “Harlan Pike’s death is being ruled an accident. A tragic slip on the stairs, likely due to his age and the foggy conditions. The medical examiner’s preliminary report supports that.”

“Preliminary.”

“Final reports take time. This is a small department, Maeve. We have to be efficient.” His tone was patient, but there was steel underneath. “I’ve read your work. The piece on the warehouse fires in the city. You have a talent for finding patterns.”

“Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment. It’s an observation. Here, patterns aren’t always welcome. People value their peace.” He leaned forward slightly. “I’m not your adversary. I’m the one who has to maintain order. Let me do that. Don’t go poking at things that are settled.”

“Harlan Pike didn’t seem like a man who would slip on stairs he knew blindfolded,” Maeve said, meeting his gaze.

Ortega’s expression didn’t change. “People get old. Their balance goes. It’s sad, but it’s not a crime.” He stood, smoothing his jacket. “Enjoy your visit. I hope your father recovers.”

He left, leaving the scent of coffee and authority in his wake. Maeve watched him go, then turned back to the bar. Jonas’s booth was empty. A few crumpled bills sat beside his untouched water glass.

Maggie leaned over. “He does that. Comes and goes like a ghost. Lives up at the keeper’s cottage, still. Can’t bring himself to leave.”

“The cottage,” Maeve said. “Is it sealed?”

“Ortega taped it off, but it’s not like Fort Knox. The boy needs his things.” Maggie’s eyes held a warning. “Be gentle, Maeve. He’s just a kid.”

The path to the lighthouse wound along the bluffs, the sea a churning slate gray below. The fog had retreated, leaving the air sharp and clean. The lighthouse stood stark against the sky, its white paint peeled in long strips, revealing the brick beneath like exposed bone. The keeper’s cottage was a small, sturdy building at its base, its windows dark. Yellow police tape crisscrossed the front door, a fragile barrier against the wind.

Maeve circled the cottage, her journalist’s eye cataloging details. The garden was neat, herbs and hardy vegetables in raised beds. A rain barrel overflowed. Around back, a woodpile was stacked with geometric precision. And there, near a basement window, a small gap in the tape where it had been peeled back and carefully replaced. Someone had been inside.

She checked the door. Locked. The basement window, however, was slightly ajar. She hesitated, the old training kicking in: respect boundaries, get permission. But Harlan was dead, the official story felt thin as paper, and her father's words echoed in her mind. *They'll make it tidy.* She knelt, pulled the window open further, and slipped inside.

The basement was cool and smelled of damp earth, motor oil, and old rope. Tools hung on pegboard walls, each in its outlined place. A workbench held a disassembled foghorn, its parts laid out with surgical care. Nothing looked disturbed. She climbed the wooden stairs into the cottage proper.

The main room was one large space: living area, kitchen, a narrow bed in the corner. Everything was sparse but immaculate. A framed photograph on the mantle showed a younger Harlan with his arm around a teenage boy—Jonas, smiling awkwardly. On the wall, a huge nautical chart of Hollow Bay and its surrounding waters was pinned, covered in handwritten notations in different colored inks. Currents, depths, shipwreck sites marked with tiny crosses.

The yellow tape was here, too, a loose X across the door to the tower stairs. Maeve ignored it. She wasn't looking for the death scene. She was looking for the book. Patrick had said Harlan kept a book, wrote everything down. A keeper's log, maybe, but more. A witness.

She opened cupboards, checked under the bed, peered into the sparse closet. Nothing. The police had probably taken it, if it was evidence. But would they see a old leather journal as evidence in an accident?

In the kitchen, she noticed something. A shallow shelf above the sink held a few chipped mugs and a small, dented tin box. The tin was slightly out of alignment with the shelf's edge. She reached up, took it down. Inside were spare fuses for the light, a few old coins, and a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it.

It was a page torn from a ledger, the columns filled with Harlan's neat, small script. Dates, weather notes, ship movements. And at the bottom, circled twice, two entries a month apart:

*Oct 12 - Light behaves erratically. W. reports same. Inspected lens. Fault not in mechanism.*

*Nov 3 - Heard it again. The singing. Not from the shore. From the water. W. says it's the wind in the rocks. It's not.*

And below that, a single line, underscored:

*The chart lies. The cove is there.*

“What are you doing in here?”

Jonas stood in the doorway to the living area, his face pale with anger or fear. He held a canvas bag in one hand, a loaf of bread in the other. “You can’t be here. This is a crime scene.”

“The door was open,” Maeve said, tucking the paper into her jacket pocket. It was a gamble. “Jonas, I’m Maeve Callahan. Patrick’s daughter.”

“I know who you are.” His knuckles were white around the bag’s strap. “You’re the one who writes stories. This isn’t a story. This is Harlan’s home. You need to leave.”

“I’m not trying to cause trouble. My father cared about Harlan. He thinks the fall wasn’t an accident.”

Jonas’s eyes flickered to the taped-off stairs, then back to her. His defensive posture crumbled, just for a second, into something younger and more vulnerable. “It wasn’t,” he whispered. Then he seemed to catch himself. “I mean... I don’t know. I found him. It was... it was awful.” He set the bag down on the table with hands that trembled. “The police asked their questions. They wrote their report. What else is there?”

“The book,” Maeve said gently. “Harlan’s journal. My father said he kept one. Did the police take it?”

Jonas’s face shut down like a slammed door. “I don’t know anything about a book. You need to go. Now.”

The fear in his voice was real. It wasn’t just grief; it was active, present terror. He knew something. He was protecting something—or someone.

“Okay,” Maeve said, moving toward the door. She paused beside him. “If you change your mind, if you want to talk about Harlan, or about the book, I’m at my father’s house.”

He didn’t respond, just stared at the floor until she left. Back outside, the wind had picked up, whipping her hair across her face. She walked quickly along the bluff path, her hand in her pocket, fingers tracing the edges of the folded paper. *The cove is there.* What cove? And who was W.?

As she reached the main road, a dark sedan pulled away from the curb a hundred yards ahead. It moved slowly, then accelerated, its windows tinted too dark to see the

driver. It wasn't Ortega's car. It wasn't a car she recognized. She watched it disappear around the bend toward the highway, a prickle of unease climbing her spine.

Back at the house, Patrick was in his chair, the TV off. He was just staring at the space where the lighthouse beam would be when night fell again.

"You went to the cottage," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I found this." She pulled out the paper, handed it to him. His good hand took it, the tremor more pronounced. He read it slowly, his lips moving slightly.

"W.," he muttered. "Could be anyone. Whitcombe. Walsh. Wilson." He looked up, his eyes meeting hers. "The singing. He mentioned that to me, years ago. Said sometimes, on the calmest nights, you could hear it from the tower. Like a woman humming, out on the water. I told him it was the seals." He handed the paper back. "Harlan didn't believe in seals, not on those nights."

"And the cove?"

"There are a dozen coves between here and the point. Most of them are just rock and tide. But if a chart says one isn't there..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "It's old talk, Maeve. Superstition."

"You don't believe that."

He met her gaze, and for a moment, the stroke's fog lifted completely. "No," he said quietly. "I don't. Harlan Pike was the most careful man I ever knew. He didn't slip. And he didn't scare easily. But that boy, Jonas... he's scared of something." He leaned back, the effort of the clear moment exhausting him. "Be careful what you pull at, girl. Some threads hold the whole cloth together."

Maeve went to her room, the paper in her hand. The town meeting was in two hours. The wake tonight. The journal was missing, Jonas was terrified, and a silent car was watching from the fog. She sat on the edge of the narrow bed, the sound of the sea filling the room. It wasn't a story yet. It was just a knot of questions in a town that preferred its answers simple.

She picked up her phone and did what she always did when a story began to breathe. She opened a new note, typed a heading: **Hollow Bay**. And under it, the first line: **Harlan Pike didn't slip**. The lighthouse beam swept past the window, a silent, steady pulse in the growing dark. It felt like an answer. Or a warning.

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