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# The Vanishing Light of Aster Cove

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## Introduction

The storm chewed the coastline like it wanted the town back. Wind shoved at Mara Bennett's old sedan as she took the last curve down into Aster Cove, wipers thrashing, rain needling the glass. The lighthouse rose out of the gray like a bone left standing—white tower, black lantern room, its beam lurching through sheets of water in a slow, relentless sweep. She hadn't seen it in years, not since she'd left after Ada's funeral with a single suitcase and a refusal to look back. Now the road funneled her toward it as if the light had summoned her by name.

Her phone, wedged in the cup holder, had been silent since Boston except for the single message she could not stop replaying. Jonah's voice, thinned by wind and distance: "Mare. Don't—don't call Thurber. If you get this, come home. Tonight. If you see the green lantern, it means go dark. Three long, two short. Trust no one near the light." A scrape of breath. A muffled curse. And then, softly, like a secret: "I found it." The line had gone dead. She'd called back—of course she had—and gotten nothing but voicemail. By the time she hit the state line, guilt had hardened into a kind of bracing clarity. She would find him. She would not run again.

Aster Cove looked the same and entirely different. On one side of Main Street, glossy placards glinted in wet windows—YES ON HARBOR RENEWAL, FUTURE FOR ASTER—spaced with the stern blue hand-lettered signs of those who remembered a different calculus—SAVE OUR COVE, NO OFFSHORE LEASES. Bright fishermen's buoys hung from porches like charms against bad luck. The diner still threw a rectangle of warm light on the pavement, and the harbormaster's office squatted at the end of the pier, its radio mast ticking. Somewhere out beyond the breakwater, foghorns called to each other, low and mournful.

Ada used to say the sea kept its own books. That it remembered what people forgot, or pretended to. As a kid, Mara hadn't understood how a thing without hands could keep a ledger. Later, in newsrooms that smelled like toner and stale coffee, she learned to love columns of names and dates, the way paper could pin truth long enough to show it to the light. She'd told herself that leaving Aster Cove had been a kind of survival, a first draft of forgiveness. But crossing the town line tonight made the old stories flare up—the night her mother had come home late with salt in her hair and eyes hard with some decision she wouldn't share, the weeks after the funeral when Jonah had started taking jobs that paid in cash and secrets, the ache of choosing a bus schedule over a boat ramp.

She pulled into the marina lot and killed the engine. Wind slapped the car. The rain had a texture here, fat with salt; it found its way under her collar and into her bones

when she stepped out. Ropes sang against cleats. Hulls knocked each other, soft and hollow. The harbor was a black bowl furred with whitecaps, the lighthouse's beam combing it in patient arcs. No other cars. No silhouettes smoking under the eaves of the bait shop. Only the raw-throated hiss of the weather and the metronome of the light.

Her finger hovered over Owen Calloway's number. Childhood summers had been made of the two of them and Jonah, all skinned knees and stolen hours, racing tides. Owen had grown into the kind of steady that could get boats and people home. According to town gossip that trickled even into Boston newsrooms, he ran the rescue boat now, answered to the harbor authority, and owed the mayor more favors than he liked. The urge to call him was a drumbeat in her blood. But Jonah's message spiked through it: Don't call Thurber. Trust no one near the light. Owen wasn't the mayor. But he wasn't no one, either. She tucked the phone away and lifted her hood against the rain.

Down the pier, the planks slick under her boots, she moved fast. She knew the shapes of Jonah's world—the cheap fiberglass skiffs varnished with pride, the overbuilt camera cases, the dented dive tanks. He'd still used the same slip number, according to the harbor ledger she'd sweet-talked the bored attendant into letting her see by phone on her way north. Slip 14. A gull screamed somewhere, sudden and too close. Lightning stitched the sky open over the headland, and in that white breath she saw the lighthouse more clearly, the wet stone around it like muscled, sleeping backs.

She counted pilings, scanned names stenciled in peeling paint. The boats bobbed like tired animals, snorting spray. Slip 12. Slip 13. She almost missed it because the stern nameplate had ripped free, its screws hanging like broken teeth. The boat itself rode low, bumping against the fenders in a sluggish, wrong rhythm, bow yawing at the angle of a thing that had come in hard and fast and tried to pretend it hadn't. Mara stepped down, instincts stitching themselves into muscle memory—hand to the rail, weight low, eyes to the slick. Rain pooled where it shouldn't have. The cabin door stood ajar, a thin wedge of black. She smelled diesel and brine and, underneath, the clean, metallic breath of something unsettled.

"Jonah?" Her voice went nowhere, eaten by the weather. The wind plucked it apart. She felt the old pitch in her chest—fear disguising itself as anger, grief trying on the clothes of command. You don't own me, she told the feeling, and let the anger sharpen her anyway. The deck was gritty with salt. A length of cut line curled at her boot like a question. She put a hand to the cabin door and stopped. Three long sweeps from the lighthouse lit the harbor, then two short. It could have been coincidence, the rhythm of a storm night, lantern glass distorting at the mercy of wind. It could have been nothing at all—except Jonah's voice, grainy and alive in her head.

Her phone shivered in her pocket with an incoming text that refused to resolve into

words—a gray speech bubble hanging, then disappearing. The harbor radio crackled in the harbormaster’s office, a nervous insect. Across the water, past the line of boats, she could just make out the darker smear of the breakwater and, beyond that, open sea. She thought of Ada’s hands on a chart, the way her mother had traced the shoals, mapping trust into paper.

Then the wave hit, rocking the slip hard enough to throw Mara against the rail. The cabin door banged wide. She caught herself, breath burning, and saw it through that sudden opening: the scatter of gear inside, Jonah’s battered duffel unzipped on the bench, the yellow slicker crumpled on the floor like a shed skin. A lantern, electric and cheap, rolled and bumped at the base of the bulkhead, knocking in a hollow, steady beat that made the hairs on her arms lift.

“Jonah,” she said again, softer now, almost a bargain. Wind climbed the mast and sang. From the headland, the lighthouse answered with its single, sweeping eye, looking for something the sea didn’t want to give back.

She eased one foot toward the cabin threshold and stopped herself. Not yet. She needed witnesses. She needed a timeline. She needed to remember the part of her that had made a living pulling single threads until knots came apart. Lightning unfurled again, etching the harbor in white lines, and in that flash she saw, out past the marina, the humped black line of rocks below the lighthouse, foam smashing into them in handfuls. Something slammed there—a thud that did not sound like water. The hairline on the back of her neck burned cold.

Mara looked from the open cabin to the headland and felt the shape of her night harden. Whatever had started with Jonah’s message had not ended here, not yet. She left the boat with its door yawning, her boots slapping the slick boards, and ran the length of the pier toward the path that cut up to the lighthouse. Rain needled her face. Her breath sawed air that felt like knives. The climb was steeper than she remembered; the grass leaned away from the wind like it wanted to go with her. Stones rolled under her soles. The light swung and swung, relentless and blind.

At the top, the world was reduced to elements: stone, light, water, wind. The lighthouse loomed at her shoulder, paint scabbed from years of storms, ironwork slick. She grabbed the railing and peered down the wet, black throat of the cliff. The rocks below were crowded with white water, the tide shouldering itself in. And there, wedged in a cradle of basalt and kelp, the hull of Jonah’s boat shone a pale, battered gray where the paint had been scraped clean by the sea. Its mast canted at a hurt angle. The bowlight ticked in a slow, stubborn blink, stubborn as a heartbeat.

No figure on deck. No hand raised. No head turning toward the beam.

The wind swallowed her name for him and threw it into the dark.

## CHAPTER ONE: Abandoned Boat

The path down from the lighthouse was a treacherous slide of mud and loose shale. Mara half-ran, half-skidded, her mind a cold, clear engine focused on a single task: get to the wreck. The lighthouse beam continued its indifferent sweep, illuminating a world of churning water and black rock in strobing, frozen instants. Each flash showed her the boat in a new, worse position—hull groaning as a wave lifted it and slammed it down, the canted mast waving like a broken arm.

She reached the base of the cliff where a narrow, barnacle-crusting shelf of rock met the surge. The air was a wall of salt spray and the deafening percussion of water on stone. Jonah's skiff was wedged tight, its fiberglass hull scarred with long, white gouges. The bowlight's weak blink was pathetic against the lighthouse's glare. "Jonah!" she screamed, the name ripped from her throat and swallowed by the gale. No answer. Only the sea's brutal, repetitive reply.

She inched along the shelf, boots slipping, fingers clawing at wet rock for purchase. The skiff's stern was closest, rising and falling in a sickening rhythm. She timed her leap, landing hard on the slanted deck. The impact jarred up her spine. The boat felt dead beneath her, not a vessel anymore but debris, already belonging to the sea. The cabin door, which had banged open back at the slip, was now torn half-off its hinges, swinging wildly.

She ducked inside. The cramped space reeked of diesel and something else—sharp, metallic. Jonah's yellow slicker lay in a puddle on the floorboards. His duffel bag was spilling clothes and a battered pair of dive fins. A cheap LED lantern, the source of the ticking she'd heard, rolled back and forth in the scuppers. Mara's gaze swept every surface, her reporter's mind cataloging details with a detachment that felt like a survival mechanism. No Jonah. But the boat was a mess that spoke of haste, or struggle.

Her hand went to the slicker. It was soaking wet, but the water on it was cold, rainwater, not seawater. She balled it up, and her fingers brushed something hard and rectangular beneath. A notebook. She pulled it free. It was a standard mariner's log, the kind you could buy at any chandlery, its cover warped with damp. She opened it. Jonah's handwriting, a familiar, messy scrawl, filled the pages. But it wasn't a record of catches or weather. It was columns of numbers, dates, and abbreviations she didn't recognize. Ship names? Codes? On one page, a crude sketch of the lighthouse, its beam drawn as a series of dashes: — — — • •. Three long, two short. The green lantern signal.

She tucked the notebook into the inner pocket of her jacket, the damp fabric clinging to her skin. A glint of color under the bench caught her eye. A scrap of paper, laminated and torn, caught on a splinter of wood. She worked it free. It was part of a nautical chart, a section of the coastline north of Aster Cove. The depths were marked in fathoms, the shoals shaded in a familiar red. But what made her breath catch were the pencil marks—circles, arrows, and a single, stark “X” marked over a stretch of deep water labeled “The Sisters.” Not a place she knew. Not a place any sane local would mark on a recreational chart.

She was about to look for more when a wave lifted the boat’s stern high, then dropped it with a brutal crack. Mara staggered, grabbing the edge of the companionway. Her foot skidded in the puddle by the slicker, and as she caught herself, her hand slapped down into the bilge—the lowest part of the hull where water collects. The water there was shallow, maybe an inch deep, sloshing with the boat’s motion. It was dark. Too dark. She fumbled for the rolling LED lantern, switched it to a steady beam, and shone it down.

The water in the bilge wasn’t clear. It had a reddish-brown tinge, swirling in lazy, cloudy patterns. And caught on a sharp edge of fiberglass near the drain plug was a shred of fabric, dark blue, like the flannel shirt Jonah favored. But it was the smear on the inside of the hull, just above the water line, that turned her stomach. A handprint, imprinted in what looked unmistakably like blood, already fading as the seawater diluted it, but unmistakable in its shape and its story.

She stared, the lantern shaking in her hand. This wasn’t just an accident. A boat could wreck itself on the rocks. A man could be thrown into the sea. But blood inside the boat, a hidden notebook, a coded chart—that spoke of something before the storm, something human and violent.

A new sound cut through the wind—the growl of a diesel engine. Mara extinguished the lantern and crouched lower in the cabin. Headlights swept across the water, reflecting off the wet hull. A four-wheel-drive pickup with the sheriff’s department emblem on the door was pulling into the marina lot above. A figure in a dark slicker and broad-brimmed hat climbed out, moving toward the pier with a flashlight beam that cut a nervous path over the bobbing boats.

Mara needed to get out of the cabin, off this wreck, and she needed to do it without being seen holding a bloody scrap of evidence. She pocketed the chart scrap, wiped her hand on her jeans, and waited. The sheriff’s beam played over the water, lingered on the empty slip where Jonah’s boat should have been, then swept out toward the rocks. It found the wreck, held steady. Mara could hear the crackle of a radio, the words snatched away by the wind.

She made her decision. She couldn't hide. She was Jonah's sister. She had a right to be here. She climbed out of the cabin, stood on the slanted deck, and raised her own hands, palms out, into the flashlight's glare. The beam hit her face, blinding.

"Hold it right there! Who's that?" The voice was amplified by a bullhorn, tinny and official.

"It's Mara Bennett!" she shouted back, turning her face from the light. "Jonah's sister! The boat's wrecked! There's blood!"

A long pause. The light lowered from her face to her feet. "Stay where you are, Ms. Bennett. Don't move." The voice belonged to Sheriff Harlan Briggs, a man whose tenure stretched back to her childhood. He'd been a deputy then, all quiet nods and a habit of looking past things he didn't want to see.

It took ten minutes for him to arrange a small outboard to come around from the harbor patrol dock. Mara spent them kneeling on the wreck, one hand on the gunwale, bracing against the surge. She didn't look back at the blood in the bilge. She looked out at the black horizon, where the sea and sky had become the same thing. The lighthouse beam continued its circuit, illuminating nothing but the empty, angry water.

Sheriff Briggs and a young deputy she didn't recognize finally pulled alongside. Briggs looked older, the lines around his eyes deeper, carved by sea air and disappointment. He helped her aboard the patrol boat with a grip that was more steadying than gentle.

"You alright?" he asked, his eyes doing a quick, professional scan of her face and clothes.

"My brother's boat is smashed on the rocks, Harlan. There's blood inside. Is he alright?"

Briggs's face closed like a door. "We've got a call out. Coast Guard's been notified. They were searching offshore before the storm really hit. We'll get you up to the station, get a statement."

"I don't need a station. I need to know if you've found him." Her voice was harder than she intended.

"We found the boat, Mara. That's all so far." He nodded to the deputy, who started the engine and turned the bow toward the marina. "We'll tow the wreck in at first light, have a proper look."

"I already had a proper look. There's a handprint in blood. On the starboard side, near the bilge pump. And a piece of his shirt."

Briggs stared at her, then at the wreck receding into the rain. "You shouldn't have disturbed a potential scene."

"It's *his* boat, Harlan. And he's my *brother*. That's not a potential scene, it's my family." The anger was good, it was fuel. It kept the terror at bay.

They docked at the patrol pier. Briggs led her to the harbormaster's office, a cramped room that smelled of damp paper and old coffee. He gave her a foil blanket and a cup of scalding, bitter tea. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders but didn't drink. The deputy stood by the door, writing notes in a small pad.

"Walk me through it," Briggs said, his voice flat. "From the beginning."

Mara told him about the voicemail. She kept it simple—Jonah sounded worried, asked her to come home. She left out the cryptic parts, the green lantern, the warning about Thurber. She told him about finding the slip empty, seeing the wreck from the lighthouse path. She described the state of the cabin, the notebook (she mentioned it as "his logbook," downplaying it), the chart scrap (she called it "an old map"), and finally, the blood and the fabric.

Briggs listened without interruption. When she finished, he tapped his pen on the desk. "Jonah been acting strange lately? Any trouble? Debts?"

"Not that he told me. We don't... we didn't talk as much as we should have." The admission tasted like ash.

"He was doing a lot of diving out by The Sisters reef, north of here," the deputy offered, glancing up from his notes. "Some of the old-timers said he was poking around the wrecks. Said he asked a lot of questions about the *Hesperus*."

Briggs shot the deputy a look that could have curdled milk. "That's enough, Danny." He turned back to Mara. "The *Hesperus* is a local legend. Went down in 1923. Treasure hunters have been looking for it for years. Jonah probably got curious. A storm like this, diving alone out there... it's a tragedy, but not a mystery."

"It's a mystery to me," Mara said quietly. "He left me that message for a reason. He was scared."

"He was a grown man who made a choice to go out in rough weather. We'll search, Mara. We'll do our due diligence." His tone was final, the bureaucratic dismissal of a case he wanted to close. "We'll get you a room at the Cove Inn. You shouldn't be alone."

She wanted to argue, to shove the bloody handprint in his face and demand he see the violence in it. But she saw the wall in his eyes, the practiced resistance of a man who had long ago learned which tides to fight and which to let pass. She nodded, let the deputy drive her to the small motel on the edge of town. The room was cold, the bedspread faded. She sat on the edge, the foil blanket still around her, Jonah's damp notebook heavy in her pocket.

Sleep was impossible. She laid the notebook on the chipped Formica desk under the weak overhead light. The coded entries stared back at her. *Oct 3: Green, three-long-two-short. Drop confirmed. North Sister. Oct 11: Signal failed. T saw. Oct 17: Ledger fragment found. A.B. connection. A.B. Ada Bennett. Her mother.*

Her blood ran cold. This wasn't just Jonah's obsession with an old shipwreck. This was something current, something with signals and drops and ledgers. And it involved their mother. She flipped to the back. A page had been violently torn out, leaving a jagged edge. On the facing page, a single sentence, pressed hard into the paper with a blunt pencil: *They are watching the light.*

A knock on the door made her jump. She snapped the notebook shut. Through the peephole, she saw only the empty, rain-swept parking lot. She opened the door a crack. No one. On the threadbare welcome mat lay a single object: a piece of driftwood, gnarled and pale. Carved into its surface was a symbol—a stylized lighthouse with a broken beam, identical to the one she'd seen etched on the antique navigation instrument in Jonah's boat. The carving was fresh, the wood still damp.

She snatched it up, her eyes scanning the parking lot, the row of darkened cars, the blurred streetlights beyond. The storm had lessened to a cold, relentless drizzle. At the far end of the lot, by the dumpster, a figure stood under a dead streetlight. A man, broad-shouldered, in a long coat. He wasn't moving, just watching her door. As she stared, he turned, unhurried, and walked into the shadows between the buildings, disappearing as completely as if the sea had claimed him too.

Mara stepped back inside, locked the door, and leaned against it, the carved driftwood clutched in her hand. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She wasn't just investigating a disappearance. She had stumbled into a current that was already pulling her under. And someone, somewhere in the wet darkness of Aster Cove, knew she was here.

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