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# The Signal from Red Harbor

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Intercept
- **Chapter 2** Decoding Begins — A Name in the Noise
- **Chapter 3** The First Stakeout — Watched from the Docks
- **Chapter 4** A Threat on the Air
- **Chapter 5** Old Wounds Reopened — Calling Lena
- **Chapter 6** Cross-Referencing — Graves and Coordinates
- **Chapter 7** Race to the Vault
- **Chapter 8** The Billionaire's Face
- **Chapter 9** Ambush in the Old Harbor
- **Chapter 10** Betrayal — The Meridian Inside
- **Chapter 11** Lisbon Lead — Pieces of the Device
- **Chapter 12** The Narrow Escape — Smear and Fallout
- **Chapter 13** Underground Archive — The Assassination Link
- **Chapter 14** The Hacker's Past
- **Chapter 15** Crossing the Sea — The Island Station
- **Chapter 16** Rebuilding the Device
- **Chapter 17** The True Purpose
- **Chapter 18** The Capture — Morrow's Offer
- **Chapter 19** Escape and Regroup — A Double Edge
- **Chapter 20** Lines Crossed — Anya Taken
- **Chapter 21** Coordinated Response — Forty-Eight Hours
- **Chapter 22** Infiltrating Arclight — The Vanishing Archive
- **Chapter 23** Public Exposure — The Uproar
- **Chapter 24** The Final Confrontation — Uplink at Midnight
- **Chapter 25** Aftermath and Choice

## Introduction

Dawn in Red Harbor came salted and thin, the wind combing the water into a pale sweep, gulls tracing slow loops over the pier. Nora Hale cued the bumper music with one hand and nursed a chipped mug with the other. The studio's fluorescent light buzzed like a tired wasp above the mic. "Good morning, Red Harbor," she said, voice soft at first and then sure, the way she had trained herself to sound—like someone you could trust while you scraped frost from your windshield or coiled wet rope on the deck. She watched the VU meter rise and fall and pretended the needles were tides, instruments she could read, patterns she could predict.

The morning show meant obituaries and fundraisers and a running joke about the marshal's cat. It meant three weather updates and two songs for the high school hockey team, who had a shot at state if the ice held. When the songs played, she turned down the studio speakers and listened the way she always listened: not just to what was there, but to what sat beneath, a bed of hiss and whisper that had shaped her life. Out by the loading dock, the guy wires on the mast trembled in the breeze, and she felt the hum travel up the building's bones into her chair.

People in town knew bits and pieces: that she'd "done government work" and "burned out." They didn't know the tightness in her chest that still woke her at night, the replayed moment where she'd missed a cross-band handoff during an operation and a man's name turned into a headline. She kept her old notebooks stacked under a console panel—narrow lines, neat block letters, a private scripture of frequencies, call signs, formats. She told herself she had moved on. Red Harbor didn't ask many questions, and she had learned to keep her answers small.

Ethan stopped by twice a week, usually when he needed the weather run in plain speech. He smelled like diesel and iodine, the ocean worked into his skin so deep no soap could touch it. "You sound good," he'd say, eyes scanning the equipment racks in the way of people who wanted to say something else. Their talk snagged on old snags: the boat they couldn't save when their father died, the house's roof he swore she'd promised to fix. He wanted her at holidays. She wanted to show up. They both failed, then pretended the gaps were natural, like tides pulled away by a distant moon.

That Monday, the rain started before noon, a slow gray curtain that thickened the harbor until the lobster buoys looked like punctuation, scattered and uncertain. By dusk, wind beat at the glass and turned the poles into tuning forks. Nora stayed at the station after sign-off, a habit she justified as maintenance. She patched in a loop to record overnight static and checked the shortwave receiver she kept on a shelf in the back, a squat metal box she'd tuned a hundred times by touch. The dipole on the roof

licked at the storm, and the S-meter edged higher, jittering.

She wasn't hunting. Not really. She drifted across bands out of muscle memory, past the weather robot's clean cadence, past a fisherman complaining about blown seals, past the time beacons with their crisp ticks like a metronome for the world. Then she heard it: a carrier rise out of the wet, hold steady, and drop three tones that didn't belong to any weather net or numbers station she recognized. The room tightened around her. She eased the BFO until the sound bloomed into a thread of speech—too fast, too thin, like whispers pushed through cloth. Under it, a pattern: five, five, three, pause. Five, five, three, pause.

She hit record. The printer coughed out a strip of spectrogram as the waterfall marched in bruised blues across her screen. The voice—if it was a voice—ran through sets of characters that felt like coordinates sundered and reassembled: northings and eastings wrenched into a different math. It wasn't atmospheric skip. It wasn't marine chatter. It was deliberate. Something old, repurposed, hiding in plain noise. She tasted metal on her tongue. The tones stuttered, repeated, and then—just before the carrier cut—the faintest shape of a word that might not have been a word at all.

The signal snapped to black. Rain clicked at the glass. Nora sat very still, the headphones clamped warm over her ears, the console lights blinking like patient eyes. She wrote down what she could: fragments, intervals, the way it felt, because sometimes feeling held you up while the facts found their footing. On the roof, the wind rolled a dull chord through the mast. She looked at the clock. Midnight had come and gone. Red Harbor slept. In the hollow between storms, a message had reached for her through the hiss, and she knew, in that aching, electric instant, that something had started. She didn't yet know its name. She only knew the shape it drew in her: possibility, and the old, dangerous pull of the hunt.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Intercept

The silence that followed the signal was heavier than the silence that had preceded it. Nora Hale sat paralyzed in the glow of the station's monitors, her fingers still hovering over the gain knobs as if she could reach into the electromagnetic spectrum and pull the sound back. The recording software on her workstation showed a flat line now, a digital tombstone for a transmission that had lasted less than ninety seconds. Outside, the Maine rain continued its rhythmic assault on the roof of the small coastal shack that housed WRDH, but the familiar sound no longer offered the comfort of isolation.

She didn't move for five minutes. Her mind, conditioned by years of government service to categorize and dissect, was already running through the possibilities. It wasn't a pirate radio broadcast; the frequency was too precise, the power behind the carrier too stable. It wasn't solar flare interference or tropospheric ducting, which usually smeared audio into a watery mess. This had been digital, compressed, and layered with a burst of high-speed data—what her old instructors at Fort Meade called a "squirting" transmission. It was designed to pack an hour's worth of information into a heartbeat to avoid detection.

Nora reached for her notebook, the one with the frayed edges she kept tucked behind the backup power supply. Her hands were steady, a residual benefit of the training she'd tried so hard to forget. She began to transcribe the visual data from the waterfall display. The peaks of the signal had left a distinct footprint: a series of notched pulses. As she traced the pattern, her breath hitched. The interval between the data bursts wasn't random. It followed a prime number sequence she hadn't seen since her final tour in the field.

"Five, five, three," she whispered, her voice sounding raspy in the empty studio. She looked at the spectrogram again. The secondary layer of the signal—the part hiding under the audible tones—was a binary string. She clicked her mouse, dragging the selection tool over the captured wave and running it through a basic decryption script she'd written months ago during a bout of insomnia. The computer hummed, its processor cooling fan kicking into high gear as it chewed through the math.

While the computer worked, Nora walked to the window. Red Harbor was a smudge of charcoal and navy in the storm. She could see the blinking red light of the buoy marking the channel entrance, a lonely sentinel in the dark. She thought about the life she had built here over the last three years—the quiet mornings, the predictability of the tides, the distance from the shadows of her past. She had traded the high-stakes theater of signals intelligence for a world where the biggest crisis was a lost dog or a school board dispute. She liked the simplicity. She needed the peace. But as she

watched the rain lash the glass, she felt the old, familiar itch returning.

A sharp *ping* from the workstation drew her back. The script had finished. It hadn't decoded the entire message—the encryption was far too sophisticated for a standard civilian processor—but it had stripped away the noise to reveal a set of raw data points. Nora leaned in, her eyes narrowing. In the center of the screen sat a string of numbers that looked like an IP address, followed by a set of coordinates.

Nora's heart hammered against her ribs. She didn't need to look at a map. She had memorized the latitude and longitude of every major listening post and naval installation on the Atlantic seaboard during her first year at the Agency. These coordinates pointed to a patch of empty woods forty miles north of Red Harbor, a place the locals called Blackwood Ridge. It was an area of rugged terrain, mostly granite and scrub pine, officially designated as a state-protected wilderness area. But Nora knew better. Blackwood Ridge was the site of a decommissioned Cold War relay station, a place that was supposed to be a hollowed-out shell of concrete and rusted rebar.

She checked the time. It was nearly 2:00 AM. The rational part of her brain—the part that wanted to keep her job at the radio station and stay out of trouble—told her to delete the file, turn off the receiver, and go home to her small cottage. She could pretend she'd never heard it. She could tell herself it was just some amateur radio enthusiast playing with old equipment. But the "squirting" technique wasn't something an amateur could pull off. That was professional tradecraft.

The signal had also contained something else, a fragment that the script hadn't been able to parse but had saved as a separate audio file. Nora put her headphones back on and hit play. At first, it was just the hiss of the storm and the rhythmic pulsing of the data. Then, a voice broke through. It was distorted, pitched down to the point of being almost unrecognizable, but the cadence was human. It spoke three words in a language that sounded like Russian, or perhaps an older Slavic dialect, followed by a sequence of letters: *P-O-L-A-R-I-S*.

Nora felt a chill that had nothing to do with the drafty studio. Polaris was a name she had encountered only once before, in a redacted file she wasn't supposed to have seen during her final month at the Agency. It had been linked to a program that supposedly didn't exist—a project involving long-term deep-cover signals archiving. Her "career-ending mistake" had involved tugging on a thread related to that file, a move that had earned her a quiet dismissal and a non-disclosure agreement that felt like a noose.

She grabbed her coat, a heavy canvas jacket that smelled of salt and stale coffee. She couldn't leave this alone. If the signal was coming from the Ridge, it meant someone had reactivated the old equipment, or they were using the site's elevation to

broadcast a message they didn't want the official towers to catch. Either way, it was a breach of the silence she had come to rely on.

As she moved toward the door, her eyes caught the S-meter on her shortwave rig. It was still jittering, though the signal was long gone. It was reacting to something else—a localized interference. Nora paused, her hand on the light switch. In the world of signals, if you were receiving, someone was usually transmitting. And if the transmission was directed at a specific coordinate, there was always a chance of a "back-scatter" effect.

She realized with a jolt of adrenaline that she wasn't just a passive observer. By recording the signal, she had interacted with it. Her receiver had processed the carrier wave, and in the hyper-sensitive world of modern surveillance, even a passive receiver could be detected if the sender was looking for a return pulse. She wasn't just listening to a ghost; she might have just rang a doorbell.

She killed the lights, plunging the studio into darkness, save for the blue glow of the computer screen. She moved to the window again, peering through the rain at the narrow gravel road that led to the station. For a long moment, there was nothing but the swaying trees and the gray blur of the storm. Then, at the very edge of the tree line, she saw a pair of lights. They weren't the bright, piercing white of a car's headlights. They were dull, shrouded in some kind of filter, moving slowly and without sound.

Nora didn't wait to see more. She grabbed her laptop, the external drive containing the recording, and her notebook. She slipped out the back door, the rain instantly soaking through her shirt. She knew the woods behind the station better than anyone; she'd spent three years hiking them to clear her head. She stayed low, moving through the brush toward the old service trail that led to her truck, parked half a mile away for exactly this kind of contingency.

Behind her, the silent vehicle pulled into the station's lot. She heard the faint *thud* of a car door closing—a heavy, dampened sound that suggested armored plating. She didn't look back. She reached her truck, a battered Ford that she'd modified with a kill-switch for the interior lights, and climbed in. Her heart was a frantic bird in her chest, but her mind was finally clear. The isolation of Red Harbor had been a lie. The past hadn't stayed buried; it had just been waiting for the right frequency.

As she turned the key and the engine rumbled to life, she looked at the GPS coordinates she'd scribbled in her notebook. They felt like a command. The Signal wasn't just a message; it was a lure, and she was already biting. She threw the truck into gear and pulled away, the tires throwing gravel as she disappeared into the rainy dark, leaving the quiet life of a radio host behind for the jagged edge of the hunt.

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