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# Secrets of the Lighthouse at Crescent Harbor

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## Introduction

Fog made a habit of Crescent Harbor. It pooled low along the quay and drifted over the hill like a living thing, muffling the clang of rigging and the cries of gulls into something that felt almost private. On the morning they carried her mother's ashes to the seawall, Claire Bennett walked behind the small procession and kept her face turned toward the lighthouse. The white tower lifted out of the gray the way it always had in her childhood—less a beacon than a stern reminder. Even unlit, it seemed to watch.

The service itself was brief. Old friends and distant cousins said the right words, Pastor Whitlow's voice catching in places where he had once laughed with her mother. Claire's brother, Sam, stood on the far edge of the gathering, collar up against the cold, not looking at her. They had not spoken properly in months. She tried not to count the reasons why. When the tin of ashes was opened, the wind shifted and the fog moved with it, slipping down to the rocks as if to take custody. Claire let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. The harbor answered with a single, far-off horn.

After, there were hands to shake and casseroles to promise to pick up from the church freezer, questions to answer with practiced sentences. How long would she stay? Long enough to inventory her mother's things, she said. Long enough to close the house and sign the foundation's paperwork. Long enough to put the past in order. The words tasted too precise, like she had been rehearsing a way to make a clean exit that would please everyone. Crescent Harbor liked its goodbyes neat. It liked its stories neater. She kept her eyes on the water until the last of the sympathy had been dispensed and the crowd thinned along the path.

The Bennett house, low and cedar-shingled, sat where the bluff began. Inside, the air held the steady smell of salt and lavender sachets, of old wood warmed by years of kerosene and tea. Claire stood in the foyer and pressed her palm to the wall; it was a childish impulse she didn't bother to name. Rooms she had cataloged unconsciously for years offered themselves up again: the narrow parlor with its rope-scarred table, the kitchen with windows that stuck when the fog swelled the frames, the little study at the back where her mother kept correspondence for the lighthouse foundation. Everything was tidy and ready for a final, rueful nod.

She began with the study because lists steadied her. Manilla folders, labeled in her mother's square, unfussy hand. Letters from donors who loved the notion of a working light they would never see. Maintenance logs notched with storm-damage notes and weeks of quiet. A cigar box of brass fasteners and keys. The box had lived on the

bottom shelf as long as Claire could remember; it was part of the landscape. She lifted the lid and found, beneath a rusted hinge and a coil of twine, a small key she didn't recognize. It was heavier than it looked, old brass gone dull with salt, its bow shaped like a simple circle marked with a faint star. When she turned it in her fingers, a line of bright metal flashed where years of use would have worn it, only there was no such wear.

It should have been nothing—a stray from a lock long replaced—but the key had weight that was not only in the metal. Her mother hadn't been a collector of keepsakes for their own sake. What she kept, she needed. Claire closed her hand around the key and, for a moment, the press of it against her skin felt like someone tapping from the other side of a wall. The lighthouse loomed in her mind the way it had when she was a girl climbing the spiral in summer, only now the thought made her throat ache. Her family had tended that light for generations. Their stories were braided into its stairs: rescues, storms ridden out on the gallery, names taught with a special softness because they had not come home. Memory, she thought, was a poor compass; it pointed where you wanted to go. Truth was something else.

On the desk was a ledger bound in blue cloth—the kind the foundation used for visitor donations and tour notes. She flipped through, half expecting a scrap of her mother's handwriting to fall free with a dry whisper. Receipts, thank-yous, reminders pinned with straight pins. No star to match the key, no note. Claire slid the key into her pocket anyway, an instinct as old as curiosity. She could hear Seamus Delgado's engine out on the mist, the rattle even in idle that meant the bearings would need replacing before autumn. Life went on out there, tidy as always, while in here the quiet stretched toward something she could not yet name.

She made tea and carried the mug to the back step where the yard ended abruptly in dune grass and a view of slate-green water. Boats came and went as smudges. The lighthouse kept its shape. The fog had lifted in bands, so the lantern room looked like it floated alone, suspended between ocean and sky. Claire remembered a story her mother used to tell on sleepless nights, about a schooner that had broken apart on a reef in a month very much like this—how everyone in town remembered the sound of it, how you can hear a ship die if you're close enough. The name had been part of their private litany of coastal ghosts, spoken low to keep it safely make-believe. She did not say it now. She did not need to.

A truck turned in at the bottom of the drive and idled, just long enough for her to notice the seal of the town painted on the door, the tidy font: Office of the Mayor. It pulled away before she stood, leaving only two wet tracks and the sharp scent of diesel in air that had been, until then, clean as glass. Claire set the mug down carefully, aware of the familiar stirring just under her ribs. She had come home to complete tasks and then leave again. It should have been simple. But there were always lists, and then there were the things that lived between the lines.

She went back inside, to the box and the key and the rooms that seemed, somehow, to be waiting differently now that the crowd had gone. Somewhere below the surface of this neat town, other engines idled. Papers were tucked away in drawers that stuck in damp weather. Locks had been changed and then forgotten. Claire slipped the key deeper into her pocket until it settled against her, a cool, persistent weight. Outside, the fog thickened and thinned, as if breath were moving through the harbor. The lighthouse watched. And if there was something to be found, she told herself, it would begin with what her mother chose to leave behind.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

Fog returned to Crescent Harbor like a tenant who had never quite learned the door, slipping in on a change of wind and settling across the roofs. Claire Bennett stood at the kitchen window and watched the gray fold against the shingles, the way it did every year when the air turned softer and the salt began its slow climb into everything. The house smelled of damp wool and old cedar, of tea steeped too long and the faint, medicinal tang of lavender sachets tucked into drawers. It was orderly, as her mother's house had always been: a place where dust motes traveled polite routes and shoes aligned themselves by the door like good citizens waiting to be called on.

She had opened the back window an hour before and left it that way, letting in the harbor's hush without inviting in the damp that followed close behind. Now, with the window shut again, the sound of a buoy reached her faintly, its bell cutting the fog into small, patient strokes. Claire carried a stack of manilla folders to the dining table and set them down as though arranging evidence. The folders had belonged to her mother, and they bore the square, unfussy hand that had taught Claire to print her name on school forms and sign her checks with a careful slash. The folders were labeled in categories that made sense only to a woman who had spent decades negotiating with tides and committees: *Lighthouse Tours - Visitor Stats 1998-2003*, *Foundation - Donor Correspondence*, *Maintenance - Storm Damage Logs*.

Claire picked up the first folder and tapped it against the table, a habit she had picked up in newsrooms when she wanted to feel in control of a story. The paper was dry and stiff at the corners. She opened it and began to sort, sliding loose sheets into chronological order, checking dates against the handwritten notes in the margins. A receipt from a hardware store, a thank-you card from a school group, a printed email about a grant that had never materialized. It was the ordinary archaeology of a life lived in service to a stone tower that most people only saw from a distance. Outside, a gull cried, and then another answered, as if conducting a survey of the low sky.

The front door clicked open, and Claire did not look up immediately. Footsteps crossed the foyer and stopped in the doorway, shoes scuffing against the braided rug her mother had insisted on shaking out once a month. The shoes were scuffed, the laces frayed, and they belonged to someone who had grown up in this house and never quite stopped treating it like a place to be negotiated rather than respected. Claire looked up and saw her brother, Sam, leaning against the frame, collar turned up against the draft. He had not shaved in two days, and his eyes were red-rimmed in a way that sleep alone could not explain.

You're making a museum of the place, he said.

I'm making a list, Claire said.

Sam pushed off the doorframe and stepped into the room. He carried the scent of rain and engine oil, and something sharper that Claire did not recognize but associated with closed doors and quick exits. He reached for a folder, then stopped, his hand hovering over the stack as if it might bite. You know Mom never kept anything important in the house anyway.

She kept enough.

Sam let out a short breath that might have been a laugh. Important is a flexible word. He glanced toward the window, where the fog had thickened into a solid sheet. Out there, the outline of the lighthouse was lost, and only the glow from the harbor lights remained, like a rumor of the town. Claire thought about the brass key she had found that morning, cool and heavy in her coat pocket. She had not told Sam about it. She did not know why.

The foundation paperwork, Sam said after a moment. You've got it?

On the counter. I haven't looked at it yet.

He nodded, as if that were the answer he expected. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a slim envelope, which he set on the table next to the folders. His fingernails were bitten down, and there was a smudge of grease on the corner of the envelope that transferred to his thumb when he picked it up again. It's from the bank, he said.

Claire did not open it. She knew what it was. The same letter had been arriving for months, addressed to their mother and forwarded to the house, opened and set aside in a growing pile of things that would be dealt with later. When their mother had passed, the pile had become Claire's to sort. Sam had offered to take care of it more than once, and Claire had let him try, knowing how these conversations went. Debt, she thought. Gambling, most likely. The kind that came with phone calls late at night and a voice that pretended to be reasonable.

I can handle it, Sam said. You've got enough on your plate.

Claire picked up the envelope and slid her thumb under the flap. She did not open it. I'll handle it, she said.

He looked at her, and for a moment something raw flickered across his face, a flash of

the boy who used to defend her from playground taunts and then vanished into a version of himself that made her wary. He nodded. Fair enough. He turned back toward the door. I'm meeting someone later. Don't wait up.

The screen door slapped shut behind him, and the house settled into its familiar patterns of silence. Claire opened the envelope and took out the letter. It was a demand, polite but firm, and the numbers at the bottom were larger than she wanted to consider right now. She folded it and placed it in a new pile marked *Immediate*, which was currently empty. She picked up the next folder and resumed her sorting, though her attention had frayed. The fog pressed against the glass, and the buoy rang again, closer this time, as if it had been nudged by a wave or a shift in the wind.

By late afternoon, the rain began. It started as a hesitant tapping, then turned into the steady drumming that Crescent Harbor did best, the kind that soaked you through without you noticing until you were already shivering. Claire made tea and carried it to the study, where the walls were lined with books about navigation and local history, their spines faded from years of salt air. The room smelled of paper and pipe tobacco, though her mother had not smoked in decades. She sat at the desk and opened the blue cloth ledger that had been there for as long as she could remember, the one that held visitor logs and tour receipts. She had flipped through it earlier, found nothing unusual, and closed it without thinking twice.

Now, with the rain steady behind her, she opened it again. The pages were soft-edged from use. She traced a finger along the entries, noting the neat columns, the careful handwriting that never varied in size or slant. It was the kind of record that inspired trust, the kind that looked as though it had been written by someone who believed that order could hold back chaos. Claire had never been that kind of believer. She had seen too many stories unravel from the inside, too many institutions that looked solid until you pressed hard enough.

She reached the back of the ledger and found an inserted sheet, a single page that did not match the rest. It was water-stained, the edges soft and frayed, as though it had been folded and carried in a pocket for years. The ink had bled in places, turning careful lines into blue smudges that looked like bruises. Claire lifted it gently, aware that the paper might tear if she was careless. It was a manifest of some kind, or perhaps a partial list; she could make out dates and cargo descriptions, but the names were incomplete, smudged or clipped off as if someone had deliberately torn them away.

The paper smelled of old water, of harbor silt and something sharper, like iron. Claire stared at the entries, trying to make sense of the gaps. A shipment logged in a year that no one in town would admit to, a cargo marked *miscellaneous* with a value that had been scratched out and rewritten. And then, at the bottom, a list of names, or what remained of them. Two were legible: *M. Reed* and *J. Hale*. The rest were ghosts,

torn away or dissolved into ink.

Claire felt the familiar tightening in her chest, the sensation that had chased her out of newsrooms and across state lines. She recognized the name Hale. Jonah Hale, the harbor master, had been a fixture in town as long as she had. The idea of his name on a list like this, in this ledger, in her mother's house, felt like a door opening onto a room she had not known existed. She thought about the brass key in her pocket, about the way it had felt when she turned it, about the star-shaped mark on its bow. It had looked like nothing important, and yet it had weight, as though what it opened mattered more than the lock.

Outside, the rain fell harder, and the lighthouse beam cut through the wet air, slow and deliberate. Claire folded the paper carefully and slipped it into her jacket pocket, next to the key. She looked at the ledger again, as if it might offer an explanation, or at least a warning. It offered nothing but neat rows and columns, a record that suddenly felt less like an archive and more like a map with roads she had not intended to travel.

The phone rang, and Claire jumped. She let it ring twice before picking up, half-expecting Sam, or perhaps a neighbor checking in after the storm. Instead, a voice she did not recognize asked for her mother by name, then paused, as if uncertain whether to continue. When the voice spoke again, it did so softly, as though the words might be overheard. Mrs. Bennett, it said. We're sorry for your loss. There was a pause, long enough for Claire to wonder if the line had gone dead. Then, just as she was about to speak, the caller said, Be careful with the lighthouse. And then the line went quiet.

Claire hung up and stared at the receiver. The rain drummed on the roof, steady and indifferent. The list in her pocket felt like a live thing, and the key pressed against her thigh like a reminder. She thought about the lighthouse, about the beam moving across the water, about what it might be trying to show her. Outside, the fog had returned, thick and white, and the town was lost in it again.

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