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The Lighthouse Letters of Cold Harbor

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Introduction

The first thing Mara notices is the sound—how the harbor breathes. Even in late afternoon, with the fog lifting and the gulls arguing over a torn bait box, there is a pulse beneath the surface that she can feel through the rental's thin steering wheel. The lighthouse rides the far edge of her windshield like a thumbprint on the sky, its white paint flayed by years of salt and wind. Home, she thinks, and then immediately corrects herself: not home. A place she left. A place that didn't wait for her.

Cold Harbor isn't dying so much as pretending not to. The wharf still lists under the weight of rubber boots and blue plastic crates, but half the storefronts on Main are papered over with FOR LEASE signs, and Mayor Alan Crowe's banners for the "Harbor Renaissance" flap from the lampposts like promises that know their own expiration date. New luxury condos claimed in tasteful serif font. Jobs, growth, revitalization. Everyone she passes on the way in seems to wear the same practiced squint, the look of a person who has chosen a side and can't quite remember when they made up their mind.

Mara parks in front of the law office that handled her father's estate and sits for a moment, listening to the old truck tick as it cools. She hasn't thought of him as "Dad" in years. In her head, he is Leonard Bennett, a man-shaped absence who left before she knew what it meant to be left. Settling the estate—that's the phrase the paralegal used, apologetic and bright. There's not much to settle. A mortgage that outlived him by two years, a stack of municipal fines, some boxes that smell like mildew and motor oil, and a deed to a structure the town keeps threatening to condemn. The lighthouse. The word feels heavier than it should, knotted with childhood nights of listening to stormglass rattle and her mother's spoon circling a mug, slow and furious.

By the time she reaches the diner, the sky has turned the color of a bruise. Cassie Lane slides her a coffee without asking and folds herself into the opposite booth like a girl sneaking back into a world they both abandoned. "You look exactly the same," Cassie lies, and Mara lets herself believe it for the span of a swallow. They trade the loose change of memory—who married whom, who moved away, who's already back because nowhere else stuck. At the counter, the television plays a loop of Crowe's last speech, the mayor's teeth as white as the sails in the stock footage spliced behind him. Cassie nods toward the screen. "He wants the lighthouse gone. Says it's unsafe. Says it blocks the view." Mara thinks of light as a thing that can block and suppress, not just reveal. It sits in her like a dare.

Sheriff Simon Hart appears in the doorway the way weather does—sudden, a shade darker than the room. He wears the uniform like he was sewn into it, and when he

sees Mara, something like recognition flickers and then shutters. He asks about Leonard in a voice that doesn't quite fit his mouth and tells her, carefully, to call if she needs anything. There are people, he says, who don't like change. There are people who like it too much. When he leaves, the bell above the door keeps ringing as if undecided. Mara watches his patrol car vanish into a wash of fog that shouldn't be there and tells herself that every town has a man like Simon; it's only the salt that makes him different.

At the edge of dusk, Evelyn Marlowe is waiting for her by the chain-link fence that keeps no one out. Evelyn is all angles and insistence, hair pinned in the practical, stubborn style of someone who has bent her life to a single task. "Keeper," she corrects when Mara calls her a historian. "Not everything worth knowing fits on a plaque." She presses a ring of tarnished keys into Mara's palm. The metal is cold as bone. "They'll vote to tear it down if the money's right," Evelyn says, looking past Mara at the town as if it were a flock she has lost count of. "They'll call it progress. But light remembers. It remembers what we ask it to show and what we ask it to forgive."

The lighthouse up close is a bruise made building. The catwalk groans under Mara's weight, and the smell is a knotted braid of kelp, rust, and old smoke. She moves through it the way you move through a story you half-remember: cautious, listening for what you missed the first time. Her flashlight picks out the chalk of salt on the walls, the blackened scars from a long-ago electrical fire, a gull's nest stitched with caution tape. The spiral stairs curl upward, a ribcage or a question. Halfway up, she stops and lays a hand against the inner wall where children's names are carved, staggered in height and decade. Beneath the knife marks the stone is cool and faintly damp, and she thinks, absurdly, that the place is breathing.

Back in the lantern room, the glass is fogged, the old lens a blind eye. The wind pushes and retracts, the way someone might test a door they're not sure they have the right to open. Mara circles the room, reading the place the way she reads a source—what's said, what's missing, what someone tried too hard to put back. A seam of paint along the baseboard is a slightly different white; a panel doesn't sit flush. It could be nothing. It could be everything. She crouches, runs a fingertip along the edge, feels grit and then the faintest give, like a held breath.

She doesn't pry. Not yet. Her phone buzzes in her pocket—Cassie asking if she's coming back through town, a number she doesn't recognize leaving a one-line message: We should talk about your father. The sky outside the glass has collapsed into ink, the harbor lights stuttering alive in a pattern she hasn't forgotten. Mara stands, pockets the keys, and tells the empty room she'll come back in the morning with better light, better tools, a steadier heart. Down on the rocks, the tide has turned. You can hear it in the scrape and slide of stone against stone, the private argument of water and shore.

On the walk back to the truck, the town feels closer than it should, as if the buildings have leaned in to listen. She thinks of letters her mother used to keep in a shoebox, tied with a fraying ribbon, the way secrets soften at the edges from being handled. She thinks of the stories she's chased in cities where no one knew her last name, how easy it was to leave pieces of herself scattered in places that would never call her back. Here, every face is a mirror, every question a debt. The air tastes of iron and rain. Somewhere behind her, a foghorn opens its single mournful note.

By the time she reaches the road, the lighthouse is a silhouette, a dark rib against a darker sky. Mara touches the keys in her pocket the way some people touch a cross or a coin and feels, just for a moment, the shape of something waiting. Not a welcome, exactly. Not a threat. A summons. In the lantern room, behind a panel the color of old bone, the past has written itself in a hand that still remembers how to shake.

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CHAPTER ONE: Return to Cold Harbor

Mara Bennett woke to a town that sounded less like a greeting than a warning. The rental's windowpanes shivered against a persistent offshore gust, and beneath the clatter she could feel the harbor breathing in long, irregular pulls. She lay still and counted the gulls arguing on the tile roof, each voice pitched for a different grievance, until the radiator ticked dry and the room edged toward chill. She had driven into Cold Harbor the night before and slept as if diving through a current—always fighting to keep her eyes closed. This morning, she would move slower, more deliberately, the way you learn to walk again after a fracture no one else can see.

Her father's lawyer, a man named Parrish who wore seersucker like it was camouflage, met her on the sidewalk in front of the shuttered law office. He extended a hand and then, noticing her hesitation, let it fall to his side. They shook anyway. She liked rituals that survived awkwardness, even when they no longer made sense. Parrish spoke in paragraphs that unspooled from one polite clause to the next, apologizing for the volume of mail that had gone unanswered, the fees left on a municipal account, the fine print she would have to sort if she wanted to hold on to the lighthouse. She nodded along as if they were discussing weather. There was something restful about small-town bureaucracy—the way it promised tedium and almost always delivered.

Outside, Main Street wore the bruises of decline like jewelry. She walked along storefronts that kept their merchandise tucked inside like shy animals. Two realtors had claimed the prime corner windows with posters of lofts that would never exist, and the diner across the street let out a hiss of steam that smelled of onions and old oil. Menus taped to the glass featured breakfasts that no longer came in portions large enough to suit a working harbor crew. She watched a woman sweep the walk with a broom made of splintered twigs, the bristles whispering over concrete like secrets being shared at a party. Mara felt a sudden pang for the anonymous rush of city streets where names were costumes you could change at will. Here, every surface seemed to insist on keeping her real name.

Cassie Lane slid a coffee across the table before she said hello. Steam rose between them and made the daylight wavier. Cassie hadn't aged so much as folded, the way paper does when it's carried in a pocket for years and then pressed flat again. She asked about the flight, the traffic, the weather, and Mara answered with facts that didn't belong to her anymore. Cassie laughed in the practiced way people do when they want to signal that nothing has changed, and yet there was a tension in her shoulders that suggested otherwise. At the counter, two fishermen in yellow rubber coats ordered fries and argued about the rising cost of bait, each man anchoring his point with a thump of his palm. The television mounted above them replayed Mayor

Alan Crowe's latest promise to turn Cold Harbor into a destination, his smile as steady and unblemished as a piece of stock footage.

Simon Hart entered through the door like weather turning. He wore a uniform that fit his body so well it looked stitched on, and his eyes flicked to Mara and then away, as if he had rehearsed this exact greeting and decided it needed editing. She remembered him from high school as someone who could stand between factions without choosing a side, a talent that seemed to have calcified into a profession. He asked about her father in a voice that didn't quite lift off the pavement. There were people, he said, who didn't like change. And there were people who liked it too much. When he left, the bell above the door kept chiming, as if undecided, and Mara watched his cruiser glide into a fog bank that shouldn't have been there and yet felt inevitable.

Outside, the town felt as if it were leaning against her, testing her balance. She thought of the lighthouse then, not as a landmark but as a question that someone had left open-ended. The deed was in her name, though it felt stolen from both of them—her and her father—by the same careful hands that had typed up the documents in Parrish's office. She wondered whether he had kept it out of obligation or sentiment, and whether the difference mattered now.

At the edge of the harbor, Evelyn Marlowe was waiting beside the chain-link fence as if she had planted herself there and grown roots. She offered a hand that was dry as parchment and eyes like polished stone, and when Mara called her a historian, Evelyn corrected her softly: "Keeper," she said, as if it were a promise. "Not everything worth knowing fits on a plaque." She passed Mara a ring of keys so tarnished they looked like they had been swallowed and retrieved from the sea. The metal was colder than the air. Evelyn spoke about votes and money and the way progress preferred straight lines over the crooked ones history liked to leave behind. When she looked past Mara at the town, it was as if she were taking attendance of people who weren't there.

The lighthouse rose ahead of them, pale and wounded, its paint flayed by years of salt and wind. The catwalk groaned as they climbed, and each step reminded Mara of her own fragility—the way her spine remembered how to carry doubt. The smell hit them at the middle landing, a braid of kelp, rust, and old electrical burn that made her throat tighten. There were names carved into the inner wall at various heights, children announcing themselves with blades and bravado, and beneath the scratches the stone felt cool and slightly damp, as if it were sweating. Somewhere above, the foghorn opened its throat and let out a note that didn't end so much as recede, like a question that decides to linger.

In the lantern room, Mara circled slowly, reading the space the way she might read a source who has had too much time to rehearse. The old lens was milky, blind as a cataract; the glass panes fogged with breath that wasn't hers. She noticed a seam of paint along the baseboard that looked like a scar healed over unevenly, and a panel

that didn't quite lie flat against the wall. She didn't touch it yet. She let her eyes travel over the scratches on the floor where chairs had been dragged, the blackened stains from a fire older than her, the dust that lay untouched except by the wind. The room felt like it was holding its breath.

A phone buzzed in her pocket, the vibration urgent and small. Cassie asking whether she'd come back through town, a number she didn't recognize leaving a one-line message: We should talk about your father. Mara looked at the panel in the wall and told herself she would return with better light, better tools, a steadier heart. She pocketed the keys and left the lantern room feeling as if the lighthouse had let her go only temporarily.

Down on the rocks, the tide was turning. You could hear it in the grind and release of stone, a conversation older and colder than the one she'd just had with the town. On her way to the truck, she thought of letters her mother used to keep in a shoebox, tied with a fraying ribbon, the kind that soften at the edges from being handled too much. She thought of the stories she'd chased in cities where no one knew her last name, how liberating it had felt to be a stranger, and how exhausting.

By the time she reached the road, the fog had thickened and the town had closed ranks around her. The lighthouse stood like a dark rib against the bruised sky. Mara touched the keys in her pocket the way some people touch a cross, or a coin, or a bruise that still aches when the weather changes. Somewhere behind her, a window went dark, and somewhere ahead of her, water met shore with a violence that sounded like forgiveness. She thought about turning back, then thought about the cost of not doing so, and pressed the truck's starter button as if waking something that had been waiting.

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