

The Lighthouse at Wren Bay Harbor

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Introduction

The ferry nosed through a milk-thick fog that swallowed the horizon and made the world feel smaller than Nora Hale remembered. Salt slicked the rail beneath her palms; the air tasted like tin and winter apples. Somewhere ahead, the lighthouse at Wren Bay cut its beam across the clouded dusk, not steady but like a heartbeat—one-two, one-two—before the light dissolved again into gray. Nora told herself the nausea was the crossing, not the return. She had sworn she would never come back.

Promises, she knew, were only as strong as what people needed to forget.

On the wharf, the boards spoke under her boots—an old language of groan and give. She recognized the silhouettes first: the bait shack with its peeling mermaid sign; the cannery dark and window-patched; the bluff rising like a shoulder pulled up against weather. Wren Bay looked the same and nothing alike, as if someone had scrubbed it and then left a residue. Eyes followed without seeming to; conversations paused mid-syllable. Her brother's name hovered there in the hush between hello and what happened. Ethan Hale, who had been restoring the lighthouse with a carpenter's stubborn hands and a historian's zeal, had not been seen for three days.

Nora found his rental above the old chandlery by memory rather than map. The door stuck, then gave. Inside, the place held the warmth of a life interrupted: a coffee mug on the sill with a ring of cold, a jacket slung over a chair, a duffel gaping open like a cut. Half his clothes were rolled tight the way he'd learned for travel; the other half lay in the laundry basket, damp salt still in the fibers. On the desk, under a cracked lamp, she found it—a child's drawing on browned paper. A lighthouse sketched in a heavy hand, crooked beam slanting over waves, and at the base, a black halo where the door should be. Someone—some child—had pressed the crayon so hard the paper tore.

She studied the drawing the way she would a witness: start wide, then close. The margin carried a faint fingerprint grease-shined smooth. In the lower right corner, a date had been scrawled and then scratched out until the fibers pilled. The smell of graphite and old paper pulled at something buried deep—scorched wood, a woman's scream, her own breath caged in her chest. The memory blurred when she reached for it, like sea glass turned in the hand: edges, but no picture. She rubbed the inside of her left wrist where the pale crescent of a burn mark hid beneath her sleeve, an old habit she thought she'd unlearned.

On the harbor road, the foghorn called, low and patient. Nora stepped to the window and watched the beam sweep the bay, striking boats that rocked in their slips like sleepers turning in bed. She tried to map the sequence of events as if they belonged to someone else: Ethan took the contract; Ethan called twice a week, then once; Ethan left a voicemail on Tuesday—she had saved it, replayed it until the words went frayed. “Nora, the tests don't add up. And there's something in the logs. If I'm right—” The message clipped there, a breath caught on the lip of a sentence. The town said Ethan was a good man, said it as consolation and warning both.

Down on the pier, someone laughed too loud, then stopped quick. Gossip moved differently here than in the city; it traveled in eddies, gathered weight, sank. She thought of Sam Reyes—the boy who had learned to drive on these switchbacks, now the detective who would ask her to let the department handle it. She thought of Lila Monroe with her camera and her stubborn jaw, who could turn rumor into proof. Wren Bay was a place that believed in its own reflections; it smiled at what it wanted to see

and kept the rest under the surface.

Nora slipped the drawing into her bag and found, beneath it, a spiral notebook with Ethan's cramped hand on the first page: water tables, dates, initials, a list of surnames familiar and not. No explanations, only arrows and underlines that made their own map. Pages had been torn out cleanly near the back. She touched the frayed edge and felt again that tug in her chest—the sense that this, all of it, was not beginning now but continuing, that some part of her had been moving toward this return ever since she left.

When she finally looked up, the light from the point found her through the window as surely as if it had known exactly where to look. The lighthouse stood apart on its spit of rock, its white skin weather-stained, the lantern room caged in glass. People said it had saved lives. People said it had watched too many drownings to stay innocent. Nora knew a structure could absorb a story the way old wood absorbed smoke. She could feel it in the way the floorboards under her feet remembered other footsteps, in the way the town held its breath around certain names.

She locked the door behind her when she left, more out of reflex than fear. The fog closed like a hand around the harbor, and the beam turned again, cutting a path that lasted only as long as the light touched water. She told herself she had come back to find her brother. She did not say out loud that she might also be here to find the part of herself that had gone missing—a door she had never opened, a night she had trained herself not to see. The tide hissed along the rocks and withdrew, and in the wake of its hush, the town's secrets pressed closer, patient as the sea.

CHAPTER ONE: Harbor Fog, Torn Page

The salt air at Wren Bay didn't just sit in the lungs; it clung to the skin like a film of grease. Nora stood at the edge of the harbor, her heels catching in the gaps between the weathered pier planks. To her left, the Ghost Fish Bait & Tackle shop groaned under a gust of wind, its rusted sign swinging like a pendulum. She checked her watch. It was six minutes past five. In the city, this was the hour of frantic commutes and sirens. Here, the only sound was the rhythmic slap of the tide against the barnacled pilings and the distant, mournful cry of a gull that sounded too much like a human sob.

She saw him before he saw her. Sam Reyes was leaning against the fender of a mud-spattered cruiser, his posture a careful blend of professional alertness and small-town fatigue. He had filled out since high school—the lanky basketball player replaced by a man who looked like he'd spent the last decade carrying the weight of Wren Bay's petty grievances and darker truths. When his eyes finally found hers, there was no

flash of recognition at first, only the sharp, analytical squint of a cop assessing a stranger. Then, his shoulders dropped an inch.

"Nora Hale," he said, his voice a low baritone that vibrated in the damp air. He didn't offer a hand, perhaps sensing the invisible wall she had spent fifteen years building around herself. "I heard you were on the ferry. News travels faster than the boat in this weather."

"It's good to see you, Sam. Though I wish the circumstances were different." Nora tucked a stray lock of dark hair behind her ear, her fingers brushing the scarf she wore to hide the tension in her neck. "Any word from the Coast Guard? Or the ground teams?"

Sam looked out toward the mouth of the harbor, where the fog was thickest. "They've swept the perimeter of the lighthouse and the marshy stretch near the bluffs. Nothing. It's like Ethan just walked off the edge of the world. No signs of a struggle at the site, no abandoned vehicle—he didn't even have a car here, did he? Just that old bicycle." He paused, his gaze returning to her, heavy with an unspoken apology. "The official line is a possible accident. The rocks out there are slick, and the tide can be a beast if you're caught unaware."

"Ethan grew up on these rocks, Sam. He wasn't some tourist who didn't know how to read the water." Nora's voice was sharper than she intended. She was a forensic neuropsychologist; she dealt in the logic of the mind and the hard evidence of trauma. The idea of Ethan simply 'slipping' felt like a lazy diagnosis. "He was meticulous. Especially with this restoration project. He wouldn't have been wandering the cliffs in the dark without a reason."

"I'm not saying he was careless," Sam countered gently. "I'm saying the elements don't care how much you know. But look, I'm glad you're here. Maybe you can see something in his things that we missed. We've kept his rental sealed for the most part, but as next of kin, you've got the right to go through it. I'll walk you up."

As they moved away from the water, the town seemed to lean in on them. The narrow streets were lined with cottages that featured boarded-up windows and gardens reclaimed by sea-scrub. They passed the Black Whale Tavern, where a few locals stood under the awning, their cigarettes glowing like low-wattage embers in the mist. Nora felt their eyes—the heavy, judgmental stare of a community that remembered her family's name and the fire that had once defined it. She looked straight ahead, focusing on the rhythmic clunk of Sam's boots.

"Lila's been asking about you," Sam said, breaking the silence as they climbed the hill toward the old chandlery. "She's running the local paper now, though it's mostly a digital blog these days. She wanted to come down to the wharf, but I told her to give

you some space."

"Lila was always the first one to the scene of an accident," Nora remarked, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. "I'll call her once I've settled in. Right now, I just need to understand what Ethan was doing in those final hours."

They reached the chandlery, a tall, narrow building that smelled of linseed oil and ancient dust. Ethan's apartment was on the top floor, accessible by a precarious exterior staircase. Sam unlocked the door and stepped back, letting Nora enter first. The room felt crowded with her brother's presence. Books on maritime engineering were stacked on every flat surface, and the walls were tacked with blueprints of the lighthouse's internal mechanism. It was the workspace of an obsessed man.

Nora moved to the desk she had seen earlier, her eyes falling on the child's drawing she had examined briefly upon her arrival. Beside it sat a stack of old lighthouse logs, their leather covers cracked and white with salt bloom. These were the primary records Ethan had been using to cross-reference his restoration work. She picked up the top volume—the log from 1974—and began to flip through the pages. The handwriting was a disciplined copperplate, detailing weather conditions, oil consumption, and the arrival of supply ships.

"He spent hours in the archives," Sam said, standing by the door. "The Mayor gave him full access. Mercer wanted this restoration to be the centerpiece of the new harbor redevelopment. A beacon of 'Wren Bay's Bright Future.'" He spoke the phrase with a hint of irony that Nora didn't miss.

"Ethan mentioned the logs in his last voicemail," Nora said, her thumb catching on a rough edge. She stopped flipping. About halfway through the book, she noticed a jagged remains of a page near the binding. It hadn't been torn out by a researcher looking for a souvenir; it had been ripped in a hurry. The remaining sliver of paper held only the tail end of a date—October 14th—and the bottom half of a single word: *...vessel*.

She leaned closer, her analytical mind shifting into gear. "Sam, look at this. This page wasn't just removed; it was excised. And if you look at the preceding entry, the ink on the facing page has a slight smudge, like it was closed while the writing was still wet—but this log is decades old."

Sam stepped over, squinting at the binding. "Maybe Ethan did it? Maybe he found something he wanted to keep private?"

"No," Nora shook her head. "Ethan treated historical documents like holy relics. He would never tear a page. Someone else was looking through these logs. Someone who didn't want the 14th of October to be part of the public record." She turned the book

over, and as she did, a small, loose fragment of paper fluttered out from between the back pages and drifted to the floor.

She knelt to pick it up. It was a triangular scrap, no bigger than a matchbook, but it contained a series of handwritten numbers and a chemical symbol: *Hg*.

"Mercury," Nora whispered. "Why would he be tracking mercury levels in a lighthouse log?"

"The old rotation beds," Sam suggested. "The giant lenses used to float in baths of liquid mercury to reduce friction. Most of that was cleaned up years ago when they electrified the light, but there's always some residue."

"But look at the numbers next to it," Nora said, pointing to the scrap. "These aren't maintenance levels. These look like coordinates. Or maybe parts per million in a soil sample."

The sound of a heavy engine idling outside distracted them. Nora went to the window and pulled back the lace curtain. Below, a sleek black SUV was parked at the curb. The driver didn't get out, but the tinted window rolled down just an inch. A plume of cigar smoke escaped into the fog. Even from the third floor, the presence of the vehicle felt like a weight, a silent observer marking her arrival.

"That's Mercer's car," Sam said, his voice tightening. "He's probably checking to see if I'm actually doing my job or just reminiscing with an old friend."

Nora didn't look away from the car. The sense of being watched, which had begun the moment she stepped off the ferry, intensified. She felt the old, familiar prickle of anxiety at the base of her skull—the physical manifestation of a memory trying to break through a locked door. She thought of the scorched wood from her dreams, the smell of something chemical and hot.

"I think Ethan found something that has nothing to do with architecture," Nora said, her voice steady despite the hammering of her heart. "He was following a trail of breadcrumbs that lead back into this town's history. And someone is very interested in making sure those crumbs disappear."

She tucked the scrap of paper into her pocket. The cliffhanger wasn't just the missing page or the mysterious car outside; it was the realization that her brother's disappearance wasn't a tragedy of the sea, but a calculated removal. As she looked back at the torn logbook, she noticed something she'd missed: on the very edge of the torn binding, there was a tiny, dried droplet of what looked like dark red wax. Or perhaps, it was something much more organic.

Before she could point it out to Sam, the lights in the apartment flickered once, twice, and then plunged them into total darkness. In the sudden silence, the sound of the exterior wooden staircase creaking under the weight of an ascending footstep was as loud as a gunshot. Someone was coming up, and they weren't trying to be quiet anymore.

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