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# Secrets of Cedar Harbor: A Small-Town Thriller

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## Introduction

The town is already breathing before dawn, the fog drawing slow coils over Cedar Harbor like a living thing. In the off-season, the boardwalk is a spine of gray planks running past shuttered ice-cream stands and souvenir shops whose painted lobsters peel in curls. The boats rock against their moorings with a tired patience, buoy bells counting time no one wants to name. This is a place that survives on its summers and remembers its winters; a place that sells postcards to strangers and keeps its grudges tucked into kitchen drawers beside the spare keys. Cedar Harbor runs on fish and tourists, on tips and tides, and on the stories people tell to keep the past where they think it belongs.

Nora Hale comes back to this place in present tense, because memory is never past in Cedar Harbor. She drives in with the windows cracked to the brine, a microphone case on the passenger seat and a knot in her throat she pretends is nothing but road coffee. She left years ago—left a newsroom that dissolved under the weight of clicks and quarterly goals, left a version of herself that measured worth by bylines and late-night edits. The podcast came after, at her kitchen table with a thrift-store mic and a promise to herself: tell the truth clean, without permission. She has been building it episode by episode, voice steady even when her hands shook. Lately, the numbers have slipped, advertisers hedging. The next story needs to matter. It needs to land.

Two nights ago, she got the message. First, a garbled voicemail from a listener who scans the police bands: West Marsh. Something found. Then an email from a high-schooler, careful and breathless at once—my name is Eli Mercer, we were out near the boardwalk cut-through, I think it's a bone. He didn't say human. He didn't have to. Nora heard the word anyway. She booked a room at the Harbor Inn, packed her recorder, and pointed her car north. Now the foghorn sounds, a low animal moan sweeping in from the point, and she knows the marsh will be slick and sucking at the shoes and exactly the same as it was when she was a kid warned never to go there.

There have always been names in this town that slip into conversation like knives. Three of them have followed Nora since she learned to spell: Hannah Reed, the senior who never made it home after the beach bonfire in 2002; Patrick "Patch" Donnelly, a deckhand with a laugh like a gull who vanished after a storm cleanup in 2004; Sloane Kerrigan, a summer waitress in 2010 who left a shift and left no trace. Different years, different families, the same ache carved into the town. The stories were taught like warnings—don't hitch rides, don't walk the boardwalk after midnight, don't ask the wrong people the right questions. Some said the water took them. Some said the town did.

For Nora, the old cases are not just headlines in the microfiche. Her mother, Claire Hale, still lives here in a saltbox with hydrangeas that bloom despite the wind, and she keeps her secrets quiet, as if quiet could make them harmless. Nora's father—stubborn, scarce, more rumor than presence when she was growing up—worked the docks in those years, crewed for men whose names are now carved onto plaques and donor walls. Once, in an old newspaper photo of volunteers after a search, Nora spotted the edge of her father's jacket sleeve beside a face she has seen framed at the yacht club. The past is threaded with her family's silhouette even when no one says it aloud. Coming back means untying knots that have held for decades. It also means risking the people who tied them.

Professionally, this is the kind of story that can lift a voice from niche to necessary. A cold case cluster. A coastal town hemmed in by money and myth. A teenager's discovery in the West Marsh that could be the first true break in years. Nora's show—Low Tide—has always chased the places where memory muddies truth. If she can map the disappearances across time, if she can show the connections others refused to see, she might save more than her download numbers. She might give the town back something it lost, whether it wants it or not.

Cedar Harbor will resist. It will smile for the camera at a fundraiser on the bluff and turn its gaze flat as slate when the questions cut too close. The fishermen will talk in half-sentences, the shopkeepers will say it's not their business, and the families that built the boardwalk will insist the town is safe now, better now, different. There are powerful names layered like paint on these pilings, and there is one that comes up more than most—a developer whose philanthropy has sanded smooth the rough edges of his history. Money here buys silence, buys distance, buys the benefit of the doubt.

Nora parks by the harbor and listens. The gulls slash the air. A door slams somewhere up the street. Beneath it all is the hush of the marsh, the wet inhale and exhale of something that has seen every secret come and go with the tide. She lifts the mic from its case and feels the familiar settle of purpose in her palms. She is here because a boy named Eli Mercer found a bone in the West Marsh, because three names have not stopped knocking for twenty years, because a mother she loves has a way of closing a door mid-sentence. She is here because the truth costs and always will, and because she has decided to pay.

The first questions are simple, the way first questions always are. Where did you find it? Who was there? What did you see? The answers will not be. They never are in Cedar Harbor, where the fog makes witnesses and liars of everyone by turns. Still, Nora presses record. The red light blinks like a heartbeat. The town inhales. And somewhere out in the reeds, the past begins to stir.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Found Bone

The marsh takes the day in pale increments, fog threading the cordgrass like old sutures. Nora Hale parks where the pavement ends and the boardwalk cut-through begins, a splintered tongue of wood that used to lead to a better view before the rot set in. She cracks the door to let the brine in, because sealing it out never works in Cedar Harbor; the salt finds the seams of your shoes, the cuffs of your coat, the pages of the notebooks you swear you will keep dry. Her fingers brush the recorder's case, cool aluminum against palm, and she counts to three before stepping out. The ground softens immediately, a wet hush rising from the peat, and the foghorn answers from the point, low and patient as a creature that has forgotten why it started.

Eli Mercer is there, shoulders tense as a fence line, boots planted in the sucking mud. He should be in school. Instead he stands with a phone in one hand and a flashlight in the other, the beam cutting a wedge through the gray. He is seventeen, wiry, with the kind of haircut that looks accidental even when it is not, and he does not smile when he sees her. He nods, once, and she nods back because she knows the language of this place: minimal motion, maximum meaning. "You Nora Hale?" he asks. His voice carries a practiced edge, as if he has said it into mirrors, into empty rooms, into car windows on lonely roads.

"I'm the one who called," she says, and extends a hand. He does not take it.

"Found it yesterday," he says. "Me and Josh, then he bailed." Another nod toward the marsh. "You want to see?"

She follows, not because she is brave but because she is curious and curiosity is cheaper than fear. The marsh inhales around them, reeds hissing, water whispering underfoot. The boardwalk, where it survives, groans like a sleeper disturbed. Nora keeps her eyes on Eli's boots, on the way he places them, deliberate, testing, always avoiding the softest spots. She does the same, though her knees remember every misstep of a childhood spent being warned away from exactly this place. Do not go into the marsh, her mother said, as if the warning alone could make it harmless. As if words could keep the ground from remembering what it has held.

They stop at a hummock where driftwood has collected in a patient crescent. The flashlight finds the bone first, pale as a promise, half-submerged in black muck. It looks lonely, almost decorative, like something that belongs in a museum case labeled Unknown. Nora crouches, careful not to kneel, and lets her gaze travel from the bone to the mud around it, to the reeds that lean in as if they have been listening. She pulls a ruler from her pocket, metal cool against her thumb, and measures. She

photographs from three angles, though she already knows the angles will lie.

"It's big," Eli says. "Too big for a bird."

"Maybe a dog," she says, though she does not believe it. The shape is too clean, too straight. The ends do not taper like they should for a rib. She feels the old itch in her fingers, the one that comes when a fact is trying to be true. She has seen enough bones in photos, in documentaries, in the margins of old case files, to know the curve of a lie and the line of a thing that was once inside someone.

Eli shifts, restless. "My dad thinks it's a deer. Or a cow from way back. Says the marsh used to flood farms."

"Deer don't have clavicles shaped like this," she says softly, more to herself than to him. The flashlight beam trembles. She steadies it with a hand on his shoulder. "When did you find it?"

"Tuesday. After school. Tide was out." He names the hour, the weather, the phase of the moon like a list of alibis. She writes it in the margin of her notebook, the ink already damp at the edges. The marsh takes what you give it, but it gives back slowly, reluctantly. She wonders what else is in the muck, what other stories are folded in the peat like letters never mailed.

She stands and brushes her knees, looking back toward the water. The fog has thickened, turning the marsh into a room with no corners. Somewhere, a gull screams and is answered by another gull, a conversation she has never learned to parse. She turns to Eli and sees the boy he must have been before the find, before the flashlight and the mud and the adult weight in his voice. He is trying to be steady, trying to be useful, trying not to be afraid. She knows the posture. She wears it like a coat in winter.

"You called me," she says. "Why?"

He looks at the bone like it might rise up and explain itself. "Because you do the podcast. Because you don't live here anymore." He hesitates. "Because my mom says you left for a reason."

"My reasons don't matter," she says. "The bone matters."

He shrugs, a sharp, defensive movement. "You think it's human?"

"We'll know soon." She taps the recorder in her pocket. "I'll get it to a lab. You did the right thing, Eli."

He does not answer. He just nods again and looks away, as if her praise is something he needs to put down before it gets heavy. They stand there while the marsh breathes around them, while the foghorn counts time in its throat. Nora thinks about the three names that have followed her into adulthood, the ones that slipped through the town like glass under a table: Hannah Reed, Patch Donnelly, Sloane Kerrigan. Each disappearance a season, a decade apart, each one wrapped in explanations that frayed at the edges. She wonders, not for the first time, if the marsh has been saving them up, parceling them out like interest on a debt.

She leaves Eli to his flashlight and his silence and makes the walk back to her car with the recorder heavy against her hip. The fog softens the edges of everything, turns the world into a sketch rather than a photograph. She thinks of her mother's house, the hydrangeas that bloom despite the wind, the way Claire Hale closes doors halfway, as if that can keep the rest of the house honest. She thinks of her father, who worked these docks in the years when the disappearances began, whose face sometimes shows up in old photos like a watermark you cannot erase. She thinks of the podcast, its dwindling numbers, its hunger for a story that will not let go.

Back at her room in the Harbor Inn, she lays the bone on a towel on the desk, as if it has earned a rest. She opens her laptop and types a single line: West Marsh, possible human remains, coordinates logged, witness credible. Her phone buzzes, a reminder that the world is still turning, still demanding attention. She silences it. The bone, stripped of context, looks like a question.

She takes a shower, lets the steam unknot the day, dresses in dry clothes that still smell like laundry and not like marsh. In the lobby, she asks the woman behind the desk for the number of a medical examiner who will not ask too many questions about why a podcaster from out of town has a bone in a bag. The woman gives her the number with a look that says she has seen stranger things, though Nora suspects she has not seen much stranger than this.

Later, on the phone with a favor-owing friend at the state lab, she arranges a handoff. The friend does not ask for a story, does not ask for a byline, does not ask why Nora Hale is poking at things that have slept for years. Some silences are professional. Some are kindness.

She eats dinner at a booth near the window, watching the tide come in. The water rises with a kind of inevitability that feels personal, as if it has been waiting for her to notice. She records a voice memo, just for herself, describing the bone again, the way the light caught it, the way the mud let go reluctantly. She catalogues the marsh's smell—decay and salt and something sweet, like rotting apples. She thinks about the teenagers who used to come here, the ones who never made it home. She thinks about the families who still set extra plates at holidays, just in case.

Back in her room, she plays the recording of Eli's voice, tinny and small in the dark. She hears the fear and the bravery braided together. She hears the marsh behind him, breathing. She thinks about the old cases, the way they were closed, the way they were forgotten. She thinks about the power of a name, how it can be a shield or a target depending on who is holding it.

She falls asleep with the recorder beside her, its red light still blinking, a mechanical heartbeat in the dark. In the morning, she will learn what the bone is. She will learn whether it is a relic of grief or the start of something larger. She will learn, again, that Cedar Harbor does not give up its secrets without a cost.

The fog is still there when she wakes, pressing against the glass like a hand that wants to be let in. She dresses quickly, checks her bag twice, and heads out to meet the day, the bone's verdict, and whatever waits in the muck. The marsh is patient. It has time. The town has time. She is not sure she does.

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