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Echoes in the Fog

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Introduction

All roads into Pelham Cove are lined with brambles and salt-worn hedges, as if the village itself is trying to remain unseen. The North Sea pounds the cliffs ceaselessly, hurling briny spray over the wind-crooked cottages, while the ever-present fog rolls in at dusk without fail—thick, silent, smothering. For outsiders, it stirs a bone-deep unease. For Isla Hartley, newly arrived and reeling from the emotional wreckage of her marriage, Pelham Cove offers a hoped-for refuge, a space to heal where no one knows her name or her regrets. Yet even as she pushes open the creaking gate of her grandmother's abandoned cottage, she senses a watchfulness in the silence: the village breathing her in, measuring her presence, deciding what to reveal.

Isla's journey to this brooding coastal outpost is a retreat as much as an escape. Her once-carefree travel columns now seem hollow—each new city, a distraction; each bustling street, a blur. The pain of her divorce clings to her, insistent as the chalk dust that gathers on every windblown windowsill. Coming to Pelham Cove is a return to childhood summers spent racing the tide and gathering sea glass, before tragedy fractured her family and time swept the village's innocence away. Now she arrives not as a bright-eyed child, but as a woman hunted by memory and loneliness.

Her first days are suffused with a worn charm: mugs of strong tea pressed into her hands by Mrs. Finch from across the lane, the gossiping of gulls, the warm shadow of the local pub's hearth. But beneath these welcomes seethe undercurrents—an abrupt silence when Isla's name is spoken, glances exchanged over hunched shoulders. She observes the way the villagers cling to old habits and rituals as if warding off something they dare not name. At night, Pelham's narrow streets seem to twist in the gloom, leading nowhere, whispering secrets on the wind.

The cottage itself is a repository of ghosts. Doors swell with damp, floorboards creak beneath invisible feet, and aged photographs stare from dusty shelves—her grandmother's gaze kind, her own childhood grin a stark reminder of simpler days. As she unpacks, Isla finds strange objects tucked in corners: a smoothed pebble painted with a child's initials, an envelope with the ink smudged away by time. The isolation that once felt healing grows uneasy, needle-sharp, as small mishaps begin—a broken window, rustling at the threshold, anonymous notes slid beneath her door.

It is in the murk and fog that Isla starts to sense another rhythm to life in Pelham Cove, one drawn by old pain and unfinished business. With each passing night, she feels a tightening—a collective holding of breath, too many things left unsaid. Even the landscape conspires to unsettle: the cold wail of the lighthouse, the shudder of the cottage with each rising gale. Here, solitude is never complete, and the weight of

unspoken histories presses in even as Isla tries to piece together her own.

Yet, as the sea gnaws eternally at the cliffs, Isla's determination strengthens. In Pelham Cove's threat-filled calm, she finds herself compelled to search for meaning amid the relics of her family's past and the villagers' evasions. The truth, she senses, is only ever a tide away—waiting, somewhere, to break the surface.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shadows on the Shore

The scent of salt and damp earth clung to the air, a constant reminder of the ocean's proximity. Isla pulled her worn tweed jacket tighter, the fabric doing little to ward off the insidious chill that seemed to seep into everything in Pelham Cove. The village, nestled precariously against the eroding cliffs of the English coast, was a jumble of slate roofs and ancient stone, all bleached by the perpetual spray. It was exactly as she remembered, and yet utterly different, viewed through the lens of her own fractured adulthood.

The lane leading to her grandmother's cottage, called 'Seawatch,' was barely more than a gravel track, overgrown with stubborn gorse bushes that scratched against the side of her old Volvo. She'd chosen the car for its reliability, a practical choice that mirrored her current life: no frills, just function. The once vibrant red paint was faded, much like the vibrant parts of herself felt lately.

As she parked, the engine groaned to a halt, leaving an abrupt silence punctuated only by the distant shriek of gulls and the relentless rumble of the waves against the shore. Seawatch stood hunched and defiant against the elements, its windows like vacant eyes staring out at the churning grey expanse of the North Sea. A tangle of ivy clawed at its stone walls, and the garden, once her grandmother's pride, was a wilderness of thorny roses and wind-battered shrubs.

Isla took a deep breath, the air sharp and clean, though it carried an undercurrent she couldn't quite place—something metallic, like old coins, or maybe just the lingering scent of damp rot. The gate, a rickety wooden affair, swung inward with a protesting creak that echoed ominously in the stillness. Rust flaked from its hinges onto her fingers as she pushed it open.

The key, a heavy, ornate brass one given to her by the solicitor, felt cold in her palm. It turned in the lock with a satisfying click, a small victory in a life that had felt like a series of defeats recently. The air inside the cottage was stagnant, thick with the smell of dust, sea salt, and something indefinably old. It was the scent of memory, she realized, a physical manifestation of time standing still.

Sunlight, watery and weak, filtered through the grimy windows, illuminating motes of dust dancing in the gloom. Furniture, draped in white sheets like ghosts, stood sentinel in the living room. Her grandmother, Evelyn Hartley, had been gone for nearly a decade, and no one had lived in the cottage since. Isla was the last remaining Hartley, the inheritor of not just the cottage, but whatever secrets it contained.

She pulled back a sheet from an armchair, revealing faded floral upholstery. The room felt cold, despite the late spring day. A small, framed photograph on a dusty mantelpiece caught her eye. It was of her and her grandmother, taken during one of those long-ago summers. Isla, no older than ten, was grinning, a missing front tooth apparent, her arm wrapped around Evelyn's waist. Evelyn, with her kind eyes and silver hair braided into a neat bun, smiled gently at the camera. A pang of longing, sharp and unexpected, pierced Isla.

She moved through the cottage slowly, each step stirring the dust of years. The kitchen, with its chipped ceramic sink and antiquated stove, felt like a museum exhibit. Upstairs, the bedrooms were smaller, simpler. Her own childhood room, with its faded wallpaper depicting sailing ships, remained largely untouched. A small, wooden toy boat still sat on the windowsill, its paint chipped from countless imagined voyages across the floorboards.

Later that afternoon, after unpacking the bare essentials—a few changes of clothes, her laptop, a stack of books she knew she wouldn't read—Isla ventured out. The lure of Pelham Cove's single pub, The Anchor, was too strong to resist. She needed a real meal, and perhaps, a dose of human interaction that didn't involve her own internal monologues.

The fog had begun to roll in, a silent, grey tide creeping over the headlands. It blurred the edges of the cottages, softening their harsh outlines and transforming the village into something ethereal, almost dreamlike. The narrow main street was slick with damp, and the air grew colder, biting at her exposed skin.

As she approached The Anchor, she could hear the muffled murmur of voices and the clinking of glasses. A warm, inviting glow spilled from its windows, promising respite from the encroaching gloom. The pub was small, with low ceilings and a roaring fire in a stone hearth. A few men, their faces weathered by sun and sea, sat nursing pints, their conversations hushed.

The proprietress, a woman with kind, crinkled eyes and a flour-dusted apron, greeted Isla with a broad smile. "Well now, you must be Isla Hartley. Heard you were back. Welcome, dear, welcome." Her voice was warm, a comforting balm after the silent cottage.

Isla smiled back, genuinely. "Thank you. It's good to be here."

"A pint of ale for you, then?" the woman asked, already reaching for a glass. "On the house, for your first night."

"That would be lovely, thank you," Isla said, touched by the unexpected hospitality.

She took a seat at a small, unoccupied table near the fire, grateful for the warmth.

As she sipped her ale, which was surprisingly good, she felt the eyes of the other patrons on her. Not overtly staring, but subtle, assessing glances. When she met their gazes, they would quickly look away, resuming their quiet conversations. It was the kind of watchfulness she'd encountered in small, isolated communities before: a mixture of curiosity and caution towards outsiders.

She overheard snippets of conversation, local gossip about fishing hauls and the unpredictable weather. Then, the name "Hartley" surfaced, causing an immediate dip in the ambient noise. A man with a grizzled beard, sitting a few tables away, cleared his throat loudly and changed the subject to the upcoming village fete. The shift was palpable, a sudden hush that left Isla feeling like an uncomfortable intruder.

Isla tried to dismiss it as small-town quirks, but the feeling lingered. It wasn't hostile, not exactly, but there was an unmistakable tension, a guardedness beneath the surface of the polite welcomes. She caught a fleeting, almost imperceptible glance between the proprietress and one of the men at the bar, a look that spoke of shared knowledge, of unspoken agreements.

She finished her ale and ordered a plate of fish and chips, which arrived hot and surprisingly delicious. As she ate, she felt the strange, almost psychic weight of the village settle around her. It was as if Pelham Cove wasn't just a place, but a living entity, observing her every move.

When she left The Anchor, the fog had thickened considerably, swallowing the last vestiges of daylight. The streetlights, few and far between, cast hazy halos in the dense mist. The world had shrunk, reduced to the immediate radius of her vision. The sound of the sea, once a distant rumble, now seemed closer, more menacing.

As she walked back towards Seawatch, a shadow detached itself from the side of a cottage ahead. Isla froze, her heart giving a sudden lurch. It was indistinct in the fog, a tall, slender figure, almost skeletal in its outline. It stood for a moment, motionless, before slipping silently into the swirling grey and vanishing.

Isla stood rooted to the spot, her breath catching in her throat. Had she imagined it? The fog played tricks on the eyes, distorted shapes. But the impression had been so vivid, so immediate. A tremor of unease snaked its way down her spine.

She quickened her pace, her footsteps echoing unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence. The cottage, when she finally reached it, offered little comfort. As she fumbled with the key in the lock, a faint scratching sound came from the side of the house, like fingernails dragging lightly across stone. She spun around, but saw nothing but the swirling, impenetrable mist.

Inside, the chill of the cottage seemed to intensify. She flicked on the main light, bathing the living room in a weak, yellow glow that did little to dispel the gloom. Her heart was still pounding. Was it just her imagination, heightened by the isolation and the unsettling atmosphere of the village? Or was there something, or someone, out there in the fog?

She locked the door, then turned the deadbolt, a sudden, primal need for security overriding her usual indifference. The scratching sound didn't repeat, but the silence inside the cottage now felt heavy, expectant. As she moved to close the curtains, she noticed it: a small, smooth pebble resting on the windowsill. It hadn't been there before. On its surface, faintly discernible, were three crudely etched letters: 'L.M.D.'

Isla picked up the pebble. It was cold and smooth against her skin, a relic from the shore. But the initials... they meant nothing to her. She turned it over and over in her fingers, a prickle of unease growing into a definite knot in her stomach. It felt like a message, a quiet, unsettling intrusion. And the question that chilled her most was: who had left it there? And why?

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