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The Disappearing Hour

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** The Missing Hour
- **Chapter 2:** Echoes at 2:13
- **Chapter 3:** Shadows Across Main Street
- **Chapter 4:** The Chalk Symbols
- **Chapter 5:** All the Lost Pieces
- **Chapter 6:** The Clockmaker's Secret
- **Chapter 7:** Keepers of Time
- **Chapter 8:** Warnings in the Night
- **Chapter 9:** Patterns in the Fog
- **Chapter 10:** Unanswered Questions
- **Chapter 11:** Letters from the Past
- **Chapter 12:** The Society's Mark
- **Chapter 13:** Fractured Memories
- **Chapter 14:** Beneath the Boardwalk
- **Chapter 15:** Old Wounds
- **Chapter 16:** Whispers at the Lighthouse
- **Chapter 17:** The Hourglass Room
- **Chapter 18:** Confrontations
- **Chapter 19:** Tangled Timelines
- **Chapter 20:** The Choice
- **Chapter 21:** A Town Converges
- **Chapter 22:** The Final Ritual
- **Chapter 23:** Shifting Sands
- **Chapter 24:** What Remains
- **Chapter 25:** Second Chances

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Introduction

The town of Breakwater is a small, wind-lashed coastal haven clinging to the ragged edge of the Atlantic, where the sea mist wraps around clapboard houses and secrets drift in on every tide. It's the sort of place where the rhythm of life is as predictable as the rise and fall of the fishing boats in the harbor—until the night that an hour quietly vanishes, and nothing ever feels certain again.

For Nora Ellis, Breakwater is supposed to be a place of healing and new beginnings. Still reeling from the end of her marriage and finding solace in her classroom by day, Nora is haunted by restless, sleepless nights and the ache of loneliness in her rented cottage on the bluff. She hopes that time and the salt air will soften her grief and help her rebuild; yet, time, she soon learns, has other plans.

The first time it happens, Nora wakes with a splitting headache, a scrape along her arm she can't explain, and a lingering sense of dread. The clock on her nightstand blinks 3:15 AM—yet only moments earlier, she could have sworn it read 2:13. Her memories of the hour in between swirl like fog, fleeting and insubstantial. It would be easy to dismiss it as a symptom of stress, or a mundane lapse in memory—except that strange fragments begin to appear: a slip of paper tucked under her pillow, the faint scent of smoke, and bruises in the shape of unfamiliar symbols.

One night becomes two, then three. The missing hour returns, like a thief slipping through the shadows at exactly the same time. As the pattern sets in, Nora finds herself drawn to corners of town she's never visited, noticing whispered conversations in the bakery and anxious glances at the town's ancient clock tower. It's as though the very air of Breakwater holds its breath, waiting for something to give.

Driven by curiosity and fear in equal measure, Nora's search for answers collides with the arrival of Tyler Raines—the enigmatic new clockmaker whose midnight walks and knowing eyes suggest he's hiding more than a few secrets of his own. As their paths entwine and an uneasy alliance forms, Nora realizes that her quest is about more than solving a riddle; it's about reclaiming lost time and—perhaps—grasping a shot at forgiveness and hope, for herself and for the town that has quietly shaped the person she's becoming.

With each passing night, the urgency mounts. Nora's longing for understanding is matched only by her growing desire for a purposeful future, one not defined by what she has lost, but by what she dares to find. As the line between past and present blurs in Breakwater's salt-soaked air, the mystery of the disappearing hour is only the beginning.

Chapter One: The Missing Hour

The second time it happened, Nora knew it wasn't a fluke. The first instance, a week prior, had been easy enough to rationalize: a late night grading papers, a glass of wine, the lingering stress of her divorce finalized just months ago. Waking with that vague sense of disorientation, the clock reading 3:15 AM when she distinctly remembered checking it at 2:10 AM before drifting off, she'd chalked it up to a vivid dream or a momentary lapse of memory. But a faint, unfamiliar scent of sea salt and something metallic had clung to her bedsheets, and a small, perfectly round bruise had blossomed on her inner wrist, like a fingerprint pressed into her skin.

This time, the pattern was unmistakable. Nora had gone to bed early, determined to get a full night's rest. She'd meticulously checked the digital clock on her nightstand: 2:10 AM. The soft glow illuminated the framed photo of her and her sister, Lily, on their last pre-divorce trip to the Oregon coast. She'd closed her eyes, replaying the day's trivialities – a spirited debate among her fourth graders about the proper classification of a platypus, a surprisingly good cup of coffee from The Daily Grind, the lingering chill in the evening air.

Then, the abrupt jolt of waking. Not slowly, drifting back to consciousness, but as if someone had flicked a switch. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and a thin sheen of sweat coated her skin despite the cool night air seeping in through the slightly open window. Her head throbbed, a dull ache behind her eyes. She squinted at the clock. 3:13 AM.

She sat bolt upright, the sheets tangling around her legs. Two-thirteen. Three-thirteen. An hour had vanished. Not just from her memory, but from the actual, ticking passage of time. There was no way she could have slept through an entire hour, not with that jarring, instantaneous shift. The silence in the room was profound, almost heavy.

A sudden, sharp pain flared on her left shin. She pulled back the duvet to see a jagged, angry red scratch, several inches long, running down her calf. It looked fresh, as though she'd scraped it against something rough and splintered. But she hadn't gotten out of bed. She hadn't moved. Her cottage was small, meticulously kept, and devoid of any furniture sharp enough to inflict such a wound.

Then she noticed it. Tucked neatly beneath the edge of her pillow, a single, dried starfish, no bigger than her palm. It was a pale, almost ethereal white, its five arms perfectly intact. Nora picked it up, her fingers tracing its rough, calcified surface. Where had it come from? She hadn't been to the beach in days, and certainly hadn't brought any souvenirs into her bedroom. A shiver, colder than the ocean breeze,

snaked down her spine.

The following morning, the starfish sat on her bedside table, a silent, perplexing sentinel. The scratch on her leg was still there, angry and undeniable. And the vague, unsettling feeling of disorientation persisted, like a tune on the tip of her tongue that she couldn't quite recall. Nora tried to focus on school, on the comfort of routine, but her mind kept drifting back to the missing hour. It felt like a gap in her very existence, a torn page in the book of her life.

Later that week, it happened again. 2:13 AM. Then, the jolt. 3:13 AM. This time, there was no starfish, but a faint, metallic taste in her mouth, like old pennies. And on her forearm, just above her elbow, was a symbol drawn in what looked like faded red chalk: a simple circle with a line through it, like a negated zero. It wasn't permanent, a mere smudge, but it was there, undeniable.

Nora began to keep a journal. She started noting the exact time she went to bed, the last thing she remembered, and the moment she woke. She meticulously described any new injuries, strange objects, or inexplicable sensations. It felt absurd, like she was documenting a phantom illness, but the alternative—dismissing it as stress—was becoming increasingly impossible.

The incidents started to spill beyond her bedroom. One morning, she found her front door slightly ajar, despite having locked it securely the night before. Another time, a small, intricate carving of a whale, made of driftwood, appeared on her kitchen counter. She lived alone. The cottage was isolated on the bluff. No one had access. The unsettling feeling intensified, morphing from mere confusion into genuine alarm.

During her morning walk through Breakwater, past the fishing docks and the sleepy storefronts, Nora found herself scrutinizing her neighbors with a new intensity. Had Mrs. Henderson, the owner of the Yarn & Thread shop, seemed a little more tired than usual? Was the postman's gait a touch more sluggish? Were those dark circles under the eyes of the young barista at The Daily Grind just a sign of early shifts, or something more?

She started noticing things that she'd previously overlooked. A flicker of panic in old Mr. Abernathy's eyes when she mentioned waking up disoriented. A hushed conversation between two fishermen at the pier about "that time of night." And the town clock, perched atop the old bell tower, seemed to chime with an odd hesitancy around 2 AM, as if struggling to keep pace with the rest of the world.

One Tuesday morning, while picking up groceries at Miller's Market, Nora overheard fragments of a conversation between two women in the produce aisle. "...and the strangest dreams, Martha. Like I was walking in my sleep." "Oh, tell me about it, Agnes! Last week, I woke up with my car keys in the freezer. My car keys!" They

chuckled, but there was an underlying tremor of unease in their voices. Nora gripped her basket tighter. It wasn't just her.

The next night, the missing hour returned, accompanied by a dull ache in her left shoulder and a strong, inexplicable craving for coffee. She also found a single, tarnished brass button on her pillow, intricately engraved with a series of tiny, almost microscopic gears. It was too old, too unique, to be from any of her own clothes. It felt ancient.

The symbols started appearing around town too, not just in her bedroom. A faint chalk drawing of the same circle-and-line symbol Nora had seen on her arm appeared on the cobblestones near the lighthouse. Another, more elaborate, was scrawled on the back of a discarded newspaper near the town square, almost hidden beneath a bench. Nora's pulse quickened each time she spotted one, a cold knot forming in her stomach.

She tried to talk to Lily about it, but her sister, pragmatic and always busy in her life miles away in Portland, offered sensible but unhelpful advice. "Stress, Nora. You've been through a lot. See a doctor. Get some sleep." Nora knew it wasn't just stress. This was something else, something far stranger and more pervasive.

Her internal compass, once so reliable, felt like it was spinning wildly. She'd always prided herself on her grounded, logical nature. Now, she was grappling with something that defied all logic. The lost hours, the inexplicable objects, the strange injuries—they were chipping away at her sense of reality, leaving her feeling increasingly vulnerable and isolated. The quiet, healing haven of Breakwater was beginning to feel less like a sanctuary and more like a trap, its gentle rhythms masking a deeper, unsettling disquiet.

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