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Instructions for Leaving the
Lighthouse

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*For the memories that weren't yours,
and the people you never forgot.*

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Chapter 1

Many ships in search for the harbor of Tidehaven relied on the lighthouse to navigate past the dangerous cliffs. But on a stormy night in 1961 tragedy struck, the lighthouse simply stopped working. No flash from the tower, no steady rotation of the light across the water. Just darkness. Many people lost their lives that day, unable to navigate their ships away from the cliffs in time.

The wires were checked. The bulb was brand new. There was no corrosion, no blown fuse, no reason for the light to stop shining. They ran tests, scratched their heads, and ran them again. The lighthouse was never able to turn back on after that.

Many believed the very land the lighthouse was on was cursed, so they moved the harbor down the coast and built a new lighthouse — sleek, modern and (hopefully) dependable. The old one was left alone, quietly decommissioned like a winter coat in summer.

The keeper, though, had lived there nearly all his life. He was too old to start over and too stubborn to leave. So Tidehaven, perhaps out of guilt or pity or both, let him stay. They said it was kinder that way. Let him live out his days in the building he loved, even if the light inside never worked again.

Then, in 1962, another storm swept through — this one

louder, angrier, and far more destructive. By morning, the lighthouse that had stood for so long was reduced to rubble, crumbling like a poorly baked cake. They found the old keeper lifeless in his chair, as if the raging storm had somehow respected his quiet retirement, avoiding him in its fury.

That should've been the end of Tidehaven's Lighthouse. And yet, more than sixty years later, Elias Mirel can still see the lighthouse. Clear as day. The slow, steady blink of its light turning through the sky. Making its way through the mist.

Which leaves only one question:

If it fell in 1962...

what is he looking at now?

The lighthouse more or less looks like it did in the photographs. Same weathered stone, same flaking paint, the same narrow windows. The only real difference is the bars over the front door — thick, rust-streaked iron that wasn't there in any of the old photos Elias had seen.

The keeper's house at its base looks worse off. Slates are missing from its roof, and the gutter is barely hanging on by a single rusted screw. One of its windows is boarded. Another is simply gone, the glass shattered, the frame edged by black mildew. A pair of gulls picks at the dark moss lining the chimney, then begins tossing scraps of old nesting material over the edge — bits of grass, dried feathers, and something that looks suspiciously like bone.

The rain has only just passed. Everything is wet and the air is thick with the smell of salt and damp earth. His shoes sink into the mud with a *squelch* as he steps off the gravel path and into the overgrown path circling the tower.

Rain has dragged trails of dirt down the lighthouse walls like tears. The water clings to the tall grass, making his pants a lot

wetter than he had hoped. The faint sound of waves breaking against the cliffs comes from far below.

He circles the lighthouse slowly, looking for anything that might explain how it's still standing today. Elias slips a gloved hand into his coat and draws out a compass. It's a small thing, worn smooth by time — its casing is dented, its glass smudged by fingerprints that he has never been able to rub away. It hasn't ever pointed north, but that's not what Elias uses it for. The compass only moves when things around it *aren't quite right*. And lately it has only been pointing towards the lighthouse, eagerly shaking its needle and spinning like crazy when he is close to it.

Elias looks up at the light in the lighthouse and takes a deep breath. He has solved many mysteries in his forty-one years of living, surely he can crack this one too. He slips the compass back into his coat, even if it almost seems to protest when he does. He checks his watch, watching his minute hand move faster than it should. Almost an hour had gone by since he started walking towards the lighthouse.

Interesting

He gives the lighthouse one more look before he turns to walk back to his car. The wind picks up as he goes, stirring the wet grass and brushing cold air against the back of his neck — like something is asking him not to stay away for too long.

* * *

His House sits a little farther back from the road than the others on his street, framed by a low iron fence with a gate that always seems to stick halfway through opening it. Beyond it, the dirt path is still soft from the rain, water filling the muddy prints

at the start of it — a pair of hands and knees by the looks of it. The garden on either side has grown rather unruly: rosemary is spilling into the path, rosebushes with far more bush than rose. And a few lavender plants cling to life like they're running on spite alone.

When Elias parks in front of The House, the first thing he sees is a man sitting on his porch. He hasn't noticed Elias yet — he's hunched over his phone, elbows on his knees, his freckled face lit faintly by the screen. His hair is a tangle of loose curls, the color reminding Elias of cinnamon. His coat is much too thin for this weather, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Elias opens the gate quietly, eyes still on the man. Then lets it fall shut.

The clang of iron on iron makes the man startle.

"Can I help you?" Elias asks.

The man gets to his feet. His trousers are streaked with mud, and the palms of his hands somehow seem even worse off- he's clearly tried to wipe them clean on his coat with little success. Still, he grins, wide and sheepish. "Couldn't get it open, so I climbed over." He tells Elias while gesturing to the gate.

Elias frowns. Now that he's closer, the man's face looks... familiar. He checks his coat pocket for his keys. Maybe it's nothing. *Maybe the man just has one of those faces.*

"I don't like people visiting when I'm not home."

The man nods "R-right yes, of course." he replies. "I was told to come here if I had any information about the lighthouse."

Finding his keys, he fishes them out of his pocket and opens his front door. "Come in. I will make us tea, and we can talk."

"You're...Elias Miler right?" The man asks him, still on the porch.

"Mirel. Yes." Elias corrects him, stepping inside and taking

off his shoes. The House doesn't like him tracking dirt across the floors. The fact that his trousers are still dripping with rainwater is bad enough.

The entryway is dim, lit only by the light filtering through the old windows. The walls are paneled in a dark wood, aged and unpolished. In some places, the grain has started to rise. Everything smells faintly of dust and old paper. A tall coat rack leans in the corner, heavy with coats in dark, muted colors.

“Good,” the man says as he steps inside. “Then I’m in the right place.” He smiles. “Benjamin Summers. Most people call me Benji.”

Benji Summers.

So that’s why he looks familiar.

* * *

Elias had never been what you’d call well-liked in his childhood. Kids tend to avoid the ones that bring little bits of bone to school in matchboxes and ask too many questions during their history class. He liked things that had stories — things with cracks and maybe a little bit of rust. He spend his allowance on broken watches and chipped mugs. Objects that looked like they’d been loved.

When a new family moved onto his street, he never expected to get along so well with their kid.

He was two years younger than Elias and a total opposite. Loud. Chatty. Seemed almost allergic to the silence Elias liked so much. The kind of boy who’d break your window with a football and be surprised it didn’t bounce.

And yet, Benji followed him everywhere — even to The House that most adults crossed the street to avoid.

It wasn't like the other houses in Tidehaven. It sat a little further back from street, surrounded by iron fencing. The garden never seemed to grow anything but weeds. The path to the front door vanished under them years ago. Elias couldn't remember it looking any other way.

He never crossed the street when he walked past it on his way to school. He always stopped to watch it. Something about it reminded him of the broken watches he loved so much.

He wanted to go in, he just...hadn't.

Not until the day he and Benji passed it on their way to school, and Benji had looked at the fence and said, "You could probably climb that."

Then he'd given Elias a boost and climbed in after him.

The House looked so much bigger now that they were over the fence. Benji grabbed Elias's hand and dragged him toward the door. The weeds almost seemed to part for them, catching at Elias's trousers as he passed. The mud sucked at their shoes but didn't hold on — like the garden *wanted* them to reach The House.

"Wait! We can't just barge in," Elias said, as he twisted his hand out of Benji's grip.

Benji turned, grinning like they were on a playground and not standing in the front yard of a house that practically radiated *Do Not Enter*. "Why not? I mean, come on — no one's lived here in years. Look at the place." He gestured vaguely to the jungle of ivy and bramble that had devoured the path. "It's abandoned."

They were only halfway to the door when it creaked open. Slowly. Wider and wider. The doorknob didn't turn.

Inside, an empty hallway waited.

A soft breeze drifted out — warm and dry. It carried the scent of wet wood, old books, and something sweet.

Was that apple pie?

Elias froze, staring at the doorway. He wasn't scared. He felt oddly welcome — and he *did* love apple pie.

His feet moved before he realized he was walking. Benji tugged at his sleeve. "Come on, man," he whispered. "I really don't think we should go in anymore. That place looks *super* haunted."

Elias shrugged him off.

Something was begging him to walk in. He needed to make tea. Clean the library. They had a visitor, after all — The House should be tidy and neat and clean.

It's always proper to make tea for your guests.

The door slammed shut behind him.

He soon learned that The House held memories. And it was oh-so-eager to share its gift with someone who might appreciate them.

Elias hadn't thought he'd been gone long. A few hours, maybe. The light had barely changed when he stepped back outside.

But the garden was different now. The weeds were gone. In their place: rosemary, rosebushes, and a rather fierce-looking lavender plant.

The police said he'd been missing for six days.

Benji's family had already packed up and left town by then.

The broken watches weren't just broken anymore. He could feel the weight of time in them — flickers of memory, bits of lives that didn't belong to him. Sometimes he saw whole moments. Sometimes it was only a sound, a scent, the echo of someone else's grief.

It wasn't just the watches, either. The bones he collected, the chipped mugs. Everything held memories.

His parents hadn't believed him. They sent him to therapy,

hoping it would help him process whatever happened inside that house. He told the therapist it had stopped.

It hadn't.

But he started wearing gloves after that — just in case. He didn't like being pulled into other people's memories without warning.

In time, he stopped thinking about The House. Or tried to.

Years passed.

Then a letter arrived — heavy paper, unfamiliar handwriting. The previous owner had died. The House was his now.

He moved in later that week.

And it felt like coming home.