

Elara Finch had never trusted the sea, but she trusted the letters.

Three of them, each arriving exactly one year apart, each written in the same looping hand she knew as well as her own heartbeat. Her brother's handwriting. Except her brother had been dead for nearly four years.

The first letter had been brief—just her name, a single line about a hidden place, and a set of coordinates scribbled beneath. She hadn't gone. Not then. Grief had been fresh, and hope too dangerous to touch.

The second letter arrived one year later. This one was longer, urgent. A warning about "the breach" and "the days thinning." Words that felt like they belonged to another world, not their sleepy fishing village. She'd burned that one in a panic, ashamed of how fiercely she wanted it to be real.

But the third letter, which arrived that morning, was different. The paper was damp with sea spray. The ink smelled of brine and kelp. And the message—barely two sentences—felt less like a request and more like a summons:

"If you want the truth, come tonight. Bring the compass."

Only one person had ever known about the compass: her brother, Rowan.

So now, at twilight, Elara walked toward the old lighthouse at the far end of the cliffs, the compass tucked into her coat pocket. The wind tugged at her hair. The tide below churned with restless whitecaps, as if the ocean itself were arguing with her decision.

The lighthouse had been abandoned for years, its top lantern shattered in a storm. She reached the rusted door, swallowed once, and pushed it open.

Inside, the air was damp and cold. The spiral staircase creaked beneath her boots as she climbed, one careful step after another. When she reached the lantern room, she stopped short.

Someone was standing there.

A man—back turned, shoulders broad, sea-wet coat dripping onto the floor. He faced the shattered window overlooking the churning waves.

"Rowan?" The word escaped her before she could stop it.

The man turned.

Her breath left her.

The face was her brother's. The crooked smile, the scar above the left eyebrow, even the dimple he hated. But his eyes—his eyes were wrong. Darker. Deeper. Like tides pulling inward.

"You came," he said.

The voice was Rowan's too—soft, warm, threaded with a familiarity that made her chest ache.

“What... how are you here?” Elara whispered.

He stepped closer. “I didn't die the way they said.”

That made her flinch. She'd been the one who found his empty boat. She'd seen the shattered rail. The blood on the wood.

“You drowned,” she whispered. “They searched for weeks.”

“I drowned,” he agreed. “But I didn't die.”

Cold washed through her. The wind howled through the broken lantern window, sending salt spray across the room.

“Elara,” he said gently, “can I see the compass?”

Against her better judgment, she pulled it from her coat. The brass glinted in the fading light, its glass face cracked but still intact.

Rowan's eyes softened. “You kept it.”

“It's all I had left of you.”

He reached for it—and hesitated, hand trembling. “May I?”

Something in his expression didn't look like longing. It looked like hunger.

Elara tightened her grip. “First tell me what's going on.”

Rowan exhaled slowly, like someone forcing patience.

“There's a place beneath the waves,” he said. “A gate between worlds. It pulled me under. I've been trying to come back ever since.”

“By writing letters?”

“I can send things through... cracks,” he said. “Just enough to reach you. Just enough to ask for help.”

Elara swallowed. “And the compass?”

“It opens the gate.”

Lightning flashed across the horizon, illuminating his face. For a moment, she saw something shift beneath his skin—like shadows moving behind a thin veil.

“Elara,” Rowan said again, voice tighter now, “give me the compass.”

She stepped back.

“No.”

His jaw clenched. “I don’t have time to fight with you.”

“You’re not my brother.”

The room fell silent except for the wind. Rowan’s smile vanished.

“Elara,” he said, voice hollow now, “you don’t understand. I am Rowan. But I am also what the sea made of him.”

She backed toward the staircase.

“What does that mean?”

He took a step forward, and for the first time she noticed his boots left small puddles—not of water, but of something thicker, darker, like ink.

“When a soul crosses the gate,” he said, “something has to come back. Something has to wear the memory.”

Her skin crawled.

“Elara. I need the compass. If you give it to me willingly, I can cross fully. I can be whole again.”

“And if I don’t?”

His eyes darkened, swallowing the last traces of her brother.

“Then I take it.”

A wave slammed against the cliff below, shaking the lighthouse.

Elara ran.

Her footsteps echoed down the staircase, the compass clutched to her chest. She didn’t look back, not even when she heard the wet, dragging footsteps following, closer and closer—

Just as she reached the door, a hand slammed onto her shoulder.

She screamed—

—and the compass in her hand pulsed, glowing faintly gold.

The thing wearing her brother’s face recoiled with a hiss, skin rippling like disturbed water.

“Elara—please—” he rasped, voice fractured.

She didn’t stop.

She burst out into the stormy night, clutching the glowing compass as the sea roared below and the lighthouse groaned behind her.

Whatever Rowan had become—or whatever was pretending to be him—was still inside.

For now.

Because the compass was still glowing.

And because the sea had begun to whisper her name.