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Harbor of Lies

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Introduction

The moon hangs low over the harbor, a frost-white coin skimming the rim of the world. Halyards tick against their masts like nervous teeth. The tide is on the make, a slow, muscular pull that swallows rock by rock along the breakwater, leaving the granite slick with weed and the smell of cold salt and diesel. Out beyond the channel bell, a shape sits on the water without lights, a darker smear against dark—too big to be a lobster boat, too patient to be a pleasure craft.

She is breathing too fast, fogging the air in quick bursts as she picks her way along the rocks where the road peters out. In town the bars have gone quiet; the last porch light on Gull Point winked out twenty minutes ago. Here there is only the scratch of her soles, the slap of water against the quarry-cut stones, the stubborn thump of her heart. She keeps her phone clenched in one hand, thumb blindly searching for a signal that never comes. A gull lifts from the pilings, startled by her movement or something behind her—she can't tell which.

The beam sweeps once, a pale blade cutting the fog. She drops low, presses herself into a crease of stone where bladderwrack brushes her cheek with cold, wet fingers. The light passes, returns, steadies. Voices bump against the wind, flattened by the water into something almost kind. She hears the cough of a small outboard somewhere in the throat of the inlet and the creak of a wooden skiff rubbing itself against a slip, impatient.

She runs. The decision is a crack, clean and echoing. Her sneaker slides on a film of kelp and she goes hard to one knee, breath knocked out in a sound that's barely hers. Fingers—gloved—find the back of her coat. A voice says her name without question, like an item on a list. There is the sweet-sour reek of some chemical and the iron taste of fear rising into her mouth. She kicks, catches someone's shin, hears a muffled curse. The phone skitters away across the rock and sinks with a tiny, satisfied sound.

They are practiced, these hands. They pull her up and turn her, not cruelly but with no room for refusal, and the world narrows to the scrape of rubber against stone as they guide her toward the slip where the skiff noses, where the outboard coughs again and goes quiet. A scrap of fabric tears free from her jacket and snags on a rusted lobster trap, a small bright flag against the dark. One shoe is wrenched loose in the struggle and left behind, its laces trailing like weed.

A figure lingers, kneels. The glove comes off. The bare hand is pale in the moonlight, the fingers sure. It presses a small metal face into the wet sand at the water's edge and holds it there for a count that feels ceremonial. When the hand lifts away, the

imprint remains: a trident inside a circle, one tine nicked, the circle notched at the compass west. The hand closes around the object and disappears into the pocket of a coat that reflects nothing. The tide reaches, licks the edges of the mark, considers.

The skiff pushes off. Water beads and runs from the oars; the wake curls back and is taken. She makes a sound, small and swallowed by the foghorn's low complaint. The boat turns without lights, finds the black path between buoys by memory or by something more certain, and heads toward the shape lying still beyond the channel. On the point, the lighthouse blinks its coded reassurance, blind to what slips between flashes.

By dawn the sneaker will be found by a man who goes out alone, a man who has watched this harbor all his life and trusts it the way some people trust God. He will nudge it with his boot and glance up at the line of wet sand where the emblem's edges have softened into nothing. He will tell himself it is a tourist's lost shoe, a fluke of tide and carelessness, because he has learned, like everyone else, which thoughts to fold away.

And still, somewhere in the town's sleeping middle, in a room where the wallpaper peels at the window and a family photo hangs sickly crooked, a memory will stir: another night, another tide, another girl who walked out toward the rocks and did not come back. The harbor holds its bargains. The water keeps its secrets. But only for a while.

CHAPTER ONE: The Date in the Note

The drive up Route 1 felt less like a homecoming and more like a slow march into a courtroom where she was both defendant and counsel. Ten years had smoothed over the potholes she remembered in the asphalt, but the gravel crunch of the Blackwater town limits sign still sounded like a verdict. Mara Bennett pulled her rental sedan to the shoulder and killed the engine, letting the sudden silence press against her ears. The air that came through the cracked window was a physical thing—salt, pine rot, and the low-tide funk of mussels baking on the rocks. It was the smell of her childhood, and it tasted like guilt.

Her apartment in Portland was a curated box of white walls and curated noise, the hum of a city that didn't know her name. Blackwater was different. Every siding, every sagging porch, held a memory of Lily. The swing set at the elementary school where Lily had tried to hang herself from the top bar just to see what it felt like; the corner store where Lily had shoplifted a tube of glitter lipstick and then confessed to the cashier three minutes later. The harbor itself, that slate-grey mouth, swallowing and giving back whatever it pleased. Mara had run from this town at eighteen, but the town hadn't stopped reaching for her. It had tugged on the fishing line of her podcast, *Cold Tides*, and reeled her back in with the promise of a new disappearance that mirrored the old.

The house was exactly as she'd left it for the funeral and never returned. Her mother had stayed another two years before the quiet drove her to a condo in Florida, leaving the Victorian's peeling paint and widow's walk to the gulls and the damp. Mara let herself in through the side door, the key still stiff in the lock. The hallway smelled of closed-up rooms and dust. She didn't turn on the lights, moving by memory to the staircase, her hand skimming the banister and coming away grey. Upstairs, Lily's door was shut. Mara stood before it for a long moment, listening to the thud of her own pulse, then turned the brass knob.

The room was a time capsule. Lily had been nineteen when she vanished, and everything she'd left behind wore the patina of a teenager's fierce, messy heart. Posters of bands that had flamed out; a stack of battered paperbacks with passages underlined in red; a bottle of blue nail polish open on the dresser, its cap askew. Mara moved through it carefully, as if the wrong step might shatter a spell. She ran a finger over the headboard where Lily had carved *L.B. + R.H.* inside a lopsided heart with a paperclip, the initials of a boy who'd married someone else and now sold insurance in Bangor. She was here to work, to dig, to pull this room apart for what it had hidden from the investigators who had glanced under the bed and called it a runaway. The police had been sure Lily had just left. It had been easier for everyone to believe that.

She started with the closet, shifting hangers, checking pockets, then moved to the desk under the window. The drawers were empty except for a desiccated spider and a paperclip. She crouched and ran her hand along the underside of the desktop. Nothing. She pulled the desk away from the wall, the legs groaning against the hardwood. Dust motes rose in a lazy cloud. And there, taped to the back of the drawer cavity where no casual glance would ever land, was a folded square of lined paper. Mara's breath caught. She peeled the tape free and unfolded the note. The handwriting was Lily's neat, backward-leaning script, a little smudged. It was a single line.

September 24. Pier 4. Midnight. Payment for the passage.

Mara stared at the words, her brain cataloging them, processing them. The date. The place. The phrase *payment for the passage*. It sounded illicit and final. It could have been about anything—gas for a boat, rent for a room, a drug buy—but the specificity of the pier and the hour felt like a spike in the pulse of the investigation. She checked her phone for the date the first time she'd aired Lily's story, a year ago. It had been September 20. The anniversary of the disappearance. The new one—the girl they'd found the sneaker for—had vanished on September 22. The dates were close but not identical. Still, the proximity sent a line of ice down her back. It was a detail the old investigation had missed, or buried, or simply never found. It felt like a key.

She sat on the edge of Lily's bed, the note in her lap, and opened the recording app on her phone. "Lily's room," she whispered, voice tight. "Found a note taped to the underside of the desk drawer. Dated September 24. Not the day she was last seen, but close. Pier 4. Midnight. Payment for the passage. We need to find out what passage she was talking about." She stopped the recording and sat in the quiet, letting the reality of it settle. This wasn't a runaway's messy room anymore. It was a crime scene she had overlooked.

Her phone buzzed. Mira Alvarez, her producer, was calling from Portland. "Hey," Mira said, bypassing hello. "The station's legal is twitchy about the new episode. They want to know if you're going to say anything that gets us sued for implying the Sheriff's department sat on evidence." Mara could hear the clack of Mira's keyboard in the background, a steady, anxious rhythm. "I told them you're just following leads, but if you find something concrete, we need to buffer it carefully. What did you get?"

"Maybe something," Mara said, standing and walking to the window. The harbor was a sliver of pewter between the houses. "A date and a pier. Midnight. Payment for the passage. It's not in the case files. It was hidden." She heard Mira's intake of breath. "That's good. That's *airable*. But be careful, Mara. Blackwater isn't just a place on a map. It's a tangle of relationships. You go poking at the old wounds, people will remind you whose daughter you are." Mara's jaw tightened. "I know exactly whose daughter I

am. That's why I'm here."

She hung up and tucked the note into her jacket pocket, patting it to make sure it was secure. The light was failing, draining out of the sky in a long, slow sigh. She needed to walk the pier, see it with her own eyes, but first she needed to see the harbor from the widow's walk. The narrow staircase to the top was a tight spiral, the wood cool under her hands. At the top, she pushed open the hatch and stepped out onto the small platform. The wind was stronger up here, whipping strands of hair across her face. The town lights were coming on in clusters, warm gold against the deepening blue. The harbor was a network of dark fingers, the piers jutting out like ribs.

Her eyes traced the lines of the docks. Pier 1 was the main marina, where the charter boats tied up. Pier 2 and 3 were for commercial fishing, the boats often out at dawn and back by noon. Pier 4 was different. It was the old industrial pier, part of the Hale Maritime shipyard that dominated the north side of the harbor. It was a place of rust and shadows, used for overflow storage and, rumor had it, things that weren't strictly on any manifest. She scanned it now, looking for anything out of the ordinary. The lights along the walkway were on, casting sickly yellow pools on the concrete, but the pier itself was mostly dark. A few shapes moved down there—men walking the line, checking lines, or maybe just taking the air. It was impossible to tell from this distance.

As she watched, a pair of headlights swept along the access road that ran behind the shipyard. A truck, big and dark, pulled to a stop at the gated entrance to Pier 4. The gate was supposed to be locked at night, but a figure stepped out of the shadows, unlocked it, and swung it open. The truck rolled through, and the gate was closed again. It wasn't unusual. Shipments happened at all hours. But the lack of official markings on the truck, the quiet way it moved, it all felt like the quiet beating of a heart she wasn't supposed to hear. It was the first tangible piece of movement that matched the feeling she'd had since reading the note—a sense that Blackwater held its breath and did its most important work while the rest of the town slept.

She stayed on the widow's walk until the truck's taillights disappeared behind a warehouse, then went back down, her legs unsteady. The house felt colder now, the note in her pocket a heavy weight. She needed to walk the ground, to feel the texture of the pier under her feet. She locked the house behind her and walked the two blocks to the harbor, her boots crunching on the gravel path that ran along the seawall. The air was colder down here, saturated with the smell of brine and creosote. A few fishermen nodded to her as she passed, their faces weathered into anonymity by the sun and the wind. No one spoke her name. It was a small town's particular talent: knowing exactly who you were and choosing, for a moment, not to see you.

Pier 4 was roped off with "No Trespassing" signs every ten feet, the metal links of the gate cold and slick with spray. A high fence topped with coiled wire ran the length of

the property. It wasn't a place you could wander onto by accident. She stood at the gate and peered through, letting her eyes adjust. The concrete was stained with oil and rust. A stack of shipping containers sat to one side, their doors padlocked. A crane loomed in the dark, its arm resting like a silent accusation over the water. She could see the place where the truck had entered, the tracks still visible in the damp ground. She tried to imagine Lily here, at midnight, waiting for someone. What passage could she have been buying? And who was the buyer?

A shape detached itself from the shadows near the first container, and Mara's breath hitched. It was a dog, a big Lab mix with a graying muzzle, who trotted over to the gate and sniffed at her boots. "Hey, boy," she murmured, reaching a hand through the bars. The dog nudged her fingers, his tail wagging slowly. He wore a collar with a faded tag. She squinted at it. *Rusty*, it said. *If lost, call the Harbor Master*. A voice carried from further down the pier. "Rusty! Get back here!" The dog gave her one last look and trotted off. The voice belonged to a man walking toward the gate, his flashlight beam swinging low. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and moved with the easy balance of someone who knew every inch of the dock.

He stopped a few feet away, the light hitting the ground at her feet. "Can I help you?" The voice was familiar, low and gravelly with a hint of warmth that made her chest ache. She stepped into the edge of the beam. "Cole?" The flashlight lifted, blinding her for a second before he angled it away. "Mara? Christ. I heard you were back." Cole Harper. The boy who'd taught her how to skip stones, who'd been Lily's friend as much as hers, whose family had worked the docks for three generations. He was broader now, his face carved with lines the sea had drawn. He wore a canvas jacket and heavy boots, and he looked at her like he was seeing a ghost.

"Just getting some air," she said, the lie thin and brittle. Cole's gaze drifted to the roped-off pier, then back to her face. He knew. He'd always been able to read her better than anyone. "This isn't a place to walk at night, Mara." It wasn't an accusation, just a fact. "I know. I was at the house. Lily's house." She saw a flicker of something in his eyes—pity, maybe, or shared grief. "Find anything?" She hesitated. She wanted to trust him, but trust was a rope she'd learned not to lean on. "Maybe," she said. "You still work the harbor?" He nodded, shoving his hands into his pockets. "On and off. The big company—Hale Maritime—bought out half the independent boats, but I still take mine out when I can. Keeps me out of trouble." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You're here about the new girl, aren't you? The one they found the shoe for."

It wasn't a question. "I'm here about Lily," she said, her voice firmer than she felt. "The new girl just proves the pattern hasn't broken. Someone's still pulling women off this pier." Cole looked out at the dark water, his jaw tight. "Be careful, Mara. This town... it's got its own laws. You start dragging things up, you're not just fighting memories. You're fighting livelihoods. People with power." He took a step back, calling the dog. "I'm at the marina most days if you need me. But think about whether you

want to open this box again.” He turned and walked away, the beam of his flashlight disappearing into the gloom, leaving Mara alone at the gate, the weight of the note in her pocket suddenly heavier.

She stood there a long time, listening to the slap of water against the pilings and the distant moan of a foghorn beginning its nightly watch. She thought about Lily, about the sister who’d been all sharp edges and soft heart, who’d believed in the good of people until the day she didn’t. She thought about the note—*payment for the passage*. She thought about the truck slipping through the gate like it belonged there. The wind coming off the water was colder now, cutting through her jacket. She pulled her phone out and opened the voice memo app again. “Pier 4,” she whispered. “Cole still here. He warned me off. He mentioned Hale Maritime. We need to look at their shipping records, their manifests. Anything that moves through this harbor at midnight without a light.” She stopped the recording and looked back through the fence at the dark shape of the pier. The answer was here. It was locked behind the gate, buried under years of tide and lies, and she would drag it out into the light, no matter what it cost.

The town was asleep when she walked back, but she felt eyes on her from the dark windows. It was a sensation she knew well from childhood—the feeling of being watched by the collective memory of the place. She let herself into the house and locked the door, then went to the kitchen and laid Lily’s note on the table. She took a photo of it and sent it to Mira with a one-line text: *This is real*. Then she opened her laptop and began to search for Hale Maritime shipping schedules, public records, anything that might explain what a midnight passage on Pier 4 could be. The screen’s glow was the only light in the room. Outside, the tide turned, the harbor exhaling its secrets in a long, slow breath. The game had begun.

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