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The Night Truth Came Home

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Introduction

The bell above the bookstore door gives a tired jingle every time it opens, a sound like a coin dropped in a shallow well. In winter, it rings less. Fog swallows the harbor and seeps inland, dampening wool coats and turning the streetlights into halos. Inside Bennett Books, the air holds to old paper and binding glue, dust motes drifting in a slow private snow. Claire Bennett stands behind the counter with her sleeves pushed to her elbows, cataloging a stack of paperbacks with a fountain pen that once bled through her mother's checklists. The radiator ticks and knocks. Somewhere beneath the wood floor, the Atlantic breathes; she feels it when the quiet is deep enough—salt in her throat, a faint thud like a slow heart.

She came back in late autumn with three boxes, a reluctance suitcase, and a set of keys that still don't sit right in her palm. Forty minutes north in her old life, there had been deadlines and sticky-note walls, coffee spooned into her mouth on the run, a voice in her ear telling her how long to a segment break. Now there are spines to straighten and names to remember. Fishermen come in for almanacs and true-crime paperbacks, tourists for romances with lighthouses on the covers, high schoolers for anything they can read in a night. Claire's hands move without deciding. She is out of practice talking about weather and recipes and who's back in town, but she has not forgotten how to listen, which is the same skill pointed in a kinder direction. In a town like this, people talk around what they mean. The pauses are the best tells.

Lena Ortiz is in the back with a box cutter, humming under her breath and carving through packing tape like a careful surgeon. She knows which regulars hate to be asked how they're doing and which ones need the asking. She is the person who pressed a hand to Claire's shoulder the first morning the sign swung in the wind again—Bennett Books in flaking gold leaf—and said, It's yours now, but your mother would like what you've done. Claire pretended not to clutch at the counter. Grief makes a seeker out of you; it sharpens your eyes and breaks your heart in ways you don't notice until you're answering a question with your mother's voice.

Maya used to explode into this room the way summer thunderstorms do—sudden and alive, leaving the air cleaner and the floor wet. When they were kids, she'd dance between the narrow aisles, fingertips skating over the books like a pickpocket casing pockets. These days, Maya is thirty-two and does not enter so much as appear, a flash of lipstick in the glass, a laugh in the doorway that makes heads turn on the sidewalk. She is the kind of beautiful that makes people reroute their plans and pretend they didn't. She and Claire are magnets set wrong: sometimes they snap together so hard the impact stuns them; sometimes all they do is slide away. They've been both sisters at once since the funeral, since the will, since someone had to decide whether to sell

the shop and neither of them could stomach the idea of their mother's handwriting hauled to a landfill.

The town has its own rituals. Gulls wheel and swear over the docked boats, the bait shed door bangs, and somewhere a radio plays the same song on a loop. Mayor Halvorsen's smile looks airbrushed on a banner across Main Street: Winter Lights Festival—Tonight! Bundle Up. Claire can count his votes in that smile, even from across the street. She tells herself she has put reporting behind her, that she is content to know the rhythm without digging out the beat. Then Jonah Reed steps off the curb, all winter coat and badge, and she feels the snap of old nerves recalling a younger story they told themselves. He nods through the window and keeps going. His mother buys cookbooks here and tells Claire she's too thin. It is that kind of town—every hello means twenty prior goodbyes and a few you don't talk about.

The storm talk begins in the late afternoon, slipping in the way the fog does: a weather alert buzzing a phone; a barometer falling; a fisherman tightening his jaw and his knots. Claire flips the brass sign to Closed for an hour at five, the sky already gone to pewter, and stands with Lena at the window to watch the first lanterns wink to life along the waterfront. The Winter Lights are tradition born of too many dark months—paper shades swaying from porch eaves, a line of people with mittened hands moving toward the harbor for cider and a bonfire on the gravel. The smell of cloves and woodsmoke will braid with salt; the foghorn will sound like grief and comfort at the same time. Claire rubs her thumb over a groove worn into the counter and tells herself she will not look for a story. Tonight, she'll look for her sister's face in the crowd.

Maya had said she'd stop by before the procession, had texted a string of hearts and a request for a scarf because hers was "somewhere romantic" and likely unrecoverable. Claire wrapped a red wool one and left it on the endcap under True Crime—an irony that made her shake her head—and waited. Instead of Maya, she got a wind that pushed under the door and lifted the edges of the flyers on the corkboard, and an elderly man who asked whether they had any Melville that didn't smell "too Herman." Claire laughed, then realized she was delaying a decision that wasn't really a decision at all. She promised their mother she'd keep an eye on Maya. Promises don't have expiration dates, even if sisters do.

At six-thirty, she buttons her coat and pockets the shop keys, the metal cold enough to sting. Lena bumps her shoulder and says, Call if you need rescuing from cider or from men who think they're interesting. Outside, fog beads her lashes; the street is slick with a fine skin of salt blown off the harbor. The light has the fuzzy quality of memory. Claire locks the door and tests it twice. Behind her, Bennet Books glows like a lit ship in a dark slip, and for a breath she wishes she could stay anchored in that warm, papery air. Then she turns toward the water, toward the lanterns and the crowd and her sister's orbit, and walks into the night that will change everything. The wind

smells of snow. Somewhere offshore, the truth has already begun its slow return.

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CHAPTER ONE: Festival Night

The Winter Lights Festival was less an event and more a collective exhalation, a shared shrug against the long, dark New England winter. Claire pushed her way through the thickening crowd, a scent of fried dough and spruce needles clinging to the damp air. Lanterns bobbed on invisible strings, their soft glow fighting a losing battle against the encroaching fog that had begun to roll in from the harbor, licking at the edges of the wharf like a hungry ghost. Children, bundled like small, colorful puffballs, chased each other with glowing plastic swords. Teenagers huddled in groups, their laughter sharp and bright against the rhythmic drone of the foghorn.

She spotted Maya almost immediately, a beacon of irreverent energy in the muted palette of the crowd. Her sister was laughing, head thrown back, a splash of red lipstick against pale skin, her dark hair a wild tumble around her shoulders. She was talking to a cluster of people near the bonfire, a glowing ring of faces warmed by the crackling flames. Mayor Halvorsen, immaculate in a cashmere coat, stood a little apart from the main group, his polished smile reflecting the firelight. Jonah Reed was there too, his broad shoulders visible even from a distance, chatting with a couple of uniformed officers. The scene felt both familiar and strangely distant to Claire, like watching a movie of her own life.

Claire hugged the red wool scarf tighter around her neck, its softness a small comfort against the damp chill that was beginning to penetrate her coat. She felt a familiar pull to melt into the shadows, to simply observe, a habit honed during her years as a journalist. But tonight wasn't about observation. Tonight was about Maya. She navigated through a cluster of shivering couples, past a vendor selling steaming mugs of mulled wine, until she was close enough to catch snippets of conversation. Maya was holding court, animated, her hands gesturing wildly as she told some story. It was always a story with Maya.

"There you are," Claire said, her voice a little louder than intended over the festival din. Maya turned, her eyes, the same shade of deep hazel as Claire's, widening in surprise, then narrowing with an almost imperceptible flicker. That flicker, Claire knew, meant she was being assessed.

"Claire Bear!" Maya cried, her voice bright, perhaps a touch too bright. She detached herself from the group with an easy grace, a practiced smile for the mayor, a quick nod to Jonah. "I thought you weren't coming."

"You left your scarf," Claire said, holding out the scarlet wool. "And you said you'd stop by the shop."

Maya took the scarf, knotting it loosely around her throat. "Oh, right, the scarf. Thanks. And the shop... I got caught up. You know how it is." She didn't meet Claire's gaze, instead scanning the crowd as if searching for someone else.

"No, I don't," Claire said, a sharper edge in her voice than she'd intended. "I've been waiting for you all afternoon. You could have texted."

Maya sighed, a theatrical puff of air that feathered her bangs. "Don't start, Claire. Not tonight. It's the festival." She gestured vaguely at the swirling lights, the festive air. "Can't we just... enjoy it?"

A familiar tension settled between them, a low hum beneath the surface of the sisterly banter. It was the same old song, a duet of Maya's impulsiveness and Claire's ingrained sense of responsibility, played out against the backdrop of their mother's expectations, and now, her absence. Claire could feel the weight of unspoken words pressing down, an accumulation of small slights and broken promises.

"What's going on, Maya?" Claire asked, lowering her voice. The words tasted like ash. "You've been... distracted lately. More than usual."

Maya's eyes, usually so open and expressive, became shuttered. "Nothing's going on. I'm just living my life." She glanced back at the group by the bonfire, a hint of desperation in her eyes. "Look, I really should get back. I was in the middle of a really important conversation."

"More important than your sister?" Claire felt a bitter laugh bubble up, but she swallowed it down.

"Don't be like that," Maya said, her voice dropping to a low, urgent murmur. "It's complicated. Things are... happening." She leaned closer, her breath warm against Claire's ear, smelling faintly of something sweet and smoky. "Just don't ask questions right now, okay? I'll tell you everything, soon. Promise."

Before Claire could respond, a man Claire didn't recognize, tall and shadowy in the flickering lantern light, touched Maya's arm. He murmured something, and Maya's head snapped up, her eyes flashing. She gave Claire a quick, almost panicked look, then a tight, brittle smile. "Later," she whispered, and then she was gone, swallowed by the press of people, the man's hand still on her elbow, guiding her away. Claire watched them disappear into the fog, a knot tightening in her stomach.

She stood there for a long moment, the sounds of the festival receding, the chill of the fog seeping into her bones. The argument, brief as it was, had left a residue of unease. Maya's evasiveness, the strange man, the hurried promise of future explanations - it

all felt wrong. Claire pulled her phone from her pocket, her fingers hovering over Maya's contact, but then she hesitated. Pushing too hard, too fast, always made Maya retreat further. Give her space. Let her come to you. Their mother's advice, a mantra that had rarely worked.

The bonfire crackled, sending sparks high into the darkening sky. The fog had intensified, now a tangible presence, muting the sounds and blurring the edges of the world. Claire could barely make out the faces of the people around the fire anymore. The air tasted of salt and woodsmoke, but also something metallic, almost coppery. Or maybe that was just the taste of worry in her mouth.

She decided to circle back, to give Maya a few minutes, then find her again. Maybe by then, her sister would be more open, less guarded. Claire moved towards the edge of the crowd, intending to make her way around the periphery of the festival. As she walked, a fragment of conversation drifted to her on the wind—a man's gruff voice, "...the old place down by the point..." and a woman's hushed reply, "...but what about Halvorsen?" The words were disjointed, meaningless, but they snagged in Claire's mind for a fleeting moment before she dismissed them as festival chatter.

The fog grew thicker still, clinging to the lampposts and obscuring the buildings along the waterfront. The world seemed to shrink, reduced to the immediate radius of her vision. Claire reached the quieter section of the street, where the smaller, independent shops gave way to residential houses. The light here was sparse, the sounds of the festival muffled by the encroaching mist. She found herself outside the old fish market, long since abandoned, its windows boarded up, its paint peeling like sunburnt skin.

Suddenly, a flash of red. It was Maya's scarf, she was sure of it, fluttering from a broken hinge on the market's dilapidated back door. Claire felt a jolt of alarm. Why would Maya be here? The man from earlier, the way he'd taken Maya's arm, the fear in her sister's eyes—it all clicked into a pattern that prickled the hairs on Claire's arms. She hurried forward, calling Maya's name, her voice swallowed by the fog.

The door, heavy and waterlogged, creaked open when she pushed it. Inside, it was pitch black, a damp, earthy smell hanging in the air. "Maya?" Claire called out again, a tremor in her voice. No answer. Only the drip of water somewhere in the darkness, and the distant, mournful cry of the foghorn. A cold dread began to coil in Claire's gut. She stepped inside, fumbling for her phone to use as a flashlight, her hand brushing against something slick and cold on the doorframe. Her last clear memory was of the pervasive, suffocating smell of brine and decay, and a sudden, sharp pain at the back of her head, before the world dissolved into an echoing blackness.

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