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Beneath the Black Harbor Lights

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Introduction

Fog draped the harbor like an old cardigan, pillied and salt-stiff, softening the rust and rot into something almost merciful. Evie Mercer parked beneath a failing streetlight that buzzed like a tired insect and sat with the engine ticking down, listening to the far, low moan of a foghorn. Black Harbor's lights flickered along the water—uneven, stubborn, a constellation of bulbs that refused to die. She had grown up measuring time by those lights and the pull of the tide. Coming back felt like stepping into a room where the conversation had never stopped, where every wall leaned in to hear.

Her last real story still clung to her like brine. She had chased a murder that wasn't what it seemed, a season of her podcast that made her name and then took it back with interest. A source she should have protected burned; a retraction came late; the network cooled. Opportunities hardened into silence. She told herself she left the city to look after her mother, and that was true, but it wasn't the whole of it. Exile could look like duty if you held it at the right angle.

Daniel used to call her between bait runs and odd jobs, weaving laughter through static as if the sea itself wanted to be in on it. He was the one who could charm a broken outboard and split a secret three ways so it felt light. In childhood they had owned the dark together—their father gone, their mother working nights, the two of them learning the harbor's grammar by moonlight. When his calls thinned to texted photos and then to nothing, the quiet had a different weight. It drew her down the coast the way a riptide drew a careless swimmer.

She had promised herself she wouldn't come back unless it mattered. Black Harbor turned promises into drift without much effort. The town had aged badly—salt chewing the paint off clapboards, storefronts blinking to vacancy, gulls picking at the bones of summer. The cannery was a husk. The dredged channel silted in spite of assurances and glossy brochures. On the bluff, a fresh billboard promised a future in warm colors: Reimagine the Shoreline. THORN DEVELOPMENT. The smiling families looked out over a water they would never learn to respect.

She cut the engine, and the silence carried old names. Jonah Calder's skiff rocked at the end of the municipal float, and for a second she saw him as he'd been at seventeen: sunburned, wiry, grease on his hands, teaching her how to read a chart by feel as much as sight. He had stayed, married for a while, worked the docks until they made him harbormaster. Reliable as the tide, people said, and in this town that was praise and a trap. She wondered how he'd look at her now—with the city rubbed off or with the mess still clinging.

The sheriff's office window cast a square of gold onto the wet pavement. Sheriff Tom Barlow had tucked this town under one arm for decades, dispensing warnings, favors, and casseroles with the same even hand. He'd patted her head at parades, written off her brother's pranks as boys will be boys, and helped her mother when the hospital bills bit. Evie understood the currency here: not cash, not entirely, but debts and stories and which hands shook where no one could see. Money from outside had only taught Black Harbor to price itself.

She tasted diesel on the air and the copper sting of cold, and something else—an edge she remembered from bad nights in better cities. Daniel's last message sat in her phone, clipped off in the middle of a sentence, as if wind or fear had cut the line. She had listened to it more times than she would admit. It wasn't proof of anything. But silence was a kind of evidence too.

Evie stepped out into the fog and felt its damp acceptance settle on her skin. She wasn't here for a story she could sell. She wasn't here to make amends to bosses who'd already forgotten her name. She was here because the harbor had a way of keeping what it wanted, and she refused to let it keep her brother. If she had learned anything from the wreckage behind her, it was that the truth moved like tidewater: hidden channels, sudden rips, and the steady, grinding patience to wear rock to sand.

She moved toward the lights, past hand-painted signs nailed to telephone poles—Save Our Jobs, Protect the Bay—past the billboard and its promise that didn't belong to anyone she knew. Somewhere out there, beyond the pilings and eelgrass, the channel bent toward a cove the maps didn't bother to name. Somewhere out there, someone had decided what Black Harbor should become. Evie tightened her grip on the wheel of her suitcase and walked, letting the fog close over her like a curtain as the town took measure of her return.

CHAPTER ONE: HOMECOMING FOG

The cottage smelled of damp wool and forgotten tea. Evie set her bag on the floor, the sound swallowed by the thick, floral rug her mother had refused to replace since the 1980s. The silence here was different than the harbor's—not expectant, but exhausted. A clock ticked with the heaviness of a heart that had grown tired of its own rhythm.

“Mom?” Her voice felt too large, a city voice in a house built for whispers.

A shape stirred in the armchair by the window, a nest of afghans and shadows.

“Evelyn.” Her mother's voice was thin, like smoke from a snuffed candle. She didn't turn. “You didn't say when.”

“I know. I'm sorry.” Evie crossed the room, the floorboards sighing under her weight. She knelt beside the chair, taking in the familiar geography of her mother's face—the deep lines framing her mouth, the papery skin, the eyes that were fixed on the gray rectangle of the window. “How are you feeling?”

“The fog came in early.” It wasn't an answer. “It chews at the joints. Daniel says it's the salt air, but I think it's the damp.”

Evie's heart gave a sharp, practical thump. “When did you talk to Daniel?”

Her mother finally looked at her, a flicker of confusion in the faded blue. “He called... yesterday? The day before. He worries about the furnace. He always worries.” She patted Evie's hand, her own fingers cool and dry as birch bark. “You look thin. Did you eat?”

“I'll make something.” Evie stood, the promise of action a relief. The kitchen was a time capsule: the same chipped Formica counters, the same stubborn drawer that always stuck, the same view of the overgrown yard that blurred into the neighbor's property. She filled the kettle, the water roaring in the silence. On the fridge, held by a magnet from a long-gone bait shop, was a recent photo of Daniel. He was on his boat, the *Persistent Ghost*, grinning, holding up a lobster with both hands. He looked like their father—the same lanky frame, the same unruly dark hair escaping from a knit cap. But Daniel had their mother's smile, easy and wide. Evie's own reflection in the dark kitchen window showed a different face: sharper, watchful, the city etched around the eyes.

She found bread in the box, hard at the edges. As she toasted it, she heard her mother

shuffling to the doorway.

“The sheriff came by,” her mother said, leaning on the frame. “Two days ago. I think. He had that deputy with him, the young one with the ears.”

“What did Sheriff Barlow want?”

“He asked after Daniel. If I’d heard from him. I told him what I told everyone. Daniel’s a grown man. He takes his boat out, sometimes for days. He’s chasing that story of his.” She waved a vague hand. “The sheriff nodded. He always nods. Like a dashboard dog.”

“Did he seem worried?”

“He seemed... heavy. Like he was carrying something inside that coat.” Her mother’s eyes drifted back to the window. “The phone doesn’t ring as much when the fog’s in.”

Evie brought her mother a cup of tea and a slice of dry toast. She ate standing at the counter, watching the fog press against the glass like a living thing. The brief, clinical email from her mother’s neighbor, forwarded three days ago, had been sparse: *Evie, your brother’s been missed at the docks. His boat’s not at its mooring. Thought you should know.* Not a missing person report. Not a panic. Just a local noticing an absence, the way one notices a missing buoy or a gull that doesn’t return to its usual perch.

After her mother dozed off again, Evie climbed the narrow stairs to her old room. It had been turned into a storage space—boxes of old tax records, a broken sewing machine, a crib that had never been used. But the bed was still there, stripped down to a bare mattress. She opened the window; the sound of the harbor seeped in, muffled by fog. The Thorne billboard was invisible now, but she could feel its presence on the hill, a bright lie swallowed by the gray.

She changed into jeans and a thick sweater, pulled on her waterproof jacket. The familiar weight of it felt like armor. In the bathroom mirror, she practiced a neutral expression, the one she used when approaching hostile sources. It didn’t fit. This wasn’t a story. This was Daniel.

The walk to the harbor was a walk through a dissolving photograph. The Salty Dog bar still had its neon lobster sign, though only the tail lit up now. The fish market’s windows were papered over. A new vape shop glowed between the hardware store and the empty dress boutique, its interior lit with an aggressive purple. Outside the IGA, a knot of men in oilskins watched her pass. She recognized Jimmy Pell, who used to throw crabs at her and Daniel when they were kids. He nodded, a slow, appraising motion. No smile. The town’s welcome was as thin as the fog.

The municipal float creaked a familiar song. Jonah's skiff was there, tied with the same double-hitch he'd used since he was twelve. A few other boats bobbed in their slips, looking shrunken and weary. The *Persistent Ghost's* spot was empty. A length of frayed rope hung from the cleat, its end frizzed and wet. Evie crouched, touching it. The fibers were swollen with water. It had been untied, or had broken, recently.

"Evie Mercer. As I live and breathe."

She didn't startle. She'd heard the measured tread on the planks. Jonah Calder stood a few feet away, hands in the pockets of a faded harbor-master windbreaker. He was broader than she remembered, the lean wiriness of youth filled out into solid strength. His face was weathered, lined at the eyes from squinting at sun and spray, but it was the same face—open, steady, unreadable in a way that wasn't unfriendly, just careful.

"Jonah." She stood, brushing salt grit from her knees.

"Your mother said you might come." He looked out at the empty slip. "He's been gone since Tuesday morning. Told Jimmy he was running out to check his pots off Gannet Rock. Didn't come back for the afternoon haul."

"Did you report it?"

The question hung in the damp air. Jonah's gaze came back to her, calm and assessing. "To Barlow? Yeah. Wednesday noon, when he didn't answer his radio." He paused. "The sheriff said Daniel was a free agent. Said he'd probably tied up at another dock, maybe gone inland for parts. Told me to wait."

"Three days is waiting."

"Around here, for a man with a boat and a history of going his own way? Three days is just... Tuesday turning into Friday." But his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "I went out this morning. Found his primary lobster pot line off Gannet, still set, untouched. He never got to them."

A cold finger traced Evie's spine. Daniel was meticulous about his gear. He wouldn't set a line and abandon it. "The radio?"

"Silent. I checked the VHF logs. Last transmission was Sunday night, routine check-in with the Coast Guard relay." Jonah took a step closer, lowering his voice. "Evie, there's talk. About the development, about the hearings next month. Daniel was... vocal. At the market, at the bar. He had concerns about the dredging plans, the water testing. He said the numbers didn't add up."

"He always had concerns." But Daniel's concerns were usually backed by a dog-eared tide chart or a fisherman's almanac, not fury. The brother in the photo on the fridge didn't look like a man spoiling for a fight.

"This was different. He was digging. Asking about old permits, about the Thorn family's first go at the harbor back in the eighties." Jonah shook his head. "People get nervous when you dig. Especially now, with the money on the table."

"I need to see his boat."

"I figured you'd say that. Coast Guard's been notified, as a courtesy. Officially, he's not missing, just... undocked without notice." The bureaucratic evasion tasted like ash. "I can take you out tomorrow at first light. If the fog lifts."

"It won't."

"No," Jonah agreed. "It won't."

They stood there for a moment, the space between them charged with a history that had no simple story. There was the teenage summer, the clumsy kisses behind the bait shed, the easy partnership on the water. Then there was her leaving, his marriage, the polite Christmas cards that had stopped a decade ago. The town had claimed him, and she had run from it. Now they were both anchored here, by duty and by dread.

"I should go check on my mother," she said.

"He'll be okay, Evie." Jonah's voice was firm, but his eyes weren't.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, and turned back up the dock. The fog was thickening, the harbor lights now just smears of weak yellow. She passed the sheriff's office, its gold square of light still spilling onto the wet street. The door was closed. She could go in, demand answers, file a report that would get lost in a drawer. Or she could do what she did best: follow the frayed rope.

Halfway up the hill, her phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number. No words, just an image: a grainy, long-lens shot of her standing at Daniel's empty slip, taken minutes ago from somewhere above, maybe from the deck of the fish-packing plant. She whirled around, scanning the buildings, the docks, the shrouded shapes of moored boats. Nothing moved but the fog.

Another buzz. A second image: a close-up of her own face, caught in profile, looking out at the empty water. Below it, typed in plain text: *He should have stuck to lobsters.*

Evie's breath misted in the cold air. The message was clear, and it was local. Someone was watching. Someone knew she was here, and they knew why. The personal search had just brushed against something public, something that wanted to stay hidden beneath the black harbor lights. She saved the images, her fingers steady. The fear was there, a cold knot in her stomach, but beside it, brighter and sharper, was the old, familiar heat of the hunt.

The fog closed around her as she walked home, but it no longer felt like a curtain. It felt like a blindfold, and someone else was leading the way.

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