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Secrets Under Midnight Harbor

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Introduction

The town is carved out of rock and rumor, lashed to the Atlantic by ropes of fog. At dawn, gulls wheel like scraps of torn paper over the breakwater; by evening the wind carries the iodine bite of seaweed and the iron tang of rust from the cannery pier. Midnight Harbor sits in a hollow of gray water and stubborn shingles, its streets edged with salt-burned hedges and cottages that lean into the weather as if bracing for a blow that never quite lands. The lighthouse keeps its one unblinking eye on the shoals, its paint flaking in long curls that show the colors of other eras beneath.

People here learn the tides before they learn to drive. They know which families bury their dead on the hill and which drink behind the bait shop after church. A half dozen boats fly the same faded pennants, and you can tell whose truck is coming by the pattern of its headlights on the clapboard. There are the men who haul nets and the women who tally catches, and then there are the ones who wear fleece vests emblazoned with a logo that promises remediation, renewal, jobs. Harbor Industries has its name on the scholarship plaques and the Little League uniforms; the mayor cuts the ribbons, smiles with his whole face, and says the town is safer, cleaner, better than it used to be. Folks clap. Some look down.

I hadn't been back in years. Cities are louder, but their noise is easy to tune out; it rises in a constant, anonymous rush. Here, sound carries: a screen door slapping shut, a gull laughing at a dropped french fry, the thud of a buoy bell in fog that smells like old pennies and wet rope. I told myself I was coming for practical reasons. My mother's cottage needed emptying—wild roses choking the fence, windows filmed with salt, closets dense with the sediment of a life that didn't include me for the last decade. An attorney slid a ring of keys across a polished desk, and I said I'd be quick. A week, maybe two. Get in, sort, get out.

On the drive in, the marshes on either side of the causeway shivered with wind, faded reeds bending like a field of bowed heads. My hands tightened on the wheel as the road dipped past the granite quarry and the old mill pond, places whose names live in your bones even if you try to leave them behind. Memory is its own kind of weather. One squall arrives unannounced and you're back where you swore you'd never stand again—wet asphalt, a horn screaming far too late, my breath fogging the inside of a windshield as blue light shattered against a wall of slick stone. Voices, then, crowding and thinning, the taste of smoke layered over low-tide rot. A hand gripping mine through the window. A promise I didn't keep.

That night took years I thought I'd be spending here. It peeled me away from friends who stopped calling and from a sister who learned how to be angry without ever

raising her voice. The town learned to speak my name like a caution. I learned to leave. In other places, I built a life out of other people's lies—documents and timelines, questions asked until the answers loosened. I told myself the work mattered because it wasn't personal. It was always personal, of course. You don't go digging if you've never been buried.

The cottage sat on a spur of road that lifted just enough to see the harbor if you stood on the back step and squinted over the sumac. I let myself in, tasting the old silence, and found the house divided into little countries—a sewing kingdom, a pantry republic, the borderless territory of old mail. In a drawer I didn't expect to open, I found a map of the harbor with notes in my mother's small, precise hand. It meant nothing. It meant too much. I shut the drawer and told myself to focus: call the junk man, box the books, sleep.

Dusk, already. The kind that happens fast here, when the fog comes in low and the town lights are late to come up. I drove down Breakwater Road with the window open, the wind pushing damp through the car, the radio not quite catching a station. The lighthouse winked as the beam swung, a tired metronome ticking off seconds you can't get back. On the far side of the inlet, the cannery flared its security lamps, flattening the dock into a cutout of black and silver.

Halfway past the bait shop, I saw the first arc of light. Not the steady turning of the lighthouse, but something closer to the waterline—a searchlight, thin and sharp as a blade, combing the surface in patient sweeps. Another followed it, crossing paths, throwing the slick water into stuttering whites and grays. A boat engine idled low, then revved, then idled again. The gulls lifted, restless. I slowed without thinking, the way you do at the site of a wreck, attention snagged by a story already in motion. Somewhere beyond the cuff of fog, voices called short and urgent. Midnight Harbor was looking for something. Or someone.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming in Gray Light

The cottage smelled of damp woodsmoke and the faint, sweet decay of potpourri that had long outlived its purpose. My mother's taste ran to sturdy furniture and sentimental clutter, a combination that made boxing her life feel like archaeological excavation. Each item unearthed—a chipped porcelain bird, a cross-stitched sampler declaring "Home is Where the Heart Is"—was a small, quiet accusation. My heart hadn't been here in a long time.

By mid-morning, I'd managed to clear the kitchen counters of everything but the kettle, a single mug, and a half-eaten box of stale crackers. My phone buzzed with a reminder about a journalist's conference call I'd semi-forgotten. I dismissed it. My editor would understand. Or she wouldn't. Either way, the muted roar of the ocean outside felt more pressing than a pitch for a story I wouldn't be writing.

A few hours later, the hunger pangs grew too insistent to ignore. Midnight Harbor didn't boast a vast culinary landscape. There was the greasy spoon by the docks, the slightly less greasy pizza place on Main Street, and the bait shop that sold surprisingly decent clam chowder on Fridays. I opted for the diner, The Salty Siren, a place where the coffee was always too strong and the local gossip flowed freer than the maple syrup.

The bell above the door jangled as I stepped inside, announcing my arrival to the handful of patrons nursing lukewarm mugs. The air hung thick with the scent of fried eggs and yesterday's fish. A few heads turned, then quickly back to their conversations, but not before I caught a flicker of recognition, quickly doused. Midnight Harbor had a long memory, especially for faces that had left and returned.

I slid into a worn vinyl booth by the window, the sea-bleached light doing little to brighten the tired decor. Before I could even eye the menu, a voice cut through the diner's hum.

"Maya Archer. Long time no see."

I looked up. Jonah Reyes stood beside my table, a coffee pot in one hand and a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He'd shed the awkward lankiness of his teenage years, replaced it with the solid build of a man who worked with his hands and wore a uniform. His police sergeant's badge glinted under the fluorescent lights, a stark reminder of how our paths had diverged. We'd shared everything from scraped knees to whispered adolescent secrets, then nothing for a decade.

"Jonah," I managed, the name feeling both familiar and strange on my tongue. "Still pouring coffee for the masses, I see."

He chuckled, a low, easy sound that softened the lines of his face. "Some things never change. You're back for good, then?"

"Just to sort out Mom's place. Then I'm gone." The words came out sharper than I intended, a defense mechanism honed by years of explaining myself to this town.

Jonah nodded slowly, his gaze lingering. "Heard about your mother. Sorry for your loss, Maya. She was... a good woman."

The sincerity in his voice caught me off guard. "Thanks, Jonah." I paused. "You're looking... official."

He shrugged, setting the coffee pot down. "It's a living. Keeps me in clam chowder." He gestured to the empty seat opposite me. "Mind if I join you for a minute? My break's almost over."

I gestured him to sit, the space suddenly feeling smaller. He ordered a coffee from Brenda, the perpetual waitress whose beehive hairdo seemed impervious to the laws of gravity. As she shuffled away, muttering about the price of eggs, Jonah turned back to me.

"So, investigative journalist, huh? Big city stuff?" he asked, a hint of curiosity in his tone.

"Mostly. Chasing inconvenient truths, rattling cages. You know the drill."

"Yeah, I do," he said, taking a sip of his fresh coffee. "Only my cages are usually a bit smaller, and the truths are just inconvenient for whoever broke the law, not necessarily the entire town."

A comfortable silence settled between us, the kind that can only exist between people with a shared history. It was broken by the sharp, insistent chime of my phone on the table. A news alert, prominently displayed.

MIDNIGHT HARBOR TEEN MISSING: POLICE SEEK PUBLIC'S HELP.

The headline blazed, stark against the gray diner light. A photo beneath it showed a boy with earnest eyes and a shock of sandy hair. Tommy Gray, 17, last seen leaving his shift at the Harbor Seafood Processing Plant.

Jonah's expression tightened as he saw the notification. "That's what the searchlights were about last night," he said, his voice low. "Tommy's been gone since yesterday evening. Parents are beside themselves."

"Seventeen?" I asked, my journalist instincts kicking in despite myself. "That's young to just... vanish."

"Tell me about it. We've had a few runaways over the years, but Tommy's not the type. Good kid. Straight A's, captain of the debate team, works hard." Jonah rubbed a hand over his jaw. "His dad, Mike, works the nets with my uncle. Hardworking family."

"Any leads?" I asked, my fingers already itching for a notebook.

He shook his head. "Nothing concrete. No signs of struggle at home, car's still in the driveway. Just... gone. Like the tide came in and took him."

"Have you checked the plant? Security footage?"

"First thing. Footage shows him clocking out, walking towards the parking lot. Then a blind spot for about fifty yards, and then nothing. Vanishes right off the screen. It's a mess." He sighed, the weight of the situation clear in his posture.

Brenda returned with my order, a sad-looking grilled cheese and a cup of lukewarm tea. I pushed the plate aside, suddenly losing my appetite. The news alert had chipped away at my resolve to be a fleeting visitor. The old itch, the need to uncover, was already resurfacing.

"And you think... foul play?" I asked, my gaze meeting his.

Jonah hesitated, picking at a loose thread on the cuff of his uniform. "We're not ruling anything out. But it doesn't feel right. Not for Tommy."

The diner's bell jangled again as another patron walked in, bringing with them a gust of cold, salty air. Jonah glanced at his watch. "My break's definitely over. Duty calls." He pushed himself up from the booth.

"Jonah," I said, before he could fully turn away. "If there's anything I can do, anything at all, to help find him..."

He looked at me, a complicated mix of recognition and wariness in his eyes. "Maya, you're not a local anymore. This isn't one of your big city stories where you can just parachute in, stir things up, and fly out. This is Midnight Harbor."

"I know this town, Jonah."

“You knew it, once. Things change. People change.” He paused, his voice dropping to a near whisper. “Just... be careful, Maya. Please. This isn’t a good time for old ghosts to come rattling around.”

He clapped a hand lightly on my shoulder, the gesture brief, almost apologetic. Then he turned and walked to the counter, grabbing the coffee pot, his uniform a stark, dark silhouette against the diner’s faded interior. I watched him go, the news alert on my phone still glowing, a beacon drawing me into the very depths I’d sworn to avoid. The clam chowder Brenda brought me, steaming and rich, tasted like ash.

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