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The Lighthouse on Hollow Bay

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Introduction

Fog braided itself along the bluffs in slow-moving ropes, dragging the last color out of the evening. The lighthouse rose from the headland like a white knuckle, its beam cutting a patient arc through rain and salt, sweeping the bay as if counting heartbeats. Gulls wheeled and argued over the wrack line, their cries stripped thin by the wind. Maya Carter paused on the shoulder of the narrow road where the blacktop surrendered to gravel, where the sea found its own language and spoke it without apology. The air tasted like iron and old storms.

She told herself she had come only to settle her father's affairs. A list, a set of keys, signatures on paper that smelled of damp ink and dust, a folder of overdue notices rubber-banded into obedience. In the distance, the lighthouse blinked again: on, off, on, like a pulse she had trained herself to ignore. Hollow Bay hadn't changed much—the shingles still gray as the undersides of clouds, the cannery's rusted letters still insisting on a prosperity no one believed in anymore. She felt the same chill she'd known at nineteen, the night she drove out with a trunk full of clothing and silence, and didn't look back.

The cottage door stuck the way it always had, swollen with salt and seasons. Inside, the air held the faintest memory of pipe smoke beneath the sharper scent of bleach, as if someone had tidied in a hurry. Her father's handwriting threaded across a notepad on the kitchen table—numbers, times, a grocery list crossed out so hard the paper had torn. Thomas Carter, the man who had taught her to read the weather from the throat of the foghorn, had not answered her last two calls. He had, however, mailed her the spare keys and a single instruction in blocky letters: Come now. She wanted to be angry about the timing, the summons, the presumption that she would drop her life and return like a tide. Anger was easier than the other thing.

Lena's name lived in the house even when no one said it. It pressed from the back of closets, hummed under the floorboards when the heater rattled awake. Maya opened a drawer to find a rubber-banded stack of photographs—summer skin and wind-tangled hair, Lena squinting into the sun, the lighthouse a white slash in the corner like a warning ignored. Memory arrived on its own schedule: the night-sour smell of kelp, the sting of rain on her cheeks, the way the beam had mapped the cliff in brief geometry—rock, railing, waves—before darkness fell again. There were gaps nothing could cross, edges she had trained herself to walk without looking down.

She stepped back outside because the walls had begun to lean. The wind came knifing up from the water, carrying the breath of diesel from the docks and the sweet rot of bait. The lighthouse beam touched her, slid away, returned in its measured sweep.

You don't have to go up there, she told herself, not ever again. She'd spent the last decade training her gaze on other people's secrets, other towns' faces under rain. She knew the tricks memory played, how it could sand down the teeth on a story until you could swallow it. But Hollow Bay made her nerves hum; the place felt both too small and endless, like a hallway of mirrors.

A car rattled past on the road and slowed when the driver recognized her, the way people did here, with a double-take that measured welcome against caution. Maya lifted a hand and let it fall. She had interviews to schedule for a story that had nothing to do with this place, an apartment sublet that would run out by month's end. She had plans that did not include knocking on her father's bedroom door to find out whether his silences were grief or design. The beam cut another clean line through the fog. Somewhere below, beyond the knife-edge of the cliff, waves shouldered against the rocks and broke themselves into white.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket—once, an insistent hum that felt like a choice. She glanced at the screen and saw a name she knew so well it vibrated in her bones: Nora Benson. Maya hesitated and let the second buzz rise before she answered, pressing the phone tight to keep the wind out. "Nora?"

"Maya." The diner's clatter lived behind Nora's voice, then fell away, as if she had turned her back on it. "Listen—are you up by the point?"

"I just got in," Maya said. "At the house."

"Don't go near the lighthouse." Nora's breath hitched, a sound that tightened something along Maya's ribs. "They're saying a kid found something under the pilings. The police are on their way. It's—" A gull shrieked, the wind filled the space, and for a beat Maya heard only the old surf-voice in her blood.

"Nora," she said, though she already knew what the word would be.

"A body," Nora whispered. "Under the light."

CHAPTER ONE: The Unwelcome Tide

The drive into Hollow Bay was a slow descent through layers of gray that blurred the distinction between the sea and the sky. Maya Carter kept her hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, her knuckles white against the leather. Every mile felt like a subtraction, stripping away the professional armor she had built in the city—the press badges, the sharp blazers, the fast-paced cynicism of a woman who made her living pulling the threads of other people's lies. Here, the road narrowed until the pines seemed to lean inward, their needles heavy with the relentless New England mist. By the time she passed the rusted "Welcome to Hollow Bay" sign, featuring a faded leaping cod that looked more like it was gasping for air, the familiar weight of the town had already settled in her chest.

She pulled the rental car onto the gravel shoulder near the old fisherman's wharf, letting the engine die. The silence that followed was not peaceful; it was heavy and expectant, filled with the rhythmic slap of the tide against rotting pilings and the distant, mournful cry of a lone gull. The smell of the town was a sensory assault she had managed to forget: salt, diesel, and the briny, metallic scent of the cannery that sat like a brooding fortress on the far side of the harbor. It was a smell that got into your hair, your clothes, and, if you stayed long enough, your very skin.

Maya stepped out of the car and felt the dampness immediately. It was late afternoon, but the light was failing fast, swallowed by a bank of fog rolling in from the Atlantic. She looked up toward the headland where the lighthouse stood. It was a stark, whitewashed column, looking less like a beacon of safety and more like a tombstone marking the edge of the world. The light hadn't begun its nightly rotation yet, but she could see the glass of the lantern room catching the last of the bruised purple light from the horizon.

"Still standing," she muttered to herself, the words turning to vapor in the cold air.

The town didn't look like it had moved a muscle since she had fled fifteen years ago. The same sagging porches lined Water Street, cluttered with lobster traps and faded plastic buoys. The same neon sign for *The Salty Spoon* flickered in the window of Nora's diner, missing the 'S' so it just promised 'The Alty Spoon' to any hungry traveler. Maya's return felt like a breach in a long-standing contract she'd made with her own sanity. She was thirty-four now, an investigative journalist with a reputation for being "difficult" because she didn't know when to stop digging, yet standing here, she felt like the nineteen-year-old girl who had watched her life shatter into a thousand jagged pieces on the rocks below.

She began to walk toward her father's house, her boots crunching on the grit. The townspeople she passed didn't offer the casual waves of a friendly community. Instead, they gave her the "Hollow Bay stare"—a long, measuring look that assessed whether she was a threat or a curiosity. She saw Old Man Miller outside the hardware store, his face a map of deep-set wrinkles and resentment. He paused in his sweeping, eyes tracking her movement with the slow, deliberate focus of a predator. She gave him a curt nod, but he didn't return it, merely spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the sidewalk and went back to his work.

The house was a saltbox cottage that looked as though it were trying to retreat into the hillside. The shingles were curled like parched skin, and the small porch groaned as she climbed the steps. She felt for the spare key above the door frame—it was still there, tucked behind the same chipped wooden ماهی carving. Her father, Thomas, was a creature of habit, and in a town like this, habit was the only thing that kept the ghosts at bay.

The interior of the house smelled of neglect. It was the scent of damp wool, unwashed dishes, and the sharp, medicinal tang of the liniment her father used for his joints. Maya stood in the entryway, her heart hammering a frantic rhythm against her ribs. She called out his name, but the only response was the clicking of the wall heater. The house felt crowded, not with people, but with the absence of them. Every corner held a shadow that looked like Lena; every draft felt like a cold hand on her shoulder.

She moved into the kitchen, noting the stack of unopened mail on the scarred wooden table. There were bills from the utility company, a catalog for nautical supplies, and a handwritten note from Nora asking if Thomas needed more soup. Maya's father had been the assistant lighthouse keeper for decades, a man of few words and even fewer friends. Since Lena disappeared, he had retreated into a shell of silence that even Maya couldn't crack. His recent calls had been cryptic, his voice sounding thin and brittle over the phone, urging her to come home to "settle things."

On the kitchen counter sat a half-drunk cup of cold tea, a skin of tannins forming on the surface. Her father's bed was made, the quilt pulled tight with military precision, but he was nowhere to be found. Maya felt a flare of irritation mixed with a burgeoning dread. He had summoned her here, forced her to confront a past she had buried under a decade of work, and now he wasn't even here to meet her.

She walked back to the front window and looked out at the bay. The fog was thicker now, a white wall that had erased the horizon. The lighthouse began its first sweep of the evening. *One-two-three, flash. One-two-three, flash.* It was the pulse of the town, the rhythm everyone lived by. It was the light that had seen everything and told nothing.

The sound of her phone vibrating in her pocket made her jump, a sharp, electric buzz in the tomb-like quiet of the house. She pulled it out, seeing Nora's name on the screen. Nora had been her best friend, the one who stayed behind to manage her mother's diner while Maya chased the truth in cities where the truth was actually wanted.

"Nora?" Maya asked, her voice sounding foreign in the kitchen.

"Maya, thank God," Nora said. There was a tremor in her voice that Maya had never heard before—not even on the night Lena went missing. "I saw your car. You're at the house?"

"I just got in. My dad's not here, Nora. Do you know where—"

"Maya, listen to me," Nora interrupted, her voice dropping to a frantic whisper. "Don't go up to the point. Stay away from the lighthouse. I mean it."

Maya's grip on the phone tightened. She felt the old, familiar prickle of a lead, the instinctual sharpening of her senses that happened right before a story broke. "Why? What's going on?"

"A kid," Nora said, her breath hitching. "Young Toby Miller was down by the pilings, looking for crabs after the tide went out. He found something. The police are already up there. Ian Hale just roared past the diner with his sirens off, but I saw his face, Maya. I saw it."

Maya was already moving. She grabbed her coat from the chair, the "investigative journalist" part of her brain taking over while the "grieving sister" part screamed for her to run the other way. "Found what, Nora? Tell me exactly what he found."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line, broken only by the sound of the wind whistling through the diner's old windows. When Nora spoke again, her voice was barely a ghost of a sound.

"A body, Maya. They found a body wedged deep under the lighthouse pilings. They're saying it's been there a long time. It's... the tide finally brought it home."

Maya didn't wait to hear the rest. She hung up and ran for the door, the cold air hitting her like a physical blow. The lighthouse was flashing now, a steady, rhythmic warning. As she sprinted toward the headland, the fog parted just enough for her to see the blue and red lights of the police cruisers dancing against the white stone of the tower.

Hollow Bay had been holding its breath for fifteen years. And now, as the sea gave up its dead, the town was finally beginning to exhale. Maya reached the base of the cliff

just as the first raindrops began to fall—hard, cold needles that tasted of salt and secrets. She looked up at the lighthouse, the beam sweeping over her, and for the first time since she was a child, she felt the crushing weight of the truth. It wasn't just a body they had found; it was the beginning of the end of the life she thought she had escaped.

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