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Beneath the Harbor's Quiet Lights

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Introduction

At the edge of the continent, where the water blackens to ink and gulls wheel like torn paper against a low sky, Harbor's Reach huddled into itself as if bracing for another season. Lila Hart arrived at dusk, when the fog moved in on quiet soles and the lamps along the boardwalk flickered awake one by one, halos trembling in the wet. Diesel from the last trawler stung her throat; salt glazed her lips. The lighthouse stood dark on its rock—a blind eye. She cut the engine and listened to the creak of the pilings, the sigh of ropes, the small sounds that made a place a place. It had been years since she'd let them in.

She told herself she had returned for a good reason. Elaine Hart—her mother, once the sharpest woman Lila knew—had folded into a hospital bed two weeks back, a stroke scissoring her words, leaving one arm stubborn, her mouth turned down at the corner like a secret she refused to tell. Duty, Lila thought as she hauled her suitcase from the trunk, and then, with a thrill of self-disgust, story. She had made a career from other people's tragedies, corralling them into episodes with careful arcs and cliffhangers, voice soft as tide. She wasn't sure who she was in silence.

The house on Oyster Street looked smaller, its cedar shingles weathered to a silver that matched the harbor on a cloudy day. The porch boards protested under her weight. In the window, the lace curtains drooped, salt-stiff, like the tired lashes of an old woman who had stayed up too late waiting for someone who never wrote. Harbor's Reach noticed arrivals. By nightfall the diner would know. The fishermen mending nets on milk crates along the south dock. The selectmen at the town hall who wore their surnames like coats that never tore. The summer people in their bright slickers and the old money in their storm-stoic wool. Here, gossip moved on the same tide as the lobster boats. It went out. It came back heavier.

Inside, the air held onto a coolness that wasn't quite clean. Lemon oil and dust, iodine and time. On the mantel, the photographs formed a catechism: Lila as a girl with bangs and skinned knees; her father in his Sunday shirt, tie askew, smile a little apologetic; Elaine, lips painted the careful coral she claimed looked good on everyone. One frame sat crooked, its corner scuffed white where the varnish had chipped. Lila straightened it and found that the picture behind—two girls on the pier at sunset, hair shining like coins in a fountain—had a torn right edge. She had known that tear was there before she saw it. She remembered how it felt to hold paper and rip.

Nora Avery. The name rose in Lila like a bruise pressed, deep and old and not done changing color. Twenty years gone and still the town said her name soft, not out of reverence but because it was a sound you didn't want to rattle. The summer Nora

vanished was the summer the light seemed different to Lila, sharper and more forgiving by turns, the summer of cheap cassette tapes and secrets offered like dares. In Lila's memory, the lighthouse lamp had glowed even on nights it was meant to be sleeping, a pulse in the fog like a heartbeat you heard only when your own slowed.

Elaine was dozing when Lila leaned in the bedroom doorway. The TV washed the walls blue. A glass bowl on the bureau held the house keys the way it always had, metal bodies winking under lamplight: front door, shed, car, church bake-sale cabinet. One key lay out of place at the rim, a long, old-fashioned shank, its head worn smooth as if a thumb had worried it for years. Lila pressed hers against her palm until it left a half-moon. Her mother's breath rasped at the end the way the sea did when it slid away from shore and left the rocks glistening and cold.

Later, drawn down by habit or hunger or the need to measure herself against the water, Lila walked to the harbor. The night had settled firmly; fog thinned to a veil, and the lamps etched honest circles on the planks. A boy kicked at a bollard with his heel, impatient for nothing; a woman in a wool hat counted the day's cash in the bait shop as if numbers could anchor her. Somewhere, a radio drifted a song from a decade ago, tinny and sweet. On the far side, by the lobster co-op, laughter flared and fell. Here was the hierarchy of Harbor's Reach, as crisp as a ledger: those who worked the water, those who owned it, those who pretended neither owned them.

She heard her name twice—Lila Hart—once with a question mark, once with a period. She kept her eyes on the black plane of the tide and let the syllables pass. The boards under her soles talked in old bones. At the mouth of the harbor, the lighthouse stood—decommissioned, proud in its uselessness—its lantern room a blank dark circle. For a heartbeat, she thought she saw a glow there, only a smudge of light, the idea of it. Memory, she told herself. Or wish.

By morning, she knew, she would have lists to make and phone calls to return, a caregiver's schedule to learn by heart, a kitchen to stock with foods her mother would pretend to eat. The town would tug at her sleeve with small tests: a smile that didn't reach the eyes, a story with an important omission, an invitation she should decline and a question she should not answer. And beneath all of it, the undertow of a name already working loose from the town's tongue, a new one that hadn't yet found its way to her ear. For now there was only the old name in the fog, Nora, and the light that never quite went out, not even when you told yourself it had.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The morning air in Harbor's Reach didn't just sit; it clung. It was a thick, briny curtain that tasted of wet granite and old outboard motors, the kind of atmosphere that turned a person's hair limp and their thoughts heavy. Lila Hart stood in her mother's kitchen, staring at a chipped ceramic mug of coffee that had long since gone cold. The house felt like a museum of things she had tried to outrun. There was the floral wallpaper, yellowed at the seams like a smoker's fingers, and the heavy oak table where she had once done her homework under the weight of Elaine's silent expectations.

She hadn't slept. The silence of the house was too loud, punctuated only by the mechanical wheeze of the oxygen concentrator in the guest room where Elaine now resided. Her mother was awake, though 'awake' was a generous term. She was present, her eyes tracking the dust motes in the light, her mind a locked room with the key thrown into the bay. Lila had spent the early hours cataloging medications and learning the rhythm of a stroke victim's needs, a far cry from the high-stakes adrenaline of a recording booth in Brooklyn.

By ten o'clock, the walls began to close in. Lila grabbed her trench coat and headed for the door, the need for movement overriding the guilt of leaving her mother with the visiting nurse for an hour. She needed to see the town in the daylight, to confirm that it was as small and suffocating as she remembered.

Harbor's Reach was built on a series of steep, rocky tiers overlooking a jagged horseshoe bay. The lower streets were a tangle of bait shops, dive bars, and hardware stores that smelled of sawdust and kerosene. As she walked toward the main drag, the Salt Line, the social hierarchy of the town revealed itself in the architecture. The closer to the water you were, the harder you worked; the higher the hill, the more you owned.

She was halfway across the town square when she saw him. He was leaning against a black-and-white cruiser, a paper cup of coffee in one hand and a clipboard in the other. He looked older—everyone did—with a few more lines around the eyes and a jawline that had hardened into something more permanent, but the way he shifted his weight from one foot to the other was unmistakable.

"Lila Hart," he said, before she was even within ten feet. He didn't sound surprised. In Harbor's Reach, news of a return traveled faster than the morning tide. "I heard you were back. Saw the car in the driveway last night when I did my rounds."

"Jonah Briggs," Lila replied, coming to a halt. "You're a long way from the varsity dugout."

He chuckled, a low, dry sound. "And you're a long way from the bright lights of the city. I saw your name on a billboard in South Boston last year. Something about a podcast? *The Final Word*?"

"It pays the bills. Or it did, until I took a sabbatical to become a full-time nurse."

Jonah's expression softened, the professional mask of a police officer slipping for a second to reveal the boy she'd gone to prom with. "I heard about your mom. I'm sorry, Lila. Elaine was always... well, she was a force of nature. It's hard to see a storm like that run out of wind."

"She's still in there," Lila said, though she wasn't entirely sure if she believed it. "She's just stuck behind a very thick wall of glass. What about you? Sergeant Briggs now? Or did they finally give you the big hat?"

"Just Sergeant. For now. It's a quiet town, mostly. I spend my days writing tickets for people who park too close to the fire hydrants and my nights making sure the teenagers don't burn down the old cannery." He paused, his gaze drifting toward the harbor. "Though, it hasn't been so quiet lately."

Lila felt the familiar prickle of her reporter's instinct. It was a physical sensation, a tightening in the center of her chest. "I saw the flags at half-mast by the marina. And the flowers on the boardwalk. What's going on, Jonah?"

He sighed, his fingers drumming against the roof of the cruiser. "Mara Beckett. You remember the Becketts? Lived over on the West Slope, three houses down from the old library?"

Lila nodded. "Small family. The father worked at the boatyard. Mara was a few years younger than us."

"She went missing six days ago," Jonah said, his voice dropping an octave. "Walked out of her house on a Tuesday night to grab a pack of cigarettes at the corner store and never came back. We found her car parked behind the diner, keys still in the ignition. No signs of a struggle, no blood, no nothing. Just an empty seat and a cold engine."

The air suddenly felt much colder. "Is that why there's a memorial tonight?"

"The family wanted it. A vigil, mostly. To keep her name in the air. People are scared,

Lila. This isn't the kind of thing that happens here. Not anymore."

Not anymore. The words hung between them like a challenge. They both knew he was thinking of Nora Avery, though neither of them wanted to be the first to say it. Twenty years ago, the town had been fractured by a similar disappearance, a wound that had never truly scarred over because the body had never been found. Lila had been fifteen then, a girl who spent her summers trailing after Nora like a shadow, fascinated by the older girl's recklessness.

"I should go," Jonah said, breaking the silence. "Shift change. But hey, if you need anything—groceries, a ride to the hospital, or just someone to tell you the local gossip—you know where the station is. We haven't moved in fifty years."

Lila watched him drive away, the exhaust from his cruiser lingering in the damp air. She felt a sudden, irrational urge to follow him, to demand more details, to treat Mara Beckett like a script for her next season. But this wasn't a script. This was her home, and the girl who was missing was a person, not a plot point.

She spent the afternoon in a daze of domesticity. She scrubbed the kitchen floor until her knuckles were raw, rearranged the spice rack, and read a few pages of a thriller to her mother, who stared out the window with a terrifying intensity. Elaine's eyes were the same shade of slate as the Atlantic, and sometimes Lila felt like if she looked into them long enough, she'd drown.

As the sun began to dip behind the jagged hills, casting long, bruised shadows across the harbor, Lila found herself drawn toward the town square. The vigil was being held at the Gazebo, a white-painted Victorian structure that sat at the center of the park.

The turnout was larger than she expected. It seemed half the town had arrived, dressed in heavy wool coats and salt-stained boots. There were the dockworkers, their faces etched with the fatigue of a day spent hauling nets; the shopkeepers; and the "old money" families from the Hill, standing slightly apart in their pristine Barbour jackets.

The atmosphere was heavy with a mix of grief and performative concern. In small towns, tragedy was a currency. People traded in "I saw her just last week" and "She always seemed so troubled." Lila stood at the edge of the crowd, clutching a white candle that a woman in a heavy shawl had pressed into her hand.

The Beckett family stood at the front. The father, Thomas, looked like a man who had been hollowed out from the inside. He spoke briefly, his voice cracking as he thanked the community for their support. But it was the mother's face that stayed with Lila. Mrs. Beckett wasn't crying. She looked angry. Her eyes scanned the crowd with a fierce, accusing light, as if she expected the kidnapper to be standing right there

among the mourners, holding a candle and singing hymns.

"It's a tragedy, isn't it?"

Lila turned to find a woman standing beside her. She recognized the face—Mrs. Gable, the town's primary purveyor of gossip and homemade jam. Her eyes were bright with the excitement of being part of something significant.

"It's awful," Lila said.

"They say she was seen down by the old pier that night," Mrs. Gable whispered, leaning in close enough for Lila to smell the peppermint on her breath. "Talking to some man in a dark truck. Of course, the police won't say a word. They're all about 'protecting the investigation.' But we know. We remember what happened before. History has a way of repeating itself in the Reach, doesn't it, Lila? I'm sure you remember."

"I remember a lot of things, Mrs. Gable."

"I bet you do. I bet you're already thinking of how to turn this into one of those stories of yours. My grandson listens to them. He says you have a way of making the truth sound like a movie."

Lila didn't respond. She looked back at the lighthouse in the distance. The fog was rolling in again, thicker this time, swallowing the base of the tower until the structure seemed to be floating in a white void. The lantern room remained dark, a silent witness to the town's secrets.

As the crowd began to disperse, the flickering candles creating a trail of light like a funeral procession, Lila felt a hand on her elbow. It was Jonah again. His face was grim in the low light.

"Lila, you might want to come down to the station tomorrow morning," he said softly.

"Why? Did you find something?"

Jonah hesitated, looking around to ensure they weren't being overheard. "A fisherman found something about an hour ago. Down on the rocks near the old pier. He was pulling in some debris after the tide went out."

Lila's heart hammered against her ribs. "A body?"

"No," Jonah said, his voice barely a whisper. "A shoe. A child's shoe, Lila. Red canvas. Covered in old silt, like it's been down there for decades."

Lila felt the blood drain from her face. She knew that shoe. She had a photograph of it in a box in her attic—the same red canvas, the same scuff on the toe. It didn't belong to Mara Beckett.

It belonged to Nora Avery.

She looked away from Jonah, toward the dark expanse of the harbor where the waves were churning against the pilings. The water was black, impenetrable, and deeply patient. It had been holding onto the town's lies for twenty years, and now, it seemed, it was finally starting to spit them back out.

"I'll be there," Lila said, her voice sounding like it belonged to someone else.

She walked back to Oyster Street in the dark, the sound of her own footsteps echoing against the shingles of the shuttered houses. The fog was so thick now that she could barely see the porch light of her mother's house. When she stepped inside, the smell of lemon oil and illness greeted her like a shroud.

She went straight to the mantel and picked up the crooked frame she had straightened the night before. She pulled the photograph out of the back—the one of the two girls on the pier. She looked at the girl on the left, the one with the bright, defiant smile and the red canvas sneakers.

Nora Avery was staring back at her, her eyes full of the secrets she had taken to the bottom of the bay. And for the first time since she had arrived home, Lila realized that her mother wasn't the only one in Harbor's Reach who was trapped in the past. The entire town was a ghost story, and she had just become the narrator.

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