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# The Lost Signal of Blackwater Cove

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## Introduction

Fog owns the mornings in Blackwater Cove. It comes in low and sullen, swallowing the pilings and the tired skiffs, beading the air with salt until the world feels damp to the touch. From the highway turnout above the harbor, Mara Quinn watched the lighthouse lamp drag a pale circle across the gray and thought of the last distress call she'd taken—years and miles away, and still close enough to bruise. She had promised herself that the sea could keep its voices. Yet here she was with a duffel, an old radio case, and a town she had not set foot in since she fled it.

Blackwater was smaller than the memory she'd carried, its clapboard streets slouched with age and salt. The cannery was a museum now, the bait shop a coffee bar with weathered charts tacked up as decoration. New banners flapped on the pier advertising redevelopment—clean lines, glossy renderings of condos where boat sheds used to lean. Beneath the veneer, the old sounds persisted: the clank of halyards, the throat-clearing honk of a distant buoy, the deep, patient roll of swell against rock.

Mara had learned to read sound before she learned to drive. Her grandfather, who had minded the radio in storms when the Coast Guard cutter was short-handed, had taught her the hum of healthy equipment and the way true trouble carried in a voice. In uniform, she'd become the one who translated panic into action, held a frequency steady while chaos boiled across the water. Until the night she couldn't. The rescue that soured her career had a date and a case number and a family attached. When she turned in her badge, the silence felt like mercy.

The silence didn't last. It began as a rumor tucked into her mother's worried voicemail—the lighthouse acting strange in the fog, fishermen swearing they heard a station that hadn't existed since before the war. Then a text from Liza, breezy and late, with a photo of the lighthouse shot at an angle that made the catwalk look like a blade. Look what I found, sis. No words after that, just a half-second clip of static and a fragment that edged under Mara's skin: a clipped burst shaped like code.

In person, the town felt smaller still. Sheriff Tom Harlan met her on the pier with a handshake that hovered between caution and welcome. The old-timers at the bait tanks watched without watching. Across the water, the lighthouse threw its slow, reassuring eye. Liza was not at the house. Her bed was made. Her car sat near the end of Wharf Street with the door unlocked and a hoodie in the back seat like she'd shrugged out of it between thoughts. On the passenger side, a smear of rust dusted the sill—old iron from the catwalk at the light, if Mara had to guess.

That night, in the rented room above the harbor, she cracked open the case she swore

she'd lock away forever. The radio smelled faintly of ozone and old oil. She ran a hand across the dials, the way a diver pats his tanks. It was foolish, she told herself, sentimental even. The set warmed in her hands anyway. She tuned to the marine bands, slid past the chatter of harbor pilots, past weather bulletins and traffic advisories, and found—nothing but the patient breath of the ocean. Then, at 02:17, a scatter of sound bled in from somewhere it shouldn't: a tight, encrypted burst, a pause, a whisper of coordinates buried in the hiss. It wasn't possible. Not with that protocol. Not from this coast.

Outside, the fog thickened until the lighthouse was a halo and the pier a smear of light. Mara listened with headphones digging into the ache at the base of her skull and with the part of her that had never stopped listening at all. The burst repeated, then cut, as if someone out there was keying a microphone with a trembling hand. In the gap, she could hear her own breath and, faint beneath it, the bow wave of something large turning in the cove.

By dawn, word had hardened from worry into fact. Liza Quinn, late-twenties, known in every diner and dock in town, had not come home. Her friends had not seen her since the fog pushed in. The sheriff's office noted the abandoned car and took a statement, the way small-town departments do—with patience and the suggestion that folks often walk off their troubles for a night. Mara stood on the pier and felt the old habit settle onto her shoulders like a dry jacket: checklist, timeline, frequencies to monitor, questions to ask.

She looked at the lighthouse, a pale needle in the milky light, and then down to the radio case by her boots. The cove breathed; the buoy moaned; gulls railed about something only they could see. Whatever this signal was—whatever it meant to pull at an old code and the oldest parts of town—Liza had heard it first. Mara reached for the handle, the decision so simple it surprised her. She was not leaving. Not until the light steadied, the signal fell quiet, and the sea gave her sister back—or told her, at last, what had taken her.

## CHAPTER ONE: Return to the Cove

The familiar scent hit Mara first, even before she'd fully cranked down the window of her beat-up Ford Ranger: salt and low tide mud, with a sweet, faint undertone of pine from the bluffs. Blackwater Cove. She'd tried to outrun it for ten years, but the place had a way of seeping into your bones, like the damp air itself. Her old house, a two-story clapboard affair painted a shade of blue that had faded into resignation, loomed just off Main Street. It looked smaller, sadder than she remembered, the porch swing still chained up for winter, even though May was halfway gone.

She parked in the gravel driveway, stirring up dust that smelled of dry earth and regret. Her mother, Evelyn, was on the porch, a small, bird-like woman whose worry lines had deepened into permanent etchings. Evelyn's embrace was tight, almost painful, smelling of lavender and the faint, sweet decay of old paper. "Mara," she whispered, her voice rough, "you came." As if there was ever a question.

Mara pulled back, forcing a smile that felt brittle. "Of course, Mom. Where else would I be?" She didn't mention the frantic voicemails, the gut-punch of Liza's last cryptic text. She looked past her mother, scanning the empty street, the familiar storefronts. Blackwater hadn't changed much, at least not at first glance. The bait shop still reeked of brine, though now it advertised artisanal coffee. The lighthouse, a stark white sentinel, stood vigil on the farthest point of the cove, its lamp sweeping the gathering gloom.

"She's not here, honey," Evelyn said, anticipating the unspoken question. "Sheriff Harlan was just by. Said they're still 'canvassing the area.' As if Liza's just misplaced her keys." Her mother's voice hitched on the last word. "Her car... it's still down by the old pier."

Mara's jaw tightened. The abandoned car was the first true alarm bell, the one that had sent her flying out of her quiet life in Portland. Liza was many things - impulsive, a bit chaotic, prone to grand gestures - but she was meticulous about her beat-up Honda Civic. She loved that car like a pet. Leaving it unlocked, with her favorite hoodie still inside, was as out of character as Mara joining a knitting circle.

"I'll go look," Mara said, grabbing her duffel bag. "You go inside, Mom. Get some rest."

Evelyn wrung her hands. "But Mara, you just got here. You must be tired."

"I'm fine," Mara insisted, already walking away. She needed to move, to do something. Sitting still in that house, steeped in the ghosts of her childhood and the fresh

phantom of her sister, would only make the silence louder.

The walk to the pier was short but felt weighted. Every face Mara passed seemed to hold a flicker of recognition, a hesitant nod, or a quick turning away. Small towns. News traveled faster than the tide. She remembered her own hasty exit, the whispers that had followed her then, and now the focus had shifted to Liza.

The old pier jutted out into the darkening water, its pilings barnacled and green. Liza's Civic sat precisely where her mother had described it, near the ramshackle bait shed that now housed a trendy seafood shack. The orange glow of its string lights spilled onto the pavement. The car looked lonely, somehow, abandoned in the fading light. A thin film of fog was already beginning to creep in from the sea, softening the harsh edges of the buildings, blurring the lines between water and sky.

Mara approached the driver's side. The door was indeed unlocked. Her gut clenched. Liza never left her car unlocked. A chill, not entirely from the air, prickled Mara's skin. She reached in, her fingers brushing against the worn fabric of Liza's hoodie on the passenger seat. She picked it up, pressing it against her face. It smelled faintly of salt and Liza's jasmine perfume.

Her eyes scanned the dashboard, the floorboards, searching for anything out of place. A crumpled coffee cup, a receipt from the local diner, a worn paperback. Nothing. Then, her gaze caught on something unusual on the passenger side sill. A fine, rusty powder, like iron filings, dusted the gray plastic. It was a distinctive coppery-red, clinging to the surface. Old rust. Very old. The kind that flaked off historic ironwork.

Mara leaned closer, her mind already cataloging, dissecting. That exact shade of rust... She knew it. She'd seen it on the catwalk of the Blackwater Cove lighthouse during childhood explorations with Liza, a forbidden playground of corroded metal and sea-sprayed glass. It wasn't a common rust. Not from the new steel on the fishing boats, or the galvanized railings of the renovated pier. This was specific, ancient.

As she straightened, her eyes swept across the dashboard one last time, a trained instinct to miss nothing. And that's when she saw it. Tucked almost out of sight, beneath a stack of old CDs, was a small, round object. It was antique-looking, with a heavy brass casing and a tarnished glass face. It looked like a compass, but it was too thick, too elaborate. It had a small antenna, barely an inch long, poking out from its side, almost imperceptible. A receiver. Liza, with her penchant for quirky antique finds, would have loved it. But this was no mere curio.

Mara pulled it out, turning it over in her hands. The brass was cold, smooth. The compass needle inside twitched aimlessly. But beneath the needle, engraved into the brass plate, were faint, almost illegible markings. They looked like coordinates, etched with painstaking care. And then, a symbol she didn't recognize, a stylized wave or

perhaps a broken circle.

“Mara?”

She jumped, spinning around. Sheriff Tom Harlan stood a few feet away, his expression a mixture of concern and professional wariness. He was a stocky man, his uniform straining slightly across his shoulders, his face weathered by sun and worry lines that mirrored her mother's. He'd been a deputy when Mara left, and now the star on his chest glinted dully in the fading light.

“Sheriff,” Mara said, her voice betraying none of the surprise. She instinctively tucked the device behind her back.

“Figured you'd be here,” he said, his eyes flicking to Liza's car. “Your mom called. We've done a full sweep. Nothing. No signs of struggle. No forced entry. Just... gone.” He paused, sighing. “Folks around here, they get restless. Sometimes they need a change of scenery.”

Mara scoffed. “Not Liza. Not without her car, not without a word. She's not some random runaway, Tom. She's my sister.” The name felt like a challenge. He'd known them both since they were kids, knew Liza's wild spirit, but also her deep loyalty.

“I know, Mara,” he said, his tone softening slightly. “And we're taking it seriously. We've put out an alert. Checked with the ferries. No trace.” He eyed her hands. “What's that you've got there?”

Mara hesitated. Part of her wanted to show him, to explain the inexplicable signal, the odd rust, the strange device. But another part, the one honed by years of Coast Guard protocol and a healthy distrust of bureaucracy, told her to hold back. Not yet. Not until she knew more.

“Just... looking around,” she said, vague enough to be true. She brought her hands forward, empty. “Found her favorite hoodie.” She held up the garment.

Harlan nodded, his gaze lingering for a moment, as if trying to read her. “Alright. We'll keep you updated. You can head back to your mom. It's getting late.” He lingered for a moment longer, then turned and walked away, his footsteps heavy on the creaking boards of the pier.

As soon as he was out of sight, Mara retrieved the brass device from her pocket. She held it up to the faint light from the seafood shack. The coordinates were still there, faint but distinct. And then, as if jolted by an unseen current, the small antenna on its side suddenly glowed with a faint, pulsing red light. A faint hum vibrated through the brass casing. And from the device itself, a sudden, almost imperceptible *click*.

Then a voice, tinny and distorted, but unmistakably human, crackled into life from the tiny speaker on the device. It was a woman's voice, hurried, breathless. Only a fragment, cut off abruptly, but enough to make Mara's heart seize in her chest.

"...impossible... the beacon... below..."

Then, static. Just static. But the coordinates remained lit, a silent accusation in the deepening fog. And in the echo of that voice, Mara felt a certainty that chilled her to the bone: Liza hadn't run away. She had stumbled into something. And that something had left a signal.

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