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Where the Night Keeps Secrets

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Introduction

Returning to Hollow Bay was something Mara Ellison had promised herself she would never do. She had built a life out of deadlines and distance, of names she could spell phonetically and walk away from once the story ran. Burnout hadn’t so much crept up as it had settled in—the grayscale hours of a windowless newsroom, the hum of fluorescent lights that made her grind her teeth, the small cruelties of people with something to hide. When the call came, it was as brisk as a headline: your mother, Delia Ellison, has passed; there are papers to sign, keys to collect. The voice belonged to a probate attorney who did not say sorry. Mara listened twice to the voicemail and then pressed delete as if that could make the tone vanish. It didn’t. She packed a bag with black clothes and notebooks, and pointed her rented car toward the thin line of Atlantic that was her first and favorite secret as a child—salt she could taste on the wind miles before she saw it.

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Hollow Bay announced itself the way it always had: with gulls that laughed at the highway, fog thick as milk along the marsh, and the faint tang of diesel and brine. The cannery had gone dark years ago, its letters losing vowels one by one until the sign read only a sound: CAN—. Houses leaned into the weather, their paint a memory, their porches crowded with boots and plastic pumpkins no one had the heart to throw away. On Main, window mannequins wore cardigans out of season and optimistic sale tags. At the waterfront, boats rocked at their slips as if nodding off, and a carved wooden bench—donated by the Regatta Committee—listed the names of winners in neat brass plaques. She recognized three of them; two were dead, one left town. The church bell at St. Matthew’s—Hale’s church, though no one said the reverend’s name like they were thinking about him—tolled the hour to an empty square. The sound slid under her skin.

Her mother’s bungalow had the resigned neatness of a place kept up for other people’s eyes. The cedar chest still breathed wool and mothballs, and the magnolia-patterned curtains had been washed recently, as if Delia had been cleaning for company. In the kitchen, a lasagna sat wrapped in foil on the counter with a note tucked beneath the edge: For Mara—warm through at 350. The handwriting was not her mother’s; a postscript in a different pen read, From Ruth Hale and the ladies. The refrigerator door was freckled with pharmacy magnets and clipped coupons, and held in place by one seashell magnet was an envelope with Mara’s name. Inside, a house key scratched against a single line in her mother’s careful block print: Check the drawer. Tell Lena I’m sorry. Mara could feel the press of old guilt behind those words like a bruise she had learned to ignore.

Hollow Bay had ways of saying welcome that felt like warnings. At the diner, the air

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was hot with fryer grease and the easy talk of people who had taught themselves how not to look surprised. Mara took a booth because a counter is always a conversation. The waitress drifted over with a coffee pot and a practiced smile that failed at her eyes. On the corkboard by the register, a glossy flyer was pinned with three thumbtacks and a plea. MISSING, it read above a school portrait of a girl with a sleek ponytail and a guarded half-smile. ELENA “ELLIE” MORAN, AGE 16. LAST SEEN: SATURDAY, 10:14 P.M., HARBOR WALK NEAR THE CHAPEL STEPS. CONTACT HOLLOW BAY POLICE. Someone had written in ballpoint beneath the date: Pray she just ran. The receptionist at the law office had not mentioned this. The bell over the diner door chimed twice as men in work jackets came in, their voices dropping when they saw her, rising again when they decided not to know her yet.

She knew the choreography of a town like this: the church potlucks with casseroles a particular shade of comfort, photographs of boat races lined up like a history that only ever went forward, the authoritarian cheerfulness of the Harvest Parade in October, with the choir’s float trailing paper leaves that caught in the gutters for months. She knew, too, the shadow that ran under it all. When they were twelve, a girl named June Merrick had not come home from the Summer Fair. There had been posters then, too—black-and-white because color was too expensive—and other children had practiced not saying June’s name aloud as if it were a dare. Mara had learned the habit of listening to what was not said faster than she learned how to hold her breath underwater. That was the beginning of the skills that made her a journalist, and the end of believing that authority meant truth.

At Delia’s writing desk—the one with a crooked drawer that stuck unless you lifted it just so—Mara found the second key wrapped in tissue paper alongside receipts bundled with brittle elastic. The key was old brass, its head stamped with a number that could have been meaningless anywhere else. Here, it was a language: 2B. The drawer scraped, jolting a little packet of photographs forward. In one, her mother stood at the church bake sale with a pie and a smile that was for the camera. Beside her, Reverend Hale’s hand hovered near Delia’s elbow in a gesture so polite it looked performative. In the bottom right corner, a smudge of a little girl—Mara—was turned away from them, looking at something outside the frame. Memory flickered the way it does when it has been dodging light too long: the chill of the chapel’s stone steps under her legs, the echo of footsteps that didn’t want to be heard, the whisper of water slapping concrete where it shouldn’t have reached.

Her phone vibrated across the desktop—an unknown local number—and then stopped. The voicemail was nine words long and unhelpful: Don’t ask about the girl. It’s being handled. Click. Mara stared at the wall where the afternoon had already started sifting itself into winter gray. “Handled,” in her experience, was a synonym for “buried.” Profession was a set of reflexes as much as a job; her hands moved before her mind decided to, flipping open a notebook, writing dates and names, drawing a rough street map that ended at the harbor. She wrote: Ellie Moran—16—last seen chapel steps.

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June Merrick—12—Summer Fair—never found. Hale—Delia—note to Lena Ortiz (library?). Then, as if her own brain wanted to betray her, she wrote: What did I see?

She could have left the next morning, she told herself. Grief did not require geography; the legal forms did not demand a pilgrimage. The city still had a desk with her name on a taped label, a stack of read-and-returned proofs waiting for edits that would feel important for about five minutes. But Hollow Bay had never been neutral ground. It had been her first assignment to herself, the story she had dodged in order to write all the others. If a girl had vanished from the harbor steps—the same steps where, once upon a time, Mara had sat with wet knees and a secret she could not hold—then leaving was not the same as going home. It was complicity.

Outside, the fog was closing up what the day had opened, knitting the town into smaller rooms. Somewhere up Thatcher Road, where the hedges grew too high and the mailboxes listed like gravestones, a curtain shifted and then fell still. Water lapped, slow and methodical, carrying away what it could. In the distance, the bell at St. Matthew’s rang vespers, and Mara felt—despite herself—the old tug of ritual. She had spent a career tugging back. She set the brass key on the desk, a small metallic promise, and pressed her palm over the dent it left in the envelope so she wouldn’t forget how it fit her hand. She would stay. She would ask. And if the town did not answer, she would listen to the silence until it told her everything she needed to know.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Call From Home

The call that brought Mara Ellison back to Hollow Bay had come on a Tuesday, because of course it did. Tuesdays were when the world collected its debts. She remembered the exact texture of the moment: she was at her desk in the Baltimore office, the one nearest the stairwell so she could hear editors shouting about word counts three rooms away, eating a sandwich she had forgotten she had bought. The phone had rung once, twice, and she almost didn't pick up, because unknown numbers in journalism meant either a source who'd changed their mind or an editor who'd found a typo in yesterday's piece. The area code, though—she recognized the area code. It was the same one her mother's landline had carried for thirty years, even though Delia had stopped answering it sometime around the time Mara stopped calling.

She picked up and said nothing. Listening was a skill she'd honed long before she'd learned to ask questions. The voice on the other end belonged to a man who introduced himself as Gerald Pugh, attorney at law, and spoke in the flat, efficient cadence of someone who had delivered the same speech many times and had grown tired of performing sympathy. Mrs. Delia Ellison had passed, peacefully, in her sleep, the previous Friday evening. There were matters of an estate to attend to, a property to settle, papers that required a signature in person. Could he expect her within the week? Mara had asked him to repeat the date of death. He did, without hesitation, and she realized he was reading from something—perhaps a medical certificate, perhaps a script he kept on his desk for exactly this kind of call. She wrote the name down on the back of an old grocery receipt and underlined it twice. Delia Ellison, dead. Not gone, not passed on in the way church ladies meant when they whispered about it over casserole dishes. Dead.

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She had one more question. Had her mother left behind any personal effects, anything of note? Pugh paused, and in that pause Mara heard something she hadn't heard in a long time from a stranger: uncertainty. There was an envelope, he said carefully, and a key. The key had been left with instructions that it go to no one but Mara. The envelope was addressed in Delia's handwriting. He did not know what was inside it. Mara told him she would be there by Thursday. She hung up, and the sandwich sat cooling on her desk while she stared at the phone as though it might ring again with some correction, some reprieve, some explanation for why a woman she had spent a decade building careful distance from would choose now, of all times, to die.

No correction came. By the time she locked her apartment and loaded her car, the decision felt less like a choice and more like gravity.

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The drive from Baltimore took four hours if you didn't stop, and Mara didn't stop. She drove with the windows cracked and the radio off, letting the highway unspool in front of her like a gray ribbon. The city gave way to suburbs, the suburbs to exurbs, and the exurbs to the long, flat stretches of coastal Maryland where the sky pressed down on the land like a hand on a table. She passed a seafood restaurant with a painted lobster on its sign that looked more amused than decorative, a used car lot where every vehicle faced the highway in identical submission, and a church whose marquee read: GOD SAID IT. THAT SETTLES IT. She thought of her mother and how Delia had gone to that church every Sunday of Mara's childhood until the Sunday she stopped, no explanation, just a quiet rearranging of Sunday routines into errands and silence.

Mara's editor, Dale Harwick, had not been happy about the leave. They'd been mid-investigation on a zoning scandal involving a county councilman and a waterfront development deal that smelled like money laundering dressed in planning language. Dale had called her decision "noble," which in the language of newsrooms meant reckless and replaceable. Mara had told him she'd be back in a week, maybe less, and to hand the zoning story to Brenda Corbin, who was better at pretending to care about municipal budgets than Mara ever had been. Dale had agreed, but his tone carried the specific disappointment of a man who knew he was being lied to. Mara would not be back in a week. She could feel it the way you feel a change in weather—a pressure behind the ears, a tightening in the chest. Hollow Bay had always had that effect on her, pulling at some low frequency she couldn't name.

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She crossed the town line on Route 14 just past noon, the hand-painted sign reading WELCOME TO HOLLOW BAY — POPULATION 4,312 — ESTABLISHED 1704 appearing almost apologetic, as if the town weren't sure it deserved visitors. The population number struck her as generous. On the drive in from the highway, she counted maybe forty structures that appeared to be occupied, a third of which seemed to be churches. Hollow Bay had once been sustained by the crab and oyster trade, then briefly by a textile mill that had shuttered in the 1980s, then by nothing in particular, just the stubbornness of people who refused to leave and the quiet money of retirees who bought waterfront property and complained about the fog. Mara's mother had lived in this town for sixty-three years without ever leaving it voluntarily, and Mara had spent her twenties believing that said something damning about Hollow Bay rather than about Delia.

The main road ran parallel to the water, and the water was the color of slate. Boats rocked at their moorings in the small harbor, and she could see the dock where, as children, she and June Merrick used to dangle their feet and dare each other to touch the water. June's laugh came back to her suddenly, high and reckless, and Mara pushed the sound away the way you push a stone under water—it kept rising.

Her mother's bungalow sat at the end of a lane called Wren Court, which was really

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just a widened driveway with five houses on it. The house was smaller than Mara remembered, or perhaps she had simply grown larger than it. White clapboard, green shutters, a porch with two rocking chairs that faced the street as though they were waiting for someone to sit in them. The magnolia curtains were new—or at least newly washed. The smell hit her when she opened the door: lemon oil, something baking, and beneath it, the faint chemical sweetness of a house that has been closed up too long.

The lasagna was still in the kitchen, wrapped in foil on the counter, with Ruth Hale's note tucked beneath it. Mara picked it up, read it again, and set it down without touching the foil. She wasn't hungry. She walked through the small house cataloguing its contents the way an appraiser would: the worn couch in the living room, the television that predated cable, the bookshelves stocked with Reader's Digest condensed novels and back issues of Guideposts. Everything in its place. Everything labeled for someone else to find. Her mother had been a woman who prepared for departures—Mara's departures, specifically—by making sure there was food in the fridge and clean sheets on the bed, as though love could be expressed through domestic choreography alone. On the refrigerator, a single seashell magnet held an envelope with Mara's name on it. She opened it. The house key slid against a folded note. Check the drawer. Tell Lena I'm sorry.

Mara turned the key over in her hand. Brass, old, stamped with the number 2B. She didn't know what it opened. She did not yet know how important it would become.

She needed air, or coffee, or both, and the diner on Main Street was the only establishment that appeared open at this hour. The building was a converted gas station with the pumps removed and the bays walled off, creating a wide, low-ceilinged room that smelled of deep-fryer grease and something floral—potpourri, maybe, or the particular perfume of someone who had been wearing it since morning. The booths were cracked vinyl in a shade of brown that had once been tan, and the counter stools had been wiped so many times that their seats were concave, molded to the bodies of a thousand regulars. A television mounted in the corner played the local news without sound, showing footage of a flooded road in what looked like a neighboring county.

The waitress appeared within a minute, which was fast for a place this empty. She was in her fifties, with a blonde perm that had gone slightly frizzy at the edges and a name tag that read DARLENE. Her smile was practiced, the kind that reaches the mouth but not the eyes, and Mara recognized it immediately—it was the smile of someone who had learned to perform warmth as a survival strategy.

"You're back," Darlene said, as though Mara were a migratory bird whose return was noted but not celebrated.

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"Back for a few days," Mara said, sliding into a booth near the window. "Settling things out."

"Your mother's place?"

"That's right."

Darlene set a coffee mug in front of her without being asked. "You take cream?"

"No."

A pause. Darlene studied her for a moment, and Mara felt the specific weight of being assessed by a small-town waitress, which was different from being assessed by anyone else because the waitress held the power of local knowledge. "Hard to lose someone," Darlene said finally, and the practiced smile flickered into something real, something tired.

"Yes," Mara said. "It is."

She had ordered nothing yet, but the coffee was good—strong, black, and slightly bitter in the way that suggested Darlene made it for herself and only diluted it for customers out of obligation. Mara wrapped her hands around the mug and looked out the window at the street. A man in a pickup truck sat at the stop sign across the road, engine running, staring at the building. He wore a ball cap and work boots and had the posture of someone waiting for something to end. He was still there when she looked again thirty seconds later, and still there a minute after that. When she stepped outside to check her mailbox—it was mounted on a post near the diner's entrance—the truck was gone.

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It was in the diner that she saw the flyer. It was pinned to the corkboard by the register, held by three thumbtacks that had gone rusty at the edges. A school photograph of a girl with dark hair pulled into a ponytail, a half-smile that looked like it had been practiced in a mirror. ELENA "ELLIE" MORAN, AGE 16. LAST SEEN SATURDAY, 10:14 P.M. The time was specific in a way that made Mara's stomach tighten—one does not write 10:14 unless one has looked at a clock, and one does not look at a clock unless the moment carries significance. HARBOR WALK NEAR THE CHAPEL STEPS. Below the printed information, someone had written in ballpoint ink: Pray she just ran.

Hollow Bay had a history of people disappearing. Mara knew this the way she knew her own heartbeat—unconsciously, insistently. When she was twelve, a girl named June Merrick had vanished from the Summer Fair. There had been posters then, black-and-white photocopies because color printing was a luxury the town couldn't justify for

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a search that didn't yield results. Mara remembered standing on her mother's porch and watching Sheriff Otis Paine walk up the lane with his hat in his hands, and she remembered her mother sitting down at the kitchen table and not speaking until the following morning. June Merrick's name had become one of those words that the town swallowed and tried to digest, and other children had learned not to say it aloud, as though silence might undo the thing that had happened.

Ellie Moran had disappeared on a Saturday night at the harbor walk near the chapel steps. Mara knew those steps. She had sat on them as a child, feet dangling above the water, feeling the cold rise from the stones and thinking about how the sea kept its secrets in the dark.

The police station was a single-story building behind the post office, with a reception window that was more suggestion than barrier. The woman behind the glass was reading a tabloid and looked up with the expression of someone who had been interrupted during the only pleasure she allowed herself during a shift. Mara identified herself and mentioned Evan Price, the name of the current chief, and the woman's eyebrows rose before she pressed a button that released a buzz and opened a door she hadn't expected to be invited through.

Chief Evan Price was in his early sixties, heavyset, with a gray mustache and the unhurried manner of a man who had been running a small police department long enough to understand that most of what came through his doors was mundane. His office was carpeted in institutional beige, with framed certificates on the wall and a coffee maker that looked like it had survived several administrations. He shook Mara's hand firmly, though his eyes moved to her face with the particular caution of someone who was deciding how much to say.

"I'm sorry about your mother," he said. "Delia was a good woman. Quiet, but good."

"Thank you."

"I understand you have papers to sign. I can help with that if you need."

"No, Attorney Pugh is handling it."

"Ah." Something shifted in his expression—a door closing, a topic being reclassified. "And you'll be staying how long?"

"That depends."

He nodded, which meant he wouldn't ask what it depended on. Mara liked that about police officers—they had the same instinct for the unanswerable question that journalists did, except they'd chosen not to follow it as a career. She asked about Ellie

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Moran instead, directly, and watched him carefully.

Price folded his hands on the desk. "Sixteen-year-old girl. Last seen walking near the harbor Saturday night. We've been canvassing, talking to people. She might have left town—kids do that sometimes, take off for a while." His tone was neutral, professional, but his knuckles were white where they gripped each other.

"Walked where, exactly?"

"Chapel steps, mostly. It's a common spot."

"Did you find anything? Clothing, a phone, anything?"

He hesitated. "We're processing the area. I can't give you details on an active investigation."

Mara nodded. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small notepad. She didn't need to write anything—the notepad was a prop, the way a stethoscope was a prop for a doctor, useful less for its function than for what it communicated to the other person. She was a journalist. She knew how to look like she was getting information even when she was simply waiting.

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"A girl missing is more than an active investigation in a town this size," she said.

Price's jaw tightened. "We take it seriously."

"I'm sure you do." She let the words sit between them. "I'm sorry, Chief. I didn't come here to cause trouble. I came home for my mother's affairs. But I've seen your flyer at the diner, and I'd like to help if I can. I know this town. Sometimes knowing a place makes it easier to ask the right questions."

He studied her for a long moment. "Come back in a day or two," he said, rising from his chair with the careful effort of a large man. "I'll see what I can share. For now, I'd suggest you let the professionals do their work."

Mara left the station and stood on the sidewalk for a moment, breathing in the cold air. The fog had rolled in from the harbor, thinning the light to something diffuse and directionless. She opened her notebook and wrote:

ELLIE MORAN — 16 — MISSING. EVAN PRICE — CHIEF — NOT HELPLESS, NOT HELPFUL. CHAPEL STEPS — WHY THERE?

Then, a new line:

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WHO PINS A FLYER AT A DINNER WITH A BALLPOINT PEN?

She didn't know the answer yet. That was the point.

Back at the bungalow, she tried the brass key on every lock in the house. None of them fit. The key was clearly for something outside the house—a post office box, a storage unit, a locked drawer somewhere in a building she hadn't yet visited. She turned it over and over in her fingers, feeling the grooves of the number 2B pressed into the metal like a tiny address, a tiny destination.

Her mother's room was at the back of the house, and Mara stood in the doorway now, looking at the bed that had been stripped and the closet that had been emptied, except for one shelf at the top where a row of small brown boxes sat like books. She dragged a kitchen chair over and climbed up, pulling the boxes down one by one. Photographs, mostly—Delia at various ages, Delia with Mara, Delia with people Mara didn't recognize. A birth certificate. A baptismal card from St. Matthew's. A faded copy of a newspaper article from the Hallow County Gazette dated 1987, about the Summer Fair, the text mostly illegible, the grainy photograph showing a crowd gathered near the harbor. The back of the clipping had been written on in pencil: She was there. She saw.

Mara's pulse, which had been calm and methodical all afternoon, began to race. She looked at the date—1987. She had been five years old. She looked at the phrase on the back and felt something shift in the floor beneath her, a settling, or a cracking, as though the house itself were responding to the weight of what she was holding.

She put the box back on the shelf, climbed down, and sat on the edge of the bed. Outside, the fog had thickened, and the sound of water against the harbor wall came through the open window, patient and indifferent. Somewhere in the town below, a church bell began to ring, and she realized it was St. Matthew's, calling the faithful to something she could not name.

She took out her phone and scrolled through her contacts until she found a number she hadn't dialed in years. Lena. The librarian the note had referenced. Lena Ortiz, who had been Mara's closest friend before June Merrick disappeared and before a thousand small silences filled the space that friendship had once occupied. The phone rang four times, and Mara was about to hang up, because four rings meant the call went to voicemail and voicemails in a town like this were filtered and curated, when someone picked up.

"Mara?" The voice was hesitant, as though the name itself needed to be tested before being believed. "Is that you?"

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"It's me."

A long pause. The kind of pause that holds more information than words. "Your mother passed," Lena said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. Truly. I—" Another pause, shorter this time, edged with something Mara couldn't identify. "Come to the library tomorrow. I have something for you. Something your mother asked me to keep."

"Why didn't you give it to the attorney?"

"Because your mother asked me to give it to you. In person." Another pause. "Come alone."

The line went dead. Mara stared at the phone and listened to the hum of the empty house around her. She thought about the brass key, the newspaper clipping, the words written in her mother's shaky pencil on the back of a thirty-six-year-old news story. She thought about the chapel steps and the sound of water rising.

She wrote it all down in her notebook, each detail a small flag planted in the landscape of something she was only beginning to understand. Outside, the fog pressed against the windows like a living thing, and Mara Ellison, alone in her dead mother's house, felt the first true tremor of the thing she had come back to find—something buried so deep and so deliberately that the entire town had built its daily life on top of it, walking and talking and ringing bells as though the ground beneath their feet were solid.

She opened the drawer of her mother's desk—the crooked one, the one that stuck unless you lifted it just so—and pulled it open with a sharp tug. The packet of photographs tumbled forward as always, and she put them back carefully, one by one, studying each face. Her mother at the bake sale. Reverend Hale with his hand near her elbow. And Mara herself, small and turned away, looking at something outside the frame.

She picked up the brass key and set it on the desk beside the photographs. Then she sat back in the chair, folded her arms on the cool surface, and waited for morning.

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