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Beneath the Midnight Sky

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Introduction

Even in her earliest memories, Harper Green sensed that the town of Midnight Springs breathed in secrets. Tucked away amid endless stretches of northern pines and sleepy backroads, the town wore its history like a second skin—one embroidered with family names, half-whispered stories, and a good dose of pride. Growing up here had been a blessing and a curse. For Harper, it meant sharing in the warmth of small-town rituals while feeling like an outsider in her own home. The Green name was known, but not always respected—at least, not in the right ways.

Harper left Midnight Springs at eighteen with a heart full of bruises and too many questions, determined never to return. Life outside the boundaries of her childhood was sometimes chaotic, but at least it was her chaos: a fierce ambition to uncover the truth, a career in investigative journalism won through hard work and stubbornness, and a patched-up circle of friends who didn't care about hometown scandals. Work was everything. And that work filled the void left by a mother she could never quite understand—a mother whose silences and secrets had left deep fissures in Harper's life.

When the call came about her mother's sudden death, something inside Harper splintered. She hadn't spoken to her mother in over a year, and the news struck like a cold wind through her apartment. There hadn't been time to say goodbye, to bridge the gap between them, or to ask the lingering questions that haunted the edges of her memory. Returning to Midnight Springs felt like stepping into a dream she'd spent years outgrowing—a place untouched by time, heavy with expectation, and shadowed by unspoken truths.

Harper's arrival is met with tight-lipped sympathy, sidelong glances, and the suffocating closeness of a town that never forgets. The funeral should have offered closure, but instead it unearths more unease: a nagging suspicion that her mother's death is not what it seems. Old friends offer comfort, old enemies resurface, and beneath casual condolences, Harper senses a growing tension winding through the community. Alliances have shifted. The sheriff eyes her with curiosity and warning. Her mother's closest friends seem guarded, evasive, and perhaps complicit in ways Harper can't yet name.

As grief mixes with the instincts of an investigative reporter, Harper feels drawn—almost compelled—to confront the shadows of her past. She begins to trace her mother's final days, sifting through worn notebooks, half-finished letters, and cryptic belongings. Strange inconsistencies cast doubt on the official account of death by natural causes, pointing instead toward something far more sinister. Each

discovery pulls Harper deeper into the town's tangled history, where past betrayals echo through present dangers.

What begins as a reluctant homecoming quickly spirals into a labyrinth of secrets, lies, and buried crimes. Harper must decide if she's willing to risk everything—including the fragile connections that remain—to drag the truth into the light. Midnight Springs may seem beautiful in the daylight, but beneath the midnight sky, it hides a darkness that refuses to rest.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Train Back to Midnight Springs

The hum of the train car was a familiar lullaby, one Harper hadn't heard in years. It was the same route she'd taken away from Midnight Springs, though then it had been a one-way ticket, a fervent prayer whispered into the wind that she'd never look back. Now, the landscape blurring outside the window felt like a series of increasingly unwelcome postcards: distant, rolling hills giving way to denser forests, then the occasional barn with a peeling paint job, until finally, the unmistakable whisper of northern pines. Each mile closer felt like a tightening band around her chest.

She checked her phone for the tenth time, though she knew there wouldn't be new messages. Her editor, always a whirlwind of demands, had simply stated, "Take the time you need, Green. But don't forget you're still on retainer." Harper appreciated the sentiment, even if it was thinly veiled professional pragmatism. It was easier to disappear into her work than to confront the messy reality of her mother's death. Or, more accurately, the messy reality of her mother's life.

The last conversation with Evelyn Green had been a clipped, strained affair, punctuated by long silences and unspoken accusations. Harper had been on a tight deadline, chasing a story about municipal corruption, and her mother had called to complain about a leaky faucet. It escalated, as it always did, into an argument about priorities, about neglect, about the chasm that had grown between them. Harper had hung up, exasperated, promising to call back when she had more time. Time she never found.

Now, that unfinished conversation was a lead weight in her gut. Grief was a peculiar beast, she was discovering. It wasn't a steady ache but rather a series of sharp, unexpected jabs. A flash of her mother's severe expression, the scent of her lavender sachet, the memory of a rare, genuine smile. They all hit Harper with a surprising force, reminding her of what was lost, and more painfully, what had never truly been found.

The train rattled, announcing its approach to the station. Harper pulled her small carry-on from the overhead compartment, her movements stiff. She'd packed light, as if her stay would be as fleeting as a bad dream. A funeral, a few formalities, and then back to the city, back to the stories she understood, the truths she could uncover. She just needed to get through this.

Stepping onto the platform of the Midnight Springs station was like walking into a time capsule. The old brick building, the weathered wooden bench, even the faint smell of pine and damp earth – it was all exactly as she remembered. No grand entrance, no

bustling crowds. Just the quiet hum of a town that seemed to exist outside the frantic pace of the modern world. A town that had always felt like it was watching.

Harper scanned the small parking lot. She hadn't called anyone, hadn't wanted a welcoming committee. She just wanted to slip in, do what needed to be done, and slip out again. But a familiar dark blue pickup truck was parked a little too perfectly near the entrance. And leaning against its fender, arms crossed, was a man Harper hadn't seen in over a decade.

Liam Miller.

Her stomach did a strange flip-flop, a mix of old nerves and lingering resentment. He was still tall, still had that easy confidence in his posture, though the boyish charm had been replaced by something more rugged, more mature. His dark hair was a little longer, falling just so over his forehead, and a faint scar traced his left eyebrow – a souvenir from a forgotten high school skirmish. He was wearing a Midnight Springs Sheriff's Department uniform, and the sight of the badge made her jaw clench.

Their eyes met across the platform, and a slow, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips. It wasn't the wide, playful grin she remembered, but something softer, tinged with a shared melancholy. He pushed off the truck and started walking towards her, his stride purposeful.

"Harper Green," he said, his voice a low rumble, surprisingly unchanged. "Never thought I'd see you on this platform again."

"Liam Miller," she countered, her voice steadier than she expected. "Last I heard, you were still chasing runaway teenagers and dealing with rogue deer."

He chuckled, a genuine sound that softened the lines around his eyes. "Some things never change. Though, a lot has, too. I'm sorry about your mom, Harper. Truly."

The standard condolence, yet coming from Liam, it felt less like a platitude and more like a bridge across the years. He had known Evelyn, not intimately, but enough to offer more than just lip service.

"Thanks," Harper said, uncomfortable with the sudden intimacy. She gestured vaguely at his uniform. "So, deputy, huh? Trading in the football cleats for a badge?"

"Something like that," he said, reaching for her bag. His fingers brushed hers, and a jolt, not unpleasant, went through her. "Figured I could save you the trouble of finding a ride. It's a small town, Harper. News travels fast."

She didn't resist when he took her bag. Old habits, she supposed. He'd always been

the one to carry things for her, whether it was her school books or the burden of her childhood anxieties.

"I appreciate it," she said, looking away, towards the dense line of trees that marked the edge of town. Midnight Springs felt closer now, its breath on her neck. "Though I was hoping for a more discreet arrival."

Liam just smiled, that same soft, knowing smile. "Discreet isn't really a word we use much around here, Harper. Especially when it comes to the Green family."

The comment, though light, carried a sting. It was a reminder of the inherent impossibility of anonymity in a town where everyone knew everyone's business, and everyone else's business too. Especially if that business involved the enigmatic Evelyn Green.

As they walked towards his truck, a lone figure emerged from the station building – a woman, slender and dressed in black, her face etched with a familiar sorrow. Eleanor Vance. Evelyn's closest friend, almost a second mother to Harper in those early, chaotic years. Eleanor moved with a quiet grace, her eyes wide and mournful as she approached.

"Harper, dear," Eleanor said, her voice thin, as if she'd been crying. She reached out, her hand trembling slightly as she touched Harper's arm. "Oh, Harper. I'm so sorry. Your mother... she was so vibrant. It was so sudden."

Harper nodded, muttering another "thank you." Eleanor's embrace was warm, but Harper felt a strange stiffness in her friend's posture, a guardedness in her eyes. It was more than just grief. It was something else. A flicker of worry, perhaps. Or something she couldn't quite place.

"I came to pick up the flowers that arrived for the service," Eleanor explained, gesturing to a small, refrigerated van parked next to Liam's truck. "It's good to see you, dear. Even under these circumstances."

"You too, Eleanor," Harper replied, trying to sound genuine. She remembered Eleanor's booming laugh, her easy way with people, the way she could always coax a smile from Evelyn. Now, Eleanor seemed smaller, faded.

"Well, I'll leave you two to it," Eleanor said, her gaze lingering on Harper for a moment too long before she turned towards her van. "See you at the house, Harper. We've been getting it ready for you."

The house. Harper swallowed, a lump forming in her throat. The house was another repository of secrets, a place she hadn't dared to think about yet. The thought of

stepping back into the silence of those rooms, filled with her mother's things, was daunting.

As Eleanor drove away, Liam opened the passenger door of his truck for Harper. "Still the same house?" he asked, his voice gentle.

"Yes," Harper replied, climbing in. The worn seatbelt felt familiar in her hand. "Still the same house." And probably, still the same ghosts.

The drive through Midnight Springs was a journey through memory lane. The small town square, the diner with its perpetually steaming windows, the old movie theater with its peeling marquee – it all looked exactly as she had left it. Even the way the sunlight filtered through the dense canopy of trees felt unchanged, casting familiar patterns of light and shadow on the asphalt.

Liam drove slowly, as if allowing her time to absorb it all. "The town hasn't changed much," he observed, as if reading her thoughts. "But people do. Everyone's been asking about you, Harper. Your mother's passing has hit a lot of people hard."

"I'm sure," Harper said, her gaze fixed on the passing houses. She recognized some of them, the well-tended lawns, the splashes of color from late-summer flowers. These were the houses of people who had watched her grow up, who had whispered about her mother, and who would now undoubtedly be whispering about her.

"The funeral's tomorrow, at the old church," Liam continued, breaking the silence. "Eleanor's been handling most of the arrangements. She's been a rock."

"She always was," Harper agreed, a faint tremor in her voice. Eleanor had been the steady presence, the one who tried to mediate the perpetual storm between Harper and Evelyn.

They turned onto a narrower, tree-lined street. And then, there it was. The Green house. A two-story Victorian, a little more faded than she remembered, the paint on the porch trim peeling slightly. It looked exactly as it had years ago: stately, imposing, and somehow, always a little melancholy.

Liam pulled into the driveway, the crunch of gravel beneath the tires loud in the quiet afternoon. He cut the engine, and the sudden silence felt heavy, oppressive.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked, turning to her, his blue eyes searching hers.

Harper looked at the house, then back at Liam. Ready? No. She was far from ready. But she was here. And Midnight Springs, she knew, would demand answers, whether she was ready or not.

“As I’ll ever be,” she said, opening the truck door. The scent of pine and damp earth was stronger here, mixed with something else. Something older. Something that smelled like secrets.

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