

Safe Haven

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As Katie wound her way among the tables, a breeze from the Atlantic rippled through her hair. Carrying three plates in her left hand and another in her right, she wore jeans and a T-shirt that read *Ivan's: Try Our Fish Just for the Halibut*. She brought the plates to four men wearing polo shirts; the one closest to her caught her eye and smiled. Though he tried to act as though he was just a friendly guy, she knew he was watching her as she walked away. Melody had mentioned the men had come from Wilmington and were scouting locations for a movie.

After retrieving a pitcher of sweet tea, she refilled their glasses before returning to the waitress station. She stole a glance at the view. It was late April, the temperature hovering just around perfect, and blue skies stretched to the horizon. Beyond her, the Intracoastal was calm despite the breeze and seemed to mirror the color of the sky. A dozen seagulls perched on the railing, waiting to dart beneath the tables if someone dropped a scrap of food.

Ivan Smith, the owner, hated them. He called them rats-with-wings, and he'd already patrolled the railing twice wielding a wooden plunger, trying to scare them off. Melody had leaned toward Katie and confessed that she was more worried

about where the plunger had been than she was about the seagulls. Katie said nothing.

She started another pot of sweet tea, wiping down the station. A moment later, she felt someone tap her on the shoulder. She turned to see Ivan's daughter, Eileen. A pretty, ponytailed nineteen-year-old, she was working part-time as the restaurant hostess.

"Katie—can you take another table?"

Katie scanned her tables, running the rhythm in her head. "Sure." She nodded.

Eileen walked down the stairs. From nearby tables Katie could hear snippets of conversations—people talking about friends or family, the weather or fishing. At a table in the corner, she saw two people close their menus. She hustled over and took the order, but didn't linger at the table trying to make small talk, like Melody did. She wasn't good at small talk, but she was efficient and polite and none of the customers seemed to mind.

She'd been working at the restaurant since early March. Ivan had hired her on a cold, sunny afternoon when the sky was the color of robins' eggs. When he'd said she could start work the following Monday, it took everything she had not to cry in front of him. She'd waited until she was walking home before breaking down. At the time, she was broke and hadn't eaten in two days.

She refilled waters and sweet teas and headed to the kitchen. Ricky, one of the cooks, winked at her as he always did. Two days ago he'd asked her out, but she'd told him that she didn't want to date anyone at the restaurant. She had the feeling he would try again and hoped her instincts were wrong.

"I don't think it's going to slow down today," Ricky commented. He was blond and lanky, perhaps a year or two younger than her, and still lived with his parents. "Every time we think we're getting caught up, we get slammed again."

"It's a beautiful day."

"But why are people here? On a day like today, they should

be at the beach or out fishing. Which is exactly what I'm doing when I finish up here."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Can I drive you home later?"

He offered to drive her at least twice a week. "Thank you, no. I don't live that far."

"It's no problem," he persisted. "I'd be glad to do it."

"Walking's good for me."

She handed him her ticket and Ricky pinned it up on the wheel and then located one of her orders. She carried the order back to her section and dropped it off at a table.

Ivan's was a local institution, a restaurant that had been in business for almost thirty years. In the time she'd been working there, she'd come to recognize the regulars, and as she crossed the restaurant floor her eyes traveled over them to the people she hadn't seen before. Couples flirting, other couples ignoring each other. Families. No one seemed out of place and no one had come around asking for her, but there were still times when her hands began to shake, and even now she slept with a light on.

Her short hair was chestnut brown; she'd been dyeing it in the kitchen sink of the tiny cottage she rented. She wore no makeup and knew her face would pick up a bit of color, maybe too much. She reminded herself to buy sunscreen, but after paying rent and utilities on the cottage, there wasn't much left for luxuries. Even sunscreen was a stretch. Ivan's was a good job and she was glad to have it, but the food was inexpensive, which meant the tips weren't great. On her steady diet of rice and beans, pasta and oatmeal, she'd lost weight in the past four months. She could feel her ribs beneath her shirt, and until a few weeks ago, she'd had dark circles under her eyes that she thought would never go away.

"I think those guys are checking you out," Melody said, nodding toward the table with the four men from the movie studio. "Especially the brown-haired one. The cute one."

"Oh," Katie said. She started another pot of coffee. Anything

she said to Melody was sure to get passed around, so Katie usually said very little to her.

“What? You don’t think he’s cute?”

“I didn’t really notice.”

“How can you not notice when a guy is cute?” Melody stared at her in disbelief.

“I don’t know,” Katie answered.

Like Ricky, Melody was a couple of years younger than Katie, maybe twenty-five or so. An auburn-haired, green-eyed minx, she dated a guy named Steve who made deliveries for the home improvement store on the other side of town. Like everyone else in the restaurant, she’d grown up in Southport, which she described as being a paradise for children, families, and the elderly, but the most dismal place on earth for single people. At least once a week, she told Katie that she was planning to move to Wilmington, which had bars and clubs and a lot more shopping. She seemed to know everything about everybody. Gossip, Katie sometimes thought, was Melody’s real profession.

“I heard Ricky asked you out,” she said, changing the subject, “but you said no.”

“I don’t like to date people at work.” Katie pretended to be absorbed in organizing the silverware trays.

“We could double-date. Ricky and Steve go fishing together.”

Katie wondered if Ricky had put her up to it or whether it was Melody’s idea. Maybe both. In the evenings, after the restaurant closed, most of the staff stayed around for a while, visiting over a couple of beers. Aside from Katie, everyone had worked at Ivan’s for years.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Katie demurred.

“Why not?”

“I had a bad experience once,” Katie said. “Dating a guy from work, I mean. Since then, I’ve kind of made it a rule not to do it again.”

Melody rolled her eyes before hurrying off to one of her tables. Katie dropped off two checks and cleared empty plates. She kept busy, as she always did, trying to be efficient and invisible. She kept her head down and made sure the waitress station was spotless. It made the day go by faster. She didn't flirt with the guy from the studio, and when he left he didn't look back.

Katie worked both the lunch and dinner shift. As day faded into night, she loved watching the sky turning from blue to gray to orange and yellow at the western rim of the world. At sunset, the water sparkled and sailboats heeled in the breeze. The needles on the pine trees seemed to shimmer. As soon as the sun dropped below the horizon, Ivan turned on the propane gas heaters and the coils began to glow like jack-o'-lanterns. Katie's face had gotten slightly sunburned, and the waves of radiant heat made her skin sting.

Abby and Big Dave replaced Melody and Ricky in the evening. Abby was a high school senior who giggled a lot, and Big Dave had been cooking dinners at Ivan's for nearly twenty years. He was married with two kids and had a tattoo of a scorpion on his right forearm. He weighed close to three hundred pounds and in the kitchen his face was always shiny. He had nicknames for everyone and called her Katie Kat.

The dinner rush lasted until nine. When it began to clear out, Katie cleaned and closed up the wait station. She helped the busboys carry plates to the dishwasher while her final tables finished up. At one of them was a young couple and she'd seen the rings on their fingers as they held hands across the table. They were attractive and happy, and she felt a sense of *déjà vu*. She had been like them once, a long time ago, for just a moment. Or so she thought, because she learned the moment was only an illusion. Katie turned away from the blissful couple, wishing that she could erase her memories forever and never have that feeling again.

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The next morning, Katie stepped onto the porch with a cup of coffee, the floorboards creaking beneath her bare feet, and leaned against the railing. Lilies sprouted amid the wild grass in what once was a flower bed, and she raised the cup, savoring the aroma as she took a sip.

She liked it here. Southport was different from Boston or Philadelphia or Atlantic City, with their endless sounds of traffic and smells and people rushing along the sidewalks, and it was the first time in her life that she had a place to call her own. The cottage wasn't much, but it was hers and out of the way and that was enough. It was one of two identical structures located at the end of a gravel lane, former hunting cabins with wooden-plank walls, nestled against a grove of oak and pine trees at the edge of a forest that stretched to the coast. The living room and kitchen were small and the bedroom didn't have a closet, but the cottage was furnished, including rockers on the front porch, and the rent was a bargain. The place wasn't decaying, but it was dusty from years of neglect, and the landlord offered to buy the supplies if Katie was willing to spruce it up. Since she'd moved in, she'd spent much of her free time on all fours or standing on chairs, doing exactly that. She scrubbed

the bathroom until it sparkled; she washed the ceiling with a damp cloth. She wiped the windows with vinegar and spent hours on her hands and knees, trying her best to remove the rust and grime from the linoleum in the kitchen. She'd filled holes in the walls with Spackle and then sanded the Spackle until it was smooth. She'd painted the walls in the kitchen a cheery yellow and put glossy white paint on the cabinets. Her bedroom was now a light blue, the living room was beige, and last week, she'd put a new slipcover on the couch, which made it look practically new again.

With most of the work now behind her, she liked to sit on the front porch in the afternoons and read books she'd checked out from the library. Aside from coffee, reading was her only indulgence. She didn't have a television, a radio, a cell phone, or a microwave or even a car, and she could pack all her belongings in a single bag. She was twenty-seven years old, a former long-haired blond with no real friends. She'd moved here with almost nothing, and months later she still had little. She saved half of her tips and every night she folded the money into a coffee can she kept hidden in the crawl space beneath the porch. She kept that money for emergencies and would rather go hungry than touch it. Simply the knowledge that it was there made her breathe easier because the past was always around her and might return at any time. It prowled the world searching for her, and she knew it was growing angrier at every passing day.

"Good morning," a voice called out, disrupting her thoughts. "You must be Katie."

Katie turned. On the sagging porch of the cottage next door, she saw a woman with long, unruly brown hair, waving at her. She looked to be in her mid-thirties and wore jeans and a button-up shirt she'd rolled to her elbows. A pair of sunglasses nested in tangled curls on her head. She was holding a small rug and she seemed to be debating whether or not to shake it before finally

tossing it aside and starting toward Katie's. She moved with the energy and ease of someone who exercised regularly.

"Irv Benson told me we'd be neighbors."

The landlord, Katie thought. "I didn't realize anyone was moving in."

"I don't think he did, either. He about fell out of his chair when I said I'd take the place." By then, she'd reached Katie's porch and she held out her hand. "My friends call me Jo," she said.

"Hi," Katie said, taking it.

"Can you believe this weather? It's gorgeous, isn't it?"

"It's a beautiful morning," Katie agreed, shifting from one foot to the other. "When did you move in?"

"Yesterday afternoon. And then, joy of joys, I pretty much spent all night sneezing. I think Benson collected as much dust as he possibly could and stored it at my place. You wouldn't believe what it's like in there."

Katie nodded toward the door. "My place was the same way."

"It doesn't look like it. Sorry, I couldn't help sneaking a glance through your windows when I was standing in my kitchen. Your place is bright and cheery. I, on the other hand, have rented a dusty, spider-filled dungeon."

"Mr. Benson let me paint."

"I'll bet. As long as Mr. Benson doesn't have to do it, I'll bet he lets me paint, too. He gets a nice, clean place, and I get to do the work." She gave a wry grin. "How long have you lived here?"

Katie crossed her arms, feeling the morning sun begin to warm her face. "Almost two months."

"I'm not sure I can make it that long. If I keep sneezing like I did last night, my head will probably fall off before then." She reached for her sunglasses and began wiping the lenses with her shirt. "How do you like Southport? It's a different world, don't you think?"

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t sound like you’re from around here. I’d guess somewhere up north?”

After a moment, Katie nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” Jo went on. “And Southport takes awhile to get used to. I mean, I’ve always loved it, but I’m partial to small towns.”

“You’re from here?”

“I grew up here, went away, and ended up coming back. The oldest story in the book, right? Besides, you can’t find dusty places like this just anywhere.”

Katie smiled, and for a moment neither said anything. Jo seemed content to stand in front of her, waiting for her to make the next move. Katie took a sip of coffee, gazing off into the woods, and then remembered her manners.

“Would you like a cup of coffee? I just brewed a pot.”

Jo put the sunglasses back on her head, tucking them into her hair. “You know, I was hoping you’d say that. I’d *love* a cup of coffee. My entire kitchen is still in boxes and my car is in the shop. Do you have any idea what it’s like to face the day without caffeine?”

“I have an idea.”

“Well, just so you know, I’m a genuine coffee addict. Especially on any day that requires me to unpack. Did I mention I hate unpacking?”

“I don’t think you did.”

“It’s pretty much the most miserable thing there is. Trying to figure out where to put everything, banging your knees as you bump around the clutter. Don’t worry—I’m not the kind of neighbor who asks for that kind of help. But coffee, on the other hand . . .”

“Come on.” Katie waved her in. “Just keep in mind that most of the furniture came with the place.”

After crossing the kitchen, Katie pulled a cup from the cup-

board and filled it to the brim. She handed it to Jo. "Sorry, I don't have any cream or sugar."

"Not necessary," Jo said, taking the cup. She blew on the coffee before taking a sip. "Okay, it's official," she said. "As of now, you're my best friend in the entire world. This is soooo good."

"You're welcome," she said.

"So Benson said you work at Ivan's?"

"I'm a waitress."

"Is Big Dave still working there?" When Katie nodded, Jo went on. "He's been there since before I was in high school. Does he still make up names for everyone?"

"Yes," she said.

"How about Melody? Is she still talking about how cute the customers are?"

"Every shift."

"And Ricky? Is he still hitting on new waitresses?"

When Katie nodded again, Jo laughed. "That place never changes."

"Did you work there?"

"No, but it's a small town and Ivan's is an institution. Besides, the longer you live here, the more you'll understand that there are no such things as secrets in this place. Everyone knows everyone's business, and some people, like, let's say . . . Melody . . . have raised gossip to an art form. It used to drive me crazy. Of course, half the people in Southport are the same way. There isn't much to do around here but gossip."

"But you came back."

Jo shrugged. "Yeah, well. What can I say? Maybe I like the crazy." She took another sip of her coffee and motioned out the window. "You know, as long as I'd lived here, I wasn't even aware these two places existed."

"The landlord said they were hunting cottages. They used to be part of the plantation before he turned them into rentals."

Jo shook her head. "I can't believe you moved out here."

"You did, too," Katie pointed out.

"Yes, but the only reason I considered it was because I knew I wouldn't be the only woman at the end of a gravel road in the middle of nowhere. It's kind of isolated."

Which is why I was more than happy to rent it, Katie thought to herself. "It's not so bad. I'm used to it by now."

"I hope I get used to it," she said. She blew on the coffee, cooling it off. "So what brought you to Southport? I'm sure it wasn't the exciting career potential at Ivan's. Do you have any family around here? Parents? Brothers or sisters?"

"No," Katie said. "Just me."

"Following a boyfriend?"

"No."

"So you just . . . moved here?"

"Yes."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

Katie didn't answer. They were the same questions that Ivan and Melody and Ricky had asked. She knew there were no ulterior motives behind the questions, it was just natural curiosity, but even so, she was never quite sure what to say, other than to state the truth.

"I just wanted a place where I could start over."

Jo took another sip of coffee, seemingly mulling over her answer, but surprising Katie, she asked no follow-up questions. Instead, she simply nodded.

"Makes sense to me. Sometimes starting over is exactly what a person needs. And I think it's admirable. A lot of people don't have the courage it takes to do something like that."

"You think so?"

"I know so," she said. "So, what's on your agenda today? While I'm whining and unpacking and cleaning until my hands are raw."

"I have to work later. But other than that, not much. I need to run to the store and pick up some things."

“Are you going to visit Fisher’s or head into town?”

“I’m just going to Fisher’s,” she said.

“Have you met the owner there? The guy with gray hair?”

Katie nodded. “Once or twice.”

Jo finished her coffee and put the cup in the sink before sighing. “All right,” she said, sounding less than enthusiastic. “Enough procrastinating. If I don’t start now, I’m never going to finish. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.”

Jo gave a little wave. “It was nice meeting you, Katie.”

From her kitchen window, Katie saw Jo shaking the rug she’d set aside earlier. She seemed friendly enough, but Katie wasn’t sure whether she was ready to have a neighbor. Although it might be nice to have someone to visit with now and then, she’d gotten used to being alone.

Then again, she knew that living in a small town meant that her self-imposed isolation couldn’t last forever. She had to work and shop and walk around town; some of the customers at the restaurant already recognized her. And besides, she had to admit she’d enjoyed chatting with Jo. For some reason, she felt that there was more to Jo than met the eye, something . . . trustworthy, even if she couldn’t explain it. She was also a single woman, which was a definite plus. Katie didn’t want to imagine how she would have reacted had a man moved in next door, and she wondered why she’d never even considered the possibility.

Over by the sink, she washed out the coffee cups then put them back into the cupboard. The act was so familiar—putting two cups away after coffee in the morning—and for an instant, she felt engulfed by the life she’d left behind. Her hands began to tremble, and pressing them together she took a few deep breaths until they finally stilled. Two months ago, she wouldn’t have been able to do that; even two weeks ago, there had been little she could do to stop it. While she was glad that these bouts

of anxiety no longer overwhelmed her, it also meant she was getting comfortable here, and that scared her. Because being comfortable meant she might lower her guard, and she could never let that happen.

Even so, she was grateful to have ended up in Southport. It was a small historic town of a few thousand people, located at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, right where it met the Intracoastal. It was a place with sidewalks and shade trees and flowers that bloomed in the sandy soil. Spanish moss hung from the tree branches, while kudzu climbed the wizened trunks. She had watched kids riding their bikes and playing kick ball in the streets, and had marveled at the number of churches, one on nearly every corner. Crickets and frogs sounded in the evening, and she thought again that this place had felt right, even from the beginning. It felt *safe*, as if it had somehow been beckoning to her all along, promising sanctuary.

Katie slipped on her only pair of shoes, a pair of beat-up Converse sneakers. The chest of drawers stood largely empty and there was almost no food in the kitchen, but as she stepped out of the house and into the sunshine and headed toward the store, she thought to herself, *This is home*. Drawing in a deeply scented breath of hyacinth and fresh-cut grass, she knew she hadn't been happier in years.