



Before the **ANCHOR**

A HAVEN HARBOR STORY



NIA MYAH

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*A free gift for the Harbor Haven Reader Circle — the story
every book in the series grew from.*

The casserole dishes were the worst of it.

Ruthie had washed the last of them twice, dried them, stacked them on the counter — and still couldn't make herself carry them back. Each one belonged to a neighbor. Each one meant knocking on a door, and a face arranging itself into sympathy, and the word *Walt* said gently, the way you'd set down something breakable.

Eight months a widow, and she had become a woman who washed clean dishes.

Outside, the cove had gone the color of a bruise. The radio in the kitchen muttered about a line of weather pushing up the coast — nothing with a name, just a squall, the kind that rattled the windows and was gone by morning. Walt would have walked the dock anyway, checking lines, because a waterman never quite trusted the sky to behave without him. Ruthie pulled his old cardigan tighter and decided she would not walk the dock. There was no one's lines left to check.

She was reaching to switch off the lamp when someone knocked.

Not a neighbor's knock. A neighbor knocked like an apology. This was three hard raps, then nothing, then a fourth so soft she almost talked herself out of it.

The girl on the porch was soaked to the bone. Seventeen, maybe. A duffel bag clutched to her chest with both arms, and under the wet coat — Ruthie saw it and felt the floor

tilt — the unmistakable round of a belly carried high and close.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said. Her teeth were going. “I saw your light. I’ll go. I just—” She didn’t finish. She looked like every excuse she’d ever made had finally run out.

Ruthie’s first thought, God forgive her, was *no*. She had nothing left to give anyone. She was a dry well, a washed dish, an old woman in a dead man’s sweater. She opened her mouth to say something kind and final.

What came out was: “Get in here before you catch your death.”



The girl’s name was Nell. She gave it the way you’d hand over a coin you weren’t sure was real.

Ruthie put the kettle on, because that was what her hands knew how to do, and wrapped Nell in the quilt off the back of the couch — the one Walt’s mother had made, the one Ruthie had not been able to fold away. Nell sat at the kitchen table and shook and watched the door like it might still change its mind about her.

“Whose is it,” Ruthie said. Not unkind. Just old, and past the age of pretending not to see things.

“Mine,” Nell said, with a flash of something — defiance, the good kind, the kind that keeps a person alive on a cold road. Then, smaller: “Nobody’s. Mine.”

“How far along.”

“Seven months. About.” Nell’s hand went flat against her coat without her seeming to notice. “I’m not — I didn’t come here to ask you for anything. I was walking to the bus and the storm—”

“There’s no bus tonight,” Ruthie said. “There’s barely a road tonight.” She set the cocoa down — not tea, the girl needed sweetness — and pulled out the second chair, the one across from her own, the one that had sat empty at every meal for eight months. She sat in her own. “So you’ll have the back room. And in the morning we’ll see what the morning says.”

Nell stared at the mug. “Why.”

It was a fair question. Ruthie turned it over and found, to her surprise, that she had an answer, and that the answer had been waiting in her a long time without her knowing.

“Because somebody left a light on for me once,” she said. “And I have one. That’s the whole of it.”



The squall did not blow itself out by morning. It dug in, the way grief does, and the power went with it sometime before dawn.

That was how Cora found them — Ruthie and Nell by candlelight, an absurd flotilla of pots catching the leak that had opened over the pantry. Cora was new to the

harbor then, young and serious, just taken on as the keeper out at Tillett Light, and she had walked the flooded shore road in oilskins three sizes too big because she'd seen, she said, that Ruthie's was the only window still lit and wanted to be sure the old woman hadn't fallen.

"I'm not that old," Ruthie said.

"No, ma'am," Cora said, and looked at Nell, and at the belly, and did not ask a single question. She just shrugged out of the oilskins, knelt by the pantry, and put her hand flat on the wet floor like she was taking the house's pulse.

"Lord," Cora said — plain, conversational, the way some people pray and most people only wish they could — "this is a leaky old roof and a scared girl and a tired woman, and You are not put off by any of the three. Keep the water out. Keep the baby in. And keep us till the light comes back. Amen."

Nell, who had flinched at the first word, was crying by the last one. Quietly. The way you cry when someone says out loud the thing you'd stopped daring to hope.

Ruthie felt something in her own chest she had assumed was gone for good. Not happiness. Sturdier than that. The plain animal usefulness of being, for one stranger on one bad night, a place to come in out of the rain.



Nell stayed.

Not forever — that's not how it goes, and Ruthie came to understand that it isn't supposed to. Nell stayed through the baby (a boy, eight pounds and furious, born at the county hospital with Ruthie in the waiting room wearing out the linoleum). She stayed through the hard green months after, learning to be a mother in the back room of a cottage that smelled like salt and bread. And then one spring she stayed somewhere else — a small apartment two towns over, a steady job, a life with her own light to leave on.

But before she went, on her last morning, Nell did a strange thing.

She'd taken to walking the beach at low tide, the baby strapped to her chest, picking up shells. That last morning she pressed one into Ruthie's palm — a battered scallop, chalky and ordinary, the kind the tide leaves by the thousand. On it, in nail polish from the drugstore, she had painted one word in careful, unsteady letters.

HOPE.

“I didn't have anything else to give you,” Nell said.

Ruthie set it on the windowsill over the sink, where the morning came in. And in the years that followed — because there were years, and there were other knocks, other soaked and frightened souls who saw the only lit window on the cove and dared the porch steps — she started a bowl. A plain wooden bowl by the door. Every soul who passed through painted a shell before they left.

A word. A name. A prayer they didn't have anywhere else to put.

By the time Ruthie was truly old, the bowl was full.

She never did carry those casserole dishes back. She kept them. You need a lot of dishes, it turns out, when your table is always one chair short of enough, because someone new is always about to sit down.

Ruthie's cottage still stands on the cove at Haven Harbor. The bowl of shells is still by the door, and the light is still on — though these days it's a burned-out trauma counselor named Ellie who keeps it, and a grumpy harbor captain next door who'd tell you he never asked for any of this.

*Their story — and the night a record storm turns Ruthie's quiet cottage into something with a name — is **Tides of Grace, Harbor Haven Sagas Book 1**. I'd love for you to meet them.*

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— **Nia Myah**

With you in the harbor

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