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The Glass Harbor

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Introduction

The ferry spit Mara Ellis back onto the town she swore she'd never return to, its fog swallowing the shoreline like a secret no one wanted to keep. The water was the color of pewter, unbroken but restless, and the pilings rose out of it like old bones. Glass Harbor appeared in fragments—clam-colored houses with salt-licked shingles, a sloping street down to the docks, the lighthouse winking a tired eye through the murk. Somewhere beyond the veiled horizon, the tide tugged at everything, insistently, the way memory tugged at her even now.

Her phone had stopped buzzing hours ago, after three voicemails, two from strangers and one from Chief Lila Montgomery, calm as ever, asking Mara to call when she could. No one could find Jonah. Two days of silence, then a rumor that his skiff had drifted in without him, then the official line: wait and see, the ocean keeps its own time. Mara had spent enough years translating official lines to know when they were stalling. She had left this place with her name singed by scandal and her heart reduced to muscle memory—now that heart beat with the old rhythm of panic and purpose.

She stood at the open rail, salt damp on her lips, watching the old glassworks museum rise from the fog. Its brick chimney, long cold, peaked above the low roofs as if sniffing the air for smoke. Once, the town had breathed molten sand and sweat; now it breathed summer tourists and construction crews and the kind of promises that came with glossy renderings. Banners flapped on the waterfront lampposts—GLASS HARBOR RENEWAL—and beyond them she could make out a sleek temporary office where Calvin Stroud's people had set up shop. Even from the water, the place looked like an apology wrapped in money.

Dockhands caught the lines, the ferry groaned, and Mara felt the deck shudder under her boots as the gangway clanged into place. Close by, gulls squabbled over something silver and slick. The scent of diesel cut through the fog, familiar and sore. She shouldered her bag and stepped onto the pier, her breath fogging the air like she was still out in the cold. Heads turned. There were faces she knew and faces that had grown into their lineage—Reeses and McAlpins and a boy who had once been the best diver off Barefoot Rock now thick in the shoulders, soft in the eyes. Evelyn Reese sat on the bench near the tackle shop, wrapped in a tartan shawl, gaze sharp as a rusted hook. She lifted two fingers in a greeting that felt like a test.

"Sorry about your brother," someone said as Mara passed. The words were not unkind. They were simply placed, like a stone on a grave.

The boathouses along the inner slip hunched together, their doors blinked open and shut by the wind. Mara knew Jonah's even before she reached it—the way he kept two buoys painted the same shade of blue their father had favored, the habit of stacking his crab pots in clean pyramids. The padlock hung there, secured but without conviction. Through the crack she saw the dim skim of a work light left on and the outline of his bench, neat except for the coffee mug missing its handle and a rag smeared with something dark. Outside, a coil of rope lay half-unwound, a greasy line of footprints tracking from the door to the edge of the slip and back again, overlapping, hurried, like people trying not to look like they were hurrying.

Down-slope, a small skiff knocked against a bumper, its hull whispering a complaint with each swell. Mara didn't have to see the registration to know it was Jonah's; she knew the sound his boats made the way some people knew a laugh in a crowded room. A life jacket slumped under the thwart. The radio handset dangled from its cradle, cord strained, the push-to-talk button ground with a new scrape. A thermos rolled to a stop and back again with the tide's pulse, patient, indifferent. No jacket on the seat. No tackle scattered in Jonah's usual, deliberate chaos. The kind of tidy that comes from someone else's hands.

Fog pressed closer, beading on her lashes. Farther out, the lighthouse sent a pale blade across the channel, cutting the water into black and silver. Mara crouched and touched the mooring line. The knot was wrong—sloppy and tight in the way a rushed knot is tight, furred at the cut end, strands flattened like they'd been pinched in something metal. Jonah had tied the same bowline since they were kids, his hands learning the loop and the rabbit and the tree before most boys learned to shave. He would never have left his boat like this. She felt the truth of that like a bruise blooming, tender and undeniable.

She straightened and looked along the pier. A shape moved in the fog, paused, then slid out of sight with the quiet chuckle of boots on wet wood. The ferry let out a long, low horn, and the sound seemed to push the town a little farther away, as if distance were a thing that could slip between her and what she'd come to find. Mara tightened her grip on the rail, breathed, and let the old, dangerous calm settle into her bones. Glass Harbor had always kept its own counsels. She would learn them again, even if she had to chip them out of the dark, one sharp fragment at a time.

CHAPTER ONE: Fogbound Return

The ferry spit Mara Ellis back onto the town she swore she'd never return to, its fog swallowing the shoreline like a secret no one wanted to keep. The water was the color of pewter, unbroken but restless, and the pilings rose out of it like old bones. Glass Harbor appeared in fragments—clam-colored houses with salt-licked shingles, a sloping street down to the docks, the lighthouse winking a tired eye through the murk. Somewhere beyond the veiled horizon, the tide tugged at everything, insistently, the way memory tugged at her even now.

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She tried Lila first, not out of sentiment but because the chief had the keys to doors that would otherwise remain shut. The dispatcher said Lila was out on Harbor Road, dealing with a fender-bender near the new development's staging area. Mara cut down the alley between the cannery and the laundromat, the damp air thick with the smell of brine and wet wool. Seagulls pitched themselves at the sky like half-hearted prayers. A spray-painted stencil on the alley wall read STROUD BRINGS HOPE, and under it, in different paint, the single word LIAR. Mara snapped a photo without

breaking stride, the image captured in grayscale that matched the day.

The crash site was more spectacle than carnage. A pickup had kissed the bumper of a black SUV with tinted windows, the kind that made their presence felt even when parked. A small crowd had formed, and in the middle of it stood Calvin Stroud, jacket open, hands in pockets, a smile that could sell solar panels to a lighthouse. He was talking to a young woman in a high-vis vest, nodding seriously, as if traffic laws were the foundation of civilization. Chief Lila leaned against her cruiser, arms crossed, her face set in the low, neutral gear she used when she wanted to be unreadable. When she saw Mara, her expression didn't change, but she pushed off the car.

"Mara," Lila said. It wasn't a question. Her hair had more gray at the temples and her uniform looked pressed within an inch of its life, but otherwise she was the same woman who'd once told Mara that the only thing scarier than a liar was someone who believed their own story.

"Jonah's gone," Mara said, keeping her voice even. "Two days, no word. His boat's in, but it's not right. You called, then didn't call back. I need to know what you're doing."

Lila's gaze flicked to the crowd, then back. "We're doing what we do. Checking his haunts, putting out word to the harbormaster, talking to boats that came in after his last known. There's no sign of violence in the usual places. No blood on the dock, no wreckage. Two days is short, Mara. You know that."

"Not for him," Mara said. "He doesn't ghost. He doesn't leave his radio dangling by the cord, and he doesn't tie knots with his nondominant hand. And he wouldn't be out in this fog unless he had to."

Stroud peeled away from the fender-bender and walked over, all practiced concern. His teeth were the right kind of white. "Chief, if you need anything from our side, just ask." He glanced at Mara with open curiosity. "You must be Jonah's sister. I'm Calvin Stroud. I've heard a lot about your family."

"From who?" Mara asked.

"From everyone," Stroud said smoothly. "People remember. Especially here." He turned back to Lila. "We'll clear the road in five. Don't want to slow you down."

Lila gave him a nod that could have meant anything and watched him stride back to his people. She lowered her voice. "I'll walk you over to the station. We can talk there."

"You have five minutes here," Mara said. "Tell me if anything's been officially logged. Tell me if the harbormaster saw him leave. Tell me if you've talked to Theo."

Lila looked out toward the water, where the fog was thickest. “No official report yet, but we’re treating it as priority. Harbormaster didn’t see him leave. I haven’t tracked down Theo yet—he’s out on a repair job. I was headed over to the Ellis place after this. You beat me to it.” She hesitated, a muscle working in her jaw. “I know you two were... distant. If there’s bad blood, I need to know.”

Mara didn’t answer the bait. “Who’s the donor on the banner?” she asked instead, nodding toward a campaign-style placard stuck near the curb. It read HARBOR RENEWAL, and in smaller print, a thank you to a name she didn’t recognize: VANCE HARBOR GROUP.

Lila’s expression tightened. “Private backing. Stroud brought it in. That’s all I know. If you want paperwork, you know where to find it.” She paused. “You didn’t come back for this, did you? The development?”

“I came back for Jonah,” Mara said. “The development is what he’d be fighting if he was here. So maybe it’s the same thing.”

Stroud clapped his hands once, loudly. “Road’s clear!” he announced, as if he’d personally negotiated peace with the traffic gods. The pickup eased forward, the SUV followed, and the crowd dissolved with the reluctance of people leaving a free show. Stroud lifted a hand to Lila and to Mara, and then he was in the back of the SUV, the door closing with a solid, armored thump. Mara took another photo of the license plate, just because.

Lila gave her a look. “Don’t go looking for fights you don’t need.”

“I’m looking for my brother,” Mara said. “If fights come with the address, I won’t turn them away.”

They stood a moment longer in the damp, the smell of exhaust fading into the salt. Lila’s radio crackled and she answered it with a practiced shorthand, her voice clipped and confident. She had always been good at compartmentalizing, at keeping each piece of the world in its jar. Mara wondered which jar she was in now: childhood friend, chief of police, or something else entirely. Lila hung up and rubbed at the bridge of her nose.

“I’ll call you,” she said. “Go home. Rest. Wait.”

“I’ll wait in his boathouse,” Mara said. “That’s close enough.”

She turned before Lila could argue and started back the way she’d come, footsteps echoing off the damp brick. The fog had thickened while they talked, swallowing the

far end of the pier. The banners flapped like a restless audience. The museum's chimney was a gray scratch against the sky. She imagined Jonah here, his outline moving in and out of view, his hands stained with oil or paint or fish blood. She imagined him angry. She imagined him scared.

Near the boathouse, a kid in a hoodie leaned against a piling, vaping, head down, lost in his phone. He glanced up as she approached, eyes flicking to her face, then away. He looked like a hundred other kids in town, bored and tethered to a screen, but something in his posture made her take notice. He pushed off the piling and ambled off toward the cannery, moving with the deliberate slouch of someone who didn't want to be watched. Mara let him go. There were other eyes. She could feel them, the way you feel a change in air pressure before a storm.

She tried the padlock on the boathouse, tugging at it once out of habit. Solid. The hinges were bright with recent oil; someone had been tending them. The crack in the door was just wide enough to slide her fingers through. The work light's glow was steady, not flickering, which meant the power was live and the battery hadn't been drained. On the bench, the rag with the dark smear was crumpled, and under it, the faint shine of something not quite organic. Mara hooked two fingers through the gap and pinched at the rag, easing it aside without disturbing anything else. Beneath it lay a length of steel, a chisel maybe, its tip blunted, the kind of tool you use for splitting something stubborn. The smear was dark, tacky. She wished she had a flashlight that wasn't her phone, but she made do, angling the beam.

The smear was old paint, maybe, or tar. Or blood. The smell was wrong for blood, though—more like creosote, bitter and smoky. She used the rag to nudge the tool back, keeping the pattern as it was. If Lila was going to do this by the book, Mara didn't want to be the reason the pages were torn.

From somewhere above, a gull let out a laugh like a rusty hinge. She turned, scanning the pier again. The kid was gone. A woman in a yellow slicker was hauling a crate toward the fish market, her boots squeaking. The fog carried the sound of a saw biting wood, and under that, the low hum of a generator. There was movement everywhere, but it was the town's normal movement, the kind that says nothing's wrong, nothing at all. Jonah would have been part of that rhythm. He would have been out here already, coffee in hand, arguing about fuel prices with the guy next door, or baiting the gulls with scraps from his bucket. The absence of him made the world feel wrong, like a song played one beat off.

Mara's phone vibrated in her pocket. A text from her editor: Need a quick update on the Lighthouse feature. Also, are you okay? She typed: Here now. Will update soon. It was the kind of half-truth she specialized in. She stared at the water, at the black cut and silver seam the lighthouse made. The urge to scream was a pressure behind her ribs. She didn't. Instead, she leaned her forehead against the cold wood of the

boathouse door and closed her eyes. The wood smelled like salt and time.

When she opened them again, a shape was standing near the edge of the pier where the skiff bobbed, a figure half-lost in the mist. Not the kid. Taller, more solid. A man, maybe, watching the boat. Mara's hand tightened on her phone. She stepped sideways to get a better angle, and the shape turned and walked away, not hurried, just gone, swallowed by the fog with an ease that felt practiced. She didn't call out. She didn't follow. She just watched the space where he'd been and let the quiet fear settle, not as panic but as a cold, clean line of thought: someone else was here, and they didn't want to be seen.

She tried the door again, then shifted her weight and looked down at the ground. There were the prints she'd seen earlier, the overlapping steps. A boot with a waffle tread, by the look of it, and beside it a smaller shoe, the kind with a patterned sole. Two sets, maybe three, all coming and going quickly. She crouched and pressed a finger into one of the damp places. Still soft. Hours, not days. She took a photo, then another from farther back, making sure to catch the angle of the light so the tread was clear. Professional instinct. It had gotten her in trouble once. It might be the only thing that got her out now.

Behind her, someone cleared their throat. "Mara?"

She turned, hand instinctively moving to shield her phone. The man standing there was lean and weathered, with dark hair tied back and hands stained by a life of grease and wood. A boatwright's hands. Theo Ramos. He had been Jonah's best friend since the sandbox, and he looked like he'd aged five years since she'd last seen him, which had been a funeral, the last one, their father's, a day when the fog had been this thick and the whole town felt like it was holding its breath.

"Hey, Theo," she said, standing.

He nodded at the boathouse. "You been in?"

"Can't. It's locked."

"Theo looked at the padlock with the tired familiarity of someone who'd picked it once or twice himself. "Jonah kept a spare key. In the fake clam shell under the dock step. He thought no one knew."

"I didn't know," Mara said.

"He didn't want you to," Theo said, then seemed to regret it. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I'm sorry. I know you two weren't... I mean, since the article. But he's my friend, and he's gone, and I don't think he left."

“What do you think?” Mara asked.

Theo glanced up the pier, then met her eyes. “I think he got into something. Something about the old glassworks. He was asking questions about the shipments, about what goes in and out and who signs off on it. He said he found something in the records. He told me to keep my head down.”

Mara’s reporter brain clicked into place despite the churn of the other, older grief. “Which records?”

“City manifest, mostly. He borrowed a ledger from someone who still worked at the glassworks. An old one. Said there were names that didn’t match what they’re saying now.” Theo hesitated. “He was supposed to meet me the night before he vanished. He didn’t show.”

“Did you tell Lila?”

“Some of it,” Theo admitted. “Not the ledger part. I didn’t have proof. I didn’t want to point a finger at a ghost.”

Mara let that sit. The fog shifted and for a moment the old museum’s roofline appeared, sharp as a knife. The lighthouse blinked. Somewhere, a horn blew, low and sad. She could feel the bones of the town under her feet, the planks of the pier, the old pilings driven deep into the muck. Jonah had loved this place. He’d stayed when she ran. He’d called her once, after the scandal, and said, “You don’t have to be sorry for telling the truth, even if they hate you for it.” He hadn’t been talking about himself.

“Theo,” she said, “help me with the lock.”

He didn’t move for a second, and in that second she saw the calculation in his eyes, the weighing of risks. Then he nodded and took a small tool from his pocket. He bent to the padlock and worked quickly, the metal making a tiny, apologetic sound as it gave. The door opened with a push, and the smell of Jonah’s place washed out: oil, cedar, salt, the faint sweetness of old coffee. The work light threw long shadows. On the bench, the rag and the chisel and everything else sat as they had. The air felt less like absence and more like a held breath.

Mara stepped inside. The space was neat in the ways that mattered and cluttered in the ways that mattered more. A corkboard had photos pinned to it: Jonah with a small shark; Jonah and Theo grinning with a broken fan; Jonah and Mara as kids on the beach, their father behind them, half in frame. There was a calendar with dates scrawled in the margin—mostly boat jobs, a few marked “Vance.” There was a stack of folded charts weighted with a jar lid. She touched the edge of the top one. The fold

lines were worn, the paper soft.

“Vance?” she asked.

“The new development,” Theo said. “Or the company behind it. He was trying to find a connection to the glassworks shipments. He thought they were using old routes.”

“For what?”

Theo looked at the door, then back at her. “He didn’t say. He just said, ‘They’re moving more than sand.’ And then he laughed, like it was a joke only he got.”

Mara’s gaze returned to the bench, to the chisel and the rag. She reached for the work light and angled it down. There, under the edge of the rag’s fold, was a thin paper edge. She used the tip of the chisel to lift it, pinching it carefully with her nails when it came free. It was a torn page from a ledger. The paper was brittle, yellowed at the crease. Names were listed in a column: Rowe, H. Garland, P. Caspar, A. Vance, C. The last was circled twice, hard enough to tear the paper in one spot. Under the names were dates, and under the dates were numbers, neat and small. Mara took a photo, then another, then slipped the page into an envelope in her bag.

“Jonah kept things in the false drawer,” Theo said, pointing to the bench. “There’s a seam along the bottom.”

Mara found it, pried gently. A shallow space held a folded square of paper. She opened it. A photograph. Jonah, younger, grinning, standing with another man on a dock. The man had a calm, handsome face and a suit that didn’t belong on a boat. Behind them, the old glassworks’ sign was visible, letters missing: GL S H RBOR. The date stamp said thirty years ago. The man’s hand rested on Jonah’s shoulder, friendly, proprietary. Mara’s breath caught. She knew that face. She’d seen it on a plaque at the yacht club and on a banner at the marina office and in a framed portrait in a government building that she used to pass on her way to school. It was Mayor Harlan Pike, the man who had vanished decades ago, the scandal that had put Glass Harbor on the map for all the wrong reasons.

“She still remembers,” a voice said from the doorway. Evelyn Reese stood there, shawl pulled tight, eyes taking in the boathouse with the proprietary look of someone who’d seen half of what had ever happened in it. “You found his little hoard. Good. Jonah was always a gatherer.”

“What do you know about the mayor?” Mara asked.

Evelyn’s smile was thin. “He wasn’t the mayor when that picture was taken. He was just a man with money and a plan and a smile that made you forget your own name.

Some said he was the glassworks' money. Others said he was Stroud's before Stroud was Stroud. It doesn't matter. He went out one night and never came back. His boat was found tied up at the lighthouse rock with his coat folded neat as a prayer on the seat. Sound familiar?"

Mara's skin prickled. "Where were you when you heard Jonah was missing?"

"Right here," Evelyn said. "I was watching the fog. It's a good place to watch. Things come in with the fog. Things go out."

Mara looked past her to the pier, where the shape had been. "Theo," she said, "have you seen anyone else around here today? Anyone who shouldn't be?"

"A couple of Stroud's crew came by yesterday, asking for Jonah," Theo said. "Said they wanted to discuss a contract. I told them he wasn't around. They waited a while, then left." He hesitated. "One of them had a boot like yours. Waffle tread."

Mara glanced down at the prints outside. "Two sets," she said. "Waffle and something smaller. Whoever was here wasn't just looking. They were searching."

A chime sounded from her pocket. A text from a number she didn't recognize. She opened it. The message was short, all caps, without punctuation: LEAVE TOWN. SHE DOESN'T WANT YOU HERE. Under it, a photo attached. It was the same picture she'd just found—Jonah and the missing mayor on the dock—but this copy had a red circle drawn around Jonah's face and an arrow pointing to the date. The photo had been taken from inside the boathouse. Recent. Whoever sent it had been here when she was not, or close enough to watch her now.

Mara looked up at Evelyn. The old woman's face was unreadable. "Who's she?" Mara asked, nodding to the text.

Evelyn lifted one shoulder. "There are women in this town who get what they want. The trick is knowing what they want." She shifted her shawl and turned to go. "Be careful with the names in that ledger. They're still breathing. Some of them are still signing checks."

Mara stepped out of the boathouse and into the fog, the paper heavy in her bag, the image of Jonah's face circled like a target in her mind. The lighthouse blinked. The tide kept tugging. Somewhere out in the gray, the shape that had watched the skiff could be walking, or waiting, or weighing whether she would do as she was told. She wasn't going to. The town had already made its choice in the quiet, and she was making hers loud.

"Hey," she said to Theo, who lingered in the doorway. "I'm going to need that fake

clam shell.”

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