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The Night Watchman's Last Secret

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Introduction

Returning Tide

Fog clung to the harbor like old lace, snagging on pilings and boat masts until the whole shoreline looked stitched to the sea. The air was all salt and kerosene and the iron tang of wet rope; gulls wheeled and cried against a sky the color of pewter, and somewhere beyond the breakers a bell buoy tolled its patient warning. Claire Mercer stepped down from the bus with a funeral dress in her overnight bag and the stubborn ache that comes from returning too late. The town of Graymist had not forgiven her leaving, and she had not forgiven it for giving her father something to love that wasn't her.

The church filled in fits and murmurs, townspeople entering in damp coats, shaking water from sleeves as if the rain could be kept at the door along with their opinions. They lined up to clasp Claire's hand—fishermen with vowels smoothed by wind, old women with lace veils and sharper eyes than their years suggested. Mayor Bethany Crowe stood near the aisle, poised as a portrait, giving Claire a polished condolence with the cool grip of a person who always knew who was watching. Outside, over the churchyard wall, a glossy placard flapped on its metal stakes: Crowe Harbor Renewal—A Bold Future for Graymist. The rendering showed clean lines, glass, and light where Claire remembered tar, rust, and the stubborn creak of wooden slips.

She had left this town a decade ago, cut clean as a rope spliced wrong. She had told herself there was no other way after the last argument with her father—the night watchman who could hear every creak of the harbor except the sound of his daughter slipping out of his life. He wanted her to accept the town as it was: its favors and its debts, the quiet trades made after dark. Claire, who cataloged ecosystems and measured harm in data points, could not forgive what she called the calculus of silence. She didn't write, then didn't know how to start. By the time she finally returned, the man who paced the piers at midnight was a name in a notice and a stack of condolences on the kitchen table.

After the service, Claire found herself at the watchman's shack by the north pier, a place so small it felt like a held breath. The room smelled of oil and tide, the walls hung with hooks and charts softened by years of fog. On the desk sat a sealed envelope with her name in her father's crabbed hand, the ink bled a little at the curves as if written on a humid night and never dried right. Beside it lay his logbook—leather cracked, spine salt-stiff, the edges dark with the touch of hundreds of damp fingers. She lifted it and felt grit under her palm, the same grit that lived in the seams of the town.

From the window she could see the lighthouse lifting through the mist, its lens turning like an eye that forgot to blink. The beam washed over the harbor mouth, thinning where the fog gathered thickest, then swept inland to skim the roofs and alleys where secrets nested. Men in high-vis jackets moved along the redeveloped pier, shouting to one another over the thump of generators; the sound carried a certainty she had always distrusted. She spotted one man leaning against a piling, boots planted in an easy spread, watching the way some men watch a reef before a storm—Marco Reyes, if the whispers were right, the salvage operator Mayor Crowe had hired under a different name.

The town was already choosing sides. Outside the shack, a hand-lettered sign read Save Our Working Harbor, rain warping its cardboard spine. Across from it, a woman in a smart coat handed out flyers about progress and jobs. Sheriff Eileen Hargrove met Claire on the steps and said she was sorry, truly sorry, but her eyes carried a message that had nothing to do with grief: be careful where you step. Claire nodded and did not promise anything she couldn't keep.

She sat alone as dusk gathered and opened neither envelope nor logbook. Instead, she traced the letters of her name on the seal until her thumb grew warm. Each small sound—the slap of water on pilings, the tick of the lighthouse mechanism far off, the hush of tires on wet road—stacked into the kind of quiet that demanded honesty. Her father had kept watch over this harbor, but he had also kept things from her. The town spoke to itself in ellipses and unfinished thoughts; if there were truths here, they were buried in mud, tucked into ledgers, hidden behind smiles.

When she finally slid the envelope into her coat pocket, its weight felt out of proportion to its size, like a stone you keep to remember where you came from. Claire stood, the logbook under her arm, and stepped back into the fog. Somewhere offshore, the bell buoy tolled again. The tide was coming in. Whatever her father had left her, whatever work he had begun and abandoned or finished and hidden, it was already pulling at her ankles, insistent as the sea.

CHAPTER ONE: Harbor of Shadows

The dampness of Graymist didn't just sit on the skin; it seeped into the marrow, a cold reminder that here, the Atlantic always had the final say. Claire Mercer stood on the narrow sidewalk outside the First Coastal Church, her heels sinking slightly into the soft, rain-slicked earth of the perimeter. The funeral had been a blur of heavy wool coats and the smell of floor wax, a somber performance for a man who had spent his life avoiding the spotlight. Arthur Mercer had been the town's night watchman for thirty years, a ghost in a high-visibility vest, yet in death, he had drawn a crowd that seemed more interested in observing his daughter than mourning him.

Across the street, the harbor was a jagged silhouette of crane arms and half-demolished piers. The "Crowe Harbor Renewal" banners whipped in the wind, their bright blues and whites looking garish against the bruised purple of the late afternoon sky. Claire adjusted the strap of her bag, feeling the weight of the logbook she'd tucked inside. She felt the prickle of eyes on her back and turned to see Mayor Bethany Crowe descending the church steps. The Mayor moved with a practiced elegance, her charcoal coat tailored to perfection, her blonde hair pinned back so tightly it seemed to pull the secrets right out of her forehead.

"Claire, dear," Bethany said, her voice a melodic hum that didn't quite reach her eyes. "It really is a tragedy. Art was a fixture of this community. A bit stubborn towards the end, perhaps, but a fixture nonetheless. I hope you're planning on staying at the house for a while? It would be a shame to see the Mercer property sit empty during such an... expansive time for the harbor."

"I haven't decided yet, Bethany," Claire replied, keeping her tone as flat as the horizon. She noted the way the Mayor's gaze flickered toward the bag on Claire's shoulder. There was an acquisitive glint there, a hunger for land and legacy that Claire recognized from the town council minutes she'd skimmed on the bus ride up. "I imagine the 'Renewal' project has its sights on more than just the old cannery."

The Mayor offered a thin, enigmatic smile. "Progress waits for no one, not even the bereaved. But let's not talk business today. You look tired, Claire. Graymist has a way of wearing down those who've been away too long. If you need anything—anything at all regarding the estate or the transition—my office is always open."

As Bethany glided toward a waiting black SUV, Claire felt a hand on her elbow. It was Sheriff Eileen Hargrove, a woman whose face looked like a map of every bad winter the town had ever endured. Eileen didn't offer a hug or a platitude. She just stood there, smelling of peppermint and old leather, watching the Mayor's car pull away.

"She's already measuring your driveway for a sidewalk, Claire," Eileen muttered, her voice low. "Your father and I didn't always see eye to eye, especially these last few months, but he was a man who knew the value of a boundary. You'd do well to remember that. Some things in this town are better left under the silt."

"Is that a warning, Eileen? Or just professional advice?" Claire asked, her investigative instincts—honed by years of cataloging delicate marine ecosystems—suddenly surfacing.

"It's a neighborly observation," the Sheriff said, stepping back and adjusting her belt. "The harbor is changing. People are nervous. When people get nervous, they start looking for someone to blame for the past. Don't give them a reason to look at you. Go home, get some sleep, and try not to poke at the bruises your father left behind."

Claire watched the Sheriff walk away, the woman's gait heavy with the burden of local law. Claire didn't head for the Mercer cottage immediately. Instead, she walked toward the north pier, the soles of her shoes clicking rhythmically on the wet pavement. The air grew thicker with the scent of salt and diesel as she approached the watchman's shack. It was a tiny, salt-scoured building that clung to the edge of the pier like a barnacle. This had been her father's kingdom, a five-by-five space where he recorded the pulse of the tides and the arrival of every hull that broke the harbor's surface.

The door groaned on its hinges. Inside, the silence was absolute, save for the distant, rhythmic clank of a shroud hitting a mast. Claire sat at the small wooden desk, her fingers tracing the gouges in the timber. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out the small notecard she had found tucked into the silk lining of her father's suit jacket just before the casket was closed. It was an odd thing to find—Art wasn't a man for sentimental notes.

The card was yellowed, smelling faintly of the tobacco he'd supposedly quit years ago. On one side, in his jagged, hurried script, were three lines that made no immediate sense:

11/14 - Aurora.42.8441° N, 70.4712° W. Check the depth twice.

Claire felt a cold bloom of adrenaline. November 14th was the anniversary of the S.S. Aurora's sinking, a tragedy that had defined Graymist's maritime history forty years ago. But the coordinates—those weren't for the known wreck site. They were slightly off, shifted toward a treacherous stretch of shoals that the local fishermen avoided like the plague.

Why had her father been carrying this? Art had been the watchman, not a diver or a salvage hunter. He was supposed to watch the surface, not the depths. She pulled the

heavy logbook from her bag and laid it on the desk. The leather was cool and damp. She flipped to the final week of entries, her eyes scanning the mundane records of trawlers and pleasure craft. But as she reached the very last page, the handwriting changed. It became smaller, more cramped, as if he were trying to hide the words in plain sight.

The fog is lying tonight, the entry read. Crowe is moving the markers. They think the watchman is blind, but the light shows everything if you know where to aim it. If she finds the manifest, the harbor belongs to the dead.

A floorboard creaked behind her. Claire spun around, her heart hammering against her ribs. The doorway was empty, framed by the encroaching gray of the evening mist. But on the weathered porch of the shack, a single, wet footprint was darkening the wood—the mark of a heavy boot, pointing directly toward her.

She stepped out into the biting wind, looking left and right along the pier. The fog had swallowed the town, leaving only the ghost-lights of the distant streetlamps and the rhythmic, emerald sweep of the lighthouse. Far down the dock, near the shadowy hull of a salvage barge, she saw a flicker of movement—a man in a dark slicker, his face obscured by the brim of a hat. He didn't run; he simply turned and vanished into the veil of white.

Claire retreated back into the shack, her breath coming in short, ragged puffs. She looked down at the notecard again. The coordinates weren't just numbers; they were a map to a secret her father had died protecting. She tucked the card into her bra, feeling the sharp edge of the paper against her skin. The funeral was over, the mourners had dispersed, and the Mayor was planning a new world over the bones of the old. But as Claire looked out at the churning, indifferent sea, she knew the night watchman hadn't finished his shift. He had simply passed the lantern to her.

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