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# The Cartographer's Wife

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## Introduction

A map is a promise. It swears that the world can be folded and carried, that coasts will keep their shapes and winds will keep their counsel. But maps also lie. They smooth reefs into harmless freckles, tuck hunger and ambition into agreeable margins, and replace the names of those who lived along a shore with the names of those who claimed it. This novel begins in that space between promise and lie, where ink becomes fate and the margins widen into oceans.

The Cartographer's Wife follows Lysbeth van der Zee, a woman who has learned to read the world by its edges: the curled lip of a sail in a squall, the ragged hem of vellum trimmed too close, the brittle hush that falls on a workshop when a patron's coin is counterfeit. When her husband, Adriaen—once celebrated, lately disgraced—vanishes from his Amsterdam studio, he leaves behind a scattering of fragments: unfinished copperplates, a ledger with gaps like missing teeth, and an atlas whose heart has been cut out. What begins as the hunt for a husband becomes the assembling of a different map altogether, one that spans the wharves of the IJ, the counting houses of Lisbon, and the blue coves of the Azores where ships pause between continents to catch their breath.

This is a story of trade winds and trade wars, of instruments polished by brine-stained hands—astrolabe, cross-staff, backstaff—and of the men who claimed the sea by measuring it. But it is also the story of the women who measured silence: wives who balanced books no guild recorded, who kept apprentices fed and rumors at bay, who learned to tell truth from bravado by the angle of a captain's hat. Lysbeth's investigation is as much an intimate audit of marriage as it is a maritime pursuit; every clue she learns about Adriaen's last days redraws the coastline of the person she thought she knew.

Seventeenth-century Europe was a quarrel about routes made flesh: Portuguese pilots whispering soundings jealously guarded for generations; Dutch merchants feverish with new horizons and quicker profits; mathematicians arguing over rhumb lines and meridians while carpenters hammered hulls that would outpace their debates. In the Azores, where Atlantic storms gather their muscles and currents knot and unknot, the sea keeps a ledger of wreckage and rescue that no customs official can balance. Against this backdrop, a conspiracy ripens—not because villains love evil, but because maps can be weapons gentler than cannon: a new channel here, a shortened voyage there, and suddenly empires tilt.

You will find technical detail in these pages—the scent of boiled glue for sizing paper, the press-kiss of copper into dampened sheets, the way a navigator “takes the sun” at

noon and records his latitude with weary pride. Such craft survives because hands remember what minds forget. Yet the instruments in this tale also serve another kind of measurement: how far loyalty will stretch before it snaps, how many bearings a heart can take before it loses its variation, and what it costs to draw a line knowing that someone, somewhere, will have to cross it.

Though this book moves among real currents and ports, its characters are of my invention, stitched from footnotes and flotsam: a Jesuit mathematician with salt in his beard; a pilot who has chewed more rope than bread; a clerk who files paper as if filing the world itself. I have taken care with the grain of the time—the markets, the guilds, the quarrels over knowledge—and taken liberties where truth refused to stand still. The Azores, Lisbon, and Amsterdam are rendered as faithfully as story and research allow, not to trap you in a museum but to set you walking streets where fish scales glitter in the gutters like small, stubborn stars.

At its core, *The Cartographer's Wife* is an atlas of memory. Some memories are bays: sheltered, easily returned to. Others are headlands: beautiful, exposed, dangerous to round. When Lysbeth pieces together her husband's last atlas, she is not only tracing hidden sea-lanes; she is deciding which parts of her life will be terra incognita and which will bear her name. May you find, in turning these pages, that maps do not merely tell you where to go. They also ask you who you are when you arrive.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Widow of the Compass

The smell of Amsterdam in April was a complicated soup of herring brine, wet timber, and the damp, earthy promise of a spring that never quite arrived without a fight. For Lysbeth van der Zee, the scent was more specific: it was the metallic tang of copper filings and the cloying sweetness of boiled linseed oil. It was the smell of the workshop on the Bloemgracht, a scent that usually meant order, industry, and the steady, rhythmic scrape of a burin against metal. But today, the workshop was silent, and the silence was louder than any cannon fire Lysbeth had ever heard described by the sailors at the docks.

She stood in the doorway, her hands tucked into the folds of her woolen apron, watching the motes of dust dance in a solitary shaft of light. The light fell directly onto Adriaen's primary workbench, illuminating a scene of frantic interruption. A bottle of expensive lampblack ink had been left uncorked, its contents skinning over in the humid air. A compass, its brass arms spread wide like a dancer frozen in mid-stride, lay discarded across a sheet of fine French vellum. To anyone else, it might have looked like a man had simply stepped out for a pipe and a stroll along the canal. To Lysbeth, who had spent twelve years measuring her life by the meticulous habits of her husband, it looked like a crime scene.

Adriaen van der Zee was a man of agonizing precision. He did not leave ink uncorked. He did not leave brass instruments to oxidize in the damp. And he certainly did not leave his favorite magnifying lens—a gift from a lens-grinder in Middelburg—lying face down where the glass could be scratched by the grit of the floor. He had been gone for three days, a span of time that had transitioned Lysbeth from mild irritation to a cold, gnawing dread that sat in her stomach like a stone. The neighbors thought he was on a bender, perhaps drowning his recent professional sorrows in a tavern near the harbor, but Lysbeth knew better. Adriaen didn't drink to forget; he drew to remember.

The disgrace had been public and surgical. Six months ago, the Dutch East India Company—the VOC, whose reach was as long as its ledger was heavy—had returned a set of charts Adriaen had engraved for the spice routes. They claimed a reef off the coast of Java had been misplaced by three leagues, leading to the grounding of the *Prins Hendrik*. The accusations of negligence had spread through the Guild of St. Luke like a rot. Orders dried up. The apprentices, sensing a sinking ship, had scurried off to the workshops of Blaeu or Hondius. Only Lysbeth remained, cleaning the plates and stretching the paper, watching her husband retreat into a world of old journals and whispered meetings.

She moved to the desk and picked up the magnifying lens, wiping it on her apron.

Beneath it lay a map, but not one of the standard VOC templates. This was a coastal rendering of the Azores, the volcanic archipelago that served as the Atlantic's great crossroads. The lines were erratic, some heavy and dark, others faint as a ghost's breath. There were annotations in the margins in a hand that wasn't Adriaen's—a cramped, hurried script in Portuguese. Lysbeth felt a prickle of alarm. In Amsterdam, possessing Portuguese portolans was more than a professional curiosity; it was a flirtation with treason. Trade routes were the most valuable secrets in the world, more precious than the gold they led to.

"You've always had a habit of looking where the light doesn't shine, Lysbeth," a voice rasped from the shadows of the doorway.

She jumped, nearly dropping the lens. Standing in the entrance was Laurens, a man who had served as Adriaen's master printer for a decade before the scandal hit. He looked haggard, his fingers stained so deeply with ink that they appeared bruised. He didn't come inside, instead leaning against the doorframe as if the workshop itself was haunted.

"He's not at the Red Lion, Laurens," Lysbeth said, her voice steadier than she felt. "And he's not at the Weighing House. I've checked the infirmaries and the watch-houses. Where is he?"

Laurens stepped into the room, his eyes darting to the ink-stained maps on the table. "He was talking to people he shouldn't have been. Men from the south. Men who don't care about the Guild's rules or the VOC's monopolies. He thought he could find a way to clear his name, Lysbeth. He thought if he could prove the *Prins Hendrik* hit a reef that shouldn't have been there—one that was intentionally scrubbed from the official charts—he'd be the hero of the Exchange."

Lysbeth looked down at the map of the Azores. "A reef that shouldn't be there? That's madness. Navigation is math, not magic. You don't just hide an island or a rock to spite a cartographer."

"In this world, you do," Laurens countered, his voice dropping to a whisper. "If that rock sits on a shortcut through the doldrums, or a secret passage to the silver mines, it's worth more than its weight in diamonds to keep it off the common maps. Adriaen found a discrepancy in a private ledger. He thought he was being a detective. He forgot that detectives often end up at the bottom of a canal."

Lysbeth felt the stone in her stomach grow heavier. She looked around the room, seeing it now not as a place of business, but as a shell. The copperplates on the racks were mostly blank or scarred with failed attempts. The money chest in the corner was light, she knew, containing only enough guilders to keep them in bread and beer for another month. Adriaen hadn't just disappeared; he had been erased.

“Help me move the press,” Lysbeth said suddenly, her mind snapping into a different kind of focus.

Laurens blinked. “What? Why? The bailiffs will be here by the end of the week to claim the equipment for the debts.”

“The press stays,” Lysbeth said, her eyes flashing. “But the compartment beneath it doesn't. Adriaen kept his personal journals there. If he found something dangerous, he wouldn't have carried it to the tavern. He would have hidden it where only someone who knows the mechanics of the shop could find it.”

Together, they strained against the heavy oak frame of the printing press. It groaned, a sound of wood protesting wood, moving just enough for Lysbeth to reach beneath the base. Her fingers brushed against a loose floorboard. She pried it up, ignoring the splinter that caught her thumb. Beneath was a small, oilskin-wrapped bundle. She pulled it out and sat on the floor, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird.

Inside the oilskin was an atlas, or the beginnings of one. It lacked a cover, the pages held together by a temporary binding of twine. Lysbeth flipped through it. These weren't the polished, colored maps meant for the libraries of wealthy merchants. These were working drawings, filled with corrected soundings, wind vectors, and strange, coded symbols. As she reached the center of the stack, she gasped. A section of the map—the area surrounding the central islands of the Azores—had been neatly excised with a razor.

“He's left me a puzzle,” she whispered.

“He's left you a death warrant,” Laurens corrected, backing away. “Lysbeth, put that back. Walk away. Go to your sister's in Haarlem. The men he was dealing with... they aren't the type to appreciate a widow's curiosity.”

“I am not a widow yet,” Lysbeth snapped, standing up and tucking the bundle under her arm. “And if he is dead, I want to know who killed him for a piece of paper. He was a disgraced man, Laurens, but he was a brilliant one. He wouldn't have risked everything for a ghost. He found something real.”

She looked at the empty space on the workbench where the compass had been. The tool was still there, but the man was gone, leaving behind only the cold geometry of his absence. She realized then that her life as the quiet, supportive wife of a master craftsman had ended the moment that ink bottle was left uncorked. She had spent years helping him draw the world; now, she would have to find her way across it.

“Where will you go?” Laurens asked, his voice shaking.

“To the only place that makes sense,” Lysbeth said, her gaze fixing on the ragged hole in the map. “The VOC might control the docks, but the sailors control the stories. I’m going to find the man who sold him those Portuguese notes. And then, I’m going to find out what was on the page he cut out.”

She walked out of the shop, locking the heavy door behind her for what she suspected would be the last time. The Bloemgracht was busy with the afternoon trade, the air thick with the shouting of draymen and the clatter of hooves on cobblestones. To the world, she was just another woman in a dark cloak, perhaps heading to the market or the church. But as she gripped the oilskin bundle tight against her side, Lysbeth van der Zee felt the first stirrings of a new kind of navigation. The map of her life had been torn, and she was the only one who could draw the lines back together.

She headed toward the harbor, toward the place where the IJ met the sea, leaving the safety of the canals behind. The wind was picking up, blowing in from the North Sea, carrying the scent of salt and the distant, unspoken promise of the horizon. Adriaen had taught her that a map was a promise. As she disappeared into the crowd, Lysbeth made a promise of her own: she would find the truth, no matter how many oceans she had to cross to reach it.

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