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When Shadows Keep Their Secrets

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Introduction

Fog sat low over Grayhaven like a held breath, turning the harbor lights into blurred coins and the gulls into torn paper drifting across the sky. Nora Blake eased her car off the wet main street and idled beside the faded mural of a summer festival—the same blues and reds her high school art teacher had begged the town council to protect. Across from it, the arcade where Nora had worked at seventeen was boarded up, sun-bleached tickets still visible through a crack in the plywood. She parked with the engine ticking down and watched rain collect in the seams of the road, the town looking both smaller and somehow more watchful than she remembered.

She had come home for a funeral and nothing else—that was the agreement she made with herself when she took the turn off the highway. Frank Blake had died in his sleep with the radio on—ocean report at 2 a.m., a storm warning Nora couldn't help but take personally. In the quiet that follows death, there are errands that feel like penance: signatures, phone calls, casseroles you thank people for and never eat. She kept busy, spoke in the brief polite phrases people here expected, and told herself the grief would arrive on schedule, and she would meet it.

The house, a salt-bitten two-story on Harbor Street, greeted her with the old smell of coffee and machine oil. She sorted what he left behind as if the past could be boxed and labeled—tax records, tools, a stack of postcards from coastal towns Frank never visited. In the back of his desk, beneath a warped shelf of fishing permits, she found a lined notebook page folded in half and then again: a list of names. There were dates in a tight, careful hand, some circled, others struck through. Nora read them twice, lips moving before her brain caught up. Two names pinched something in her chest—girls she'd known in passing, a neighbor who'd vanished the summer she left for college. The ink had bled at the corner where a coffee mug once sat.

An old camera roll lay in a metal tin beside the list, paper label peeling, the same dates written along its edge in the same hand. She turned the roll in her fingers, hearing the muffled click of trapped years. Frank had never been a photographer. Nora, who had spent half her twenties developing questionable leads and half-remembered timelines, felt the practical part of her brain engage. Evidence is a door. Some doors open when you knock. Others require you to pick the lock.

On her way back from the funeral home, she checked Frank's mailbox. Among the sympathy cards and utility bills was a postcard slick with rain. The lighthouse on its front was Grayhaven's, the postcard shot from a low angle that made the tower look like a warning. No return address, just a single line on the back in block letters: WELCOME HOME. DID YOU BRING A FLASHLIGHT? She stood there with key and metal

and paper balanced in one hand while the fog pressed closer and the gulls announced something nobody could interpret.

That night, the house creaked and settled around her in familiar ways. Streetlights threw a tired glow across the living room, illuminating dust and the outline of Frank's favorite chair. She spread the list on the coffee table, copied the names into her notebook out of habit, and circled the dates that matched headlines she half remembered. The camera roll sat beside her like a small, patient animal. Outside, somewhere down Harbor Street, a car braked without headlights—a soft, deliberate sound that made her pulse flutter and then race.

Nora told herself it was the town, nothing more—old wood, old roads, old ghosts of a place that preferred silence. Still, when she closed the curtains, she did it with the awkward care of someone who doesn't want to be seen closing them. On the mantel, a framed photograph of Frank at a charity picnic caught her eye, the corner of a banner cropped in such a way that only the word KEEP remained. She laughed once, quietly, at her own tendency to make everything a clue.

By morning the fog would lift, the harbor would look almost pretty, and people who had known her since she was born would stop her on the street to tell her stories about her father. She would nod and thank them. She would also, because she knew herself and because the postcard's question now lived under her skin, take the list and the camera roll to the only shop in town that still developed film. She would ask a few careful questions and pretend her interest was professional, impersonal. But as she folded the paper and slipped it into her bag, she recognized the feeling that had brought her to a hundred doorways in a hundred other towns: the first tug on a thread.

Grayhaven had always been a place where the fog carried secrets from one porch to another. Nora hadn't decided yet whether she was here to grieve or to look. The truth is that the town rarely allows you to do only one.

CHAPTER ONE: The Wake and the List

The air inside St. Jude's Parish Hall smelled of damp wool, industrial floor wax, and the cloying, heavy scent of lilies that had begun to wilt under the fluorescent lights. Nora Blake stood by a long folding table, watching a cluster of town elders hover over a tray of ham sandwiches. They moved with a practiced, somber efficiency, the kind of grace only acquired by attending a lifetime of funerals in a town where the median age seemed to climb every time the tide went out. Grayhaven didn't just mourn its dead; it processed them, folding their histories into the communal pile like laundry.

Her father, Frank Blake, lay in a closed casket in the sanctuary next door. He had been a man of few words and even fewer enemies, or so Nora had thought. As she shook hands with people whose names she only half-remembered—men with calloused palms and women with eyes that searched her face for traces of the girl she used to be—she felt the familiar weight of being an outsider in her own birthplace. They offered platitudes about Frank's steady hand and his quiet soul, but their gazes often flickered toward the door, as if checking to see who might walk in next.

"You look just like your mother, Nora. It's a tragedy she couldn't see you now," Mrs. Gable said, patting Nora's arm with a hand that felt like dry parchment. Mrs. Gable had lived three houses down from the Blakes since the sixties and was the unofficial custodian of every neighborhood scandal. "Your father was a private man. He kept his porch light on for you, you know. Every night. Even when the news said you were halfway across the country chasing those... stories of yours."

Nora offered a tight, professional smile. "It was just work, Mrs. Gable."

"Work is one thing. Family is another. In Grayhaven, we don't always see the difference," the old woman replied, her eyes narrowing slightly before she drifted off toward the coffee urn.

Nora retreated to a corner, her back against the cool cinderblock wall. Her mind kept drifting to the salt-bitten house on Harbor Street and the objects she had found only hours before. The notebook page was tucked into the inner pocket of her blazer, the edges of the paper pressing against her ribs like a cold finger. The names on that list—some crossed out, some circled—felt like a direct contradiction to the version of Frank Blake being celebrated in the other room. Her father was a man who spent his Sundays fixing outboard motors and his evenings reading the tide charts. He wasn't a man who kept secret tallies of the missing.

Ben Archer approached her then, moving through the crowd with the ease of someone

who belonged in every room he entered. He was taller than she remembered, his hair shot through with premature streaks of grey that gave him a distinguished, weathered look. He held two plastic cups of lukewarm punch. He handed one to her, his fingers lingering briefly against hers.

"You look like you're plotting an escape," Ben said, his voice a low, pleasant rumble. "Or a witness interrogation. I can never quite tell with you, Nora."

"Is it that obvious?" Nora took a sip of the punch; it was aggressively sweet and tasted of artificial cherries. "I'm just trying to reconcile the man everyone is talking about with the man I lived with for eighteen years. They make him sound like a saint. My dad was many things, but he wasn't particularly holy."

Ben leaned against the wall beside her, looking out at the room. He owned the local bookstore now, but he had once been the boy who sat behind her in chemistry, whispering jokes that nearly got them both suspended. "He was a pillar, Nora. In a town like this, a pillar doesn't have to be perfect; it just has to hold up its part of the roof. He did that for a lot of people. He handled their legal messes quietly, he lent money without asking for interest, and he kept his mouth shut. That's the highest currency we have here."

"Keeping quiet," Nora mused, thinking of the camera roll in the tin box. "It's a specialty of the house, isn't it?"

Ben gave her a sharp, searching look. "You've been back for twenty-four hours and you're already digging. Give it a rest, Nora. Just for today. Let the man be buried before you start the autopsy on his life."

"I'm not digging, Ben. I'm just observing."

"That's a journalist's lie for digging," he said, though there was no malice in it. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "If you need anything—and I mean anything, even if it's just a place to sit where no one asks you about your career—the shop is open. I still have that back corner by the history section. No one ever goes there."

As Ben moved away to speak with Mayor Thomas Quill, who had just entered the hall with the practiced solemnity of a man on the campaign trail, Nora felt a surge of restlessness. She didn't want the punch, she didn't want the sandwiches, and she certainly didn't want the curated memories of Grayhaven's elite. She waited until the Mayor was occupied with a group of local businessmen before slipping out the side door, into the bracing, salt-heavy air of the afternoon.

The fog had retreated to the edge of the horizon, leaving the town in a state of high-contrast clarity. She drove back to the house on Harbor Street, her grip tight on the

steering wheel. Once inside, she didn't go to the kitchen or the bedroom. She went straight to her father's office, a cramped space that smelled of old paper and the cedar oil he used on the floorboards.

She pulled the list from her pocket and smoothed it out on the desk. The names were written in her father's steady, upright script.

Katie Sullivan. June 1994. Mark Thorne. October 1998. Elena Vance. August 2005.

The list went on, twelve names in total. Some, like Elena Vance, Nora remembered vividly. Elena had been a few years older than her, a girl with a wild laugh who had disappeared during the Founders' Day festival. The police had called it a runaway case, despite the fact that Elena's car was still parked at the pier with her purse inside. Others on the list were names Nora didn't recognize, people who must have vanished before she was born or after she had left.

Beside the name *Katie Sullivan*, Frank had written a single word: *False*.

Next to *Elena Vance*, he had written a date that didn't match the newspaper archives: *August 14th*, not the 12th.

Nora opened the metal tin and pulled out the camera roll. It was a 35mm canister, the kind that had become a relic in the age of digital sensors. She turned it over in her palm. Why would her father, a man who barely knew how to operate a microwave, be holding onto undeveloped film? And why was it hidden in a false-bottomed drawer beneath his fishing permits?

She looked at the postcard she had received earlier. *WELCOME HOME. DID YOU BRING A FLASHLIGHT?*

The message felt like a taunt, a challenge from someone who knew what Frank had been hiding. Or perhaps it was a warning. Nora reached for her phone to call the only person who might provide a straight answer—or at least a legal one—but stopped herself. In Grayhaven, every phone call was a pebble tossed into a very small pond. She needed to see the images on that film before she involved anyone else.

She spent the next hour meticulously going through the rest of the desk. She found nothing else of immediate note—just more utility bills and a few old maps of the coastline with handwritten notations about depth and current. It was the mundane debris of a quiet life, save for the one anomaly sitting on the blotter.

The doorbell rang, a sharp, jarring sound in the silence of the house.

Nora froze, her heart hammering against her ribs. She moved to the window and

peeled back the curtain just enough to see the porch. A man stood there, wearing a dark windbreaker with the Grayhaven Police Department emblem on the chest. It was Detective Marcus Reyes.

Nora sighed, a mix of relief and renewed tension. She tucked the list and the film into the desk drawer, locked it, and went to the door.

"Detective," she said, opening it just a crack. "The wake is at the parish hall. I think you missed the ham sandwiches."

Marcus Reyes didn't smile. He was a man who looked like he had been carved out of driftwood—hard, weathered, and resistant to the elements. He had been a few years ahead of Nora in school, a star athlete who had stayed behind to wear a badge while everyone else dreamed of escaping.

"I wasn't there for the food, Nora. I was there to pay my respects, but you'd already left," Reyes said. He looked past her into the hallway. "Tough day. Your father was a good man."

"So I keep hearing," Nora replied, stepping back to let him in. "Is this an official visit, Marcus? Or are you just checking on the local girl who went to the big city?"

"A bit of both," he said, stepping into the entryway. He took off his cap, revealing cropped hair that was thinning at the temples. "Frank and I worked on a few things together over the years. Harbor committee stuff, mostly. But he called me about a week before he passed. He sounded... anxious. Which wasn't like him."

Nora's pulse quickened. "Anxious about what?"

Reyes shrugged. "He didn't say. Just asked if the old cold case files were still kept in the basement of the station or if they'd been digitized. I told him we'd moved most of them to the county archives, but the physical logs were still in the cage. He said he might want to come by and look at something. He never showed."

Nora leaned against the doorframe, her mind racing. "Which cold cases?"

"He didn't specify. But Frank was a detail man. I figured he'd stumbled onto some old property dispute or a title error." Reyes paused, his eyes lingering on Nora's face. "You haven't found anything unusual in his papers, have you? Anything that would explain why a retired man would suddenly care about files from twenty years ago?"

Nora thought of the list. She thought of the names and the dates and the word *False* written in her father's hand. She thought of the postcard and the feeling of being watched as she stood at the mailbox.

"Just tax returns and fishing permits," she lied, her voice steady. "He was a boring man, Marcus. You know that better than anyone."

Reyes nodded, though he didn't look entirely convinced. "Right. Well, if you do find anything—or if you feel like someone is taking an undue interest in your return—you give me a call. This town is quiet, Nora, but it's not always peaceful."

After Reyes left, Nora stood in the hall for a long time, watching the dust motes dance in a sliver of afternoon light. She felt the weight of the house pressing in on her, the secrets of the timber and the stone. Her father hadn't just been a pillar of the community; he had been a vault. And someone out there was very worried that she had the key.

She went back to the desk, unlocked the drawer, and took out the camera roll. She didn't have a flashlight, but she had a digital camera in her luggage with a macro lens. It wasn't the same as developing the film, but if she could just see the first few frames, she might understand what Frank was willing to risk his reputation for.

As she reached for her bag, her eyes caught on a detail she had missed before. On the underside of the desk lamp, stuck there with a piece of yellowed Scotch tape, was a small, hand-drawn map of the Grayhaven pier. A single 'X' was marked near the old bait shop, and next to it, a set of coordinates.

Nora pulled the tape free. The coordinates led to a point about half a mile offshore, near the jagged rocks known as The Sisters. It was a place where the currents were notoriously treacherous, a graveyard for small boats and careless swimmers.

She looked at the map, then at the camera roll. The funeral was over, the mourning had begun, but for Nora Blake, the investigation was just starting. She realized then that she wasn't just here to bury her father. She was here to finish whatever he had started, even if it meant tearing the town apart to do it.

She grabbed her coat and the film, heading for the door. She knew a shop in the next town over that still had a darkroom. Grayhaven was too small for the truth, but the world outside was still wide enough to hold a few answers. As she stepped onto the porch, she glanced at the street. A black sedan was parked fifty yards down, its engine idling, the driver's face obscured by the reflection of the grey sky on the windshield. It didn't move as she got into her car. It just waited, a silent shadow in a town full of secrets.

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