

****The Last Ferry Home****

The night was settling in, casting a thick mist over the water. Natalie gripped her bag tightly as she stood alone on the wooden dock, waiting for the last ferry back to the mainland. The lights from the small island town were starting to flicker out, and an eerie silence filled the air. She'd come to the island for answers, and while she hadn't found the clarity she sought, she had uncovered secrets she wished she hadn't.

A faint glow appeared on the horizon. Natalie squinted, making out the silhouette of the ferry, its lights barely cutting through the fog. It arrived with a low hum, an old, rusting vessel that seemed to have seen better days. She stepped aboard, finding the ferry empty save for a lone, grizzled man at the wheel. He nodded to her as she boarded, his eyes shadowed under a frayed cap.

"Last ferry tonight," he said in a low, gruff voice. Natalie nodded, feeling a strange chill. The man didn't look at her again, turning his gaze toward the water, his hands steady on the wheel as they left the dock.

The fog thickened, swirling around them as the ferry cut through the dark waters. Natalie shivered, pulling her coat tighter, and tried to distract herself by gazing into the mist. But something didn't feel right. She realized, with a start, that the lights of the mainland weren't visible yet; they should have been, even in the fog. She looked over at the captain, but his face was expressionless, as if he was in a trance.

After what felt like hours, she could make out something in the fog—a strange shape on the water, small and indistinct. As they drew closer, her heart pounded. It was another boat, old and worn, its hull half-submerged, leaning precariously to one side. Natalie peered at it, her breath catching when she saw faded letters on the side: **The Windward**, the name of her father's old fishing boat that had been lost at sea a decade ago.

She staggered back, eyes wide. Her father had disappeared on that very boat, and no trace of him was ever found. The captain finally spoke, his voice distant and hollow.

"Strange, isn't it, how things lost in the sea have a way of finding their way back?"

He met her gaze, his eyes no longer shadowed, but filled with a strange knowing. She tried to respond, but her words stuck in her throat. The ferry drifted closer to the wrecked boat, almost as if the captain intended to dock there.

Then, out of the fog, she saw him—a figure standing at the bow of *The Windward*, staring right at her. It was her father, or something that looked like him. His face was pale, expression calm, and he lifted a hand in a slow, beckoning wave.

Terror gripped her. She turned to the captain, but he merely nodded, as if encouraging her to go. She backed away, clinging to the railing, her mind racing.

And then, just as quickly as it had come, the boat and her father's figure vanished into the fog.

The captain resumed steering toward the shore, as if nothing had happened. But Natalie knew, deep down, that something in her had changed—she'd left part of herself back there in the mist, with her father's ghost on the water.