

Abandoned

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She was drifting when we found her. The vessel materialized suddenly from the thick fog, just off our starboard bow. I threw the engine of the *Martha Ann* into reverse, narrowly avoiding a collision.

Minutes before, Rob had been giving me hell about being so cautious navigating the fog. Vindicated, I yelled at him from the wheelhouse. “What was that about me driving like Grandma?”

My little brother huffed and waved me off, crossing the deck to peer at the boat. “Pull alongside her.”

Rob was just annoyed because he wanted a beer with the boys at the Portway Tavern, and I’d dragged my feet about heading in for the day. The fishing had been good. He was right though—we should have returned to port when the fog first started rolling in, before it got so dark. Winter days on the Oregon coast are short and cold.

I felt a chill now, gazing at the strange boat. She was called *Legion*—I could just make out the letters in the peeling paint on her stern. She looked abandoned—not just because there didn’t appear to be anyone on board, but because she looked shabby. It was clear no one had maintained her for a long time. Below the water line, her hull was encrusted in gooseneck barnacles. Tackle was strewn across her deck. Careless. I was meticulous about storing my own gear. Dad had insisted on that, teaching us boys how to fish. The *Martha Ann* had been his before she was mine. Our gillnetter was named for my mother, and she’d served us well for over twenty years.

The *Legion* was a troller, and appeared to be considerably older than the *Martha Ann*. I wondered if she'd become unmoored. Looked like she'd gotten caught in an outgoing current when we found her, drifting west of the Astoria-Megler Bridge. With the receding tide pulling the troller out to sea, it was a wonder she hadn't hit the pillars of the bridge or run aground on a sand bar. The river can be dangerous even at the best of times, the waters of the Columbia Bar littered with the remains of ill-fated ships.

"Drop anchor," Rob said. "I'm going aboard." He grabbed a mooring line and reached for the *Legion*, securing the vessel to our gillnetter. I felt a sense of unease about him going, but I was curious too. What had happened to the boat's occupants? Did they fall overboard?

I lowered our anchor and watched as Rob snatched a flashlight from the wheelhouse and boarded the *Legion*. I pointed the *Martha Ann*'s floodlight his way to provide more light.

He walked the deck of the *Legion* and then stepped into the troller's wheelhouse, looking around.

"What's in there?" I called.

"Nothing," he yelled back, the beam of his flashlight sweeping the inside of the wheelhouse. "No papers on who owns it. No sign of suicide." He chuckled to himself. "Or foul play."

I hadn't even considered those scenarios, but Rob's thoughts ran darker than mine. What if the owner hadn't fallen overboard, but jumped? Suicide wasn't unheard of on the coast, especially when the fishing was bad and it felt like the winter rains would never end. There was certainly something ominous about the unmanned boat. Whatever had happened wasn't good.

“I’m going below,” Rob said, grinning. He loved a mystery, and it looked like he was enjoying solving this one. Guess he forgot about that beer at the Portway. He climbed below deck, disappearing for a few minutes.

I listened intently. The fog around us seemed to mask ambient noise, rendering the Columbia nearly silent. I could no longer hear foghorns from other boats or sea lions barking in the distance. Just the sounds of water lapping against the two vessels and Rob stumbling around below deck.

Finally, he surfaced. “Well?” I asked. “What did you find?”

He brushed black grime from his flannel jacket. “It’s a mess down there—gear on the floor, couple of ratty blankets. The head is filthy.”

“No sign of anyone on board?”

He shook his head, disappointed by the lack of clues. “No. Nothing.”

I grabbed the receiver on my radio. “Come on back. We need to call this in.”

Rob jumped back onboard the *Martha Ann* as I radioed the Coast Guard. We couldn’t leave an abandoned vessel drifting.

I had just connected with the USCG station when I heard Rob cry out. Receiver in hand, I stuck my head out of the wheelhouse to find him doubled over in the middle of the deck. He clutched his head, groaned, and then collapsed.

I dropped the receiver and ran to my brother. He lay supine, his body bucking with the throes of a seizure, his lips flecked with spit and blood.

The radio crackled, a man's voice broken by static. I leapt up and snatched the receiver. "Mayday! This is Andrew Cosner of the *Martha Ann*." I explained our situation, requesting emergency aid. Then I rushed back to Rob, who had gone still. Kneeling, I searched for a pulse. His heart was still beating, his breathing shallow.

The radio crackled again, but this time the sound wasn't coming from the wheelhouse of the *Martha Ann*. A deep, garbled voice blared from the *Legion*. It sounded more like a growl than speech. I stared at the troller, sure the radio hadn't been switched on before—Rob would have mentioned that.

The beam of the *Martha Ann*'s floodlight still illuminated the wheelhouse, but the fog was so thick my view was obscured. Behind the dirty glass window, I could make out a dark figure, its shape bulky, like a broad-shouldered man wearing a black rain slicker. The face was in shadow, so I picked up Rob's flashlight. The face looked featureless, the shadows inside the wheelhouse too dark to see detail. But the eyes reflected yellow, like those of an animal.

The radio cut out, and then, next to me, Rob shuddered. I checked his pulse. Nothing. My own pulse thundered in my ears as I began CPR to revive my brother, desperate for help to arrive.

When I finally raised my head again, the *Legion* was gone. Not as though the mooring line had slipped and the troller drifted away from the *Martha Ann*, back into that curtain of fog, but vanished, as though it had never existed at all.

Three days later, my brother was laid to rest, my family forever altered, the mystery of the *Legion* left unsolved.