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Beneath Her Silence

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Introduction

When the town lit candles for the man who rebuilt its harbor, Claire Mercer thought about the list of names her father had burned in the cellar. Wax had run in pale tears along the boardwalk railings, hardening in the salt air like a promise the sea would never keep. Harbor's End wore its grief as neatly as its summer postcards—boats bobbing in their slips, flags bright against a pewter sky, gulls skittering along the tide line. From the car window, the water looked close enough to touch and cold enough to bite.

She crossed the causeway with the windows cracked, letting in the sour-sweet mix of salt, diesel, and old rope. The hand-painted sign still leaned at the bend—Welcome to Harbor's End—newly adorned with a wreath of white lilies and a black ribbon that flapped in the wind. She had the absurd thought that the sign was smaller, that the town had shrunk when she left, and then realized it was only her, coming back larger with all the weight of what she hadn't done since she'd gone. Her phone pulsed on the passenger seat: a message from a number she didn't save and didn't need to. Nora: courthouse. 10 a.m.

Inside the courthouse, the air smelled of varnish and wet wool. The old clock over the clerk's desk ticked too loudly, marking a time that seemed to belong to another century. A portrait of Thomas Alden, Harbor's End's benefactor, hung draped with a strip of black cloth, his smile immortalized at the ribbon-cutting of the new marina. Sheriff Daniel Kestrel stood near the door, hat in hand, the same crow's-feet by his eyes, the same careful way he said her name—Claire—as if it might break. He thanked her for coming home. He didn't ask why she'd stayed away.

She told herself to sit, to breathe, to let the ceremony of it carry her through. She hadn't brought a notebook, but the itch to write came anyway, a reflex she couldn't kill. She could feel the shape of a story taking root in her chest: the candles, the portrait, the town that had learned to celebrate what it was told. Once, she would have already sketched questions in the margins. Now she watched the door and held her hands in her lap to keep from tapping, reminding herself she was here as a sister, not a reporter. She was here because the last time she didn't show up for Nora, the silence between them had lasted a year.

They brought Nora in wearing county orange and the bravest face she had. Her hair was pulled back too tight, her mouth set the way it had been when they were girls and dared each other to jump from the low pier in March. The room tilted; Claire had a sudden, impossible memory of Nora at eight, legs all knees, holding up a jellyfish with a stick and asking if it could hurt you after it was dead. The clerk read the charge, and

the name landed like a stone: Thomas Alden. A murmur moved through the benches. Claire felt the town looking, assessing, placing her in a story they had already told themselves: the fallen reporter, the prodigal daughter, the sister of the accused.

The judge's voice was a metronome. Counsel entered appearances. Bail was argued in tones meant to sound reasonable and didn't. Words like community ties and risk and severity filled the space where air should have been. Claire watched Nora not move when they said remand, watched the flinch that wasn't quite a flinch when the cuffs clicked again. She wanted to stand, to shout that they were wrong to make a spectacle of a woman who spent her weekends at the food pantry and her nights with a child who still believed the sea could be kind. She stayed seated, nails pressed crescents into her palm, feeling the old rule of the place press back: do not make waves.

They gave them five minutes in the cramped visiting alcove, a phone on each side of the glass and the kind of fluorescent light that leached all color from skin. Up close, Nora's eyes were the same green-gray as the water on a windless morning. There was a scrape on her forearm, a smudge she hadn't noticed, a steadiness Claire recognized as effort. Claire picked up the receiver and swallowed everything she wanted to ask, every theory that had already begun to assemble itself from fragments and habit.

"Nora," she said, her voice sounding like someone else's, softer and older, "I'm here."

Nora's hand tightened on the phone. For a second her mouth trembled, and the girl with the jellyfish was there, brave because she had to be. Then the composure returned, a mask as careful as the town's. "I didn't kill him," she said. "Claire, I didn't."

CHAPTER ONE: Arrival

The traffic on Route Nine slowed to a crawl just past the turnoff for Seaview Cemetery, where a string of cars idled in patient tribute. Claire eased her foot off the gas and let the rental coast, the engine's muted hum replaced by the rhythmic slap of tires over seams in the asphalt. A small procession was making its way along the hillside lanes—headlights off, parking lights on, a flicker of candles held against the afternoon gray. From this distance, the line of mourners looked like a string of pearls laid across the green slope, and Claire felt a familiar, unwelcome urge to count them.

The road dipped and the town opened up below in its crooked embrace of harbor and hills. Harbor's End wore its weather like a mood ring—today it was the color of pewter and worry. The breakwater curved like an old scar out to the lighthouse, and the new marina lay snug inside its protection, a lattice of docks and cranes that had not been there when she left. Claire's chest tightened with the petty indignation of recognizing something you once knew by heart and finding it had been rewritten.

She drove past the memorial without looking long, though the portrait caught her anyway, the face of Thomas Alden smiling from a poster board propped against a lamppost. It was the same picture from the dedication ceremony last summer: confident eyes, that practiced modest tilt of the head, the ribbon-cutting scissors held up like a trophy. A wreath of white lilies had been placed at the base, their waxy petals browning in the salt air. Someone had tied a black ribbon to the lamppost; it thrummed in the wind, a thin pulse against the day.

Her phone buzzed again on the passenger seat, the same unlisted number Nora had used from the jail phone. Claire didn't need to read the message to know what it said—the courthouse, the time, the terse reassurance that she was handling it. She had seen the text three times already, and each time the words felt like a rope pulled tight. She had driven through the night to get here, stopping only for gas and coffee that tasted like copper, and now the proximity to the thing itself made her hands ache on the wheel.

The edge of town had the same tired grace she remembered: the bait shop with its peeling red paint, the diner's neon sign blinking but not quite convincing, a stretch of antique storefronts that had been trying to look quaint for forty years. An election banner sagged between two lampposts—Kestrel for Sheriff, the letters sun-faded, the year outdated. It swayed and straightened in the wind, a stubborn, useless motion. Claire turned onto Main Street and felt the steering wheel tug, a faint resistance she told herself was only the road.

By the time she found parking behind the courthouse, the drizzle had set in—a fine mist that clung to hair and eyelashes and made everything smell like wet stone. The building’s granite steps were worn concave at the center, a smooth shallow basin that carried the rain in a glittering path to the doors. Inside, the air was thick with varnish and damp wool, and the old clock above the clerk’s desk ticked with a judge’s authority. She remembered sitting in this same lobby as a child, watching her father sign a contract on the hood of a clerk’s counter, his pen moving like it had an audience.

Sheriff Kestrel was already inside, standing near the doors to Courtroom B as if he were both usher and guard. He had the same angular face she remembered, the same deliberate stillness, though his hair had gone fully gray at the temples and the lines around his eyes were deeper. When he saw her, he took off his hat and held it against his chest, a gesture that felt formal and old-fashioned and oddly kind.

“Claire,” he said, and her name landed gently, as if he were testing it for cracks. “I know you drove straight through.”

“Daniel,” she answered, keeping her voice steady. “It’s good to see you.”

It wasn’t, particularly; it was necessary. He nodded, and something in his mouth tightened, a grimace that wanted to be a smile. “I appreciate you coming. Nora’s asked for you. We’re doing everything by the book.”

She wanted to ask what book that was, who had written the rules, and how far they could be bent, but she was here as Claire Mercer, sister, not the version of herself who had once asked questions until the answers bled. She clipped the urge and took the visitor’s pass he offered. The lanyard was warm from his hand.

The courtroom had been set up for an arraignment docket, and the benches were crowded with the town’s day-trippers and its permanent residents, faces she knew in the way you know a coastline you haven’t navigated in years. A portrait of Alden still hung near the judge’s bench, draped with the same black cloth from the morning news. Someone behind her whispered that they had postponed the service, and someone else said there would be a candlelight vigil at dusk, down by the marina where he’d cut the ribbon. Claire focused on the wood grain of the bench in front of her, tracing with her eyes the little islands of knots and whorls, trying not to hear the rest.

They brought Nora in through a side door, a deputy on each elbow. She wore the county’s bright orange jumpsuit, her wrists shackled with a thin chain that rattled when she moved. Her hair had been pulled back into a severe knot, exposing the pale nape of her neck. The shape of her mouth was set, and Claire recognized it: the same

expression Nora wore when she had been eight and jumped from the low pier in March, convinced the cold wouldn't matter if she didn't look at the water. For a second, Claire could almost feel the slap of it, the shock that went through bones and made a person new.

"Nora Mercer," the clerk said, and the name echoed in the high ceiling. "You are charged with one count of murder in the first degree. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor," Nora said, her voice clear and, except for the tremor at the end, steady. The words did not make the room any quieter. The judge set conditions that sounded like a cage—no contact, high bail, surrender of passport—and Claire tried not to think about the small daughter waiting at home, about the stories she would have to be told.

Bail was denied. A murmur went through the room like wind moving dry grass. Claire stood without meaning to, then sat back down, feeling the eyes on her, the way they cataloged her face and her posture and the absence of a notebook in her hands. She saw the calculation in their glances: the disgraced reporter returns; the family that had been Harbor's End's pride for two generations now wearing shame like borrowed shoes.

They were given five minutes in the visiting alcove, a narrow box painted a color that existed nowhere in nature and lit from above by a fluorescent tube that hummed. The glass was clean on her side, smudged on the other. Nora picked up the receiver and held it against her ear, waiting, and the silence hummed along with the light.

"I didn't kill him," Nora said before Claire could decide what to ask. Her voice came through the receiver thin and frayed. "Claire, I didn't."

"I know," Claire said, because it was the thing to say and because she needed to say it. The words tasted like a half-truth she hadn't earned. She watched her sister's eyes for the flicker of relief and found none. Nora's gaze shifted to the wall behind Claire, as if reading something written there that Claire couldn't see.

"I found him," Nora said, her mouth close to the microphone. "I went to the cliff house like he asked, and he was already dead. I panicked. I ran."

"Why were you meeting him?"

Nora's thumb rubbed at the edge of the receiver, a repetitive, soothing motion. "He said he needed to fix something. He said it was about the waterfront. About my—about something I'd sent to the state." She stopped, swallowed. "He said if I didn't come, he'd tell everyone what he'd found out. About what I put in the water."

“What does that mean?” Claire asked, and felt the old muscle memory of the question, the way it opened a door even when you didn’t know what lay beyond it.

Nora’s eyes came back to Claire’s then, sharp and scared. “Don’t let them bury it under the water,” she whispered, and her hand trembled, rattling the receiver against the cradle. “Please. Don’t let them say it was me.”

The deputy knocked on the door to signal time. Nora’s mouth shaped something else, something Claire couldn’t read, and then she set the receiver down with a careful, deliberate motion. Claire watched her stand, watched the chain between her wrists catch the light. The marshals took her by the elbows and turned her toward the door that led back to the place where people were kept.

Claire stayed in the alcove until the fluorescent hum felt like the only sound in the world, then hung up the receiver and stepped out into the lobby. The crowd had thinned, but a few people still lingered, talking in low voices that stopped when she approached. She recognized Mrs. Pelletier from the library, who smiled a tight, apologetic smile; she saw Mr. Doyle, who had taught her history in tenth grade and had once written a commendation for her scholarship. They looked at her with a mixture of sympathy and speculation, as if she might announce something that would help them arrange their own feelings.

Sheriff Kestrel was waiting by the door, his hat back on his head. “Claire,” he said, stepping closer, lowering his voice. “I need to ask you something as a friend and as a neighbor. You’re a reporter—”

“Not anymore,” she said, sharper than she intended.

“Not anymore,” he conceded, with a nod that made it worse. “But you know how to dig. Your sister will get her day in court. The best thing you can do right now is let the process happen.”

“What’s the process?” Claire asked, and she could hear the blade in the question. “Is it the one where the town prints a story about a beloved developer and a volunteer mom and lets everyone pick their villain?”

Kestrel’s jaw tightened, and the skin around his eyes pinched. “We don’t have all the facts yet. Don’t go looking for trouble. It’s got a way of finding you anyway.”

He held the door for her, and the wind off the water pushed into the lobby, smelling of brine and something else, something faintly chemical that Claire couldn’t place. She stepped out into the drizzle and stopped under the portico, suddenly unwilling to walk to her car and drive to the house and pretend she knew what came next.

Across the street, a camera crew from a regional station was packing up, their white van with its satellite dish pulling away from the curb. A reporter in a black raincoat was talking to a woman with an umbrella, their voices chopped by the wind into fragments: community... devastation... shock. Claire turned up her collar and walked down the steps, her shoes quiet on the wet granite.

Main Street had the same handful of shops she remembered, only their signs were newer and the names were different, and a few windows were papered over with signs that said Closed for the Season. The café was open, steam fogging the glass. She went in and ordered a coffee she didn't want, mostly to stand somewhere where no one was looking at her. The woman behind the counter wore a pin with Alden's face on it—In Memoriam—and the coffee came with a printed sleeve that said Harbor's End: The Best Little Port in New England. Claire held the cup and let it warm her fingers.

Outside again, the drizzle thickened. She walked to the corner and looked down toward the waterfront, at the new boardwalk that gleamed with a fresh coat of sealant and the string of shops that had gone up where the cannery used to be. The marina was busy even in the gray weather—boats nudging their slips, a crane swinging a pallet, men in yellow slickers moving with the calm efficiency of routine. Alden had put all that there. He had given the town work and postcard views and a reason to hold its chin up.

She was still standing at the corner when a sedan pulled up and parked in the loading zone in front of the bank. A man got out, lean and neat in a dark suit, his hair combed with a precision that looked like a habit he'd never lose. He took a moment to adjust his cuffs, then looked up at the sky as if judging whether the rain was worth the inconvenience. Claire knew that posture. She knew the way his eyes scanned a street—assessing, cataloging, deciding who mattered.

Mayor Thomas Alden's son. The name surfaced without effort: Ethan Alden, late thirties, a lawyer turned developer, the quiet engine behind his father's public projects. He caught her looking and, for the briefest second, his face registered a flicker of recognition. Then it passed, replaced by a polite blankness. He lifted a hand in a small wave that did not invite conversation and went into the bank.

Claire let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Her phone buzzed again, another message from the same number. She looked down at the screen. The message was short: They say there's evidence. Photos. Don't let them paint her into a corner.

She opened the message and saw the attachment start to download. It was slow on the weak signal, a grid of pixels resolving into shapes. The picture was grainy, taken from a distance, maybe from the road above the cliffs. It showed a figure in a light

jacket standing near the edge, wind whipping the hood back from a face. Another figure was blurred in the background, half-obsured by scrub and rock. In the foreground, caught in the edge of the frame, was a car Claire recognized with a sick drop in her stomach: Nora's old Subaru, with the dent in the rear passenger door from a grocery cart that had gotten away from her last spring.

Under the image, a line of text: Time stamp 7:52 p.m. The night Alden died.

Claire closed the phone and slid it into her pocket. The rain had soaked through her shoulders, and the coffee had gone cold. Across the street, the candle vigil was beginning to form on the courthouse steps; little points of light were being handed from stranger to stranger, bright and fragile. She thought of the list of names her father had burned, of the way the smoke had smelled like wet leaves and secrets, of the way he had told her, with his hand on the back of her neck, that some things belonged to the past and the sea.

She turned away from the light and walked back to the car. The engine turned over on the first try, and she pulled out onto Main Street, heading for the house she had promised herself she would leave again. She didn't need to count the candles. She didn't need to read the messages. The town had already written its story; Harbor's End had always been good at that. It polished its grief until it shone and buried what it couldn't bear to look at beneath the water. Claire pressed the accelerator, and the road rose up to meet her.

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