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# The Vanishing Tide

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## Introduction

By the time Claire Mercer saw the lighthouse beam swing across the fog, she had already rehearsed what she would say to her father a dozen times. None of the words fit. The ferry's horn sounded once, low and mournful, and the gulls startled in a ragged white cloud that slapped the damp air. Grayhaven's shoreline emerged by degrees: the black ribs of the decaying mills, the huddle of clapboard houses facing the wind as if bracing for a blow, the rusted anchor planted like a monument in the town square. The town always had a way of appearing as if it had been there forever, and would outlast whatever tried to wash it clean.

She hadn't intended to come back. Even when the hospital called, even when the nurse explained that Henry Mercer had suffered a minor stroke—minor, as if such a word could ever properly modify the delicate machinery of a brain—Claire hesitated. There were practical reasons, the nurse had said gently. Someone ought to be with him for a few weeks. In Boston, Claire had work that demanded a different kind of vigilance: deadlines, editors, stories that could be handed off at the end of the day. Grayhaven, she knew, would ask for a different price and keep asking.

The ferry docked with a soft bump and the scent of diesel thickened. Claire stood, feeling the deck's hum, and in the tilt of the boat she recognized the small calibrations her body still made here without her consent: knees flexed to meet the swell, a palm open to steady herself against a rail slick with salt. Memory was not a simple warehouse, she thought. It was a tide. It took and returned, rearranging the seabed each time. You could build your life on the feeling that the ebb was permanent, but the flood never failed to come.

Fifteen years earlier, on a night that would grow barbs in her mind, Emma Wilder had walked toward the water and did not come back. It was the summer everyone was leaving, in one form or another. Claire left for college; Emma left without a destination. The town's version of that night changed with the season: an argument, a storm that wasn't as bad as they said, a car that maybe never crossed the causeway. Claire had tried to report the facts—what she knew, what she didn't—but there are truths a place will not hand you, not even if you ask with the precision of a sworn statement. In the years since, she had learned to distrust stories that sealed too neatly at the edges. Lives didn't close like envelopes. They frayed.

Henry would be in the harbormaster's office, if he had his way. He had worked the water his whole life—first on trawlers, then running skiffs, then keeping the harbor's comings and goings in a ledger that smelled of ink and salt. In her childhood, that office had been a kingdom of charts with sun-faded corners, coils of rope that held the

memory of knots, a tide clock that ticked steadily through storms and holidays alike. It was here she learned the grammar of the coast: flood and ebb, slack water, neap and spring. Henry always said you respected the sea because it was honest, and Claire had once believed him. Then, standing in the glare of a searchlight at midnight, listening to radios crackle with static and rumor, she had felt how water could keep secrets as well as any person.

She hauled her suitcase over the ramp and onto planks that creaked as if relieved to be useful. The fog pressed close, turning edges into smudges. Beyond the harbor, a bell buoy tolled—counting time, or marking a boundary no one talked about crossing. She could already picture the house on Breaker Street, the porch rail furred with salt where the paint had peeled, the family portrait above the mantel with the face torn out as a joke in some adolescent fit and then taped back on, slightly askew, for years. In that house she had learned what people would rather not say. The shape of a withheld truth was legible in the way a person shrugged, in the pause before a laughter that arrived late. The town had taught her to listen between words. Journalism had taught her to write down what she heard.

On the walk up from the docks she passed the bakery, already closed at dusk, a hand-lettered sign promising cinnamon knots in the morning. A pickup idled outside the tackle shop. Men leaned in conversation, their bodies angled so the gist of it would not carry. She felt their eyes in the way she had always felt them: cataloging her return, pinning motives to her like name tags. Claire Mercer, the one who left. Claire Mercer, the one who asks questions. She would tell herself that coming back now was about Henry. She would even mean it. But the town would remember Emma, and the part of Claire that had never left would remember her too, with a suddenness that hurt.

There had been a time when she and Jonah Price had stood on the pier and promised to get out together, their hands sticky with brine from a catch that was more work than money. He'd stayed. She didn't blame him for that. People stayed for good reasons: family, debt, love threaded with obligation. And yet she wondered what it had cost him to keep the life he had. In the distance, the lighthouse turned its patient white eye and then looked away again. The beam washed over the harbor every twelve seconds. She counted, an old habit. Twelve seconds for the water to shine, then disappear. If you timed your steps just right, you could move between visibility and shadow like a fugitive.

Grayhaven's mayor these days was Lillian Carrick, daughter of a family that had paid for scholarships and roofs and, more lately, a glossy visitor center with a plaque that put her name in bronze. People said she had saved the town. People also said the old ways were dying because of men like Gideon Rowe, who arrived with a smile and a portfolio of renderings that made the waterfront look clean and expensive. Claire knew enough from Boston to recognize the ways money could change a story before anyone told it. You replaced the nouns first. Mill became loft, pier became promenade. Then

you swapped out the verbs. Work became invest, complain became resist. By the time the new words were printed on banners and brochures, the place in question had already begun to become something else.

At the corner by the square, fog beading her lashes, Claire paused. The anchor loomed, hulking and useless on land. Someone had draped it at Christmas with a string of lights that had gone dark halfway through January and now hung like a tired necklace. Across from it, the church bell tower was a cutout against the gray, and she could imagine Father Ellis making his evening rounds, half-pastoral, half-inquisitor, asking after souls, collecting local news like shells. The sea spoke in its own language all around her—slap, hiss, the small applause of water against pilings—and she felt the old pull, familiar and unwelcome. Home was not a place so much as a gravity.

She didn't know, as she stood there with her suitcase and her unpracticed lies for her father, that the town had already begun to close around a fresh absence. She didn't yet see the flyers that would go up, or the way a carved whale would look misplaced and then, suddenly, like a key. She only knew what she had always known: that Grayhaven remembered selectively, the way a shoreline keeps the wrecks it prefers and scours the rest to sand. She told herself she was here to lift Henry's kettle, sort his pills, drive him to appointments, keep him from downplaying what hurt. She told herself she could leave when he was steady, when her debt was paid.

But the tide was already turning, quiet and unstoppable. And when it came in, it would bring with it all that had been dropped and lost, all that had been tucked into the deep with a wish and a prayer for forgetting. The lighthouse turned its eye; the harbor breathed. Claire took one step, then another, into the fog that smelled like salt and iron and stories no one wanted to tell.

## CHAPTER ONE: Return to Grayhaven

The fog, when it finally surrendered, did not do so gracefully. It thinned by degrees, as if reluctantly loosening a grip, and the harbor revealed itself in gray washes of light. Claire Mercer felt the ferry's engines thrum into a lower register, a polite throat-clearing before a speech. She had spent the crossing watching the water smear past the window, one hand resting on the handle of her suitcase, the other balled in the pocket of her coat. She had practiced what to say to her father—simple sentences, free of argument. It was the same kind of rehearsal she used before difficult interviews, and she didn't like what that suggested.

A gull shrieked and then another, the air suddenly full of white wings and judgment. The shoreline sharpened: the bones of the old cranberry mill with its broken windows like vacant eyes, the huddle of saltbox houses facing the water with the stubborn posture of those who have no choice. She could see the square, the rusted anchor planted there like a bad omen, the church steeple a black needle stitching sky to land. Grayhaven hadn't grown, and it certainly hadn't improved. If anything, it had settled deeper into itself, as if the fog had been a kind of honesty.

She'd left this place with the steadiness of someone who never meant to return. Fifteen years had done little to soften the edges of that resolve. In Boston, she could be a different kind of quiet, the kind that went with deadlines and the clean geometry of city blocks. Here, quiet was an old coat that still smelled like smoke, and everything she said felt borrowed. The nurse had called it a minor stroke, a phrase designed to soften fear, but Claire had heard the tremor behind the words. Her father was not a man to ask for help. Asking was the last symptom.

The ferry bumped the dock, a gentle collision that reminded her of the ways water negotiates with what is stubborn. She stood, feeling the deck shift under her feet, the practiced sway of her body an unwelcome memory. Her suitcase was too full and too heavy, packed as if for a long stay she was determined to avoid. There was no good way to travel home. You either arrived as a stranger or as someone who had never left. Neither felt true, and she didn't like the space between.

Grayhaven had its own pace for arrivals. Men leaned on truck beds, exhaling smoke into the cold, eyes flicking toward her and then away. A boy hoisted a bucket and stared. She recognized the looks, even if she didn't recognize the faces. Return was an event here, a story the town could bend and twist to suit itself. She wondered which version would take root. Claire Mercer, the one who got out, or Claire Mercer, the one who came back. In her experience, the truth rarely had the courtesy to choose a side.

She moved down the ramp, the wood groaning like a complaint, and landed on the dock with the suitcase hitting behind her in a soft thud. The smell was of diesel, brine, and something deeper, the smell of decay that lived under good things. The harbormaster's office sat a short walk from the ramp, low and painted a faded green, the windows salt-streaked. Her father had always kept the tide clock in the window, a tidy machine that marked the hours of flood and ebb with a certainty she envied. She pictured him inside, head bent, adjusting the pencils in his shirt pocket.

Before she could go to him, a strip of white caught her eye. A flyer, taped to the lamppost nearest the bait shop, its edges curled from damp. Lily Donahue, sixteen. Missing since Friday afternoon. Claire stopped, her practiced calm faltering. The photo was the kind a mother chooses—school picture, uncertain smile, hair not quite behaving. Lily had been last seen at the estuary trail, the same path Emma had taken the night she vanished. The coincidence landed heavy, an old bell struck again, its note vibrating somewhere she thought had gone numb.

She took in the rest of the square with new attention. The bakery sign already read Closed, an hour before dusk, the town's appetite shrinking with the light. A pickup idled outside the tackle shop, its exhaust plume a soft ghost. Two men stood in conversation, their shoulders angled like a fence. The old men on the pier had a new name for her father's job—harbormaster Emeritus, they'd joked last Christmas when she called—but Henry still kept the office keys on a ring in his pocket. He would know about the flyer. He would know everything that mattered in that unhelpful, stubborn way of his.

A man stepped out of the bait shop and let the door swing shut behind him, the bell jangling. Jonah Price. He wore a canvas jacket with a smear of something dark along the cuff, and his hands were scarred in that way that happened to men who worked with wire and salt. He saw her and stopped for a beat, the way a deer does before deciding on direction. Then he came over, wiping those scarred hands on his jeans as if the gesture could clean away the years between them. Claire felt something in her chest tighten, a knot pulled by habit.

"Claire," he said. He said her name like he was trying it out. "Didn't know you were coming in today."

"Didn't know it myself until the ferry schedule told me." She kept her voice even, careful. "How are you, Jonah?"

"Older," he said, then gave a small, tired smile. "Busier. Town's a mess for work. People fixing what they can't afford to replace." He glanced at the flyer on the lamppost. "You saw Lily, I guess. It's all anyone talks about. The estuary trail again. People are twitchy."

"Has anyone searched?" Claire asked, the reporter rising before she could weigh it. "Are they using dogs? Coast Guard?"

"Local volunteer sweep yesterday. Hale's running it, but you know how that goes." Jonah shrugged. "She's a kid with friends and habits. Sometimes kids come home. Sometimes they don't." He said it like he'd had to believe both options to survive. She felt the old frustration rise, the way this town let time dissolve edges, let questions soften into rumors.

Detective Marcus Hale had been a patrolman when Claire was in high school, seen mostly in the background of bad nights. She pictured him older, harried, bound by budgets and politics. "I should talk to him," she said, thinking aloud. Jonah's expression flickered, a warning she didn't need to decode. "What?"

"Listen," he said, lowering his voice even though they were alone on the walkway. "Don't stir anything up. Not right away. People remember you as the girl who asked too many questions about Emma. It's still tender. If you march in there demanding files, they'll shut you out before you get your coat off."

"I'm here for my father," she said, and knew it sounded only half true. He raised an eyebrow. It was the same expression he used to give her when she claimed she didn't want dessert. She had missed it, and she hated that she had missed it. "Fine. I'm also here because a missing kid isn't something I can pretend not to see."

He nodded, eyes on the water. "My crew's got a job at the old cannery tomorrow, pulling the last of the pilings. If you need eyes somewhere, I can take a look around when the tide drops. But Claire—don't make yourself the story. This town eats its own when it gets scared."

She wanted to say she was already the story, had been since the night they found Emma's jacket without her inside it. Instead, she thanked him, took his number, and watched him walk back to his truck. He didn't look back. It felt like a kindness.

The harbormaster's office was thirty yards away. She could see the silhouette through the salt-hazed glass, a man sitting, head bowed. She rehearsed again. Simple sentences. No argument. She pushed the door and a small bell chimed, a sound from her childhood that turned her stomach. Henry looked up from a ledger, startled, then carefully set his pencil down. He was thinner, but his eyes were the same pale blue, ocean bright. For a moment, she couldn't remember any of her lines.

"You're here," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I am," she said, and set her suitcase down by the door. The room smelled of paper

and pencil lead and the faint rot of old rope. The tide clock on the wall ticked softly to itself, an eccentric heartbeat. The pencil in his right hand trembled, then stilled. He saw her notice and didn't pretend not to. "The nurse said minor," she added, trying to soften the word with her own practice. "But that doesn't matter to you, I guess."

"It was a warning shot," he said. "I listened." He looked at the ledger, at the window, at the ledger again. It was a map of comings and goings, neat columns of times and boat names, weather notes in the margins. To him, this record was a kind of moral act, a refusal to let the harbor be only water and chance. Claire had grown up on those margins: *Fog thick at dawn; wind WSW at twelve; Kingfisher took a wave on the starboard.* She had learned to read storms in pencil.

They didn't hug. They never had. He stood with care, steadying himself on the edge of the desk. "I can close up," he said. "You go to the house. There's soup in the freezer. The neighbor keeps checking in and leaving notes on the door like I'm a child."

"I'll walk with you," she said. He gave her a look that told her he didn't need the help, and then, with a small sigh, another look that admitted he might. They stepped out into air that had gone colder. The fog was almost gone, leaving a thin haze that made the harbor look like an old photograph. A bell buoy rang in the distance, maddeningly patient. She pictured Lily Donahue, pictured Emma, and forced the images to the side. There would be time for them later. Too much time.

On the walk to Breaker Street, Henry didn't say much. That was familiar. He had always communicated in observations about water and wind, occasional directives, small acts of care that looked like chores. He'd put oil in her car the winter she was home from college without being asked. He'd left a box of her mother's letters on her bed the day after the funeral with a note that read, *Your turn to keep them.* He had a way of letting her know he remembered without needing to speak of it directly.

Breaker Street was a row of saltbox houses that leaned toward the water as if listening. Theirs was third from the end, the porch paint peeling in long curls that looked like bark. The garden had gone to weeds, except for a single rosebush near the steps that had managed a defiant red. Claire felt the old ache as she climbed the stairs. Inside, the air was stale, like a room closed for a season. She could see the mantel from the doorway, the family portrait with its torn face. She had taped it back on once in anger, and again in apology, and now it hung there as a record of both.

"You didn't have to come," Henry said, setting his keys in the bowl by the door. "I can manage."

"The nurse said otherwise." Claire put her suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. "And the hospital said you agreed to it."

"I agreed to a suggestion." He moved to the kitchen, one hand brushing the wall for balance when he thought she wasn't looking. "Soup," he announced, opening the freezer. He wasn't a man for gratitude. It would come out sideways, as a story about a boat, or a note on the tide chart. She let it be. For now.

She followed him and stood in the doorway, watching him wrestle with the freezer drawer. The kitchen was the same except for the new refrigerator, a silver box too wide for the alcove. On the side, someone had pinned a magnetized tide table, the kind sold at the gift shop near the pier. She ran her eyes over the printed squares, the neat rows of times and heights. It made a certain sense to put your faith in a schedule like that, even if the sea never followed it precisely. People liked to pretend nature obeyed paperwork.

"Have you heard about Lily Donahue?" she asked, trying for casual. Henry froze with a carton of soup in his hand. He closed the drawer carefully, then turned. His face had gone guarded, the way it did when she used to ask about things he didn't want her to know. "Jonah mentioned it. It's all over the square."

"Kid went missing at the estuary," he said. "That's what they're saying." He didn't add anything else. He didn't have to. The estuary was where the current swung strong, where the reeds hid things, where the lighthouse beam could be seen between the cattails on a clear night. It was also where a group of teenagers had partied the night Emma disappeared. Claire had been at that party. She remembered a bonfire, a boy's laugh that sounded like a threat, the way Emma had looked at the water as if it might be a door.

"You were at the docks that night," Claire said quietly. It wasn't a question. He had been harbormaster then, too. He had been on the water more nights than not. Henry put the soup on the counter and rubbed his thumb over a spot of rust on the metal lid. He did not answer. His silence was its own answer. She felt the old argument rise in her throat, the one about why he never told her everything, why he had let her leave with the pieces he refused to join. She swallowed it. The nurse said minor, she reminded herself. Minor.

"I should call the hospital," she said instead. "They wanted an update."

"They'll want the pharmacist to confirm I picked up my prescriptions," he said, with a tired humor. "They love their procedures." He had always respected procedure, but only when it agreed with his sense of what mattered. It was the same with church. He went on Christmas and Easter, not for God, he'd once said, but because some things are better done with company. Claire had never found a way to argue with that kind of logic. It had too many escape routes.

She stepped into the living room, the floorboards creaking under her weight. The house remembered her better than she wanted it to. She ran a hand along the back of the sofa, which still wore a slipcover from twenty years ago. On the bookshelf, there was a small wooden whale, its tail carved in a gentle curve. It looked familiar, but not in the way of their family. She picked it up. The wood was smooth, the paint chipped along the spine. She turned it in her hand and felt something shift inside. It rattled.

She held it to her ear, then pressed it against her palm. A small seam along the back gave under her thumbnail. She pried. The whale split into two hollow halves. Inside was a tiny slip of paper, folded tight. Claire's heart gave a sharp knock. She smoothed the paper with her thumb. In careful handwriting she recognized, a single sentence: *If you find this, don't come looking for me.* It was signed with a looping E. Emma.

Claire stared at it until the words blurred. Emma had given her a carved whale once, on her thirteenth birthday. It had been a silly superstition between them, a totem for keeping safe near the water. That whale had vanished the night Emma did; Claire had looked for it in the weeks after, certain it would turn up in a pocket or under a bed, a sign that the loss was temporary. She had mourned the whale as if it were a piece of Emma herself. And now it sat in her father's house, in her hand, with a message she had never seen.

She shut the whale's halves together and heard the click. Her pulse sounded loud in the quiet. The refrigerator hummed. Down the hall, the old clock ticked, and outside, the bell buoy rang again, as if marking the time it had taken for this object to resurface. She thought of Lily, of the estuary trail, of Jonah's warning. She thought of Henry, in the kitchen, carefully not answering her question. It was not possible, she told herself, to love someone and also want to shake the truth out of them. It was not possible, and yet here she was.

She crossed the kitchen, the whale heavy in her palm. Henry had his back to her, stirring soup now, the spoon making a steady scrape against pot. She held out the whale. "Where did you get this?" she asked. Her voice was steady. She was good at steady.

He turned and saw what she was holding. The spoon stopped. His eyes flicked to the whale and then to her face, and for a moment he looked older than she had ever seen him. "I don't remember," he said, a lie that had the decency to sound ashamed.

"Henry," she said, her voice breaking despite herself. "Where did you get this?"

He looked past her, out the window, toward the harbor where the lighthouse was beginning its evening rotation. "The tide brings things back," he said, not looking at her. "You know that." He put the spoon down. He still wasn't looking at her. "Soup's hot," he added, as if that could change the subject. The whale, in Claire's hand, felt

like an anchor she hadn't meant to drop.

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