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The Tides That Keep Secrets

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Introduction

Grayhaven greeted her with a low ceiling of fog, the kind that pressed close and turned every streetlight into a halo. The sea was working itself into the harbor, each swell slapping the pilings with a patient, practiced hand. Ava Mercer stepped out of the rental car and tasted brine and diesel on the air, the old mixture she used to swear was embedded in her hair for days after a storm. The clapboard church sat above the wharf on a bald patch of lawn, white paint flaking like thin scabs. Bells tolled without hurry. People she almost recognized gathered under black umbrellas, speaking in the pitched hush that clings to both weddings and burials.

She had come back for boxes and signatures, for the math of an estate and the simple apology of a bouquet. That was what she told herself in the long miles up the coast: she would not be staying long enough for the tide to turn. The town had its own rhythm—four beat buoys, gull cry, the rattle of chain in a winch—that she had trained herself not to hear. But memory is an old net; it sags and snags. By the time Pastor Harlan's voice floated across the room like smoke over water, she could feel Grayhaven's weave tightening around her ribs.

Faces turned, politely curious, then softened into the practiced sympathy small towns keep on hand. Tom stood toward the back of the sanctuary, hands on hips, jaw locked, a tide line of salt across his work boots. He nodded once, a flick of acknowledgment more than welcome. The casket at the front was maple, pale as low-tide sand. Nora Mercer had been meticulous in life; even this felt neat, a departure arranged to leave little mess behind. But grief has its own currents, and under the prayers Ava could hear the brass of the harbor, the ache of a rope under strain.

After, in the quiet of the rectory, Ava found her mother's Bible on a side table, leather darkened by years of hands. The ribbon marker fell open to Psalms, and there—tucked towards Lamentations as if the word itself could keep it safe—was a photograph she had never seen. Jonah Hale on the pier, fifteen at most, a half-laugh caught in the grain. The wind lifted his hair, and a gull blurred in the corner like a careless brushstroke. The pier railing was chipped where they used to hook their heels and spit into the water, counting breaths until the spit met the tide. The edges of the photo were thumb-soft, the way old pages curl. On the back, in her mother's tidy, no-nonsense script: Summer before. Keep.

Grayhaven had learned to speak around Jonah's name, the way one learns to step around a loose deck board. Ten summers ago he had been here, a boy who could sketch the harbor from memory, who beat her at cards and kept his secrets the way others kept coins. Then he was a bright shirt vanishing into fog. The police said

runaway. The town said tragedy. Ava, nineteen and already calculating escape, had said nothing and left as soon as she could. She had built a life on the far side of this coast, listening for other children's monsters, explaining to other parents how memory edits itself for survival.

But the photograph made a small, insistent heat in her palm. Nora had saved this—quiet Nora, who believed in routine and recipes, who taught her children to keep their heads down when elections came and tempers ran hot at the diner. If her mother had kept Jonah's laughter between lament and prophecy, then silence had not been absence after all; it had been a weight she misread. Ava slipped the picture into the inside pocket of her coat, feeling suddenly, ridiculously watched, as if the boy in the photograph could still cock an eyebrow and say, Don't start what you won't finish.

Outside, the town had new banners strung between poles: GRAYHAVEN RISING in a clean font, watercolor waves smudged behind the promise. Lucas Rowe's face smiled from a billboard near the harbor road, the kind of smile that assumed cameras would always be kind. The cannery—once a rusted spine along the shore—was wrapped in scaffolding and commerce. Progress, the signs said, as if the old bricks had asked for it. Ava remembered the cannery for dares and dawdling, for pockets full of splinters and boys whispering in the echo.

Tom offered to handle the house. He would bring a crew, he said, break down furniture, sort, toss. There was an ache under the offer, a ledger open between them with pages left unpaid. "Don't go dredging, Ave," he added, eyes on the road. "Let the past be the past." He meant Jonah, and he meant everything else: their father's drinking before he moved inland, the way Ava's acceptance letter had felt like betrayal. She nodded the way you nod at the ocean: a gesture of respect with no promise of obedience.

That evening she climbed the hill to the old Mercer house, where the wood knew her footsteps and the windows wore the sea in their panes. Dust lay like silt over the piano keys. The refrigerator hummed a tired note. She opened cupboards and found the precision of Nora's life—labels, dates, a narrow world that had room for order but not confession. On the kitchen table, a ledger of bills. In a cookie tin, a clutch of church programs. Between the leaves of a cookbook, one grocery list and a napkin ghosted with coffee. And now, in her coat, a boy's unguarded laugh.

She told herself she was only following the good practice she preached to other families: when a child goes missing, honor what remains. Hold what you can, allow questions to exist without rushing them into answers. But the harbor kept talking, and the fog thinned enough to show the line where ocean met rock, where fall and recovery have always negotiated their uneasy truce. Somewhere below, a buoy bell chimed, steady as a metronome. Somewhere beyond that, the cannery watched with its blind windows, and the town pretended not to notice.

By the time the first gulls went quiet, Ava had admitted what the photograph already knew. She had come home for a funeral. She would stay for the boy who never got one. And as the house settled and the tide turned, she pressed her thumb to the back of the photo where her mother had written Keep—and felt, for an instant, as if something pressed back.

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CHAPTER ONE: Salt in the Floorboards

The morning came in gray, as if the fog from the day before had melted and seeped into the light itself. Ava woke in her childhood bed, the mattress sagging in the middle like a sigh. For a moment, she was nineteen again, listening for the sound of her father's truck returning late, the house holding its breath. Then the room sharpened: the water stain on the ceiling shaped like a boot, the chipped paint on the window sash where she'd once scratched her initials. She was thirty-five. She was a psychologist who spent her days in a quiet, sunlit office, helping children articulate their fears. Here, her own childhood fears felt close enough to touch, not as memories but as a low-grade hum in the walls.

Downstairs, the house was a museum of her mother's last, quiet years. Everything was dusted and placed, a life pared down to its essential functions. Ava made coffee in the same percolator that had groaned every morning of her youth, the smell of it thick and familiar. The photograph of Jonah was on the counter where she'd left it, a small square of defiance against the order. She picked it up again, her thumb tracing the edge of his laugh. It wasn't just a picture; it was a question asked in her mother's hand.

The task of sorting felt monumental and disrespectful. To box a life is to admit it's over, and Nora Mercer had always seemed like a fixture, as constant as the tidal clock in the harbor. Ava started in the living room, a space that had rarely been lived in, kept for company that seldom came. Dust motes swam in the watery light. She opened the bottom drawer of the secretary, a place that had once held wrapping paper and twine. Now it held a neat stack of community newsletters, the *Grayhaven Beacon*, folded to the classifieds. She flipped through them idly, her mind already drifting to the logistics of estate sales, until a familiar name caught her eye.

Not a headline, just a mention in a block of small print from ten summers ago: the annual Founder's Day picnic. A list of children who'd entered the sandcastle contest. *Ava Mercer, Thomas Mercer, Jonah Hale, David Bower, Sophie Crane...* The list went on, a roll call of her childhood cohort. Her name, his name. Side by side in newsprint. It was nothing, a common enough record. But seeing them paired like that, a decade later, in her dead mother's drawer, felt like a summons. Nora had kept this. Why? Not for nostalgia—her mother wasn't nostalgic. She saved things for a reason, the way she saved coupons or manuals.

Ava laid the newsletter on the floor. The list was long, but her eye kept snagging on Jonah's name. It sat between hers and David Bower's, a space so small you could cover it with a fingertip. She remembered that day—the sun too hot, the smell of salt

and Coppertone, Jonah's fierce concentration as he carved a moat that kept collapsing. David had accused him of cheating. Jonah had just laughed and said the tide would judge them all. The tide had judged, in its way. It had taken one of them and left the rest to grow up on the shore.

She closed the drawer. The house was too quiet. The only sound was the distant moan of a foghorn, a sound that used to feel like a lullaby and now felt like a warning. She needed to do more than just pack and label. She needed to listen to what the house was keeping.

The kitchen was Nora's command center. Ava opened the pantry, stocked with canned goods arranged by size and date. Her mother had been a woman who believed a place for everything was a bulwark against chaos. Ava checked the high shelf, where the good china sat unused for decades. Behind a stack of platters, she found a small, tin recipe box. Inside, instead of cards, were folded papers. Grocery lists. A warranty for a washing machine long gone. And then, on a sheet of her mother's personalized stationery—a gift from the church ladies—was a handwritten list. It was titled, in Nora's precise cursive, *Neighborhood Children, Summer '16*.

There were fifteen names. All the kids from their stretch of Harbor Road and beyond. Ava's name was first. Tom's second. Jonah's was fourth. It was a roster, but for what? Beneath each name, Nora had made a small notation. A checkmark. A star. Next to Jonah's name was a single word: *Promise*.

Ava felt a chill move through her, unrelated to the damp air. A promise? To whom? About what? Her mother had been a woman of her word, but she didn't speak in riddles. This felt like a clue, but the code was missing. She folded the list and tucked it into her pocket alongside the photograph. The two artifacts felt warm against her leg, a pocketful of questions.

She was wiping down the kitchen counter when Tom's truck growled into the gravel driveway. He didn't knock, just let the screen door slam behind him. He carried a box of contractor-grade trash bags and a roll of packing tape. His eyes swept the kitchen, taking in the orderly surfaces, the absence of clutter.

"Good, you started," he said, his voice the same gravel as the driveway. "I brought the truck. We can load the bigger stuff tomorrow if you want."

"I'm not rushing, Tom."

He leaned against the counter, crossing his arms. He was broader than she remembered, his hands scarred and calloused. He looked like their father, but with their mother's severe, watchful eyes. "The longer you stay, the harder it is. That's all I'm saying. People talk."

“Let them talk.”

“It’s not about talk, Ave. It’s about—” He stopped, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s about peace. Mom’s. Yours. Mine. Dragging up old history doesn’t give anyone peace.”

“I found a list she kept,” Ava said, watching his face. “Of all the kids from that summer. Including Jonah.”

Tom’s expression didn’t change, but a muscle in his jaw tightened. “So? She was a pack rat. Kept every church bulletin and school flyer. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means she was thinking about him. About that time.”

“Everyone thinks about it. You just don’t talk about it.” He pushed off the counter. “Look, I’ve got a job site at three. I’ll come by in the morning with the truck. Don’t... don’t go stirring up dust you can’t see through.”

He left, the screen door sighing shut behind him. His warning hung in the air, as tangible as the smell of brine. It was the same thing he’d said at nineteen when she’d asked why the police had stopped looking so fast. *Don’t stir up dust*. It was the town’s motto, etched on every silent tongue.

The list in her pocket felt heavier. *Promise*. It could be anything. A playdate promise. A promise to return a book. But Nora Mercer didn’t annotate playdates. She annotated important things. Bills paid. Doctors’ appointments. This was a record, and Ava was trained to read records.

She left the kitchen and climbed the narrow stairs to the second floor. The air grew colder, thicker with the scent of old wool and lavender sachets. Her mother’s bedroom was at the end of the hall. It was pristine, the bed made with military corners, the curtains drawn. On the nightstand was a small, leather-bound journal. Not a diary—Nora didn’t believe in airing laundry, even to paper—but a logbook of sorts. Ava had seen it before, always closed.

She opened it now. The first pages were lists: medications, grocery runs, mileage on the car. Then, about halfway through, the entries changed. They became shorter, more cryptic. Dates and single lines. *June 10. Spoke to P.H. about the berries. June 24. Saw the light at the old place again. July 8. The boys were out too late. The fog was bad. July 15. Promise kept.*

Ava’s breath caught. *July 15. Promise kept.* That was the day before Jonah disappeared.

She flipped forward. The entries resumed their mundane character for a week. Then, on July 23—the day the search was officially called off—there was one more line, written in a shakier hand than the rest. *The tide takes what it wants. We are all just boats.*

It wasn't an answer. It was a shroud. But it proved Nora had been watching, recording. The woman who believed in silence had been building a case in code. Ava sat on the edge of the perfectly made bed, the journal open in her lap. The house creaked around her, a sound like old bones settling. She felt a pang of something almost like anger. Why hadn't her mother just *said* something? Why all this careful, quiet accumulation of clues?

Because saying it out loud would have meant admitting the town's story was a lie. And in Grayhaven, the story was everything. *GRAYHAVEN RISING*. The new banners flapped outside, a narrative of progress over grief. Jonah Hale was a footnote in that story, a sad but closed chapter. Her mother's journal said otherwise.

Ava spent the next hour going through the room with a new intensity. She checked the backs of drawers, the lining of jewelry boxes, under the felt at the bottom of the cedar chest. She found nothing more until she returned to the bedroom's wide-plank floor. One of the boards near the radiator had always been loose. As kids, she and Tom used to hide comic books there. She knelt, her knees protesting, and worked her fingernail into the crack.

The board lifted with a low groan. The space beneath was shallow, lined with the dark, sandy grit of decades. But it wasn't empty. Nestled in the dust was a small, oilskin pouch, the kind fishermen used to keep matches dry. It was dark with age, but the leather was supple. Someone had handled this recently.

Her heart was a dull drum against her ribs. She lifted the pouch out. It was surprisingly heavy. With careful fingers, she untied the cord and opened it.

Inside wasn't a matchbox. It was a collection of small, sea-worn objects: a piece of blue sea glass, smoothed to a soft edge; a brass button, tarnished green; and a small, folded square of paper, brittle with salt air. Ava unfolded it with exquisite care.

It wasn't a note. It was a child's drawing, done in faint, wavering pencil. It showed a rocky cove, a distinct notch in the cliff line she recognized as Siren's Cove, a mile north of the harbor. In the cove, a crude boat was drawn, but it looked wrong—not floating, but propped up on rocks as if it had been dragged or abandoned. And in the boat, a small, stick-figure boy was drawn, one hand raised in a wave. Or a warning.

The drawing was unsigned. But the style was unmistakable. The way the waves were jagged lines, the way the stick figure's hair was a series of excited spikes. She had

seen a hundred drawings like this, tacked to refrigerators and classroom walls. This was Jonah Hale's hand. A drawing made after he was supposedly gone.

A floorboard creaked in the hallway.

Ava's head snapped up. The sound hadn't been the house settling. It was a step. A deliberate, quiet step. She wasn't alone. She shoved the pouch and its contents into her jacket pocket, her blood humming with a sharp, animal alertness. The steps receded down the stairs, followed by the faint, almost imperceptible click of the front door latching shut.

She waited a full thirty seconds, her breath held tight in her chest. Then she moved to the window, peering through the lace curtain. The street below was empty, lined with the familiar cars of the neighborhood. No figure retreated down the walk. Nothing moved but the gray, shifting air.

Someone had been in the house. Someone who knew the loose board in the floor. Someone who had just listened to her discover that Jonah Hale hadn't simply vanished into the fog ten years ago. He had left a message behind, and now, so had they.

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