

Part One – The Goodbye

Chapter 1

The Last Summer

A Quiet Coastal Town

The first light of dawn always arrived gently in Seabrook.

Long before the fishermen steered their boats toward the open sea, before the bakery filled the streets with the comforting aroma of fresh bread, and before children raced along the harbor chasing gulls, the town belonged to the waves.

The ocean never truly slept.

It whispered against the shoreline through the night, carrying stories from distant lands and returning them to the weathered cliffs that had stood for centuries. The lighthouse, standing proudly at the edge of the bay, swept its beam across the dark water in slow, comforting circles, as if reminding every sailor that home was never far away.

Seabrook was not the kind of place that appeared on postcards or travel brochures.

There were no grand hotels or crowded beaches.

Instead, there were white cottages with flower-filled gardens, narrow stone lanes winding between ancient oak trees, and neighbors who greeted one another by name. Doors were rarely locked. Children wandered freely from one yard to another, knowing that every adult watched over them as though they were family.

Time seemed to move differently there.

The hurried pace of the outside world never reached the little town.

People measured their days not by clocks but by the tide, the ringing of the church bell, and the golden light that settled over the harbor every evening.

Among the cottages overlooking the sea stood one with blue shutters and climbing roses curling around its porch.

It belonged to the Hayes family.

Inside lived twenty-year-old Eleanor Hayes, whose smile had become as familiar to the town as the sound of the waves themselves.

Every morning she opened the windows to let in the salty breeze before helping her mother prepare breakfast. She loved the quiet rhythm of ordinary life—the kettle whistling on the stove, the scent of lavender drifting through the garden, and the cheerful chatter of neighbors walking past the gate.

Unlike many young people her age, Eleanor never dreamed of living in a great city.

She belonged to the sea.

She believed every sunrise over the water was different, every storm had its own personality, and every season painted the coastline with new colors.

To her, there was nowhere more beautiful on earth.

Across town, Daniel Carter had already been awake for hours.

His father owned one of Seabrook's oldest fishing boats, and Daniel had spent most of his childhood learning to read the currents, mend nets, and respect the unpredictable moods of the ocean.

Tall, kind-hearted, and endlessly curious, Daniel possessed a quiet confidence that drew people to him.

He could repair almost anything with his hands.

He laughed easily.

He listened more than he spoke.

And when he smiled, people felt that everything would somehow be all right.

There was only one place he hurried to after returning from the sea.

The hill overlooking the lighthouse.

Every afternoon, almost without fail, Eleanor was already there with a book resting in her lap.

Sometimes she read.

Most of the time she simply watched the horizon.

It had become their place.

No one remembered exactly how the tradition had begun.

Perhaps it started with a childhood game.

Perhaps with an accidental meeting years before.

Eventually, meeting on the hill simply became part of life.

One warm July afternoon, Daniel climbed the grassy path carrying two paper bags.

“You’ve brought supplies,” Eleanor said with a laugh.

“I’ve brought lunch,” Daniel corrected proudly.

She peeked inside.

Fresh bread.

Strawberries.

Cheese.

And two slices of apple pie wrapped carefully in cloth.

“You remembered my favorite.”

“I always remember.”

She smiled, unable to hide it.

They spread a blanket beneath the old oak tree overlooking the harbor.

Below them, fishing boats drifted gently with the tide while children skipped stones across the water.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Comfortable silence had always been one of the greatest gifts of their friendship.

“You’ve been thinking,” Eleanor finally said.

Daniel looked toward the sea.

“I received another letter today.”

She already knew what it meant.

The war, which had once seemed impossibly far away, was drawing closer.

Young men from neighboring towns had begun leaving one after another.

Some returned on leave.

Some returned in coffins.

Others never returned at all.

“You don’t have to go,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“But you want to.”

Daniel sighed.

“I don’t want to leave you.”

He paused before continuing.

“But if everyone stays because they’re afraid, who will protect the people waiting at home?”

Eleanor stared at the waves below.

She hated that his answer sounded exactly like the man she loved.

Kind.

Honorable.

Selfless.

She understood it.

That didn’t make it hurt less.

The wind lifted strands of her chestnut hair across her face.

Daniel gently tucked them behind her ear.

“I’ll come back.”

She searched his eyes.

“You can’t promise that.”

“No.”

He smiled sadly.

“But I can promise I’ll spend every day trying.”

A church bell echoed across the harbor.

The sound lingered in the warm afternoon air.

Neither of them knew it then, but this would become one of the happiest days they would ever share together.

Years later, Eleanor would remember every detail.

The smell of salt carried by the breeze.

The warmth of Daniel’s hand in hers.

The distant cry of gulls circling above the lighthouse.

The taste of strawberries under the summer sun.

Memory has a strange way of preserving ordinary moments.

It is only after they are gone that we realize they were extraordinary.

As the sun began its slow descent toward the horizon, Daniel reached into his pocket.

“I’ve been carrying this around all week,” he admitted.

“What is it?”

Instead of answering, he took her hand.

Resting in his palm was a small silver compass, polished smooth from years of use.

“My grandfather gave it to me before he passed away,” he said quietly.

“He told me that no matter how far life takes you, never forget where your true north is.”

He closed her fingers around it.

“I want you to keep it.”

Eleanor looked at him in surprise.

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“What if you need it?”

Daniel smiled.

“I already know how to find my way home.”

She held the compass tightly, unaware that one day it would become far more than a keepsake.

It would become the first clue in a mystery that had not yet begun.