

Emma Id-Mris borcle/goal

# EMMA

## AND THE SECRET BY THE SEA

By Jane Pane



# **Emma and the Secret by the Sea**

Written by Jane Pane

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[The Doll in the Seaweed](#)

[The Girl on the Street](#)

[The Voice in the Quiet](#)

[Morning Restless](#)

[The Lighthouse in the Mist](#)

[The Room That Wasn't Empty](#)

[Questions at the Table](#)

[Grandma's Warning](#)

[The One Who Doesn't Speak](#)

[His Name Is Jack](#)

[The Secret Inside the Doll](#)

[The House at the End of the Street](#)

[The First Words](#)

[The Newspaper Clipping](#)

[The Decision](#)

[The Last Meeting](#)

[The Light Beneath the Lighthouse](#)

[The Morning That Wasn't](#)

[The Last Glance](#)

[Epilogue](#)

# The Doll in the Seaweed

Emma liked walking the shore when no one else was around. After school, when the beach emptied and the shadows grew longer, the world felt quieter, like it was waiting.

That afternoon, the air was heavy with salt and something else she couldn't quite name. The seagulls weren't calling like usual. The waves were gentle but slow, like they, too, were holding their breath.

☞ She kept glancing over her shoulder, though she didn't know why. The wind tugged softly at her shirt, like someone brushing past her. For a moment, she thought she heard her name — whispered faintly, far behind — but when she turned, there was nothing.

Her sandals sank slightly into the damp sand as she walked. Pieces of seaweed curled around her feet like fingers. She paused. Something caught her eye.

There, tangled in the wrinkled ribbons of kelp, was a doll.

It shouldn't have been there.

Emma stepped closer. The doll was old—too old. Its gray dress was stained with brine, its tiny arms stiff, as if frozen mid-reach. Its hair—white, shoulder-length, stringy—clung wetly to its face.

☞ Something about the way it lay, half-buried, made her chest tighten. It didn't look like a toy lost in play. It looked like it had been placed there.

But what made Emma shiver wasn't how the doll looked.

It was how it faced her.

Like it had been waiting.

She crouched beside it, heart quickening. For a second, she almost didn't want to touch it. But something inside her whispered: "Pick it up."

☞ The whisper didn't come from the outside. It felt like it slid between her thoughts, like a dream speaking its own language.

Her fingers trembled as she reached out. The doll was ice-cold, even though the sun had warmed the sand for hours. Its eyes—gray, glassy, too human—met hers.

Something shifted inside her. She wasn't alone.

Emma jerked her head up.

The beach was empty.

But in the far distance, near the dunes, a shadow flickered. Like a girl.  
Standing. Watching.

And then — gone.

🐉 Her breath caught in her throat. She stared at the spot where the figure had been, willing it to come back, to prove it was real. But there was only the soft sigh of the sea.

Emma held the doll tighter and turned slowly toward home.

She didn't see the faint footprints in the sand behind her.

Or the way the tide stopped, for just one heartbeat, before it started again.





# The Girl on the Street

The sun was slowly sinking behind the rooftops, washing the narrow seaside street in a soft blue glow. Long shadows stretched like dark fingers across the pavement, and the houses on either side looked strangely quiet — too quiet. Even the usual sound of waves crashing in the distance seemed muffled now, like the world was holding its breath.

Emma walked alone, her sandals brushing against the warm asphalt. A seagull cried somewhere far above, but otherwise, the silence was complete. She clutched the strange doll tighter in her arms — the one she'd found tangled in seaweed earlier that day. Its white hair was still damp, its gray dress stained with salt and sand. She hadn't meant to bring it with her, not really. But somehow, she couldn't leave it behind.

There was something about it.

Something unsettling.

Like the way its glassy eyes always seemed to be looking — even when Emma turned away.

She crossed the familiar intersection near the town square. Normally, this place buzzed with bikes and chatter, with neighbors calling greetings across fences, with kids racing scooters up and down the lanes. But now, the benches were empty. The café windows were dark. And the street... was completely deserted.

Emma paused.

That's when she saw her.

At first, she thought it was a trick of the light — a shimmer in the distance, like heat rising off the pavement. But then the shape sharpened. Just past the line of parked cars, near the edge of the old post office, stood a girl.

A girl in a pale dress, motionless in the middle of the street.

Her skin glowed faintly, almost like moonlight. Her long hair hung perfectly still, even though Emma felt a breeze brushing her own cheeks. And the eyes... from this distance, Emma couldn't see them clearly, but something in the way the figure stood — still and waiting — made the hairs rise on the back of her neck.

The doll slipped slightly in her arms. Emma clutched it tighter.

She blinked, heart pounding.



The girl was still there.

They stood facing each other in perfect silence — two children frozen in the middle of a sleeping town. One alive. The other... something else entirely.

Emma wanted to speak, but her mouth was dry. Her thoughts raced — Who is she? Why is she just standing there? Why does she feel... familiar?

The girl didn't move. Didn't wave. Didn't blink.

Just stood. Watching.

Emma took one step forward.

And the girl was gone.

No flicker. No sound. No vanishing puff of smoke like in fairy tales.

Just... gone.

Emma stood alone again, the street stretching out in both directions like a forgotten dream. Only the sound of her own breath filled the silence now.

She turned and ran — the doll pressed tightly to her chest, her sandals slapping against the pavement, heart racing like it wanted to escape her chest.

She didn't stop until she reached her house.

Even then, when she finally shut the door behind her, she still felt those unseen eyes watching.



# The Voice in the Quiet

At home, everything was the same.

The smell of soup. The sound of her dad fixing something in the kitchen.

The quiet voice of her mom on the phone.

Emma hung up her coat and took off her shoes.

She didn't mention the doll. Or the girl.

Not yet.

She sat at the table, her hands in her lap.

She felt... different. Like something had followed her home.

After dinner, she helped wash the dishes.

Then she went to her room and unpacked her backpack.

The doll was still there.

Cold. Damp.

Those pale eyes stared up at her from under the scarf.

Emma zipped the bag shut and pushed it under her bed.

Later, curled up under her blanket, she stared at the ceiling.

The house was quiet. Too quiet.

And in that stillness, she heard it again.

A whisper.

Faint and far away, like it came from somewhere deep beneath the floorboards.

"Bring me back."



## **The Dream and the Door**

The dream began in water.

Emma was standing in a hallway. But the floor was wet.

She looked down — her bare feet were in a thin layer of water. It rippled gently, like the sea.

The walls dripped.

The air smelled like salt and old wood.

Somewhere, a door creaked open. She turned.

At the end of the hallway stood a girl.

The same girl from the street.

White dress. Pale face. Empty eyes.

Emma tried to speak, but her voice didn't come.

The girl raised one hand, slowly.

Not to wave—

but to point. Emma followed the finger.

There was a small wooden door, just barely open.

From behind it came the voice.

Soft. Sad.

“Bring me back.”

Emma reached for the doorknob—

—and woke up.

Her room was still dark.

The sound of the sea came faintly through the window. But her pillow was damp.



# Morning Restless

Emma woke up suddenly, as if someone had called her name.

The room was dark and still, with only a pale morning light slipping through the curtains.

The whisper still echoed in her ears, like it hadn't ended with the dream

—  
but had followed her into the real world.

“Bring me back...”

She sat up in bed, clutching her blanket. Her heart was beating fast, though everything around her seemed quiet.

Her pillow was damp. Her hands were trembling.

The air felt heavier somehow, as if something from the dream still lingered—invisible, but real.

Emma tiptoed across the room and slowly unzipped her backpack.

The doll was still there, as if waiting.

Its white hair was tangled, the hem of the gray dress still wet.

The doll's pale eyes stared into nothing—yet somehow, it felt like they saw more than Emma ever could.

She quickly zipped the bag shut and held it close to her chest.

Without a second thought, she dressed, pulled on her coat and sneakers, and slipped quietly out the door, careful not to wake her parents.

Outside, the morning air was cool and carried the scent of salt.

A gentle breeze brushed her hair. In the distance, seagulls called out, and the houses still slept, wrapped in early silence.

The light was paper-pale, soft and strange. The world around her felt... different—as if the dream hadn't quite ended.

Emma didn't just walk.

It was as if she was being drawn—gently pulled by something that couldn't be seen.

The voice still echoed in her mind. Step by step, she headed toward the sea. Toward the lighthouse.





# The Lighthouse in the Mist

The path to the sea was empty. Morning wind rustled the leaves, whispered through fences, and carried the sharp scent of salt and seaweed.

Emma walked slowly, clutching her backpack tightly against her chest, as if it could protect her from something she couldn't name. The town was silent, except for the occasional cry of gulls waking above the rooftops. She stepped down onto the beach.

The sand was still damp from the night tide, and every step left a clear mark.

Emma was about to turn toward the rocks when she stopped. There—right at the edge of the water—were footprints.

Small. Light.

They led from the shore straight toward the old lighthouse. Emma froze. They looked like the footprints of a child...

but who would be walking here at dawn? She bent down. The prints were sharp and fresh, as if left just moments ago.

And yet there was no one around.

Her heart beat faster as she looked toward the lighthouse.

It stood, as always, leaning slightly, its walls cracked and peeling.

No one had lived there for years. People avoided it. Whispered about it.

But today... something was different. A light burned at the top of the tower.

Faint, flickering, like a candle behind dusty glass. Emma followed the footprints.

They wove through the dunes, around a jagged rock, and ended at the base of the lighthouse. And there—just beside the old, half-open door—stood a girl. The same girl.

White dress. Long white hair. And those eyes—blank, endless, like the sea at night. Lika.

She didn't speak.

She simply stood there, watching Emma.

Then, slowly, she lifted one hand and pointed—to the door of the lighthouse. Emma's chest tightened.

And yet... she did not turn away.



# The Room That Wasn't Empty

The door groaned open, and Emma stepped inside. The air was colder than she expected.

Not just cool like the sea breeze—but cold like stone that hadn't felt sunlight in years.

It smelled of salt and dust and something else... something sharp and metallic, like old nails and rusted iron. She paused at the threshold.

The light from outside stretched in a soft stripe across the floor, but the corners of the room were swallowed in shadow.

There was a table near the wall, uneven and crooked, with a tin cup still sitting on it.

An old jacket hung by the door, covered in dust.

A heavy chair stood beside a cracked window, as if someone had just left it moments before.

But no one was there.

No footsteps. No sound. Emma moved deeper into the room.

Each step creaked beneath her sandals.

Everything felt still—but not forgotten.

This was someone's space.

Someone quiet.

Someone who hadn't truly left. She stopped near the chair. A folded blanket rested on its back.

And on the small shelf behind it, a candle stub, long since burned down, and a small carved bird made of wood.

Her heart beat faster. She didn't know what she was expecting.

But not this. Not a room that felt so alive... and yet so completely alone. And then she heard it.

A faint creak—maybe the floor... maybe the wind...

Or maybe someone else, still here.

Her breath caught in her throat. She turned, almost ran to the door, pushed it open, and slipped outside. The morning light hit her face like a wave.

Emma didn't stop to look back.

She ran.



# Questions at the Table

The house was warm, sunny... and far too normal. It smelled like toast and jam, and the soft hum of the television came from the kitchen.

As if everything was just as it should be.

As if all the strange things that had happened by the lighthouse had stayed outside the front door.

But for Emma — they hadn't.

They had followed her home and were now sitting quietly in the corners of the room, saying nothing. She slipped off her shoes, left her backpack by the wall, and walked into the kitchen.

Her mother stood by the stove in a bathrobe, her hair still a little messy.

"Oh, you're up?" she said with a smile. "You usually sleep in on weekends."

"I just..." Emma hesitated. "I couldn't sleep." Her mother set a cup of tea and a piece of toast in front of her. "Hmm. Probably too much sun yesterday. You were out all afternoon." "Mum, who used to live in the lighthouse?" The question came out of nowhere, as if someone had whispered it for her.

Her mother paused for a moment, then turned back to the toaster. "Why do you ask that? It's just an old place. Been abandoned for years." "I just... heard something. That there used to be someone. An old man." "Well, yes. There was. The lighthouse keeper. Long ago. He took care of it before they shut it down."

"What happened to him?" Another silence. This one lasted longer. Emma could feel the air shift in the room — ever so slightly.

Tighter. Thinner.

"He didn't go anywhere," her mother said finally. "He just... changed. Became quiet. People said he was strange. Eventually he stopped talking to anyone at all." "Did you know him?" "I saw him once or twice. He barely spoke. Sat up there like he was waiting for something. Or someone." Emma didn't reply. Her tea was cooling.

The sunlight rested softly on the edge of the table, as if nothing had happened.

But she felt cold inside. Her mother didn't look her in the eyes.







# Grandma's Warning

Grandma was sitting in the garden under the apple tree, holding a cup of tea in both hands.

She was always the first to wake up, and she loved the quiet of early morning. Even the birds seemed to wait before breaking her peace.

Emma walked over slowly. Not because she was afraid to interrupt, but because the moment felt delicate — almost magical.

Grandma nodded without turning her head.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” she said. “You look serious today.”

Emma sat down on the woven chair beside her. For a while, she didn't say anything.

Then she asked:

“Grandma, do you remember who used to live in the lighthouse?”

Grandma didn't answer right away. She took a sip of tea and stared off into the distance, as if she were checking something — maybe inside herself, maybe out beyond the trees.

“I remember,” she said at last. “The old keeper.”

“Did you know him?”

“Everyone in the village did. But he was... different. Quiet. Not kind or unkind. Just like the wind — you don't see it, but you feel it.

He'd always been that way. And then he got even quieter.”

“Why?”

Grandma gave a small smile, but it was the sad kind.

“When something happens that leaves pain deep inside, a person doesn't always know how to speak about it.

And sometimes... maybe they're not supposed to.”

Emma looked at her closely.

“But why doesn't anyone talk about him? Even Mom. It's like everyone's afraid.”

Grandma looked at her — a warm and steady gaze with a shadow behind it.

“People aren't afraid of the past itself, Emma. They're afraid it might come back.

And sometimes... it does.

When no one expects it.

And when someone is ready to listen.”

Emma tightened her hands in her lap.

“What if I’m ready?”

Grandma didn’t answer.

She just looked at her — long and quietly —  
with eyes as deep as the sea.



# The One Who Doesn't Speak

It happened later that day, when the sky was heavy with the smell of sea air and everything felt slower than usual. Emma was walking back from the store with a small paper bag pressed against her chest. The wind had picked up, fluttering the corners of posters on the wall and making the seagulls cry louder overhead. She turned the corner by the harbor, the same quiet stretch where boats rested like sleeping animals and fishermen smoked in silence.

That's when she saw him.

He was standing near the edge of the dock — an old man, looking out toward the sea. His posture was straight but tired, and he didn't move, not even when the wind tugged at his sleeves.

Emma slowed her steps. There was something about the way he stood — not lost, not waiting.

Just... still. Like the lighthouse itself. No one else seemed to notice him. A man passed by and didn't turn his head.

The woman with the dog didn't glance once.

But Emma saw him.

And she knew — even before he turned his face slightly, just enough for her to glimpse the shape of his eyes — that this was him.

The man from the lighthouse. The one no one talked about.

The one who watched and waited and said nothing.

For a moment, their eyes met.

Not long. Not intense. But enough for her to feel the coldness of sea air inside her chest.

Then he turned and walked away — slow, steady steps down the narrow path behind the boats.

He didn't look back. Emma stood there, holding the bag tighter.

She didn't know what to say.

There was no one to say it to. But inside her, something had shifted — as if the quiet had spoken anyway.



# His Name Is Jack

The next day, Emma returned to the harbor.

The sea was quieter than usual, as if it too was holding its breath.

She stood by the wooden railing, watching the far end of the dock where the old man had stood the day before.

But he wasn't there.

Only the boats creaked softly in their ropes, and the wind carried the salty scent of the tide.

Her eyes searched the shadows along the waterline, just in case.

She didn't even know what she'd say to him if he appeared again — but something inside her needed to see him.

To know he was real.

Footsteps crunched softly behind her.

Grandma appeared from the narrow path, carrying a small woven basket and her old folded umbrella.

She wasn't surprised to see Emma there.

She sat beside her on the bench, her movements slow but graceful, like she had done this a hundred times before.

"Here again, sweetheart?" she asked, brushing a strand of hair from Emma's face.

Emma nodded without turning.

"I saw him. Yesterday. The old man. He was just standing there, staring at the sea.

He didn't move. Not even when the wind blew.

It was like he didn't belong to this world anymore."

Grandma followed her gaze, silent for a moment.

"His name is Jack," she said softly.

"He used to be the keeper of the lighthouse.

A good man. Kind. Everyone knew him."

Emma looked at her grandmother with wide eyes.

She hadn't expected an answer.

She hadn't expected Jack to have a name.

"What happened?" she asked.

Grandma sighed and looked out at the water.

"There was a storm," she said.

“Years ago.

Jack’s daughter disappeared that night.

She was playing near the rocks... and then she was just... gone.

They searched for days.

But the sea keeps its secrets.”

Emma’s chest tightened.

“He had a daughter?” she whispered. “What was her name?”

“Lika,” Grandma said. “She was nine. Just about your age now.”

The name struck Emma like a bell.

Lika.

The ghost girl.

The one in the dream.

The one who pointed without speaking.

Her throat felt dry.

“I think I saw her,” Emma said, her voice small.

Grandma didn’t flinch. She just looked at Emma, long and calm, her face unreadable — and then reached out and gently took her hand.

“Then maybe,” she said quietly, “not everything is lost.”





# The Secret Inside the Doll

Emma sat on the floor of her room, legs tucked beneath her, staring out the window.

The breeze lifted the curtain gently, as if someone invisible were peeking in.

Outside, everything seemed normal — sunshine, a few passersby, the distant bark of a dog.

But inside her, questions stirred like restless waves.

Who was Lika? Why did she appear to Emma — not to adults, not to neighbors, but to her?

And what did she want?

Attention? Understanding?

Or... help?

The image of the girl in the white dress, with her silent, hollow gaze, wouldn't leave her mind.

She seemed both sad and strong, quiet yet heavy with unspoken meaning.

And deep down, Emma knew it was all connected — the ghost, the lighthouse, Jack... and that strange doll she had found on the beach.

Emma slowly turned her head and looked at the doll lying on her desk, nestled between a seashell and an old book.

It looked like it was waiting. Not urgently, not ominously — just patiently.

As if it knew its time was coming.

She stood, walked over, and picked it up.

It was still cold to the touch, even after resting in her warm room for days.

The gray dress, the white thread hair, the glassy eyes — all of it looked ordinary, but there was something inside... something remembered.

She turned the doll around and noticed one of the seams on its back looked slightly crooked, not quite like the others.

The fabric there felt tighter, as if something had been tucked inside.

Emma frowned and ran her finger over the stitching — and a chill passed through her.

The seam didn't look factory-made.

It looked... added.

Carefully, she grabbed her scissors and began to snip at the threads, one by one.

No sound in the house seemed louder than the soft, whispering snip of the scissors as the fabric gave way.

Inside was a small, folded piece of paper.

Old. Brittle.

Emma held her breath as she slowly unfolded it.

The ink had faded, but two things stood out clearly:

L.S.

and below it:

7 Seaside Lane

She didn't recognize the initials.

But the address...

She'd heard it before.

Seaside Lane — the old road near the cliffs, where hardly anyone lived anymore.

Emma clenched the note in her hand.

This wasn't a coincidence.

This was... a message.

The doll in her other hand suddenly felt heavier.

Or maybe just more important.

It wasn't just a toy.

It was a thread leading backward — into something lost.

And she had just pulled it.



# The House at the End of the Street

The next morning, Emma stood at the edge of Seaside Lane, clutching the folded paper in her hand.

The address — 7 Seaside Lane — was written in faded ink, but she had memorized it the night before.

The narrow road curved away from the main street, winding toward the cliffs and the farthest stretch of the town where the houses grew older and the silence deeper.

The deeper she walked, the quieter everything became.

No laughter, no cars, no barking dogs.

Only the sound of her own footsteps and the distant whisper of waves somewhere far below.

Most of the houses looked like they hadn't been lived in for years — their windows dusty, shutters loose, and gardens overgrown.

At the very end of the lane stood a house with peeling white paint and a sagging roof.

Number seven.

Emma stopped at the rusted gate.

The front yard was wild with weeds and brittle grass, and the path to the porch was barely visible.

She felt a chill, though the morning sun was warm on her shoulders.

She didn't go in — not yet.

Instead, she stood quietly, trying to imagine what this place had looked like long ago.

Who had lived here? What had happened inside those quiet, crumbling walls?

A voice made her flinch.

"You're not from here, are you?" an elderly woman asked from across the street.

She was watering a pot of dried flowers and watching Emma with mild curiosity.

Emma hesitated, then shook her head. "I live nearby... I was just..."

The woman didn't wait for the explanation.

She glanced at the house, then lowered her voice.

“Sad place,” she said. “There was a girl... many years ago. Drowned in a storm, they said.

Her father searched for her for days.

They found the doll, but not the girl.”

Emma felt her stomach twist.

“A doll?” she asked softly.

The woman nodded.

“Gray dress. White hair. I remember it.

They said the waves brought it back, but she never returned.”

Emma didn’t say anything.

Her hand tightened around the paper in her pocket.

“What was her name?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

The woman frowned.

“Can’t remember. It’s been too long. Most people have forgotten.”

And with that, she turned and went inside.

Emma stood there for a long time, staring at the house.

The windows reflected nothing. The porch was still.

And yet... she felt as if someone — or something — was watching from inside.

A girl, maybe.

A memory.

A ghost waiting to be seen.

She didn’t go in that day.

But she knew: this was her next step







# The First Words

The sun was already slipping behind the sea when Emma returned to the lighthouse. Evening light stretched long shadows across the rocks, and the cry of gulls echoed above her like distant memories.

The heavy wooden door stood ajar, just as she had left it. This time, she didn't hesitate. She stepped inside quietly, her sandals soft against the old wooden floor. The air smelled of salt and something older — dust and silence, maybe, or forgotten time.

She walked through the corridor where she had seen the empty room days ago. But now, it wasn't empty.

Lika stood there.

The ghostly girl was exactly as before — pale skin, white dress, silver hair falling to her shoulders. But this time she wasn't just a figure in the distance or a passing shadow. She was right there, only a few steps away. And she was watching Emma.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The silence wrapped around them like the thick fog outside.

Then, softly, Lika spoke.

"You found the doll," she said, her voice barely more than a breath.

Emma's heart leapt. She nodded. "Was it yours?"

Lika didn't answer right away. She looked past Emma, as if she saw something far away. Then her eyes locked with Emma's, and there was a sadness in them so deep, it felt like the room itself sighed.

"She was the only one who listened," Lika said. "Before it happened."

Emma wanted to ask who "she" was — the girl, the doll, or someone else entirely — but her throat felt tight, as if the air had thickened around her. She could feel the wooden walls breathing, the history soaked into every board and nail.

Lika's presence wasn't cold like Emma had expected. It was soft, like fog over warm sand — gentle, but not comforting. There was something unfinished about her, like a sentence without its last word.

Emma took a slow step forward. "Are you stuck here?"

Lika blinked slowly, her expression unreadable. For a second, her face looked almost like a child's again — frightened, but brave.

"She never listened," Lika whispered. "But maybe you will."

Before Emma could answer, Lika began to fade, her outline dissolving into streaks of light and shadow — not disappearing, exactly, but drifting out of reach.

“Don’t forget me,” she whispered. “Please.”

And then she was gone.

Emma stood alone in the quiet room, the last word still hanging in the air like the echo of a wave that never reaches shore. She didn’t know what to do next — but she knew she would come back.



# The Newspaper Clipping

Ever since that night on the lighthouse, Emma hadn't been able to sleep.

Lika's words echoed in her mind like the sound of the sea caught in a shell:

«I called, but no one listened...»

There had been no anger in her voice. Only silence. A silence so deep it felt like it carried an entire ocean of loneliness. Emma knew then: this wasn't just sadness — it was a memory that refused to fade, a wound bound to the shore, the doll, the salt in the air.

That morning, Emma sat cross-legged on the floor of her room, staring at the doll. Its white hair had become a tangled mess, the grey dress even more faded. But now she saw it differently.

This wasn't a toy.

It was evidence.

Near the hem of the dress, barely visible before, she now noticed tiny stitched initials: L. K.

Lika Korinova.

It was her.

Emma knew where she had to go.

The library was nearly empty. Summer holidays had driven most of the kids toward the beach or the forest, and the archive room hadn't seen visitors in years. The librarian gave Emma a soft smile as she passed, and Emma quietly slipped toward the back, where a metal door stood half-open beneath a dusty sign: "ARCHIVES – STAFF ONLY."

The room smelled of old paper, rusted metal, and something faintly salty — like forgotten sea air trapped in the walls. Light from a narrow window slanted across the room, turning every dust speck into a slow-swirling star.

Emma pulled out a box marked 1978.

Her hands trembled slightly as she flipped through the fragile newspapers. Most were filled with ordinary things: birthdays, recipes, fishing competitions. But near the fold of one yellowed page, she froze.

There it was.

A headline, small and almost hidden at the bottom:

"Girl Missing in Storm — Lika Korinova, 9."

Body never recovered.

Below it, a tiny black-and-white photo.

A girl with straight, light-colored hair and a neat dress stared back at the camera.

Her eyes — full of life.

Familiar.

Emma felt something twist in her chest.

This was her.

Not a ghost.

Not a whisper.

A real girl.

And no one had looked for her.

No second article. No memorial. Just one short column. Then nothing.

As if she'd vanished... and the town had chosen to forget.

Emma knelt on the floor, the page gripped gently in her hands. The air in the room grew heavy. She closed her eyes and pressed the clipping to her chest.

— I hear you, Lika, she whispered.

Now she knew what had to be done.

The past couldn't be undone.

But it could be spoken out loud.

And something precious — lost for so long — could finally be returned.





# The Decision

That night, the wind picked up.

The sea hummed louder than usual, its voice rising and falling like it had something to say but couldn't find the words. Emma sat cross-legged on her bed, the folded newspaper resting beside her like a silent companion. The room was dark except for the soft glow of her reading lamp and the golden eyes of the doll staring up at her from across the room.

It was strange, she thought, how something so small could carry so much weight.

She had held the truth in her hands. Lika Korinova — nine years old, lost in a storm, forgotten by everyone but the sea.

And now, by her.

Emma's gaze drifted to the doll. Its white hair glowed in the lamplight. The grey dress, though worn and simple, looked almost elegant now, like something that belonged in a portrait — not on the dusty floor of a forgotten beach.

How many nights had Lika waited? How many summers had passed since her voice had last been heard?

Emma rose slowly from her bed and crossed the room. She knelt before the shelf and gently picked up the doll. It was colder than she remembered. Heavier. The stitched initials near the hem of the dress — L.K. — now seemed to burn under her fingers.

This wasn't just a toy.

This was a tether.

A voice.

A cry that had never been answered.

She sat back down and held the doll in her lap.

The lighthouse. That was where Lika always returned. That was where she had first spoken, first appeared. It had to mean something.

Emma's grandmother had once said that places remember things people forget. Maybe the lighthouse remembered. Maybe the beach did too.

And maybe, just maybe — if Emma brought the doll back there — the story could end the way it should have.

Her thoughts swirled like tidewater — rushing, spinning, clearing the sand until only one thing remained.

She would return the doll.

Not as a gift.

Not as an offering.

But as a promise.

A promise to the girl who had waited too long.

A promise that she had been heard.

Emma looked out her window. The sky was a deep, velvety blue, scattered with stars. In the far distance, she could just make out the faint silhouette of the lighthouse, dark and still, like a sleeping eye.

Tomorrow, she would go there.

Not out of fear.

But because she finally understood:

Some stories don't want to be forgotten.

And some voices only need one person to listen.



# The Last Meeting

Evening fell over the town like a blanket of gold and lavender. The air stood still, as if the whole world was holding its breath. The sea whispered softly, gently — not angry, not afraid, but as if it, too, was saying goodbye.

Emma walked along the wet sand barefoot, leaving behind faint footprints that the waves rushed to erase. In her hands, she held the doll — the one with white hair and the grey dress. Her fingers trembled, but not from fear. From something deeper. From the weight of the moment.

This was the place where everything had begun.

And now, it would be where everything ended.

Her heart beat slowly, but loudly — as if it echoed with every step. The salty breeze wrapped around her shoulders like a memory. She could feel the doll pressing into her palms, not heavy, but full — full of silence, full of waiting.

She stopped at the edge of the tide. The water brushed her toes, cold and light. Somewhere in the distance, a seagull called out once — and then all was still again.

The sun, growing tired, dipped slowly toward the horizon. Its rays touched the water, the rocks, and Emma — like a final kiss.

And then, as if from the air itself, she appeared.

Lika.

She stood at the edge of the water — thin, almost transparent, yet completely clear. Her face was calm. No pain. No tears. Only a faint, almost surprised smile — as if she herself couldn't believe she was being seen. That someone had waited for her.

Her dress swayed gently, though the air was still. Her eyes — those pale, empty eyes — no longer seemed hollow. They shimmered slightly, as if filled with light.

Emma stopped. Their eyes met — and in that moment, the world vanished.

Just the two of them.

Two girls.

Two stories.

One truth.

“You’re heard now,” Emma whispered, her voice barely shaking.

And she reached out the doll.

Lika walked forward slowly. No wind. No sound. Only the soft hush of the tide. She took the doll in her hands, so gently, as if she was afraid to lose it again.

For a moment, she just held it to her chest. Her eyes closed, and the faintest breath escaped her lips — like a sigh that had waited years to be released. The sea behind her seemed to brighten, just a little, like it was listening too.

And then — something shifted.

Not the light. Not the air.

Inside.

Something became lighter. Clearer. Whole.

Lika looked at Emma and nodded. A silent thank you.

Then she turned her gaze toward the lighthouse.

Up there, something was waiting.

Something that had waited for years.





# The Light Beneath the Lighthouse

Emma climbed the creaking steps of the lighthouse, clutching the doll tightly to her chest. Shadows flickered across the worn walls, lit by the last golden rays of the setting sun slipping through dusty windows. Everything here felt familiar — the peeling paint, the heavy silence, the air thick with memory.

At the top landing, the warmth of the day lingered like a breath held too long. Time seemed to pause. On an old table by the window lay a forgotten seashell, smooth and silent. Emma didn't know exactly where the doll belonged, but something in her heart told her — this was the place.

She gently set the doll down. It stood still, as if it had been waiting to come home.

Then, light bloomed.

Not from a switch or a bulb — this light was alive. Soft, golden, and warm, it filled the tower's chamber, pouring over the floor, the walls, the windows, and Emma herself. It felt like a quiet embrace.

And in that light — Lika appeared.

She stood near the window, just as ghostly as before, but something had changed. She was glowing faintly, peacefully, like the sun reflected on water. Her face held a smile — not of sadness, but of gentle gratitude. Her eyes, once empty, now shimmered with quiet light.

Emma didn't move. She only looked. She knew — this was goodbye.

Lika nodded. No words were spoken. None were needed.

And in the next breath, she became light. Not fading, not vanishing — but transforming, becoming part of the warm glow that filled the lighthouse.

Outside the windows, the sea lay calm and still. The sun slipped beneath the horizon, leaving a trail of golden fire across the waves. Emma stood alone.

But this time, she felt truly at peace.



# The Morning That Wasn't

The house was so quiet that Emma thought, for a moment, the world had stopped.

No distant whispers behind walls.

No creaks in the hallway.

No voice calling from nowhere.

Just light.

Soft golden rays spilled through her curtains, dancing gently across the floor. Emma blinked slowly, her body still remembering the weight of yesterday — the sand beneath her feet, the sea breeze in her hair, the warmth of the doll in her hands. But the room now felt lighter, like something heavy had finally lifted.

She sat up in bed and listened.

Still... nothing.

And it was the most peaceful nothing she had ever known.

Barefoot, Emma padded down the hallway, her fingers brushing against the cool wall. The air smelled of toast and chamomile — her mother's quiet way of saying "I'm here."

In the kitchen, sunlight stretched across the table, and her mother stood by the stove, stirring something slowly. She didn't turn around when Emma entered — not because she didn't notice, but because she already knew.

Emma slid into her chair.

No words.

No explanations.

Only silence.

Her mother placed a cup of tea in front of her, along with a slice of bread and honey. Then she sat down across from her and finally looked up.

Their eyes met — and in that glance, everything was understood.

Emma gave the smallest smile. The kind that only comes after something ends, but in the softest, gentlest way.

Then, slowly, her mother reached out and touched her hand — not to ask, not to press, just to let her know: I see you. I believe you.

Emma squeezed her fingers in return.

The clock ticked once, twice, and then fell silent again.

She looked out the window and saw the old tree in the garden swaying ever so slightly. A breeze passed through the leaves, rustling them like a whisper — but no voices followed.

For the first time in a long time, she didn't feel watched.

She felt whole.

She didn't know what would come next. But today, this morning, this calm — it was enough.



# The Last Glance

Later that evening, Emma returned to the sea. Her steps were slow, as if she weren't just walking forward — but gently letting go of something behind her. The air was warm and salty, and the sky above the water glowed with the fading light of the sun — soft pink and gold, brushed with copper. Even the gulls cried quieter than usual.

She reached the very spot where she had first found the doll among the seaweed. Everything looked nearly the same: the same shells, the same rocks, the same uneven tide line. But now, it all felt different — as if something had been set free. The air felt lighter. The sand no longer cold. The wind no longer afraid.

It no longer whispered secrets — it simply moved.

Emma sat down on the shore, wrapping her arms around her knees. She didn't think. She didn't search. She just watched the horizon.

The fear was gone. So was the mystery.

Only a soft sadness remained — and a peaceful silence inside.

She closed her eyes for a moment — and felt it.

A gaze. Not heavy, not urgent. Just... gentle.

Emma opened her eyes.

Far in the distance, where the sky kissed the sea, a shimmer of light stirred. Faint — like a ripple, like the last flicker of sunlight.

And in that flicker — for just one heartbeat — a figure emerged.

Lika.

She didn't wave. She didn't speak. She simply stood there. Her eyes, even from so far away, were full of quiet thanks. And the light around her began to fade — slowly, softly — until the sea held nothing but sky again.

Emma smiled.

Not for anyone else. Just because it felt right.

She stood, brushed the sand from her legs, and turned toward home. She didn't look back.

Let the past stay where it belongs.

The sun dipped lower, the waves whispered something gentle — like the sound of paper turning.

And far off, high atop the lighthouse, a single beam of light flickered. Just once.



Like a goodbye.

And Emma walked — a little older, a little quieter, but with a light inside her that hadn't been there before.





# Epilogue

Sometimes, when the night is especially still,  
Emma still hears something beyond the ordinary.  
Not words. Not voices. Just... a call.  
And she knows:  
if it ever happens again —  
she'll be ready.