

Laura Bellini

The Tide Doesn't Take Everything

The Sea Returned the Evidence. He
Came Back for a Second Chance.



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ROMANS

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INTRO

After a night storm, the sea always looked innocent. Like someone who had wrecked another person's life the evening before, then showed up the next morning in a clean shirt and asked whether there was anything they could do to help.

I stood on the wet sand a few hundred meters from the harbor in Kuźnica, looking at the line of branches, plastic bottles, scraps of netting, and dark seaweed the water had thrown ashore. The wind was still too strong for early October, but the sky was brightening in the west. Behind me, I could hear the metallic clatter of masts in the marina. In front of me, the waves moved more calmly, as though the madness of the night had had nothing to do with them.

I should have gone back to the workshop.

At nine, I had a call with the regional heritage conservator about funding for an exhibition I had been working on for nearly a year. At eleven, a shipment was due to arrive with wooden fragments of an old fishing boat recovered during harbor dredging. I had forty minutes to shower, drink coffee, and pretend to be a person who ran a small maritime museum, had the budget under control, and did not start her day rummaging through whatever the Baltic had tossed onto the beach.

And yet I kept walking.

I had been doing this after storms since I was a child. First with my father, later on my own. My father used to say the sea never gave things back by accident. I, as an adult woman with a conservation degree and considerably less

patience for romantic theories, believed currents, wind, and buoyancy were explanation enough.

Even so, I always watched where I stepped.

I bent to pick up a piece of green glass smoothed by the water. I turned it between my fingers and slipped it into my jacket pocket. We could use it in a mosaic during one of the children's workshops. A few meters farther on, I found a cracked float, then a plastic crate with Danish lettering on the side.

I did not see the metal until I reached the remains of an old net.

It was not shiny. It almost disappeared into the wet sand. Only a few centimeters protruded from the tangle of lines.

I pulled.

The net gave way reluctantly, revealing a small rectangular metal tag attached to a heavily corroded ring. I brushed the sand off it with my glove.

And stopped hearing the sea.

Three numbers were still legible on the metal.

214.

Below them were two letters.

MR.

I knew this object.

Not one like it.

This one.

Fifteen years earlier, tags like this had hung from the locker keys at my father's old diving base. He had stamped the numbers himself, slightly crooked, into pieces of aluminum bought from a marine supply shop in

Władysławowo. The letters MR stood for Morska Rafa, the company he had run with Roman Krawiec.

The company had ceased to exist after the accident.

Roman Krawiec had died.

Half the peninsula had decided his son was the man who should have prevented it.

And for six years, I had loved that son more than common sense should ever have allowed.

I tightened my fingers around the tag.

"Ada?"

I turned sharply.

A few meters away stood Mr. Leon, a retired fisherman who walked the beach every morning carrying a yellow bucket and searching for amber, even though over the past twenty years he had supposedly found less of it than the average tourist did in a single weekend.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes."

The answer came too quickly.

I closed my hand around the tag.

"I just found a piece of scrap."

Leon looked at me, then at my clenched fingers, but he did not ask. On the peninsula, people could refrain from asking questions with the same professionalism people elsewhere used to ask them.

"After a storm like that, it'll keep throwing things up for a while," he said.

"Probably."

He walked on.

I stayed where I was.

Locker 214 had belonged to Roman.

I knew because the key had been found among his personal effects after his death. I even remembered the moment my father had taken it from the plastic evidence envelope the police handed over.

The problem was that this tag should not have been lying on the beach.

The key marked 214 had sat in my father's desk drawer for years.

Or at least that was what I had believed.

I took out my phone.

For several seconds, I stared at my father's name in my contacts. I could call him. Ask. Let him tell me I remembered it wrong, or that there had been more than one set of numbers. I could let one logical sentence close the matter.

Instead, I took a picture.

Then another.

I turned the tag over.

There was a scratch on the back.

No.

Not a scratch.

A carved mark.

A small letter K.

A chill passed through me that had nothing to do with the wind.

Maks did that to everything that belonged to him or had been repaired by him. K on the underside of his toolbox. K on the casing of an underwater camera. K on the metal mug he used for coffee at the base. K on the key ring he had once given me.

Roman did not mark things that way.

Maks did.

Behind me came the sound of a car pulling up near the beach access.

I would not have paid attention if a door had not slammed a moment later.

I turned.

First I saw a navy SUV.

Then the man walking toward me.

For five years, I had sometimes imagined our next meeting. In none of those versions did I have wet hair, muddy boots, and my father's old storm jacket on. In most of them, I was indifferent. Calm. Polite in a way that made it perfectly clear that whatever had once existed between us had stopped mattering a long time ago.

Reality had no respect for my plans.

Maks Krawiec stopped a few steps away.

He was older, of course. Broader through the shoulders, more tired around the eyes. His hair was shorter. He had several days' worth of stubble and the same deeply inconvenient ability to look at someone as if, during a conversation, the person standing in front of him was the only thing in the world that mattered.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then his gaze dropped to my closed hand.

"What did you find?"

He did not say hello.

He did not ask how I was.

After five years, he started exactly where everything between us had ended - with the things he had not told me.

I opened my fingers.

The tag lay in my palm.

Maks's face changed at once.

I did not need to ask whether he recognized it.

"Where did you get that?" he asked quietly.

"The sea gave it back."

He took one step toward me, then stopped before he came too close. Once, he had never needed to think about distances like that.

"Ada, listen to me."

I laughed without humor.

"Five years ago, I was supposed to listen to you too."

"I know."

"No, Maks. That's exactly the problem. You never knew what I knew."

I looked at the letter K.

Then at him.

"Why is your mark on your father's key?"

He did not answer.

And that one second of silence was enough.

Not because it told me the truth.

Because it proved there was a truth to tell.

A wave broke behind me and surged high enough for the water to touch the toes of my boots.

Maks stared at the tag as though he had just seen something he had been afraid of for years.

"I thought it was gone," he said.

Chapter 1 - What Was Supposed to Disappear

"I thought it was gone," Maks said.

For several seconds I stared at him, waiting for whatever was supposed to come next.

Nothing did.

Instead of an answer, I got the same kind of silence I remembered far too well: the brief tightening of his jaw, his gaze slipping away for a second before returning to me, as if in that one second he had managed to assess every possible version of the truth and choose the one he believed would do the least damage.

Once, I had thought that quality was self-control.

Later I learned that Maks could keep quiet for many different reasons, and I never knew which one applied at any given moment.

"What exactly was supposed to disappear?" I asked.

The wind blew a strand of hair into my mouth. I pushed it aside without taking my eyes off him.

Maks looked at the tag marked 214.

"That tag."

"A tag? A minute ago you looked as if the sea had washed a human hand onto the beach."

"Because I know where it came from."

"So do I."

"Not everything."