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The Silence Between Us

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Introduction

Fog lay over the harbor like a hand on a bruise. The lighthouse blinked its slow, indifferent eye, a pale arc sweeping the slick backs of rocks and the black seam where ocean met sky. Nina parked beneath a salt-stiffened pine outside the funeral home and sat with the engine ticking, watching her breath silver the windshield glass. The sign out front—Harrigan & Sons—had been newly painted since she was a teenager, but the steps still slanted, and the door still made that soft, wet sucking sound when it closed on you, as if the building swallowed grief whole.

Inside, lilies pinched the air. She nodded when people spoke her name, that formal, careful tone they used for tragedies and new babies. She was thirty-four and felt both older and smaller; she let her hands clasp and unclasp, smiled when it seemed right, and flinched at the unexpected touch of a palm at her elbow. Daniel's photograph on the easel looked almost like the man who ran the trail behind their apartment and came home mud-splattered, talking about the cold bite of the wind. Almost, because she knew the way his mouth tipped when he was about to say something clever, and the picture had missed it. Or the photographer had missed it. Or maybe the person who'd chosen it had been her, and she had missed nothing so much as the person she had been before she couldn't keep hold of herself.

The ocean's breath followed her out when she left, rank and clean at once. She drove the short road past the shuttered tourist shops and out to the point where the old keeper's cottage sulked behind a tangle of dune grass. Their place—his place, now, she corrected herself; her place, whether she wanted it or not—sat close enough to the rocks that in storms the spray touched the windows. Here, the wind spoke in the chinks of the clapboard. Here, the last night she remembered clearly, Daniel had kissed her temple and said, Sleep, Ellie. She hated how that name fit and didn't fit, how it belonged to a time when she hadn't yet learned to count the gaps.

The living room still held the shape of him: the mug ring on the coffee table, the sweater collapsed across the back of a chair, the worn leather messenger bag slouched near the door. She stood for a long moment with her arms wrapped around herself, as if she were trying to keep her own outline from blurring. Her doctor had called them episodes, as if naming them trimmed their edges. Side effects, he said. We'll adjust the dosage. But the nights didn't care what they were called. They slid, seamless, into rooms and left with something in their pockets.

She turned on a lamp and watched yellow light soak into the walls. On the mantel, a line of stones Daniel had pocketed from walks graded from coal to bone. She tried to summon the argument they'd had a week before he died and could only pull up a

sensation: a heat in her throat, a taste like metal. She remembered the way he had stepped toward her, then away, and the space between those two movements felt like a door that never quite closed, a draft that never quite stopped.

The jacket hung by the kitchen door where he always left it, salt stiff, flecked with sand. On the floor beneath, his boots still wore the coast—threads of eelgrass, a pale smear of mud that had dried into a crust you could flake with a thumbnail. Nina reached for the jacket because touching it had become a compulsion these last days, the warm animal comfort her body begged for though there was no warmth left in it. Her fingers slipped into the pocket and brushed paper.

She fumbled the porch light on and held the thing up to it. A Polaroid, the white border gone tea-brown at the edges, the image slightly blurred by the way Polaroids always held motion like a secret. A girl looked back at Nina from a summer somewhere: wind-tangled hair, a T-shirt with a faded heart, eyes not quite meeting the camera as if she had been called and was deciding whether to answer. Nina knew that face before she knew why she knew it. Recognition skated up her spine. In this town, there were faces you learned like prayers.

The lighthouse eye turned; the tide breathed; the house creaked as if remembering. She tried to tell herself the photograph was a relic picked from a yard sale, a loose page from Daniel's habit of collecting the lost. But the paper felt fresh where someone had touched it not long ago; the corner had a soft notch from a thumbnail. Nina imagined the jacket against Daniel's ribs, the picture warm with his heat. Beneath the kitchen fan's low drone, she heard the familiar, patient murmur of the sea—then, quieter still, an old voice she kept trying not to hear: You don't remember because you don't want to. She lifted the photograph closer until the grain broke into tiny squares, until the girl's eyes were only shadow, until Nina could not tell whether the shiver in her hands came from grief or the first cold of something else.

CHAPTER ONE: The Photo

The girl in the Polaroid had a name: Sarah Jenkins. Nina knew it not from the photograph itself, which offered no inscription, but from the sudden, sharp prickle of memory. Sarah. The name tasted like saltwater and forgotten summers. She'd been a year or two younger than Nina, a wisp of a girl with eyes too big for her face, known mostly for her quietness and the way she always seemed to be watching the world from just outside its frame. Sarah Jenkins, who had vanished without a trace almost two decades ago, swallowed by the rocky coastline and the whispers that followed.

Nina's fingers traced the faded heart on the girl's T-shirt, a detail so mundane it felt like a scream. This wasn't just a random picture. Daniel hadn't collected lost items in that way; his fascination had always been with the untold stories, the quiet injustices. The fact that he'd had this specific photo, tucked into his jacket pocket, felt less like an accident and more like a deliberate statement. A message, perhaps. But to whom? And why now?

She flipped the Polaroid over, half-expecting a date, a name, anything to anchor the image to a time or a purpose. Instead, scrawled in thin, almost hesitant handwriting, were four words: "Don't let them forget." The ink was a pale blue, slightly smudged, as if written in haste or by a trembling hand. It wasn't Daniel's handwriting. His script was bold, sprawling, confident. This was smaller, more delicate. A woman's, perhaps? Or a younger person's?

The phrase chilled her, not just for its implied warning, but for the question it sparked: *who* was "them"? And *what* was it that shouldn't be forgotten? Sarah Jenkins, of course. But the town had done an excellent job of forgetting. Her disappearance had been a flurry of sirens and search parties, then a slow, inevitable fade into local legend, a cautionary tale whispered to children who strayed too close to the cliffs. The official explanation had been a runaway, or perhaps a tragic accident, a slip on the treacherous rocks. No body had ever been found, no real closure offered. Just silence.

Nina walked from the kitchen to the living room, the Polaroid clutched tight. The house, usually a comfort, now felt like a repository of unspoken things. Daniel had been meticulous, organized. If he'd had this photo, with this note, it meant something. It wasn't just a memento. He'd been working on something, hadn't he? A project, he'd called it. He'd spend hours in his study, the door closed, the low hum of his computer a constant companion. She'd always assumed it was for work, some complex case he was managing, or maybe a personal writing project he'd never quite shared. He'd been evasive, charmingly so, whenever she pressed. "Just digging up old bones, love," he'd say, a smile playing on his lips, deflecting her curiosity with a kiss.

Old bones. The phrase now echoed with a sinister clarity. Had he been digging into *these* old bones? Into Sarah Jenkins' disappearance? And if so, why had he kept it a secret from her? Their marriage hadn't been perfect, but they'd always shared their burdens, their curiosities. Or had they? Lately, her own memory had become a patchwork quilt, frayed at the edges. Gaps, dark and smooth, where entire conversations, even days, should have been. The doctor called it anxiety, said the medication would help. It mostly made her tired, and the gaps, if anything, seemed to widen.

She pulled Daniel's messenger bag closer, tipping it over gently on the worn rug. His wallet, keys, a half-eaten granola bar. A small, dog-eared copy of *Moby Dick*, his favorite. And then, a stack of envelopes, neatly bundled with a rubber band. Utility bills. Not much help there. But beneath them, at the very bottom, was a small, leather-bound notebook. Not the elaborate sketchbook she knew he sometimes used, but a plain, unassuming journal, the kind you'd pick up in any stationery shop.

Nina's heart gave a strange, lurching thump. She hadn't seen this before. He usually kept his personal notes in a more robust, artsy journal, filled with charcoal sketches and philosophical musings. This was different. Smaller. More discreet. She picked it up. The leather was soft, worn from handling. It felt warm, as if it had recently been held.

She ran her thumb over the cover, a faint indentation visible. Something had been pressed into it, a shape, perhaps a button or a pen cap, worn smooth over time. She flipped it open. The first few pages were blank, then came Daniel's handwriting, unmistakable. But it wasn't the usual sprawling script. Here, it was tighter, more constrained, as if he were trying to keep his thoughts from overflowing the page.

The entries weren't dated, but they seemed to progress chronologically, or at least thematically. They were short, almost like bullet points, interspersed with fragmented sentences. "Jenkins case: neglected details. Police report inconsistencies. Weller connection?"

Mayor Thomas Weller. The town's golden boy, the scion of a respected local family. He'd been Mayor for as long as Nina could remember, a smooth talker with an easy smile and a knack for making problems disappear. What connection could he have to Sarah Jenkins?

Nina flipped another page. "Old Quarry. Night of the storm. Witness account: Martha's Diner - late shift." Martha's Diner. The only place open after midnight in this town. Nina had worked there herself for a summer during college, slinging fries and lukewarm coffee to tired fishermen and late-night revelers. She knew the rhythm of that place, the hushed conversations, the secrets exchanged over greasy burgers.

Another entry, bolder, underlined multiple times: "Someone silenced her. Not just Sarah. Others?"

The words hit Nina like a physical blow. Silenced her. Not an accident, then. A murder. Daniel believed Sarah Jenkins had been murdered. And he believed others had been silenced too. The implication hung in the still air of the cottage, thick and suffocating.

She looked down at the Polaroid again, the girl's half-averted gaze suddenly more poignant, more telling. Sarah Jenkins, forever young, trapped in a moment of summer light, holding a secret Nina was now tasked with uncovering. Daniel had been chasing this. He'd been close to something. And then he'd drowned. A sudden, unexpected drowning, out on the bay, his body found tangled in seaweed near the old lighthouse jetty. The police had ruled it accidental. But now, with this photograph, this journal, that ruling felt less like a conclusion and more like a carefully constructed lie.

A shiver snaked through her, a colder sensation than the ocean breeze. She had loved Daniel. She had trusted him implicitly. But had he been keeping things from her? Had she, in her own hazy state, simply failed to notice? The thought was a bitter pill. Her mind raced, a frantic scramble of disjointed images and half-formed questions. She suddenly felt an urgent need to know everything, to peel back every layer of the truth, no matter how ugly.

Nina's gaze fell on the final entry in the small journal, just a single, stark sentence scrawled across the bottom of the page: "Don't let them forget." The same words as on the back of the Polaroid. Not Daniel's handwriting. The same delicate, hesitant script. Someone else had written this. Someone else was involved. Someone else knew. And Daniel had been trying to communicate with them, or warn them. Or maybe, this was the message *he* had received.

The air in the room suddenly felt thin. She wasn't just grieving a husband anymore. She was standing on the precipice of something far more dangerous, a tangled web of secrets and lies that reached back decades, touching even the quietest corners of this sleepy coastal town. And Daniel, her Daniel, had been right in the thick of it. The silence between them, she realized, wasn't just the quiet of grief. It was the heavy, oppressive silence of a town protecting its dark heart. She had to find out what Daniel knew. She had to find out who had written those words. And she had to do it before the silence swallowed her too.

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