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The Last Neighbor

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Introduction

On clear mornings in Hawthorn Bay, the fog retreats like a well-trained pet, obediently slipping back beyond the breakwater. The clapboard houses along Winter Street seem to exhale at once—their porches drying, their windows catching the first frank light. Mara Ellis has learned to time her coffee to that moment, a small ritual of control. By the time the gulls get noisy, Noah is supposed to be halfway down the block, earbuds in, indifferent to everything but whatever he's streaming. She tells herself the routine is a scaffold, not a cage.

She sets her laptop on the scarred kitchen table, red-pen instincts prickling, and toggles between a manuscript in need of commas and an email thread that will not die. Vice President, the PTA subject line insists. It sounds like a joke when it's attached to her name. The thread has devolved into a delicate warfare over bake sale tables and who gets the prime slot near the gym entrance. Mara types a diplomatic sentence, deletes it, and tries again, hearing the more dangerous beat underneath: keep the peace, keep quiet, keep your head down. It has been a long time since anyone accused her of that.

Noah stomps in, a flash of growth spurt awkwardness and damp hair. "You going to be home after school?" he asks, a question that feels like a test. His eyes cut toward the fridge where the calendar is color-coded, promising steadiness she can't always deliver.

"I'll be here," she says, and her voice is even. "Unless something urgent comes up with the—" She stops before she says PTA because it sounds like an apology.

He grunts, which could mean anything, and grabs a granola bar. He is fifteen and allergic to sincerity. He is also smarter than she is about the internet and most days more suspicious of the world. She watches him jog down the steps and thinks about how many different versions of leaving there are. His father believes Mara left her old life; Noah believes she left it for him. The truth is messier. There was a story that went wrong, a name printed too soon, a job that evaporated. In Hawthorn Bay, she is tolerated because she has learned to be smaller.

The house next door looks cleaned with a square of blue sky. Evelyn Monroe's windows are always polished to a shine that makes Mara feel lazy. Last night, just after nine, Evelyn had called from the shared fence line in a voice pitched not to carry. "Do you have a minute?" she'd asked without quite meeting Mara's eyes. She smelled like ocean and citrus. "I did something," she said, then laughed at herself and amended it to, "I found something. It's probably nothing. Can we talk tomorrow when

it's quieter?" Mara had nodded, that old machinery whirring back to life inside her, the part that never really dies. She went to bed with the taste of salt and a new, unwelcome feeling: anticipation.

By late morning, the town has settled into its postcard posture. The mayor's face beams from a banner stretched across Main, promoting a coastal revitalization plan that promises "a brighter Hawthorn." The library's steps are being swept for a photo op; a developer's name appears on a plaque that wasn't there yesterday. Mara tells herself she's only stretching her legs when she turns toward Evelyn's house with a container of muffins, the acceptable currency of female curiosity.

The porch boards creak under her weight. She lifts her hand to knock and sees, before she touches the glass, that the door isn't latched. The gap is small—half an inch and then the house beyond, still and listening. Her breath does an involuntary stutter. Hawthorn Bay houses are not left open, not even to the sea breeze everyone pretends they love more than they do.

"Evelyn?" she calls, and this time her voice carries. The foyer smells faintly of jasmine and bleach. There's a coffee mug on the console table leaving a dark ring on an old nautical chart, steam ghosting from the lip. The sound of the refrigerator hums; somewhere a clock ticks. The house offers up nothing else. Mara steps farther in, every angle of her training returning uninvited: door ajar, personal effects undisturbed, time of last known activity measured in degrees of warmth.

On the kitchen counter, beneath a clipped recipe and a grocery list written in neat loops, a single note waits. The paper is torn from a small pad, the handwriting careful, almost prim. It isn't addressed to anyone, and it isn't signed. Three words, underlined once, and then nothing: Under the breakwater.

The coffee is still warm.

CHAPTER ONE: The Door Left Open

The coffee on Evelyn Monroe's console table was still warm, a detail Mara Ellis clung to like a rosary bead. It suggested that whatever had pulled Evelyn from her house had been sudden, but not catastrophic. People who leave in a panic usually take their coffee, or fling it, or forget they ever made it. They do not set it down with such deliberate care beside a neatly clipped recipe for lemon thyme chicken, as if they intend to return within minutes to preheat the oven.

Mara stood in the foyer, the front door still propped open by the toe of her sneaker. The air inside was cool and smelled faintly of jasmine and bleach, a combination that felt aggressively intentional, like Evelyn herself. The house was a smaller mirror of Mara's, one of the salt-silvered clapboard twins that lined Winter Street, but where Mara's interior life tended to sprawl—half-read books stacked on side tables, a laptop always awake on the kitchen island—Evelyn's was geometrical and spare. The chart beneath the mug was a tide map of the bay, its creases softened by time. The coffee ring was a dark, spreading stain. Mara could hear the refrigerator humming, a low complaint from the guts of the machine, and beyond it, a clock ticking with the steady, unaffected rhythm of a heart that wasn't there.

She should not be in here. The thought arrived late, an afterthought scrambling to catch up. Her hand had already opened the door wider; her feet had already carried her three steps past the threshold. She had spent years training herself not to cross lines, not to ask questions that started with *I couldn't help but notice*. That training had saved her job, her peace, maybe even her sanity. It had not, however, taught her to ignore a door left unlocked in a town where people set their alarms to take out the recycling.

"Evelyn?" she called again, her voice bouncing off the high baseboards and the tidy staircase. "It's Mara. Your door was open."

She waited. The silence answered back with a steady, unbothered gaze. There was nothing here for her. Evelyn was probably next door at the library, or at the market buying the lemons for that chicken. She had a life. She wasn't the type to vanish without locking up. The thought made Mara glance at the deadbolt. It was turned back, the tongue free and exposed. A person leaves and turns the lock. It is muscle memory.

But the coffee was warm. It could have been brewed five minutes ago, or twenty. The steam had thinned to a ghost, but the surface still held a slight sheen, an oily shimmer that Mara knew from her own mornings when the pot sat too long. She forced herself

to look away from it, to scan the room for anything else out of place. There was nothing. A magazine stack perfectly aligned with the edge of a sideboard. A throw pillow plumped and positioned at a precise forty-five-degree angle. A single scuff mark on the floor near the stairs, the kind that could have been made by a boot heel at any time in the last week.

Her phone was in her back pocket, heavy with possibility. She could call the police and sound like a fool. *My neighbor's door is open and her coffee is warm.* They would ask if Evelyn had a husband, a boyfriend, a roommate. They would ask if they fought. They would ask if Evelyn had been drinking. *Is this a pattern?* Mara could hear the question without the detective having to ask it. She didn't know. Three months, and all she had was the surface. Evelyn was a wave that broke in the mornings and receded at night, leaving only clean sand.

Mara took another step. She could see into the kitchen now, the white quartz counters scrubbed to a dull gleam. No dishes in the sink. No mail fanned out on the breakfast bar. On the counter, beneath a paperweight shaped like a nautilus shell, a small notepad lay open. The tear on the top page was clean. The handwriting was Evelyn's, the same compact, looping script she used to label her recycling bin and her spice jars.

Under the breakwater.

No salutation. No signature. Just three words, underlined once with a firm pressure that left a burr in the paper. The phrase hung there, nonspecific and cryptic. It could have been a reminder to walk the dog she didn't own, or to retrieve something she had hidden. It could have been a meeting place. It could have been a metaphor. Mara's reporter's brain, dormant but not dead, took it apart. Under the breakwater meant the old path that hugged the coast, the strip of sand and rock that only appeared at low tide. It meant secrets, or it meant solitude. It meant nothing and everything.

She backed out, her hand finding the doorknob as if to reassure it that she was leaving. The wood met the jamb with a soft click, and she hesitated. Should she lock it? If Evelyn returned and found her door locked from the outside, she might be annoyed. If she didn't return, the police would be happier with an intact scene. The decision felt too large for the moment. She left it alone.

Outside, the day had sharpened. The fog had retreated to the far side of the bay, and the sun was doing its best to convince everyone that summer wasn't done with them yet. Down the street, the Miller's Retriever was barking at a squirrel. A car turned the corner with its windows down, releasing a brief blast of talk radio into the air. Everything normal. Everything the same. Mara stood on Evelyn's porch and felt the first cold thread of fear stitch itself into her ribs.

She walked back to her own house, the muffin container heavy in her hand. She would have to explain herself to Noah if he came home and found her standing on the neighbor's porch like a scavenger bird. *I was concerned*, she would say. He would roll his eyes, which was his primary form of communication. *Mom, you do this. You look for things that aren't there.* He wasn't wrong. She had spent a year building a life that required no sharp edges, and yet her hands still searched for them.

Inside, the kitchen was warm and smelled faintly of toast. She set the muffins on the counter and opened her laptop. The screen lit up with the unfinished email to the PTA, the subject line an accusation: *Re: Bake Sale Table Placement*. She stared at it for a moment, then closed the tab. Her fingers found the note she had copied onto a scrap of paper while standing in Evelyn's foyer. She wrote: *Under the breakwater*. She stared at the words until they lost meaning.

Her phone buzzed. A text from the PTA president, a woman named Diane who treated the school's fundraising like a military campaign.

Diane: We need a final count on the brownies. And someone has to man the table from 10 to 12. Can you do it?

Mara typed back: *I'll check my schedule*. The lie was automatic. Her schedule was wide open, an acre of time she had cleared with intention. She put the phone face down on the counter.

She should call the police. She should call them now and say, *My neighbor isn't home and her door was unlocked and there is coffee on the counter and a note that makes no sense*. They would ask questions she couldn't answer. They would tell her that Evelyn Monroe was a grown woman who could leave her house if she wanted to. They would ask if Evelyn had enemies. They would ask if she had a boyfriend. The truth was, Mara didn't know. She knew Evelyn's grocery preferences and the fact that she preferred herbal tea to coffee, and that she had a scar on her left wrist that looked like a burn. She didn't know if Evelyn had a past, or a person, or a problem.

She picked up her phone again and scrolled to the non-emergency number for the Hawthorn Bay Police Department. Her thumb hovered over the call button. She had a sudden, vivid image of the detective's face, the one who had come to the school last spring to talk to the kids about online safety. He had worn a shirt that didn't fit right and a name tag that said Holt. He had been polite in the way that suggested he would not be easily impressed.

She pressed the call.

"Hawthorn Bay Police, non-emergency," a voice said, flat and uninterested.

"Hi. My name is Mara Ellis. I live at 112 Winter Street. My neighbor—her door is open. I think something might be wrong."

"Is she missing?"

"I don't know. I can't find her."

"Have you tried calling her?"

"She left her phone. It's on the counter."

There was a pause. The sound of typing. "Is there any sign of forced entry?"

"No. Just the door. It wasn't locked."

"Okay. An officer will swing by within the hour. What's the neighbor's name?"

"Evelyn Monroe. 110 Winter Street."

"Is she elderly? Does she have any medical conditions?"

"No. She's—she's forty-two. Healthy."

"Alright, ma'am. We'll send someone. Do not enter the residence again."

The line went dead. Mara set the phone down and let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. She looked at her kitchen clock. It was a stupid thing to be aware of, the exact time she had called the police. She wrote it down in a notebook she kept for shopping lists. 11:48 a.m. She underlined it twice.

She waited. She tried to focus on the manuscript she was supposed to be editing, a historical romance that kept getting the date of the Battle of Trafalgar wrong. She corrected the error with a red pen and felt a small, familiar satisfaction. It was the clean work of making something right. It was not investigative. It was not risky. She was good at it. She had built a life out of things that were fixable, sentences that could be tidied, commas that could be relocated. She had made herself a small person in a small town, and the town had obliged by staying small around her.

The knock came twenty minutes later. It was sharp and confident. Mara opened the door to a man in a uniform, late forties, with a face that looked like it had been worn down by weather and bureaucracy. His name tag said Holt. His eyes scanned her quickly, professionally, then moved past her to the kitchen, the living room, the stairs.

"Ms. Ellis?" he said. "I'm Detective Holt. You called about your neighbor."

"Yes. Evelyn Monroe. 110 Winter Street. The door's open. I went in—"

"You went in."

"Just to the foyer. I called her name. There's a coffee mug on the table. It was still warm."

Holt's expression didn't change. He took a small notebook from his pocket. "And the door was unlocked. You're sure about that?"

"I saw it was ajar. I nudged it with my foot. It swung open."

"Did you see anything else? A weapon? Signs of a struggle?"

"No. Nothing. It looked normal. Too normal."

He glanced at her. "Too normal."

"The coffee," she said. "And the note. It said 'Under the breakwater.'"

Holt looked at his shoes for a moment, as if considering the phrase himself. "You said she's forty-two. Any family in the area?"

"She has a sister. Lives out of state. I don't think they're close."

"Boyfriend? Husband?"

"I don't think so. She doesn't mention anyone."

"You'd be surprised what people don't mention," Holt said. He closed his notebook. "I'm going to walk over and take a look. You can come if you want, but stay on the porch."

Mara followed him down the front steps and across the lawn that separated their houses. The grass needed cutting. She made a mental note, then hated herself for it. The detective walked with a heavy, deliberate stride, his hand resting on his belt. He didn't seem to notice the beauty of the day. He stopped at Evelyn's porch and took in the view: the open door, the tidy facade, the flowerpots arranged in a size descending order.

He pushed the door open with his knuckle and stepped inside. Mara waited on the porch, peering through the doorway. She watched him scan the foyer, saw his eyes

land on the coffee mug, the note. He didn't touch anything. He moved into the kitchen, then the living room, then back to the stairs. He stood at the bottom and looked up.

"Ms. Monroe," he called. His voice was deeper than Mara's, a professional bellow. "Police. Are you home?"

Silence answered him. He turned back to Mara. "Has she ever left like this before? Gone away without telling you?"

"She told me last night she wanted to talk. She said she'd found something."

"And she didn't say what."

"No. She said it was probably nothing, but she wanted to be quiet about it."

Holt's expression shifted by a millimeter. "Quiet about it."

"She didn't want to talk over the fence. She was looking around. Like someone might hear."

"And you didn't think to mention that when you called?"

"I didn't know if it was relevant."

He let that hang. Then he stepped back out and pulled the door closed. It didn't latch. He looked at the frame. "The latch is sticking," he said. "It's an old house. You have to pull it hard. I've seen people leave thinking they locked it."

"So you think she just left?"

"I think we don't jump to conclusions. I'm going to ask around. Her car is in the driveway. Her purse is on the hook by the door, at least from what I can see without touching. People leave on foot sometimes. They need to clear their head. Sometimes they go down to the water. There's a path by the breakwater. She might have gone for a walk."

Mara thought about the note. Under the breakwater. It could be a walk. It could be a meeting. It could be a place to leave something you didn't want in your house.

"Do you want me to call you if she shows up?" she asked.

"You can call me either way," Holt said. He pulled a card from his wallet and handed it to her. It was white and plain, with his name and a direct line. "If you remember anything else, anything at all, call me. Don't go knocking on doors yourself, Ms. Ellis."

Leave it to us."

He walked back to his cruiser, which was parked at the curb. Mara watched him pull away, the car sliding down the street with the easy confidence of someone who had seen it all before. She stood on Evelyn's porch, alone again, the door still not quite closed.

She went back inside her own house and locked the door, then checked it twice. She tried to call Evelyn's cell. It went straight to voicemail. The greeting was cheerful, brisk. *This is Evelyn. Leave a message.* Mara left one, trying to sound casual. "Hey, it's Mara. Just wanted to drop off muffins. Call me if you get a second."

She set the phone down and looked out the window. The street was quiet. The house next door stood with its door slightly ajar, a small wound in the perfect skin of the block. She thought about the coffee, the note, the way Evelyn had looked last night when she said *I found something*. She thought about the detective's voice, the casual suggestion of a walk. She thought about how easy it would be to believe it.

But she had seen the underlining on the note. The pressure of the pen had left a ridge. It wasn't a reminder. It was a warning. And Mara, who had spent years trying to be small, felt the dangerous old urge to be seen.

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