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The Silent Alibi

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Waking to Absence
- **Chapter 2** The Official Story
- **Chapter 3** Holes in the Ledger
- **Chapter 4** The First Vanished Man
- **Chapter 5** A Face from the Past
- **Chapter 6** Breaking the Narrative
- **Chapter 7** Old Wounds, New Gaps
- **Chapter 8** Following the Money
- **Chapter 9** The Reclusive Officer
- **Chapter 10** The Whistleblower
- **Chapter 11** Memory and Betrayal
- **Chapter 12** Into the Meridian
- **Chapter 13** Old Photos, New Lies
- **Chapter 14** The Ethics File
- **Chapter 15** Under Pressure
- **Chapter 16** Fractures
- **Chapter 17** A Personal Betrayal
- **Chapter 18** The Lullaby
- **Chapter 19** Allies Gather
- **Chapter 20** Truth and Memory
- **Chapter 21** Before the Fall
- **Chapter 22** The Conventicle
- **Chapter 23** The Truth About Jack
- **Chapter 24** The Reckoning
- **Chapter 25** After the Silence

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Introduction

He left a Polaroid on the kitchen table and a silence so loud the house seemed to be trying to speak. That is how the story will be told, later, when the absence has weight and shape, when the details have been folded and unfolded until the corners are soft and the image is a little more cracked than before. But before the photograph, before the hush that settled and never lifted, our life was a field guide to ordinary rituals. If there was a warning, it was folded small and tucked somewhere I forgot to look.

On the evening the storm rolled toward Briar Hollow, the forecast was content to be dramatic. Local weather made a game of naming thunder as if it were an unwanted relative. “Squall line,” the anchor promised with a grin too white for the gray screen at his shoulder. “Expect downed limbs, power flickers, torrential rain.” The town shrugged. We’ve always had weather. The clapboard houses along Sycamore, where we live, have been scoured and repainted so many times you can read a century of storms in the thickness of their skin.

Jack disliked television noise, so the weather ran on mute while he built a tower that wouldn’t stand. He’d carried an unfinished model home from his office—balsa and thin acrylic—and spread it on our dining table, a trestle scarred by ring marks we’d stopped seeing after the first year of marriage. He used his thumbnail to smooth glue along a seam, breath held, then readjusted the angle so the tiny façade aligned with a sketch. I watched from the kitchen, elbow deep in dishes, the smell of garlic still ghosting the air from a simple pasta. He hummed when he worked, tuneless, a sound like a long exhale. I liked that sound. It meant he was home in the way that counts.

Our house speaks if you know how to listen. The radiator in the hall ticks three times before the heat moves. The back door has a hinge that creaks on humid nights. The kitchen light buzzes in a register you only hear when you stand right under it, fighting with a fruit fly. I track these sounds the way I track quotes and sources, by habit. It’s a reporter’s tic—if you can name it, you can control it. That was my private superstition, anyway: label things and they’ll behave. The world doesn’t care about your labels. It will peel them off and stick them back on the wrong jar.

“Ortiz called,” I said, rinsing a plate, water steam smudging the window. “She’s moving the interview with the councilman to Friday. ‘Emergent budget shift.’ Translation: he doesn’t feel like being fact-checked.”

Jack smiled without looking up. “Don’t let him fluster you.”

I snorted. “It’s cute you think we’re even in the same room. He’s going to do that thing

where he leans on the back of his chair like he's about to stand up, and then I'll spend the next fifteen minutes trying to get him to sit down again."

"Bring cookies." Jack pressed a toothpick into the model's interior. "Nobody does the lean move after a sugar rush."

"You're confusing real life with bribes," I said, and he glanced at me, the quick sideways look with one eyebrow up that meant I'd walked into his bit. That was our call-and-response. After seven years, you learn when to lob, when to spike, when to let the ball fall because actually you're hungry and the pasta is going cold.

I drained the spaghetti and let the strainer hiss over the sink. On the windowsill sat a brass key we'd found in a junk drawer when we moved in—too ornate for any lock in our house, all filigree and weight. We'd kept it because it felt like a prop in a play we hadn't been cast in yet. Sometimes I turned it in my fingers when I was waiting for water to boil, tracing the loops like they might spell something in a language I used to know. There are objects that seem to carry meaning before you can attach a story to them. We tell the story later, to justify the feeling.

We ate sitting side by side, plates on the table, our knees touching in a way that meant we were fine. His ankle made that small, old complaint when he folded it under the chair; he'd sprained it fencing in college and it became a barometer. Jack lifted his glass, clinked mine on purpose to hear the sound, and said, "We should get out of town this weekend. Hike. Find a trail that goes somewhere we've never been."

"You say that," I said, "and then you spend two hours drawing what the trail might look like."

"I'm trying to be spontaneous," he protested, smiling. "Help me fail at it."

I nodded. A note landed in my head and I didn't write it down—the way he said "we should" like it was a promise he could keep. I remember the feeling of it, now, more than the words themselves. I could tell you about my notebook sitting open on the counter, a line scribbled about a budget line item that didn't add up in the Meridian Development fund, but that would sound like plant and payoff. That night, it was just a puzzle for later, a thread to tug when I was ready for my brain to itch.

Outside the first fat drops hit the window with the authority of palm slaps. Somewhere a wind chime started to quarrel with itself. Jack stood and went around the house in a circle, the way he always did in weather—checking latches, shutting windows. He reached for the back door and pushed until the hinge surrendered its complaint. He turned the deadbolt and checked it twice. That, too, was ordinary. He liked to feel the lock with his thumb and forefinger. Somewhere at the beginning of us, I had found his carefulness charming and then, when I was tired, found it fussy and then, when we

were good again, found it sweet. Marriage is a flipbook if you turn the pages fast.

“Storm kit?” I called, half-joking. He kept a small stash in the hall closet: candles, batteries, a lighter that always worked better for him than for me.

“Already staged,” he said. “Just in case.”

The phrase landed oddly. Jack was always staging something: models for work, impromptu dinner tables, a picnic blanket that we’d never remembered to buy until he pulled one from the trunk. He was good at making a space look like the best version of itself, a gift that made him a favorite with clients. It also meant he sometimes disappeared behind the things he arranged. I have memories of his hands with more detail than of his face, which is a trick of lighting, not a confession.

After dinner, he returned to the model. I took my laptop to the couch, my fingers moving without grace over the keys as I outlined the budget story. The Meridian project had been a campaign promise turned very real, very fast: a sleek mixed-use development on the riverfront; job numbers announced with balloons; press releases floating like confetti. The numbers made sense until they didn’t. It was probably a rounding error. It was probably a consultant’s idea of creative accounting. It was probably none of my business when my editor had asked for a profile of a local bakery that had learned to survive through ten rent hikes in twelve years. I wrote those profiles too, with the same attention I gave the numbers, because that’s what a small-town reporter learns: you don’t get to be precious about your beat.

And yet I saved a file with a label I didn’t understand: for later. I wrote, then stopped, then wrote again, the keys chattering fast, as if speed could force clarity. The cat from next door sent a wet paw under our screen and pulled it back with an injured dignity. Thunder rolled a few beats away.

When I got stuck, I hummed a line I’ve hummed since I was a child. A lullaby with no words I could remember, only the falling shape of it, like a staircase going down. My sister laughs when I do it and says, “You’re making it up.” Maybe I am. Maybe someone made it up for me when I was too small to remember the person, only the tune. There is a photograph of two girls sitting on a curb, knees dirty, their shadows cut short by noon, and I cannot say if one of them is me. The photo isn’t in any album; it floats in a shoebox with receipts and ticket stubs and the brass key’s twin that never turned in any lock. On some days, I don’t trust my own recall. On most days, I choose to.

“You’re doing the ghost song,” Jack said, not looking up from his miniature tower.

“You love my ghost song,” I said.

"I love everything you hum that's not from that podcast," he said, and the silence that followed felt like a room readying itself—lights dimmed, audience leaning back, the first line about to be spoken. My phone buzzed. A text from Elise: You seeing this sky? I sent back a photo of our backyard, the black-cotton heft of the clouds. She responded with a lightning bolt emoji. Elise is the person who can love you across a decade and still surprise you with how she keeps a secret. I did not know which secret, yet, but I could feel its outline even then.

By nine, the storm was close enough to throw quick flashes into the rooms. The house turned into a flipbook of itself: lit, dim, lit, dim. We played cards. We cheated, openly. He let me win, then didn't, then pretended to let me, which infuriated me more than losing. We kissed in a way that felt like wanting to want each other, and that was honest too. No marriage is all hunger. Some nights are quiet companionship across a table with the rain trying to punch through the glass.

After the second flash and the longer roll, the power hiccuped and came back. I told myself I wasn't watching the clock when I was. It was a habit from fieldwork: late hours mean late nights out alone; late nights alone make you measure when you should be home. "I'm going to bring the model down to the studio," Jack said, wrapping his hands around the base of the acrylic. "Safer if something leaks. Remember the roof last spring?"

"You mean the rain from exactly one cracked tile over your desk?" I said, and he grinned, because it had been absurd, the way one flaw put a footstep of water exactly on his keyboard. He lifted the model with the kind of concentration that made him handsome—jaw set, eyes narrowed—and carried it toward the basement door.

"I'll lock up after," he said. "You head to bed. I'll be down in a bit."

"Don't get lost in it."

"I won't." He leaned in and kissed my forehead, a gesture I'd once told him felt like someone checking for fever. He used it when he needed to move past me and didn't want to say so.

I gathered plates and rinsed and hung the dish towel over the oven handle so the stripe lined up with the edge. Small control, small comfort. The brass key on the windowsill caught and threw a filament of the storm's brief light. The hinge sighed when the basement door closed. In the hall, the storm kit glowed white in my mind's eye from its place on the shelf like it wanted a part in this. The house ticked, and I ticked back, turning off the living room lamp, checking the front door even though he would check it again, sliding the latch on the skinny window that doesn't open anymore.

In the bedroom, I undressed with the economy of someone alone. We were still learning the shape of our days after a season of long nights—his jobs had piled one on another; my deadlines had stacked and slid. Togetherness becomes a set of grazing touches: a hand at the small of a back in the kitchen; shared toothpaste; a laugh in the car; shoulders touching in sleep. I lay on my side of the bed with the blinds open to watch the weather perform. Streetlight pale. Leaves rubbing the window screen like paper on rough stone. I texted my sister: Power's twitchy. She sent back a flashlight emoji and a heart.

Downstairs, there was the heavy sound of something set carefully on a table. Then the softer sound of paper moving, which is unquantifiable but real, like someone turning the page of a long book you're not reading. I listened to the first rain hit and then skid down the glass. I hummed the first four notes of the not-a-lullaby and stopped, annoyed with myself. My phone lit on the nightstand with a notification I ignored.

I didn't hear the basement door open again. I didn't hear the back door. I didn't hear anything I could use as evidence except the storm, which has an alibi for everything.

I dozed. I woke to the stringy cries of a fox and for a second thought it was a child until memory corrected me, rewinding first to the kitchen, then to the table, then to his hands on the model, then to his mouth on my forehead. I rolled onto his side and felt the small cool valley where his body warms the mattress when he leaves and returns. I glanced at the clock. The digits scrolled; the storm argued with itself.

Sometime after midnight, the power stuttered and the alarm went into a trance of beeps and then remembered who it was and quieted. I got up, padded barefoot to the hall to look down toward the kitchen. The dark was thick enough to feel at the edges, like velvet meant to curtain a stage. At the top of the stairs I hesitated, my hand on the banister polished by both of us over years of mornings and midnights. The house offered me its sounds: the radiator getting ready to do the thing it does; the refrigerator deciding to hum, then not; the wind throwing itself at the eaves and failing.

"Jack?" I said, not loudly, because you don't want to wake a person you love if they've found sleep. There was no answer, but that wasn't strange. Some nights he stayed up sanding a seam until it disappeared. Perfection in small increments; the endless seduction of tiny improvement. I went back to bed. I scraped hair away from my eyes; I tucked my feet under the blanket and reminded them where the warm spot was.

The final ordinary moments: I set my phone face down and let the glass tap the wood just once. I touched my ring, a habit so reflexive I don't know when I learned it. I listened to the rain become a steady curtain. The house breathed, and I breathed with it, and somewhere between the third and fourth flash, my eyelids gave in.

In the morning, the house will be intact. The doors will be locked. The model will be dry and perfect on the basement table. The storm will have dragged itself east, leaving branches laid like bones across the road. And Jack—Jack will not be here.

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CHAPTER ONE: Waking to Absence

The first thing I noticed was not the absence of his body but the absence of his sound. The bed was cold on his side, a shaped emptiness that had already lost the ghost of heat. The alarm clock showed a red 6:03 AM and an empty line where his sleep-breathing usually braided with mine. I waited for the low, tuning-fork hum of the shower handle when it is turned just so, for the soft tap of his toothbrush against the sink, for the refrigerator door's complaint as he pulled out the creamer he pretends not to like. None of those sounds came. The silence had texture, the kind you feel pressing gently against your eardrums when you wake inside a strange room. In this familiar room, it felt like trespass.

I sat up and the floorboards accepted my weight with their usual hesitant groan. The storm had left us, dragging its wet tail east, but the house smelled like rain had passed through the walls to shake hands with the dust. In the hall, the radiator ticked like a patient metronome. The bedroom door, which we always leave open three inches for the cat who never comes, stood a perfect five, which made me frown. Jack measured the gap once with a carpenter's square because he thought I didn't notice when I kicked it wider in the night. He had a superstition about doors and air. "If it can breathe, it can sleep," he'd said, and I never decided if that was nonsense or wisdom. It's hard to decide anything at six in the morning on an empty half of a bed.

I walked the house in the order I always walk it when I'm unsure. Kitchen first, because coffee is a rite, and because the basement door is off the kitchen and he might have gone down to sand the model and fallen asleep on the old couch. The kitchen was neat in a way that felt staged rather than lived in. Dishes from last night stacked by the sink with the dried garlic clinging like a memory, the dish towel folded into a perfect rectangle, the brass key we keep on the windowsill sitting exactly in the center of the sill. The basement door was closed. I put my hand on the knob and felt for warmth, as if it could tell me whether a body had passed recently. It was cool. I opened it and shouted his name into the dark stairwell. The smell of sawdust and damp rose up to meet me. I flipped the light. The basement was empty except for his worktable, where the acrylic model of the Meridian project—his current obsession—stood completed, a tiny city bathed in bare bulb glare. Beside it, his tools were aligned like soldiers. No Jack. No sleeping man on the couch. No note.

I checked the living room and the front door. Deadbolt engaged, chain in place, the tiny scratch on the doorframe exactly where it always was. I tried to remember if I'd heard the lock click before I fell asleep. The memory was thin. The storm had been loud enough to turn any other sound into a rumor. I went to the back door. It was locked from the inside, the little brass knob turned to the right, the keys hanging from

their hook beside it. The window above the sink had a smudge where someone had touched it, but that smudge could have been from last week. Our kitchen window had a relationship with the weather; it fogged, it wept, it showed our faces back to us like a tired mirror. I stood on my toes and peered into the backyard. The grass was littered with wet oak leaves and a plastic chair had tipped over. Branches lay like dropped bones across the neighbor's fence. There was no sign of a human shape.

Back upstairs, I went through the rooms. His closet was open, a few hangers pulled forward as if he'd considered an outfit and changed his mind. His running shoes were missing from their mat, but his jacket still hung on the hook by the front door. That jacket had been a gift two winters ago, a deep navy that turned green in certain light. He wore it everywhere when the weather turned. Without it, he'd be cold. A thought slid in and was ignored: he could have taken a different jacket. I pulled open his dresser drawer. Two pairs of jeans gone, three shirts, his gray sweatshirt with the frayed cuffs, the good socks that don't give you blisters. It didn't feel like panic packing; it felt like someone choosing clothes for a trip that might take more than a day. That didn't fit with the locked house.

I tried his phone. It was on the nightstand where he left it most nights, charging. I picked it up and pressed the side button. The screen lit with a picture of us on a rocky beach, squinting into wind. It asked for his passcode. I entered our anniversary—0814—and the phone unlocked with a little bounce of the icon. There were three texts from his boss about the model delivery, one from his sister asking if he wanted to go to the farmers market, and a missed call from an unknown number at 10:47 PM. Nothing after. I opened the photos. The most recent was of our dinner from last night, the plate angled to hide that he'd eaten most of his pasta before I'd taken the picture. That was a Jack thing: he wanted the picture to look like the moment he wished we'd had, not the moment we had. I looked for any new images, anything from early morning, but there were none. I opened his email. Nothing unusual. I checked the calendar. An appointment today with a structural engineer. A reminder for his mother's birthday next week. Nothing that explained leaving.

I called his phone. It rang from the bedroom. I followed the sound. It was in his jacket pocket. The jacket on the hook by the front door. I pulled it out and saw a lump in the inside breast pocket. My fingers found a worn leather wallet and, tucked behind his primary credit card, a Polaroid. It was the wrong size for the pocket, forcing a bend that had cracked the image along the left edge. The photograph showed a man standing in front of a plain concrete wall, unsmiling, hands in his pockets. He was older than Jack, maybe fifty, with a sharp nose and a part in his hair that looked deliberate, like a ruler had been used. The wall behind him had a small logo near the bottom that I couldn't make out, just a gray block with a letter cut into it. The Polaroid was dated in the white border in blue pen: 8/12. That was two months ago. The handwriting was Jack's, precise and right-leaning. A number was scribbled under the date: 11-3-9. It didn't look like a phone number. It looked like a code, or the start of a list that had run

out of room.

I stood by the front door, the jacket in one hand and the Polaroid in the other, and I felt a coldness slide along my ribs. The hallway light was the morning kind, weak and pale, and the photograph seemed to brighten and dim with the house's electricity as it settled. I turned it over. Blank. On the front, I studied the man's face again, trying to find any reference point in Jack's world. A client? A contractor? The developer from the Meridian project, Thomas Keller? The man in the photo wasn't Keller; I'd seen Keller's face on billboards and in the paper—blond, smiling like a door-to-door salesman who knows you'll buy. This man was darker, leaner, not a talker by default. I slid the Polaroid back into the wallet and put the wallet where it belonged, then picked it up again. The cracked edge made a small sound when I pressed it. The number 11-3-9 ticked something in my brain—a locker, a safe, a code for a gate—and then the thought drifted away.

I went to the window over the sink and pushed it up to let air in. The neighbor's dog barked at a squirrel and then gave up. The street was a stage set of wet leaves and gleaming asphalt. Across the way, Mrs. Delgado was already sweeping her porch in a rhythm that had not changed in the six years we'd lived here. She raised a hand and I raised mine back. The gesture felt absurd, too normal for the register of my pulse. I tried to think if Jack had said anything unusual last night, if there had been a tone under a phrase. He had said, "We should get out of town this weekend," but he said that every few weeks. He had said, "Safer if something leaks," referring to the model, the storm. He had said, "I'll lock up after." He had kissed my forehead like a doctor checking for fever, the way he did when he wanted to move past me without discussion. He had closed the basement door. He had not said he was leaving. He had not left a note.

I called his office line. It went to voicemail. I called his cell again to make sure it wasn't in the house. It rang in the jacket. I looked for keys. His car keys were on the hook with the jacket. His house keys were not on the hook. I checked the bowl by the door where we throw loose change and receipts. Nothing. I went to the back door again and looked at the hook. There were three keys there: one for the back door, one for the front, one that opens the mailbox. His car key fob is always on the ring with the house keys. I opened the front door and looked down the steps. Our driveway is short and straight and has no hiding places. His car, a slate gray sedan, sat exactly where he'd parked it after work yesterday, the hood lightly beaded with leftover rain. I walked down and touched the hood. Cool. Not recently driven. I peered in the windows. Nothing unusual. His gym bag was in the back seat. His sunglasses were in the cup holder. He would have taken those if he drove anywhere.

I went back inside and called the hospital. No John Does. I called the police non-emergency line because I didn't know what else to do and because it was too early to make the kind of call that gathers neighbors. A woman's voice, tired, asked what my

emergency was and I said, "My husband is missing but the house is locked." She said, "Has he been missing longer than twenty-four hours?" and I said, "Since last night," and she said, "Is there any sign of forced entry?" and I said, "No." She suggested I wait a few hours and call back. I hung up and the kitchen seemed to shrink by a dimension.

I sat at the table where he had built the model and I put my hands flat on the wood, feeling for vibrations as if a train might pass under our little house. The silence had expanded to fill all the corners. My phone buzzed. It was Elise. Her text read: *Just saw the damage. You guys okay?* I typed back: *We're fine. The house is fine.* I didn't write that Jack is gone. I didn't write that I am holding a cracked Polaroid like a talisman. She replied: *Coffee later?* I said: *Maybe.* The word felt like a door closing.

I went through the coat closet, the junk drawer, the small secretary desk where Jack kept receipts. I found a folder labeled "Meridian" and inside it a printout of a budget with a yellow highlight over a line labeled *consulting fees*. It was a number that looked too large and too round at the same time. I found a receipt for a hardware store we don't use, out on the highway. It was dated two weeks ago and paid with cash. I found nothing else that felt like a message. I spread the contents on the table next to the wallet and the Polaroid. The house made a small sound as it settled and I flinched.

It took twenty minutes for the police to come after I called back, which felt fast and slow at the same time. The officer was young, with a neck tattoo that he kept trying to hide under his collar. He took notes in a small spiral that bent when he pressed hard. He asked if Jack had been depressed, if we'd argued, if he'd been drinking, if he had anywhere else he could be—friends, family, a girlfriend. I answered no to all of them, which felt like a relief and a lie at once. We argued sometimes about small things, like whether the dishwasher needed pre-rinsing. He had friends, but none he would drive to at two in the morning in a storm without his phone. He had an ex-girlfriend from college; I'd seen her on social media, a landscape architect in another state. They hadn't spoken since we got engaged. I said all of that and the officer nodded and said, "We'll file a report. Most of these resolve by noon. People get scared of the storm and end up at a relative's house and forget to call."

"Do you want to see the Polaroid?" I asked. The question came out before I knew I was going to ask it.

"What's a Polaroid?" he asked, and I held it out. He took it by the edges like it might be evidence. "Do you know this man?" I said no. He said, "It could be a client. Your husband is an architect, right?" I said yes. He said, "I'll take a photo of it for the report. It's probably nothing."

When he left, I went to the basement and stood in the center of the concrete floor. The model cast a long shadow in the bare bulb light, a little city perfect and clean. I ran my

hand along the workbench and felt sawdust like flour. On the far wall, Jack had hung a corkboard with sketches and photos of buildings. There was a thumbtack holding a Polaroid of me asleep on a plane, taken on a trip to Montreal five years ago. I lifted it and saw there was another pin mark beside it, circular, empty. Something had hung there and been removed. On the floor beneath the corkboard, I found a small strip of torn paper, no bigger than a fingernail. It was torn from a receipt or a note. I could read three letters: *END*. That was all.

I went back upstairs and put coffee on. The drip filled the kitchen with the smell that usually meant day starting. I held the cracked Polaroid up to the window and tilted it. The concrete wall in the image reflected light differently in one spot, as if there was a door cut into it that had been painted over. The man's eyes were a flat gray. He wore a plain dark jacket. His hands were in his pockets but his right thumb was hooked over the edge, the way Jack sometimes did when he was thinking. I set the photo down and called Detective Lena Ortiz's direct number. She was two years ahead of me in high school and now ran the kind of cases that never made good headlines. Her voicemail picked up. I said, "Lena, it's Maya Hart. Jack is missing. The house was locked, his car is here, his phone is here. I know you're not supposed to take a report before twenty-four hours, but something is wrong. Call me."

I sat at the table and the clock rolled to eight. Eight meant nothing except that it was later. I made a list in my head of what I knew, the way I would before writing a story. Fact: the house was locked from the inside. Fact: Jack's keys were gone, car and wallet were here. Fact: a Polaroid in his wallet dated two months ago. Fact: the basement door closed, the model finished. Fact: he wore a different jacket, took his running shoes. Fact: there was no note. The list felt like bones without a skeleton.

I carried my coffee to the front window and watched the street wake up. Kids in yellow raincoats walked to the bus stop, a jogger splashed through puddles with poor form. Everything ordinary and exact. A car turned the corner and slowed as it passed our house, then sped up. I told myself it was nothing. I told myself that a locked house with no broken windows and no forced doors and a man who might have taken a jog down the river path and slipped was not a story yet. It was only a silence. It was only a morning without a voice.

And then my phone buzzed. Not Ortiz. A text from an unknown number. No name, just digits. It read: *You weren't supposed to see that.*

I looked at the Polaroid. I looked at the door. The house was intact. The silence was not.

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