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The Shadowed Walls of Willow Bay

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Introduction

You can learn a town by its silences. The things people don't say at the post office, the way they watch the ocean when your questions get too close. Willow Bay had the kind of quiet that crept under doorways and into your hair, salt-stiff and persistent. I grew up inside that hush, pretending not to hear it until I couldn't pretend anymore.

I used to be a reporter—the kind who carried a notebook like a blade and believed that the right question could cut through any lie. After a while, the noise of other people's tragedies set up camp in my head and wouldn't leave. I traded newsrooms for a spare bedroom with blankets hung on the walls and a secondhand mic I learned how to love. The Blue Hour was small but sharp. I liked the control: a single voice, mine, shaping an investigation one breath at a time. People sent me their stories when they didn't trust anyone else. I told myself that distance was protection.

Willow Bay wasn't distance. It was the smell of kelp baked onto the pier and the gulls that sounded like laughter with a mean streak. It was the Seacliff Hotel, a sandstone ship run aground at the edge of town, windows polished to a philanthropic shine. In summer, the lobby breathed lavender and money; in winter, antiseptic and old wood. The hotel taught everyone how to smile with teeth and keep the rot tucked behind mahogany doors. I knew its floors as well as the cliff paths—knew where the boards complained if you stepped wrong, where the staff vanished when they didn't want to be found.

My brother, Ben, knew it better. He was the one who stayed. We didn't talk about the night I left or the year that followed. We didn't talk about the hymn our mother hummed when she wanted us to sleep, a tune the town pretended belonged to God and not to grief. We didn't talk about June Parker, not for a long time. June and I had been two sides of a coin we kept flipping, never agreeing which face was luck. She said I asked too many questions; I said she didn't ask enough. We were both right, which is another way of saying we hurt each other.

Podcast transcript excerpt — The Blue Hour, Episode 0: CLAIRE (host): If a place has a story to tell, it starts at the waterline. That's where the tide erases what you need erased and leaves what you can't avoid. This season, I'm going home. Willow Bay is as pretty as a postcard and just as flat—until you look hard at the corners. I won't pretend I'm not part of the story. I am. So let's put it on record.

I told myself I wasn't returning for anyone in particular. I could frame it as a study in coastal power, the way money launders reputations, how a hotel can become a church if enough people need it to be sacred. That was the pitch I recorded and then deleted

at two in the morning while the city outside my window hissed with late buses and rain. The truth was less professional. Willow Bay mattered because I'd spent half my life mastering how not to think about it, and the other half checking the locks on windows I couldn't name. The past was a house I moved out of years ago; sometimes I still smelled its smoke.

The Seacliff called to me in little ways. A glossy alumni newsletter with Victor Hale's smile plastered across a scholarship drive. A forwarded email about a town council vote, the hotel's logo stamped at the bottom like a seal. Ben's short texts—You good? You should visit—arriving at odd hours and then evaporating under jokes. Sheriff Tom Reyes—a name I hadn't said aloud in years—popped up in a lukewarm article about community policing, and I felt a tug I resented. I was good at letting stories find me. I tried not to think about going to find this one.

On a Wednesday in late spring, I edited an episode about a missing girl from a town I'd never set foot in. I calibrated my voice to steady, set the levels, cut the breaths that sounded like doubt. When I finished, I made tea that tasted like oversteeped seaweed and stared through the steam at my reflection in the window. The city behind me turned into a ghost version of Willow Bay: the cliff line, the flares of lighthouse glass, the soft thread of our mother's lullaby. My phone buzzed once, then again, insistent.

The first alert was a link from an old classmate I hadn't spoken to since graduation: Did you see this? The second was a voicemail, unlisted number, voice paper-thin and shaking in my ear when I pressed play. Claire? It's Maya. You probably don't— Listen. June's missing. From the Seacliff. They're saying she left on her own, but she didn't. Please call me. Please.

The tea went cold on the windowsill. Outside, the rain started in earnest, a steady tap like fingers drumming impatience on glass. I stared at the screen until my own face blurred. The room shrank to the size of the message and the space inside a single word. Missing. The town I'd trained myself not to look at was suddenly in my hands, all salt and shadow, asking me to come back.

CHAPTER ONE: Return to the Seacliff

The road to Willow Bay was a ribbon of gray steel unspooling between two walls of pine, and the farther I drove, the more it felt like the past was leaning against my bumper, pushing me home. Every mile marker was a little tick of the clock I'd ignored for years. The rental car smelled like lemon disinfectant and stale French fries, and the radio kept searching for a signal that wasn't there. I clicked it off. Silence was better company than static.

The first sign for the town was sun-faded and listing slightly to the left, as if even the wood was tired. Willow Bay, Pop. 4,112, elevation 30. It might as well have read: All secrets kept. I took the exit too fast and let the tires sing on the expansion joints of the bridge. Underneath, the water looked like hammered pewter. The tide was going out, leaving wet rocks and clumps of seaweed like clues exposed by the retreating breath of the ocean.

Main Street hadn't changed much. There was the new bakery that had taken over the old hardware store, its windows frosted with condensation. The harbor still smelled of diesel and bait. A pair of gulls tracked my car like they were taking notes. A few faces turned as I passed, the slow, reflexive glance of a town where nothing moves fast enough to outrun recognition. I kept my eyes forward. If anyone waved, I didn't see it.

The Seacliff Hotel appears before you do, rising off the bluff with its sandstone façade scrubbed to a respectable tan. The architecture suggests old money and sturdy secrets: towers that don't need to be tall, windows wide enough to make you think you're being invited in. On the lawn, white tents were already going up for something that looked like a fundraiser. I parked in the public lot and stared at the entrance, the revolving doors spinning out little bursts of laughter and clinking glassware. The place didn't look haunted. That's the problem with Willow Bay; the ghosts wear good suits.

Inside, the lobby was cool enough to raise goosebumps. Lavender and lemon again, a combination I associate with cleaning up what you don't want to smell. Velvet armchairs in a pale, forgiving blue. A concierge desk carved from something so dark it might have been grown in a cave. The man behind it was too young to remember me and too well trained to let that matter.

"Welcome to the Seacliff," he said. "Do you have a reservation?"

"I'm looking for Ben Monroe," I said. "He's the manager."

The smile didn't waver. "Mr. Monroe is in a meeting. May I take a name?"

“Claire Monroe.” I watched his eyes flicker with the connection. The corners of his mouth tightened just enough to show he’d heard the last name in the context of town lore. “I’ll wait.”

There was a seating area tucked behind a row of potted ferns. I dropped into a chair and tried not to think about how many times I’d sprinted across this lobby as a kid, June’s hand in mine, both of us tracing the patterns in the carpet with our sneakers. The carpet had changed, but the layout was etched into muscle memory. I knew that beyond the doors marked Private there was a corridor with a window seat and a view of the cliff path. I knew there was a supply closet that smelled of ammonia and what my teenage brain had classified as danger. I knew the floorboards in the east wing sang in the key of B-flat if you stepped on them with your left foot first.

A woman in a navy blazer hurried past, speaking into her phone in a low rush. “...no, move the flowers to the east wing. The light is better there, and Victor wants the portraits visible.” She caught my eye and offered a tight nod. I recognized the stride of someone late for a detail that could become a problem if ignored. In hotels, the past is a problem with a due date.

My phone vibrated. A text from Maya, the first I’d seen with a timestamp after midnight: I’m at the Seacliff. Meet me out back by the service entrance? If you’re coming. I hesitated. I’d listened to her voicemail four times on the drive, the tremor in her voice sticking to me like burrs. June. Missing. The words were a little tug at my chest that I refused to name as panic. I typed: Here now. Give me ten.

Before I could stand, the elevator doors slid open and Ben stepped into the lobby. My brother, in the shape of a man I didn’t entirely know. Taller than I remembered, shoulders carrying the weight of the hotel’s expectations. He wore a crisp shirt with the Seacliff crest over his heart and a tie that looked like a thin strip of sea. For a second, he didn’t see me. In that second, he looked exhausted.

Then his eyes found mine. His expression didn’t change so much as it rearranged itself, like furniture moved to cover a stain.

“Claire,” he said, and I heard the old habit of naming first to slow down whatever came next. “You didn’t call.”

“You were in a meeting,” I said, standing. We didn’t hug. We did the half-step shuffle of people who can’t decide whether to pretend we’re fine. Up close, he looked like he’d been sleeping under his desk. “How are you?”

“Busy.” He glanced at the concierge, then back at me. “The Founders’ Gala is tomorrow. It’s a big deal for the hotel. For the town, too.” A beat. “Why are you here?”

“Maya called me. She said June’s missing.”

Ben’s face tightened. “June isn’t missing. She left. She quit her job and left town.”

“She didn’t tell Maya. She didn’t tell anyone. Her apartment is empty except for a few boxes, and her car’s still at the lot.”

“People do that,” he said. “You know how it is here. They get fed up and they go. It doesn’t mean—”

“She was working on something,” I interrupted. “Maya says June was digging into the hotel. Into you, maybe. Into Victor.”

Ben’s jaw pulsed. He moved closer, lowering his voice. “Don’t start. Not here. Not with this. The police are looking into it. They’ll find her, and when they do, you’ll feel silly.”

“The police told Maya she left on her own.”

“They told her the truth.”

I watched his eyes. There’s a tell when someone’s lying; they don’t look away, they go still. Ben had gone very still. “Where were you last night?” I asked.

He blinked. “Home. Sleeping. I closed the bar here and went home.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“Jesus, Claire.” He rubbed his forehead, the gesture worn. “Don’t do this. Don’t turn your family into a story.”

I felt that old, familiar click—the moment a story stops being background and becomes the only thing in focus. “I already started a new season of the podcast about this town,” I said, pitching my voice low. “About power and what gets buried here. If you want me to leave, you’ll have to give me something that doesn’t sound like a line.”

Ben exhaled hard through his nose. He glanced toward the private corridor. “Not here,” he repeated. “If you’re staying, check into a room. Don’t make a scene. And stay away from Victor Hale.”

“He’s the benefactor,” I said. “Hard to miss.”

“Don’t be smart.” He looked at me, and for a second the manager vanished, replaced by a kid who used to hide behind me when the thunder came. “You shouldn’t have

come back.”

He turned and walked toward the elevator without waiting for an answer. I watched him go, the set of his shoulders telling me he was bracing for something I hadn't seen yet. The concierge offered me a key card with my name printed on it like a verdict. I took it. The room was on the third floor, east wing.

From the lobby window, I could see the lawn and the first guests arriving for the gala setup. Women in dresses that fluttered like flags, men in the uniform of their own success. Victor Hale would be somewhere in that blur, smiling the way a lighthouse smiles: steady, bright, useful. I pulled out my recorder and started a new file, just to hear my own voice when I got back to the room.

“Day one,” I said, whispering into the mic. “I’m standing in the place I told myself I’d never come back to. The Seacliff Hotel smells the same, which feels obscene. June is gone. Ben is lying. The town is already closing rank. This is what I know so far.”

Later, when the corridor emptied and the faint hum of vacuums started two floors down, I slipped out the service entrance. The air was sharp with sea salt and the evening chill that always came earlier than you expected on the coast. Concrete steps led down toward the employee lot and a path that hugged the cliff. The path was lit by sconces spaced too far apart, leaving pools of darkness you had to jump across.

Maya was waiting by a dented sedan, arms folded tight against the wind. She looked like she'd lost ten pounds since graduation, and all of it from her eyes. “You came,” she said, voice thick with relief and suspicion.

“I’m here,” I said. “Tell me everything.”

She looked over her shoulder, then unlocked the car. “Not here. In here.” She slid into the driver's seat and I took the passenger side. The car smelled like coffee and something sharper, fear maybe. She handed me a folded piece of paper. “I found this in June's locker. I wasn't supposed to go in there. But no one's looking for her the right way.”

The paper was a printout of an old floor plan of the hotel, the kind contractors use, with red circles around the east wing storage rooms and a line drawn from them to a space labeled 114. Handwritten along the bottom was a single sentence: Don't trust the ledger. Trust the lighthouse.

“What ledger?” I asked.

June had been obsessed with the hotel's archives, Maya explained. She had keys to the basement storage, a place no one went unless they had to. In the last month, June

had started calling the hotel's charity fund "a washing machine." She said the Seacliff's books had gaps in them so neat they had to be on purpose. "She said the money came in clean from donors and went out clean to families, but there were names missing. Not just amounts—names. Whole families erased. She wanted to know who got paid to forget."

"And the lighthouse?" I asked.

Maya shook her head. "She didn't say. She was careful after a while. She started checking over her shoulder. She told me not to call her at work. Then she was gone."

I looked down at the floor plan. The east wing storage was the same area I knew from childhood, the place where we played hide-and-seek until a stern woman with a whistle made us leave. "Has anyone talked to Victor?" I asked.

"Victor is untouchable," Maya said. "He writes the checks. He funds the police detail at the pier and the scholarships and the free clinic. The sheriff gets calls if he's late with a thank-you letter. People treat him like he's the town's heartbeat. You can't accuse a heartbeat of anything."

We sat in silence as the sun sank, leaving the cliffs in blue shadow. The hotel windows lit up one by one, gold squares stacked like pages in a heavy book. I could hear the faint thrum of music from the lobby bar. Somewhere out on the water, a foghorn blew, low and patient.

"I'll find her," I said. It sounded like a promise I shouldn't make.

Maya nodded, and for the first time her mouth softened. "June said you were the only person who'd ask the question everyone was afraid to hear."

"People don't like that," I said.

"She didn't care." Maya's voice cracked. "Find her. Please."

I got out of the car and walked back toward the hotel entrance, the wind coming hard off the ocean, pushing me forward. Inside, the lobby was a river of tuxedos and silk. A string quartet played something classical I couldn't name. Victor Hale stood near the fireplace, his hand on the shoulder of a woman whose necklace caught the light like a warning. He glanced up as I passed and his eyes held mine for a moment—curious, courteous, utterly unreadable.

My room was at the end of the hall, door number 317. The key card glowed green and the lock clicked with a sound like a bone snapping. The room was clean and cold, with a window that faced the cliffs. I set my bag on the bed, hung my jacket on the chair,

and placed my recorder on the nightstand. The Seacliff had a way of making you feel watched even when you were alone.

I crossed to the window. Below, the cliff path cut a pale line along the edge of the world. The lighthouse at the point blinked once, then again, slow and steady. Don't trust the ledger. Trust the lighthouse. I pressed my forehead to the cool glass and thought of June laughing at something stupid I'd said when we were fifteen, both of us half in love with the same boy who'd never deserve either of us. I thought of Ben's stillness. I thought of Victor's polite, unwavering gaze.

A soft knock startled me. I turned, listening. It came again, polite but urgent. Not the kind of knock housekeeping uses. I moved to the door and looked through the peephole. A man stood in the hallway, hands in his pockets, shoulders squared like he was bracing for weather. I knew the set of him even before I opened the door.

Tom Reyes had put on a few years and a badge that looked heavy on his chest. His hair had more gray at the temples, but his eyes were the same steady brown that used to make me feel like the only person in the room.

"Hello, Claire," he said. "I heard you were back."

"Small town," I said.

He glanced down the empty hall. "Can I come in?"

I stepped back. He smelled like cold air and coffee, the smell of a night shift. He took in the room—my bag, my recorder, the window I'd been staring out of—and sighed.

"You always did know how to pick the room with the view," he said. "I'm going to ask you for a favor, even though I know you won't like it. Don't turn this into a broadcast before we have facts. June Parker isn't officially a missing person yet. We're looking. People leave. Sometimes they don't tell anyone."

"She wouldn't leave Maya," I said. "Not like this."

He studied me, an old habit we both remembered. "You're not impartial. You're her friend and you're Ben's sister and you're the girl who left town and made a name for herself telling other people's stories. I'm not saying you can't help. I'm saying stay on the sidelines until we know which way the river runs."

"And if the river's been dammed?"

Tom's mouth tightened. "Then don't stand in front of it. I don't want to pull you out of it."

He left a minute later with a warning wrapped in something that might have been affection. I locked the door behind him and sat on the bed with my phone in my hand. My thumb hovered over the record button. I could do what he asked. I could wait. Or I could do what I do.

I set up the mic, clipped on the windscreen, and watched the lighthouse flash. I thought of the floor plan in my pocket, the red circles around rooms that probably hadn't been opened in years. I thought of Ben's lie and Tom's caution and Victor's smile. I thought of June's handwriting—Don't trust the ledger. Trust the lighthouse—and the way her voice had sounded when she was excited about a puzzle, like Christmas morning with words.

"Day one," I said into the mic. My voice sounded steady. "Willow Bay is doing what it does best: closing ranks. The Seacliff has already written a story that makes this easy. Girl leaves town. Girl needs space. Girl will be back with apologies and a tan. I'm here because I don't believe in easy stories. June, if you can hear this somehow, hold on. I'm coming."

I stopped recording and stared at the blinking light on my recorder. Outside, the foghorn blew again, and the lighthouse flashed, a rhythm as old as the bones under the cliffs. I sat in the quiet and waited for the town to tell me a lie. It didn't take long.

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