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Everything We Left in Darkness

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Introduction

In the city, Nora Blake kept her life small on purpose. One plant she never named. A desk shoved against a window overlooking a brick wall that borrowed its light from other people's mornings. She took freelance assignments that asked for clean copy and no feelings. When strangers asked what she did, she said, writing, and if they pressed, she smiled and said, nothing you've read. The phone rang on a wet Thursday when the radiator hissed like a warning. She let it go to voicemail because it was a local number she hadn't seen in years, a New England area code heavy as a tombstone.

The message was only a few words that knocked the center out of her. Emma. I'm sorry. Call us. By the time Nora pressed redial, her palms were damp and her throat knotted. Margaret's voice—her mother's—came through thin and controlled, as if pulled through wire: There was an accident. Emma's gone. They think—something with pills. It was quick. It was... peaceful. Nora's mind made a quiet, vicious circle around the word peaceful, as if turning it might give back a pulse.

She packed as the sky fell into a slate-colored afternoon. Two sweaters. The funeral dress she told herself she would never need again. A notebook that hadn't caught her handwriting in months. The plant stayed, drooping by the window, and she thought, absurdly, that she should leave the blinds open so it could watch the weather. The car service smelled like rain and coffee. The driver didn't speak. Nora didn't, either, not when she passed the state line, not when the trees thickened and the road narrowed to the idea of a road, not when the sign for Ashburn—Population 9,614—slid by, familiar as an old bruise.

The town had always worn its better face on Main Street. The hardware store flag snapped in the wind; a hand-lettered sign at Lily's café promised hot cider and pumpkin scones. There were chrysanthemums on the steps of the church, damp with mist. Nora felt the town looking at her through window glass, the way you look at your reflection to see what's changed. People she'd known as children carried grocery bags, took out their trash, pretended not to stare. Ashburn had a long memory and a talent for amnesia when it suited. It kept secrets in attics and baked them into pies.

At the house, Margaret met her on the porch and folded her in. The hug was brief and stiff. Nora smelled cold air and lavender lotion. Her mother's eyes were rimmed in red and unreadable. The living room had been rearranged since Nora last saw it, angles squared off, picture frames dusted to an inch of their lives. Emma's high school photo had moved to the mantel, the glass catching a sliver of gray light. Nora set her bag down and didn't sit. She couldn't. If she sat, it meant a shape had formed around this.

They told her the rest in pieces, as if facts arrived in small, safe doses. Emma had fallen down the back stairs at her building, alone. There were pills in her system—anti-anxiety, the doctor said, prescribed. The railing had a loose spindle, already reported to the landlord. The coroner used words like probable and accidental. Nora listened and nodded and felt her old job—a muscle she hated and needed—stiffen awake. Questions arranged themselves without permission. What time? Who found her? Where was her phone? Why was there a bruise in the wrong place, a mark no fall should leave? The details didn't yet fit, not quite, as if someone had pressed them into a shape the town could live with.

That night, in her childhood room, the wallpaper's tiny blue flowers watched from the past. She lay on the bed without undressing. Rain ticked against the window in a patient rhythm. Sleep came in broken films. In one, Emma was six and darting up the attic stairs, her hair a dark ribbon. In another, Nora heard their mother say, Not this again, Nora, leave it. And in the thin place between dreaming and waking, a voice, young and delighted: *Catch me, Nor. Bet you can't.* In the morning, the attic door would still stick the way it always had, a door that remembered every hand that had pushed it.

Ashburn woke to church bells and rumor. Lily Park texted her a line that felt like a lifeline: Come by. I've got breakfast that bites back. Nora went for the coffee and found instead the shape of her friend's hand over hers, warm, steady. The café was a theater of normal—toddlers, clatter, a chalkboard menu—but the air tasted like the hallway before a storm. He was here yesterday, Lily said quietly, meaning the detective. Marcus Hale. New to Ashburn, not new to death. He's thorough. He'll want you to let him do his job. The thing with Nora was, even when she wanted to let someone, she didn't know how.

On her way back, Nora walked past Town Hall, its white columns as clean as a lie. A campaign poster for Mayor Richard Calloway smiled from a bulletin board—For What We Build Together—and for a moment she saw the town the way brochures wanted it: safe streets, Saturday parades, the easy choreography of people who believed they were good. Then the wind lifted the edge of the poster and she saw beneath it another notice, older, corners curled: Meeting on zoning appeal postponed. She thought of Emma, stubborn as a struck match, pushing into rooms that did not want her. Emma had always asked the questions Nora had taught her to ask and then gone further, past the part where it was polite to stop.

At the funeral, faces turned like flowers to the sun and to the spectacle of grief. Condolences piled up, neat and useless. Someone from the Mayor's office offered help in that careful way that meant, We're watching this. And then a small, odd detail presented itself, the kind that catches in a reporter's throat: Emma's locket—childhood-gold, always on—was missing. Nora touched the place where it should be on her own

neck, muscle instead of chain. A thread pulled tight.

Later, alone in Emma's apartment, dust settled in the shape of time not lived. A plant on the sill crisped at the edges. The kitchen smelled like cinnamon and lemon cleaner. In the bedroom, a stack of papers had been burned down to a black, flaking sun in the wastebasket. On the desk, a notebook sat quiet and locked behind a password Emma would have thought was clever. Nora's fingers itched. She wasn't a reporter anymore. She had promised herself that. But love bends promises until they snap. The question didn't leave her: accident, suicide, or something with a name and a face?

She stood very still and listened to the apartment. The radiator clicked. A neighbor upstairs laughed and then hushed. Somewhere, water ran, and stopped. Nora opened the notebook to the first barrier it offered and felt her old life tilt under her feet, the way the town tilted under its own story. If she stepped forward, there would be no gracious retreat, no way to unknow what she found. She thought of Emma's last text, the one she hadn't answered fast enough—Can we talk? Later's fine—and realized that later had become a border she could cross only in one direction. *I'm here*, she told the room, and for the first time since the phone call, her voice didn't sound like a stranger's.

CHAPTER ONE: Black Suits in a Bright Church

The morning of the funeral broke clear and cruel, a sky so blue it felt like a reprimand. Nora stood in her childhood bedroom, wrestling with the black dress she hadn't worn since her grandfather's service a decade ago. The fabric was stiff, holding the ghost of that other grief in its seams. From downstairs, the murmur of her mother's voice on the phone was a low, continuous hum, the sound of logistics overriding lament. Coffee perked in the kitchen, a normal smell that had no right to exist on a day like this.

She finally won the battle with the zipper and stared at herself in the mirror on the back of the door. A stranger stared back—hollowed-out eyes, a mouth set in a line too thin for her face. This was the Nora who had covered city council corruption and factory fires, the one who could compartmentalize a tragedy into column inches. That Nora felt like a costume she was borrowing. The other one, the one who had once braided Emma's hair and stolen cookies from the cooling rack, was a tremor underneath.

Downstairs, Margaret was a figure of controlled motion, arranging a plate of untouched pastries left by a neighbor. She wore a dark gray suit, her hair pulled back with a severity that made her cheekbones sharp as axe blades. "People will be here soon," she said, not looking at Nora. "We should go. Punctuality matters. It shows respect."

"It shows we know how to follow a schedule," Nora said, the words out before she could stop them. The old friction, sparked by grief and nerves, crackled in the air.

Margaret's hands stilled on the plate. "Today isn't about us, Nora. It's about giving your sister a proper goodbye. A dignified one."

The word *dignified* hung between them, heavy with unsaid things. Emma had never cared much for dignity in the way their mother defined it—neat, public, palatable. Emma's dignity was in stubborn questions and stained fingertips from weeding her overgrown garden, in wearing mismatched socks to town meetings. Nora swallowed the retort. Arguing with Margaret was like pushing fog; you only exhausted yourself and it remained unchanged.

The drive to St. Anne's was silent except for the whisper of tires on wet leaves. Ashburn had donned its mourning face. Flags on Main Street hung at half-mast. A cluster of women from the Historical Society stood solemnly near the bakery, their heads together. Nora felt their gaze track the car like the slow turn of a lighthouse beam. Everyone knew the Blake car. Everyone knew its errand.

The church parking lot was already half-full. Black-suited figures moved toward the heavy oak doors like moths drawn to a somber flame. Nora recognized most of them: Mr. Henley from the hardware store, his wife dabbing at dry eyes; a knot of women from her mother's book club; a few younger faces she couldn't place, probably Emma's friends or colleagues from the library. And there, leaning against his sedan with a notebook in hand, was a man she didn't know. Tall, with a watchful stillness that was professional, not pious. Detective Marcus Hale, she presumed. He met her glance briefly, a nod of acknowledgment that offered no comfort, only assessment.

Inside, the church smelled of lilies and old wood polish, a combination that turned Nora's stomach. The flowers were enormous, white and funereal, framing the closed casket at the altar. Closed. She'd insisted on that, a small rebellion against Margaret's idea of a public viewing. She didn't want this town to see what the fall, or the pills, or whatever it truly was, had done to her sister's face. The casket was a simple oak, another choice that felt like an argument lost.

Lily found her in the second pew, slipping in beside her without a word. She just took Nora's hand, her grip firm and warm, a tether in the swirling quiet. Nora squeezed back, grateful for the silent solidarity. Across the aisle, she saw Mayor Richard Calloway settle into the front pew reserved for dignitaries. He was handsome in a polished, political way, his silver hair catching the light from the stained-glass windows depicting saints in serene suffering. He caught her eye and gave a small, solemn nod of condolence that looked perfectly practiced.

The service began. Reverend Ames, who had baptized both Blake girls, spoke in gentle, rolling tones about God's mysterious plan and Emma's vibrant spirit. He used words like *vivacious* and *caring*, words that could apply to anyone, that smoothed the rough edges of a specific person into a generic good. Nora listened to the eulogies—Emma's college roommate, a colleague from the Ashburn Public Library—and heard fragments of the sister she knew: her laugh that was too loud for quiet rooms, her habit of leaving philosophical quotes on sticky notes in the books she recommended, her fierce, often frustrating, sense of justice. But they were curated fragments, like polished stones from a riverbed, the jagged parts left underwater.

Nora's gaze kept drifting from the casket to the pews. She saw the faces, the appropriate sadness, and tried to map the town's geography of secrets onto them. Who here had known Emma was investigating something? Who here might have benefited from her silence? The questions were a low hum beneath the liturgy, a reporter's reflex she couldn't quiet. She saw Mrs. Gable, the town clerk, weeping quietly into a handkerchief. She saw Tom Rourke, who'd dated Emma in high school, his jaw tight. She saw the Calloway family, the Mayor's wife looking appropriately distraught, their adult son checking his phone under the program.

Then, during the final hymn, as the organ swelled, Nora's eye caught a detail. It was small, almost nothing. Mayor Calloway reached into his breast pocket for a handkerchief to dab at his brow. As he withdrew his hand, something glinted—a flash of gold on his pinky finger. It was a ring, a simple signet style. But Nora's breath hitched. It wasn't the ring itself. It was the way the light hit it, the specific, dull gleam of old gold. It looked, in that sliver of a second, terrifyingly familiar. It looked like the gold of a locket. Emma's locket.

The hymn ended. The moment passed. Calloway tucked his handkerchief away, his hand now resting on his knee. Was she imagining it? Grief played tricks on the eyes, turned shadows into threats. But the certainty was a cold stone in her gut. She would have to get closer. She would have to see.

The recession was a slow shuffle of black wool and muted condolences. Nora, moving in a daze beside her mother, accepted the handshakes and murmured sympathy. "So tragic." "Far too young." "She was such a light." The phrases blurred. Then a hand gripped hers, harder than necessary. She looked up into the face of Detective Hale. Up close, his eyes were a pale, tired blue.

"Ms. Blake. My condolences." His voice was low, meant for her alone. "I'd like to speak with you, briefly. At your convenience. There are a few follow-up questions."

"Of course," Nora said, her own voice sounding distant.

"Not today," he added, perhaps sensing the fracture beneath her composure. "Tomorrow. My card." He pressed a plain white card into her palm. His gaze held hers for a beat longer than necessary, a silent message: *Don't do anything rash*. Then he released her hand and melted back into the crowd.

Outside, the autumn sun was blinding after the dim church. People clustered on the steps, their voices louder now, the social performance shifting from solemnity to commiseration. Nora stood slightly apart, the detective's card a sharp edge in her hand. Lily appeared at her elbow again, passing her a bottle of water.

"You looked like you were about to faint in there," Lily said quietly.

"I'm fine. Did you see Calloway's ring?"

Lily blinked. "The Mayor? No. Why?"

"On his pinky. It looked..." Nora trailed off. It sounded insane. It was a common enough style of ring. But the gold, that specific hue...

"Nora." Lily's voice was gentle but firm. "You're exhausted. You're seeing connections

that aren't there. Today was... a lot. Let's get you home."

The wake at Margaret's house was a blur of casseroles, whispered conversations that stopped when Nora entered a room, and the oppressive cheer of people trying to prove life goes on. She escaped to the back porch, leaning against the railing, breathing in the cold air scented with decaying leaves. The sun was sinking, painting the clouds in streaks of orange and bruise-purple. Below, in the yard, a few late-season fireflies blinked their morse code in the growing dark.

The back door creaked open. She didn't turn, expecting Lily or her mother. It was neither.

"Nora Blake." The voice was male, smooth and cultivated. She turned. Mayor Calloway stood there, his suit jacket unbuttoned, a cup of coffee in his hand. He looked sympathetic, avuncular. "I hope you don't mind the intrusion. I just wanted to extend my personal condolences. Emma was... a remarkable young woman. A true loss for our community."

"Thank you, Mayor." Nora's eyes zeroed in on his right hand, the one holding the cup. The pinky finger was bare. No ring.

"She was passionate," Calloway continued, his gaze thoughtful, distant. "Sometimes perhaps too passionate for her own good. This town... it has its rhythms, its ways. Emma sometimes wanted to rush the music, so to speak." He took a sip of coffee. "It's a delicate thing, trying to improve a place you love. You can pull too hard on a thread."

The metaphor was too neat, too prepared. It felt like a warning wrapped in a platitude. "What thread was she pulling on?" Nora asked, keeping her tone neutral.

Calloway gave a small, sad smile. "Oh, you know Emma. Always a project. The library funding, the mill redevelopment plans... she had her hands in many pies. A keen mind. But grief can make us search for patterns where there are none, Nora. I hope you won't burden yourself with... speculation. The police have ruled it a tragic accident. Sometimes, the cruelest answer is the simplest one." He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, a gesture that felt both paternal and proprietary. "If you need anything, my office is always open. Truly."

He gave her shoulder a slight squeeze, then turned and went back inside, leaving Nora with the chilling certainty that he had said exactly what he intended to say, and that his ring had been very deliberately absent from his finger.

Later, when most of the mourners had gone and the house was settling into its new, Emma-shaped silence, Nora stood in the foyer. Margaret was in the kitchen, washing

dishes with a vigor that spoke of deep distress. On the hall table, amidst a scattering of sympathy cards, was a small, forgotten item: a printed program from the funeral. Nora picked it up. On the back, in elegant script, was a list of pallbearers. She hadn't paid attention during the service, lost in her own storm.

She read the names. And there, near the bottom, was one she recognized: *Henry Calloway*. The Mayor's son. Emma's age. They'd been in the same class at Ashburn High. A quiet, bookish boy, if she remembered right. Why was he a pallbearer? Had they been close? Nora couldn't recall Emma ever mentioning him in recent years.

The simple answer, the one Calloway had just advised her to accept, was that it was a civic gesture, a show of community support. But the reporter's mind, the one that had cost her jobs and relationships, saw a different shape. It saw a ring missing from a finger, a pallbearer who was a stranger's son, and a casket that should never have been closed. The thread Calloway had mentioned wasn't just pulled. It was wrapped around Emma's throat, and now, in the quiet of the empty house, Nora could feel its end, waiting for her hand.

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