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The Quiet Lies We Keep

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Introduction

Everything in Willowsby sounds like it is sleeping, even when Nora isn't. The ocean hushes beyond the dunes, a steady breathing at the town's edge, and the gulls cry like old hinges in the dim. In the kitchen, early light presses through the thin curtains in a narrow band, laying a silver blade across the sink. Nora stands in her robe, fingers curled around a cold mug she forgot to rinse last night. The house holds its nighttime shape—shoes lined by the door, a coat slung over a chair back, the low tick of the thermostat—like a stage set waiting for the actors to remember their cues.

She moves by memory. Switch on the kettle. Rinse the mug. The tap water runs cold at first, bright with the faint, metallic bite of the pipes. There is the soft rasp of ceramic on the counter, the nearly invisible grit of salt on the windowsill from days when the wind pushed the sea up the street. Lily's boots are by the mat, one tipped over on its side, a smear of sand like a bruise at the heel. Upstairs, Lily turns in her sleep; a creak in the ceiling answers. Daniel's office door is closed—the same way it was last night—his jacket hung with the practiced neatness he prefers, seams aligned, pocket square smoothed flat by a careful hand.

Nora has a careful hand too. It's what makes her good at the archives: dates labeled, papers flattened under weights, edges repaired with translucent tape that disappears against the page. She likes the way facts fit in boxes, the way names line up in tidy rows. Even so, sometimes a box surprises her. A receipt tucked where it shouldn't be. A photograph with a face turned away. In her own mind, drawers stick at odd moments—small stutters in the catalog—where a day is a little dimmer, a room she must feel her way through by touch. She tells herself it's the insomnia, the strain of cataloging other people's losses. But there's also the older thing she does not name out loud: the rain-slick road years ago, the bright swing of headlights, the taste of copper and winter air. The scar at her hairline is thin as a thread, easy to forget until it catches the light.

The kettle hums toward a whistle. She stands very still and thinks of Daniel's laugh at a neighborhood dinner, how it shows all his teeth, affable and bright, and how, at home, the same mouth thins when the mail is late or the door is left ajar. He is good at making messes look like order; he speaks softly when he's angry. They have learned the choreography of small rooms: how to pass in the hallway without touching, how to say "fine" and let it mean "not now." Lily is the axis they circle, their gravity, their agreed-upon truth. There are things Nora has not asked because she already knows the shape of the answers Daniel will give—rounded, polished, safe. Quiet is a kind of pact.

Willowsby demands pacts. The town is a set of repetitions that looks like safety from the outside: the same coffee poured by the same hands at the diner, the same red tide warnings posted at the pier, the same faces offering the same chatter—weather, school fundraisers, the pothole outside the post office that no one gets around to fixing. People look and look away with equal vigor. Windows reflect more than they reveal. When she walks to work, Nora counts the crab traps stacked by the bait shop and the ways people pretend not to notice one another. History is a living thing here, kept in shoeboxes under beds and in whispers traded over fences. She knows, better than most, that the clean line a record offers is a fiction stitched over a seam.

She pours the tea and inhales the floral steam, breath hitching on the memory of lavender sachets her mother once tucked in drawers, the scent of laundry on a Sunday. Sensations open doors: the clatter of a spoon against porcelain, the slick feel of a raincoat sleeve, the faint iron warmth of a radiator as it kicks on. Beneath everything is the ocean, patient and ceaseless, advancing and retreating as if teaching the town to breathe. Nora doesn't always trust her memories, but she trusts these. The sound of Lily's laugh from down the hall in summer. The weight of a wool coat across her shoulders in March. The comfort of paper under her fingers, the past willing to hold still if she coaxes it just right.

Lately, the nights have lengthened. She wakes at 3:12, 3:18, 3:26, the clock's green numbers changing without mercy, and lies listening to a silence full of small noises: the ice maker's cough, the flaw in the fan that clicks every seventh turn, the soft chime of a phone charging in the next room. Sometimes she thinks of stepping outside into the cool, salt-pocked dark and walking the length of Harbor Street until the pavement gives way to sand, until she can hide her feet in the cold. Other times she stays very still and counts her heartbeats until they slow. She tells herself—like a nurse with a soothing voice—that morning is near, that whatever wakes her will be easy in daylight.

But morning, like truth, is not always kind. There are moments when the present shudders and something old looks back at her from the mirror—some version of herself she has been trying for years to retire. She has learned to compromise with it, to keep the peace. She has learned that marriage is a series of edited statements, that memory can be less a record than an agreement. In Willowsby, people forgive what they can name and punish what they can't. Nora has tried to be ordinary enough to disappear.

From far off, a siren threads itself through the dawn, thin at first, then clearer, an approaching seam ripper in the quiet cloth of the street. She sets the mug down and listens, pulse ticking high in her throat, the steam lifting like breath from the tea. The sound swells, turns down their road, and, just as she reaches to still the vibrating glass of the window, three hard knocks land on the front door.

CHAPTER ONE: Morning After

The cold didn't wake Nora; the texture did. It was the unforgiving grit of the kitchen floorboards pressing against her cheek, a sensation so foreign to her usual routine of waking under a down comforter that it bypassed her consciousness and went straight to her nerves. Her eyes snapped open, but the world was a blur of low-angled sunlight and dust motes dancing in a silver haze. She tried to lift her head, and the room tilted violently to the left. A sharp, rhythmic throb pulsed behind her right temple, timed perfectly with the frantic drum of her heart.

She was lying on the hardwood between the island and the pantry. Slowly, with a groan that felt like it was tearing through rusted pipes, Nora pushed herself up onto her elbows. The first thing she saw was the blood. It wasn't a pool—not the dramatic, cinematic lake of red one might expect—but a series of dark, tacky smears on the honey-colored oak. She reached up, her fingers trembling, and winced as they grazed a jagged crust at her hairline. The skin was hot and swollen. When she pulled her hand away, the pads of her fingers were stained with a drying, rusty brown.

Memory was a fractured mirror. She looked at the blood and tried to find the incident that caused it. There had been a glass of wine—no, two. She remembered the sound of the ocean, more aggressive than usual, and the feeling of a coat against her shoulders. Had she gone out? The back door was slightly ajar, a sliver of the morning's mist creeping across the threshold like a ghost. This was wrong. Nora was a woman of locks and bolts, a woman who checked the stove twice and the windows thrice. To find the door unlatched felt like a violation of her very nature.

As she struggled to her feet, the kitchen began to resolve into sharper, more distressing details. Near the door, a single footprint was stamped into the wood in a grayish-brown sludge. It was a partial print, the serrated edge of a heavy sole, dragging slightly toward the center of the room. It wasn't hers. She looked down at her own feet; she was wearing thick wool socks, the bottoms clean except for a bit of lint. She was still in the clothes she'd worn yesterday—a navy sweater and charcoal slacks—but they were rumpled and smelled faintly of woodsmoke and something sharper, something like ozone.

She grabbed the edge of the granite countertop to steady herself. The silence of the house felt heavy, almost predatory. "Daniel?" she whispered, her voice cracking. There was no answer. She looked toward the hallway that led to the stairs. Lily's room would be quiet this time of morning, the teenager buried under a mountain of pillows, but Daniel should have been up. He was a man of the 6:00 a.m. gym rotation and the 7:15 a.m. espresso.

Nora moved toward the sink, her gait unsteady. She needed to wash her face, to scrub the evidence of this mysterious lapse from her skin before anyone saw her. But as she turned the faucet, her gaze fell on the small, round kitchen table. Sitting there, dead center on the placemat, was an object that didn't belong. It was a heavy brass key ring with a miniature lighthouse fob—the kind sold at the Willowsby gift shop by the pier. Nora didn't own a lighthouse keychain. Daniel didn't either. He found them tacky.

She stared at it, her breath coming in shallow hitches. A flash of a face flickered in her mind—wide eyes, a laugh that was a bit too loud, the smell of expensive, floral perfume. Maya. Her neighbor from two doors down. Maya had a keychain like that. Nora had seen her jangling it while they chatted over the garden fence just three days ago. Why was it on Nora's kitchen table? And why did the sight of it make Nora's stomach drop into a cold, dark abyss?

A sudden, sharp sound from the front of the house made her jump, a jolt of electricity shooting through her spine. It was the mail slot clattering, followed by the heavy thud of the morning edition hitting the floor. The sound was so mundane it should have been a relief, but in the vacuum of her missing hours, it felt like a starter's pistol. She checked the clock on the microwave: 7:42 a.m. She had lost nearly six hours. The last thing she remembered clearly was Daniel closing his office door at 1:00 a.m. while she sat in the living room, nursing a second glass of Merlot and watching the fog roll in over the dunes.

She began to move with a frantic, desperate energy. She grabbed a dishcloth, dampened it with cold water, and began to scrub the blood from the floor. She worked on her hands and knees, her breath hitching, her mind racing to construct a plausible narrative. *I tripped. I hit my head on the corner of the island. I passed out.* It was simple. It was clean. It was the kind of thing that happened to people who didn't sleep enough. But it didn't explain the muddy footprint, and it certainly didn't explain the lighthouse keychain.

As she finished wiping the floor, she heard the heavy, rhythmic tread of footsteps on the stairs. Daniel. She scrambled up, tossing the bloodied cloth into the back of the laundry cupboard, hiding it behind a jug of bleach. She smoothed her hair over the cut on her temple just as her husband rounded the corner into the kitchen.

Daniel was already dressed for the office in a crisp, light blue button-down and tailored trousers. He looked exactly as he always did—composed, architectural, and entirely in control of his environment. He stopped when he saw her, his eyes drifting over her disheveled clothes and the pale, gaunt cast of her features.

"Nora?" he said, his voice a smooth baritone that carried a hint of practiced concern. "You look like you didn't sleep at all. And why are you wearing yesterday's clothes?"

"I... I fell asleep on the sofa," she lied, the words tasting like copper. "I must have bumped into the table when I got up to come into the kitchen. I feel a bit lightheaded."

Daniel stepped closer, his hand reaching out to tilt her chin up toward the light. His touch was cool, his fingers lingering just a second too long on her jawline. He studied the area where the cut was hidden beneath her hair. Nora held her breath, waiting for him to push the strands aside, to see the dried blood she hadn't quite managed to clean from her skin.

"You're very pale," he noted, his expression unreadable. "Maybe you should stay home today. The archives aren't going anywhere."

"I'm fine, Daniel. Just a headache." She stepped back, breaking the contact. She felt an irrational urge to hide the lighthouse keychain, but it was sitting right there on the table. Before she could move, Daniel's gaze followed hers. He looked at the brass lighthouse, his eyebrows knitting together in a small, sharp V.

"Is that Maya's?" he asked. His tone was casual, but Nora noticed the way his grip tightened slightly on his leather briefcase.

"I... I think so," Nora said, her heart hammering against her ribs. "She must have dropped it when she stopped by yesterday afternoon. I found it under the chair this morning."

It was a second lie, layered on top of the first. Maya hadn't stopped by yesterday. Maya had been out of town—or so she'd told Nora the week before. Daniel stared at the keys for a long moment, then looked back at Nora. There was a flicker of something in his eyes—not suspicion, exactly, but a deep, calculating curiosity that made her feel like a specimen under a microscope.

"Right," he said slowly. "I'll drop them off on my way out. Her car is in the driveway."

"No!" Nora blurted out, her voice a pitch too high. "I'll do it. I need the walk. The air will help my head."

Daniel shrugged, a graceful movement of his shoulders. "Suit yourself. Just try not to fall over in the street." He leaned in and kissed her cheek—a dry, perfunctory gesture—and then he was gone, the front door closing with a firm, final click that seemed to echo through the house.

Nora slumped against the counter, her legs feeling like water. She reached out and grabbed the keys, the metal cold and heavy in her palm. She needed to get to Maya's. She needed to see the woman's face, to hear her voice, to find some anchor in the

reality of the previous night. She walked to the hallway mirror and did her best to fix her hair, pinning it back so the bruise was mostly obscured, though the swelling was starting to darken into a nasty shade of plum.

She didn't wake Lily. She didn't trust herself to speak to her daughter, whose perception was far too sharp for Nora's current state of fragility. Instead, she slipped into her trench coat, tucked the keys deep into her pocket, and stepped out onto the porch.

Willowsby was waking up in shades of gray. The fog hadn't fully lifted, clinging to the eaves of the Victorian houses and dampening the sound of the distant surf. The air was sharp with salt and the smell of rotting kelp, a signature of the changing tide. Nora walked down the steps, her boots clicking on the pavement, a sound that felt dangerously loud in the morning hush.

Maya's house was a smaller, more modern bungalow, painted a cheerful yellow that looked sickly in the overcast light. As Nora approached, she noticed something that made her stop short. Maya's front door was wide open. Not just unlatched, but swinging slowly on its hinges in the light breeze, revealing the dark maw of the entryway.

The silence coming from the house wasn't the silence of sleep. It was the heavy, weighted silence of something gone wrong. Nora stood on the sidewalk, her hand trembling in her pocket, her fingers curled so tightly around the lighthouse keychain that the metal dug into her skin. She should call out. She should knock. She should turn around and run back to the safety of her own kitchen.

Instead, she found herself moving up the path. Each step felt like walking through deep water. Her mind was screaming at her to stop, but her body was propelled by a sickening, morbid necessity. She reached the porch and looked inside. The hallway was a mess—a coat rack overturned, a shattered vase of dried flowers strewn across the runner.

"Maya?" she called out, her voice barely a whisper.

No response. The house smelled of the same woodsmoke and ozone she had detected on her own clothes. Nora took one step over the threshold, her eyes adjusting to the dim interior. She moved toward the living room, her breath caught in her throat.

There, near the fireplace, she saw a hand.

It was pale, the fingers curled slightly, resting on the edge of a Persian rug. Nora froze. She didn't want to see the rest. She wanted to erase the last five minutes, the last six hours, the last ten years of her life. But as she stood there, paralyzed by a terror that

felt like ice in her veins, she heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up fast at the curb.

Blue and red lights began to pulse against the yellow siding of the house, rhythmic and urgent. The siren, which had been a distant thread of sound only minutes ago, died with a final, mournful wail right outside the gate.

Nora looked down at her hand. She was still holding the keys. She looked at her sleeves, noticing for the first time a smear of something dark on the cuff of her coat—a match for the stains she'd scrubbed off her kitchen floor.

The front door behind her creaked further open as heavy footsteps thudded onto the porch. Nora didn't turn around. She couldn't. She stared at the hand on the rug, her mind a white-hot void where her memories should have been.

"Ma'am?" a voice called out, firm and authoritative. "Police. Step away from the body and put your hands where I can see them."

Nora's fingers spasmed, and the lighthouse keychain hit the floor with a bright, metallic chime that sounded like a bell tolling for the end of the world. She turned slowly, her heart stopping as she looked into the eyes of a uniformed officer. Behind him, standing by the squad car, was a man in a dark suit with a tired, observant face—Detective Aaron Miles.

The morning after had arrived, and it was far colder than the night.

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