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The Last Witness on Marlowe Street

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Introduction

By the time the bus let Claire off at the corner of Marlowe and Third, the river fog had climbed the gutters and settled low, a wet, metallic breath in her mouth. Paint peeled from the storefronts like sunburn, curling back to expose older names—the barber that became a vape shop that became a shuttered promise. Neon from the laundromat blinked in a tired pulse, the O in OPEN stammering like a heartbeat that couldn't decide whether to keep going. She adjusted the strap of her bag and stared down the block she'd spent half her life sprinting past. Marlowe Street looked like someone had tried to smile and cracked a tooth.

The town paper lay facedown against a storm drain, ink bleeding into the concrete. Claire picked it up, hands already smudged from a thousand other headlines, and flipped to the front. REMAINS FOUND NEAR QUARRY, the Gazette announced in blocky authority. Underneath, a smaller line: Police Reopen 20-Year-Old Case. Her throat tightened against a reflex she didn't trust—grief or relief, she couldn't tell. She had left this place to learn how to ask better questions, to tie truth into something neat enough to print. But truth had never been neat here. It had seeped, pooled, hardened like the tar lines rethreading the cracked road.

A campaign banner lifted in the wind from the hardware store awning, bright as a bruise. Daniel Mercer's smile was all varnish and certainty, a promise you could almost believe if you didn't know how quickly promises rotted in damp. MAYORAL CANDIDATE. COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT NOW. His name was everywhere—on signs, on lips, in the hush that followed when people saw Claire and remembered who she had been then. She felt their eyes from porch shadows, curtains breathing with the draft. Outsider, insider. Witness, girl, journalist. Pick a name and hope it fits.

Ruth's house waited at the end of the block, the place where the porch sagged and a single maple scraped at the roofline like it wanted in. The screen door creaked the same way it always had. Inside: the soft wheeze of the oxygen concentrator, a clock that beat too loudly in the small rooms, the lemon cleaner Ruth used to cover the smell of damp wood. Her mother was thinner than Claire remembered, her face a map of evasions and tiredness, her hands still busy with invisible mending. "You shouldn't have come," Ruth said, but didn't mean it. "You look like you haven't slept." Claire didn't tell her that sleep had been rationed into thirds—work, worry, and the dream that dissolved as soon as she opened her eyes.

She placed the Gazette on the kitchen table, its headline cutting through the floral vinyl like a wound. Two decades ago a girl had gone missing and the town had politely let the story fade, like the flyers left to bleach in the sun. Claire had been the last to

see her. That's what everyone said. That's what the old interviews hinted at when reporters had come sniffing back then, leaning too hard into their microphones, waiting for a child to conjure something the adults could not. Over the years, the edges of that night had worn smooth, as if a thumb had rubbed them compulsively until there was nothing left to catch on. She had learned to live in the gap.

On the counter, a stack of prescription bottles lined up like gravestones. Claire touched the labels with journalist's habit—dates, doses, patterns—and then looked past them to the window over the sink. The glass had bubbled with age, warping the street into a watercolor: Lena Ortiz's porch swing, empty; the Mercer banner hanging too white against the sky; the funeral home's roofline black as a drawn eyebrow at the end of the block. Somewhere beyond it, the quarry cupped the forest like a held breath. The article had said hikers found a shallow grave when the trail washed out. "Bad luck," the police called it. Claire had never believed in luck here, only in what was owed and what was kept.

Ruth reached for the paper and then drew her hand back as if it had heat. "They'll turn this into a show," she said. "They always do." Her voice was soft but it carried something stubborn under it, an old root in the soil you couldn't pull up without tearing the garden. Claire wanted to ask the questions she'd asked a hundred strangers in a hundred kitchens, but this table was her first newsroom and Ruth had always been better at silences. "I'm just here to help," Claire said, and the words tasted like compromise. Help her mother. Help herself. Help a ghost that had learned her name before she learned her own.

Later, when the daylight thinned to plywood gray, Claire stepped onto the porch to breathe air that wasn't disinfectant and memory. The neighborhood was chorus and hush: a dog chain rattling, a faraway siren, the muffled bass of a car moving too slow for anyone not looking for something. The wind found the copper chimes Ruth had hung by the gutter. They did not sing so much as rattle, a thin, reluctant sound, and in it something loosened behind Claire's eyes—not a picture, not a clear line, just the small, precise click of metal against metal. A circle of charms, skimming bone. A bright, tinny note like laughter swallowed by water.

She stood very still, the hair at the back of her neck lifting. It wasn't a thought. It was a feeling, a contour she knew well enough to trace in the dark—a wrist flashing in porch light, the weightless clatter of a bracelet as someone turned too fast, and under it all the faint thread of a song, a scratched chorus snagging on the same word over and over as the night held its breath.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The ceiling fan in Claire's childhood bedroom wobbled with a rhythmic, off-kilter tick that sounded like a metronome counting down to an argument. It was the same sound that had lulled her to sleep through high school, yet now it felt like a warning. She lay on the twin-sized mattress, her feet dangling off the edge, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars she had pasted to the plaster twenty years ago. They were dim now, their phosphorescence exhausted by two decades of holding onto the light, much like the town of Marlowe Street itself. The air in the room was heavy with the scent of lavender sachets and the underlying dampness of a house that had stopped fighting the humidity of the valley.

She had spent the last decade in a cramped apartment in Chicago, where the noise of the 'L' train drowned out the silence of her own thoughts. In the city, she was Claire Bennett, the woman who could pull a lead out of a redacted police report and stare down a crooked alderman until he blinked. But here, under the sloping roof of 412 Marlowe Street, she felt the layers of her professional armor peeling away like the wallpaper in the downstairs hallway. She wasn't an investigative journalist here; she was just Ruth's daughter, the girl who had stayed behind when the world went dark, and then ran as soon as the sun came up.

Claire sat up, her joints protesting the soft dip of the old springs. She reached for her laptop bag but stopped. Her mother was downstairs, probably hovering near the stove or rearranging the same three photographs on the mantle. Ruth had always been a woman of frantic, quiet motions—a bird trapped in a glass jar. Since the news of the quarry discovery had broken forty-eight hours ago, those motions had become even more jagged. Claire could hear the muffled television through the floorboards, the local news anchor's voice a low drone. They were talking about the bones again. Everyone was talking about the bones.

Descending the stairs, Claire avoided the third step from the bottom, the one that groaned loud enough to wake the dead. She found Ruth in the kitchen, her back to the door. The older woman was staring out the window into the backyard, where a rusted swing set sat strangled by ivy. Ruth's shoulders were hunched, her frame appearing dangerously fragile under a thick wool cardigan she wore despite the indoor heat. The oxygen concentrator hummed in the corner, its plastic tubing snaking across the linoleum like a translucent vine.

"You should eat something, Claire," Ruth said without turning around. Her voice was thin, like paper that had been folded and unfolded too many times. "There's some chicken salad in the fridge. I got it from the deli. Lena says they've improved their

recipe, though I think they use too much dill."

"I'm not hungry, Mom," Claire replied, leaning against the doorframe. She watched her mother's reflection in the darkened windowpane. "The Gazette said the sheriff's department is holding a press conference tomorrow morning. They've moved the remains to the county morgue for identification. They're saying it's definitely a female, late teens."

Ruth's hand went to the collar of her sweater, her fingers twitching against the wool. "They say a lot of things in this town. Most of it is just wind. You shouldn't get caught up in it. You're here to help me with my appointments, remember? Dr. Aris wants to see me on Tuesday about the new meds."

"I know why I'm here," Claire said, keeping her voice steady, the tone she used when an interview subject started to veer off-script. "But we both know who they think is in that quarry. It's been twenty years, Mom. People don't forget a girl like Sarah Vance. Especially not after the way everything ended."

"Nothing ended," Ruth snapped, finally turning around. Her eyes were clouded but sharp with a sudden, flickering intensity. "It just stopped. There's a difference, Claire. And if you've come back here thinking you're going to play detective with our lives, you can pack that bag right back up. This town has a way of swallowing people who ask too many questions. It already swallowed enough of you once."

The sharpness of the remark stung. Claire remembered the months of therapy, the soft-voiced doctors in clinical rooms asking her to describe the woods, the lights, the sounds. She remembered the frustration of reaching into her mind and pulling back nothing but a handful of gray mist. To the town, she was the "Last Witness," a title that carried both pity and a lingering, unspoken accusation. If she had just remembered more, if she hadn't been so traumatized, maybe Sarah's parents wouldn't have moved away in a cloud of grief and unanswered questions.

"I'm not twelve anymore," Claire said quietly. "I'm a journalist. I know how to handle myself."

Ruth let out a dry, rattling cough and adjusted her nasal cannula. "A journalist. You think a press badge is a shield? In Marlowe Street, it's just a target. Go to bed, Claire. The damp is getting into your head."

Ruth shuffled past her, the plastic tubing of her oxygen tank clicking against the floorboards. Claire stayed in the kitchen, the silence of the house closing in on her. She felt the familiar itch of a story—the one that had been humming in the back of her brain for two decades. She opened the refrigerator, not for the chicken salad, but for a glass of water to wash down the metallic taste of anxiety. As she reached for a pitcher,

her sleeve caught on the edge of a drawer in the small antique hutch Ruth kept near the pantry.

The drawer slid open a few inches with a reluctant rasp. Claire went to shove it shut, but something caught her eye. Beneath a stack of tattered coupons and old utility bills, a corner of matte paper poked out. It wasn't the glossy finish of a modern print. It was the thick, slightly textured cardstock of an old-fashioned photograph. Claire hesitated, listening for her mother's footsteps upstairs. Hearing nothing but the rhythmic thumping of the oxygen machine, she reached in and pulled the photo free.

It was a Polaroid, the colors bled out into sepia and muted greens. The image showed a group of people at a Fourth of July picnic—the town square's gazebo was visible in the background, draped in bunting that looked more gray than blue. In the center stood a younger Ruth, laughing, her arm linked with a woman Claire didn't recognize. To their left was a man in a police uniform, his hat tipped back, a wide, easy grin on his face. He looked vital, untouchable. Claire recognized him instantly: a young Marcus Hale, long before the weight of the badge had soured his expression.

But it was the figure in the background that made Claire's breath hitch. Standing near the edge of the frame, half-obsured by the shadow of an oak tree, was a man watching the group. He wasn't smiling. He was dressed in a dark suit that looked far too expensive for a local picnic. Even in the grainy, aged photo, the sharpness of his features was unmistakable. It was Daniel Mercer, but he looked different—hungry, his eyes fixed on the woman standing next to Ruth with an intensity that bordered on predatory.

Claire flipped the photo over. In her mother's cramped, elegant handwriting, three words were scrawled across the back: *July 14th. Late.*

She frowned. Sarah Vance had disappeared on July 14th. But the official police report, the one Claire had memorized during her first year of j-school, stated that the annual town picnic had been cancelled that year due to a massive storm cell that had knocked out power to the entire valley. The report said everyone had been hunkered down in their homes by six o'clock.

Claire looked at the photo again. The sun was out. The bunting was dry. The people were celebrating. The discrepancy was a small thing, a minor detail in a twenty-year-old cold case, but to Claire, it felt like a loose thread on a cheap suit. If the picnic hadn't been cancelled, why would the official record say it was? And why was her mother hiding a photo of a day that supposedly never happened?

A floorboard creaked overhead. Claire quickly slid the photograph into the pocket of her jeans and pushed the drawer shut just as the sound of Ruth's bedroom door closing echoed through the house. She stood in the dim kitchen, her heart hammering

against her ribs. The sensory trigger she'd felt on the porch—the sound of the chimes, the ghost of a bracelet—clashed with the physical evidence in her pocket.

She walked back into the hallway, her eyes landing on the heavy oak dresser that sat in the foyer. It was an heirloom, filled with linens and the detritus of a lifetime spent in one zip code. On top of it sat a small, decorative wooden bowl where Ruth kept her keys and spare change. Tucked partially under the bowl was another piece of paper, a folded slip of yellow carbon from a local business.

Claire picked it up. It was a receipt from 'Mercer Construction & Development,' dated only three days ago. It was for a "private consultation," and at the bottom, in the space for a signature, was a sprawling, authoritative 'M'.

The air in the house suddenly felt too thin. Her mother, who lived on a fixed pension and complained about the price of deli salad, was having private consultations with the town's wealthiest developer—the man currently running for mayor on a platform of "clearing away the rot."

Claire moved toward the front door, needing the bite of the night air to clear her head. She stepped onto the porch and looked down Marlowe Street. The fog had thickened, turning the streetlamps into glowing, indistinct orbs. Across the way, a car was idling, its headlights off. As Claire watched, the vehicle slowly began to roll forward, its tires whispering against the damp asphalt. It didn't speed up; it just drifted past the house, a dark shape in the mist.

As it passed under the weak light of the corner lamp, Claire caught a glimpse of the driver. He didn't look at her, but she saw the silhouette of a heavy jaw and the glint of a watch as he gripped the steering wheel. The car disappeared into the fog, leaving behind only the smell of exhaust and the unsettling feeling of being watched.

She reached into her pocket and touched the edge of the Polaroid. The paper felt cold, almost damp. Her mind raced through the inconsistencies: the picnic, the storm, the receipt, the man in the suit. She thought of Sarah Vance, who had walked into the woods and never walked out, and the girl she had been—the girl who had seen something she couldn't remember.

Claire looked back at the house, at the flickering blue light of the television in the living room where her mother had left it on. The town of Marlowe Street was a tomb, and she was beginning to realize that the bones in the quarry were only the beginning. The real secrets weren't buried in the dirt; they were hidden in plain sight, tucked into drawers and written in the margins of everyday lives.

She pulled her phone from her back pocket and dialed a number she hadn't called in three years. It rang four times before a gravelly, familiar voice answered.

"Bennett?" Detective Marcus Hale sounded like he'd been gargling glass. "I heard you were back. You shouldn't be."

"I found a photo, Marcus," Claire said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "The picnic. July 14th. Why does the file say it was rained out?"

There was a long, heavy silence on the other end of the line. Claire could hear the faint sound of a police scanner in the background. When Marcus finally spoke, the warmth from the old photograph was nowhere to be found.

"Stay out of it, Claire. For your mother's sake, just stay in the house."

The line went dead. Claire stared at the phone, the chill of the night finally seeping through her sweater. She looked down at the street again and saw a small object lying on the bottom step of the porch, something that hadn't been there when she arrived. She walked down and picked it up.

It was a small, silver charm—a tiny, tarnished lighthouse. It was identical to the ones she remembered Sarah Vance wearing on her wrist. Claire squeezed the metal until it bit into her palm, the sharp edge a cold reminder that the past wasn't dead. It was just waiting for her to wake up.

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