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Every Neighbor Keeps a Secret

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Introduction

In Ashfield, summer arrived in a hush before the cicadas found their voices. The maples along Warren Street lifted their leaves like green hands cupping light, and the old mill river shouldered past the footbridge with a steady patience that had lulled generations into believing they knew what ran beneath. Each morning the town woke to the scrape of porch brooms and the tap of mailboxes closing, to coffee cooling on kitchen counters and the small courtesies that passed from neighbor to neighbor like coins: a wave, a borrowed ladder, the promise to keep an eye out. It was the kind of place where you learned to speak softly because the houses sat close and sound carried, and where people wore their histories like good coats—brushed clean, buttons shined, frayed seams tucked out of sight.

Lila Hart had come back to Ashfield for reasons that were easier to explain than to live. The divorce papers had left her with a last name that matched the one etched over her father's hardware store, and when Evan Hart's hands began to shake—a rattling that made screws skitter like raindrops—she moved into the spare room and learned the inventory list by heart. By day she took the early slot at Ashfield Middle as a school counselor, guiding kids who had already grown used to the weight of expectation, who counted detentions like pennies and worried about futures they couldn't name. Afternoons, she stocked shelves and made bank deposits, answering to the same men and women who had once corrected her spelling and called out to her from convertible roofs. At night she walked the block, one loop along Victor Avenue and back, the river whispering behind the fencing, the footbridge a thin line she could trace in the dark without thinking.

She told herself the arrangement was temporary, a bridge between the life she had tried to build and something undefined that would come later. The routine was a kind of truce she made with herself—coffee at six, bus duty at seven-thirty, a quiet word to a seventh grader who flinched when the bell rang, an egg salad sandwich eaten in the shade of the courtyard maple, her father's careful ledger lines waiting on the counter when she returned. She kept her voice even and her gestures small, a practice that began years ago, after the accident no one in Ashfield talked about directly anymore. When sleep broke, it did so like thin ice, quick and soundless, leaving her wide-eyed and breathless, the smell of river mud slick in her throat. On those nights, she stood in the kitchen and watched the porch swing move with the night breeze and told herself the town was quiet because it was peaceful, not because it had learned to keep its stories under glass.

Mia Carter lived three houses down in the blue Victorian with the gingerbread trim, the one everyone called the Dollhouse even though Mia would roll her eyes and say,

“Please, it needs new plumbing, not a ribbon.” She was twenty-nine and seemed as if she had been born knowing how to turn a room toward her, someone who could make the PTA meeting feel like a late-night talk show and then remember to send soup when Mrs. Keane’s hip went out. Mia collected stray cats and fundraising committees with the same chaotic affection, and though some found her relentless brightness tiring, most of Ashfield loved her in the way small towns love their own—generously, until it wasn’t convenient. Lila liked her because Mia asked real questions and actually waited for answers, because she could be messy and late and yet attentive in a way that made Lila feel both seen and wary. There was a tilt to Mia’s smile that hinted at private negotiations, an undercurrent beneath the charm, as if she were always buying herself time.

On weekends, the town let itself breathe a little. The farmer’s market spread over the green like a quilt, strawberries sweet enough to stain your fingers, the reverend’s booth offering lemonade with an earnestness that dared you to refuse. Children ran in shoes that never quite fit after their last growth spurt, and gossip braided itself into the breeze—gentle, teasing, yes, but with threads that could cut if pulled too tight. Mayor Ellen Cross appeared in perfectly pressed linen, and men from the volunteer firehouse swapped stories that grew taller with each retelling. Under the pavilion, Jonah Reed, Mia’s on-again, off-again, tuned his guitar and sang covers that made old songs sound new. Lila lingered at the edge, where the green tipped toward the riverbank. From there, Ashfield resembled the postcards in the drugstore carousel: a town like a promise, the footbridge arcing modestly, church steeple pricking the sky, water dark and steady as a kept secret.

What Lila had learned since coming home was that peace in Ashfield was often a performance, a layered practice of knowing and not-knowing, of squinting past the bent fence post and pretending it had always leaned that way. She understood the choreography: where to stand at the block party so you could slip away unnoticed, how to ask after a neighbor’s son without asking why he hadn’t been seen lately, which questions counted as kindness and which were considered meddling. She was good at this dance. It kept the edges soft. It let her move through days that might otherwise catch on old memories and tear. But she also knew that performances end. The lights come up. People blink. It’s not the reveal that hurts as much as the sudden sight of what you allowed yourself not to see.

Before the summer unspooled, before the flyers and the vigils and the cameras stationed at the rotary, Lila would sometimes meet Mia at the footbridge just after dusk, when the heat bled off the day and the water took on the color of bruised peaches. They would lean on the rail and trade small talk—cat antics, schoolyard drama, the undertow of town politics—until Mia grew quieter, fingers tracing circles in the condensation on her cup. “You ever think,” Mia would ask, voice softened by the river’s shush, “how much easier it is to keep something to yourself when everyone assumes they already know you?” Lila would answer with a noncommittal hum

because the truth was yes. She had built a life on that ease. And when Mia laughed, quick and bright, the bridge seemed to steady under them both, as if the things unsaid could be made harmless by proximity.

Ashfield, from the outside, was a place that took care. It patched roads, delivered casseroles, sent notes signed with too many exclamation points. It did not like to consider what could crawl through the seams if you let your attention wander. Lila's father still greeted customers by name, still fixed hinges brought in wrapped in paper towels, still kept a photograph of Lila's mother on the office shelf—a woman who had left before Lila could walk and yet continued to smile in the same dress year after year. He liked his books balanced and his evenings predictable. Lila did not ask him what woke him sometimes in the hour before dawn, the same hour that found her at the sink, watching the swing move. They accommodated each other the way houses do, expanding and contracting with the weather, their creaks and sighs considered part of the structure.

When the invitation came for the midsummer block party—hand-lettered, taped to every mailbox on Victor Avenue—it felt like one more opportunity to practice being okay. String lights would be strung, grills rolled to curbs, the paper goods stacked by the cooler that always leaked. Someone would bring sparklers; someone would complain about the parking. Lila would make her pasta salad and count it as participation. Mia would float from yard to yard in a red sundress that made everyone look twice. The river would keep its own counsel, moving past as it always did, indifferent to laughter and music and the scaffolding of stories that held the street up.

What Lila did not know—what Ashfield preferred not even to imagine—was how quickly a night could tilt. That by the time the coals went gray and the last plastic cup skittered down the street, the town would be awake in a way it had not been for years. That one absence could fill every living room with a different kind of weather. That the footbridge, which had always felt like a safe way across, could begin to seem like the place where you stopped and looked down and realized how dark the water was, and how far it ran.

CHAPTER ONE: The Block Party

The scent of grilled hot dogs and damp grass hung heavy in the twilight air, a comforting, familiar perfume that was the unofficial start of Ashfield's midsummer block party. String lights, haphazardly draped by Mayor Cross's husband, pulsed faintly as the sun dipped below the tree line, painting the sky in streaky purples and oranges. Children, sticky-fingered and shrill, darted between folding chairs, their laughter rising above the gentle thrum of conversation and Jonah Reed's acoustic guitar, which was, predictably, a little out of tune.

Lila leaned against the splintery fence separating her father's yard from Mrs. Keane's meticulously manicured petunias, nursing a plastic cup of lukewarm lemonade. She had contributed her pasta salad—a crowd-pleaser she'd perfected over years of similar gatherings—and now felt she'd fulfilled her social obligation. Her father, Evan, was holding court by the grill, his usually stoic face softened by the glow of the charcoal and the easy camaraderie of neighbors who'd known him since he was a boy. He gestured with a pair of tongs, recounting some story about a rogue squirrel in the hardware store, and a ripple of indulgent laughter spread through his small circle.

Mia Carter, as expected, was the gravitational center of the party. She moved through the crowd in a flowing red sundress, a beacon of effortless charm, drawing people in with a flash of her wide smile and a genuine curiosity that made each person feel, for a fleeting moment, like the most important one in the room. Lila watched her from a distance, admiring the way Mia could navigate the delicate social currents of Ashfield, deflecting Mrs. Keane's thinly veiled criticisms about her messy flowerbeds with a laugh, then turning to Mayor Cross to discuss the upcoming town council meeting with an earnestness that bordered on theatrical. Mia seemed to embody the town's best self, a vibrant thread woven through its often-staid tapestry.

Jonah Reed, after mangling a few more chords, launched into a surprisingly soulful rendition of an old folk song. Mia paused, her gaze finding his across the lawn, and a small, private smile touched her lips. It was a look Lila had seen before, an intimate current passing between them that always seemed to exist regardless of their current "on-again" or "off-again" status. He sang directly to her, his voice a little rough around the edges, but undeniably heartfelt. For a moment, the usual buzz of the party quieted, caught in the tender sincerity of the song.

Then Mia drifted away from the group near the picnic tables, making her way toward the edge of the lawn where the old footbridge arched over the river. Lila noticed her take out her phone, holding it up as if to capture the last vestiges of the sunset reflecting on the water. There was a brief, almost imperceptible hesitation in Mia's

step, a flicker of something that wasn't quite her usual effervescent energy. Lila, ever attuned to subtle shifts in human behavior from her work as a school counselor, marked it subconsciously. Perhaps just a moment of quiet reflection, she thought.

But as Mia continued towards the bridge, she was joined by Reverend Holt. The Reverend, usually jovial and quick with a blessing, seemed unusually stiff. He kept his back mostly to the party, his body language oddly rigid as he spoke to Mia. Mia, in turn, listened, her head cocked, her bright red dress a stark contrast to the Reverend's dark, conservative attire. Their conversation, though soundless to Lila, seemed to carry a weight that pushed against the lightness of the party. Mia's earlier, almost imperceptible unease, now seemed to solidify into something more tangible.

Lila had been about to walk over, perhaps offer Mia another lemonade, but something in the intensity of their exchange held her back. She saw Mia shake her head, a quick, dismissive gesture, before the Reverend placed a hand on her arm, a gesture that looked more like an attempt to restrain than to comfort. Mia pulled away, not violently, but with a definitive grace. She then turned, heading away from the bridge and, surprisingly, away from the party entirely. She moved quickly, almost a brisk walk, towards the far end of Victor Avenue, where the street narrowed and dissolved into a gravel path leading to the old logging trails.

Lila frowned, watching Mia's red dress disappear into the deepening shadows. It was unlike Mia to leave a party without a dramatic farewell, or at least a cheerful wave. She was the kind of person who milked every social interaction for all it was worth. The Reverend stood by the bridge for a moment longer, a solitary figure silhouetted against the dimming sky, before he too turned and slowly rejoined the periphery of the party, his face unreadable.

The music swelled again, Jonah having moved on to a more upbeat number. The aroma of a fresh batch of hot dogs hit the grill. The children's shrieks grew louder. Life, in Ashfield, continued its easy rhythm. Lila looked at her father, still laughing by the grill, then at Mrs. Keane, already complaining to Mayor Cross about the rowdy teenagers down the street. Everyone seemed to have reabsorbed themselves into the festive chaos, oblivious to Mia's quiet exit.

A shiver, unrelated to the cooling evening air, traced its way up Lila's spine. The memory of Mia's fleeting unease, the Reverend's rigid stance, the uncharacteristic departure—it all clicked into a small, unsettling pattern in Lila's mind. It was probably nothing, she told herself, just Mia being Mia, off on some spontaneous adventure or fleeing a tiresome conversation. Yet, a tiny sliver of disquiet settled in her gut, a familiar sensation from her school counseling days when she saw a child's bravado crack just for a second.

Hours later, the party began to wind down. The last sparklers fizzled out in smoky

drifts, the grills cooled, and the children, finally exhausted, were bundled into cars. Lila helped her father pack up their folding chairs and the remnants of the pasta salad. The street lights cast long, distorted shadows, and the air held the metallic tang of extinguished fireworks.

“Did you see Mia leave?” Lila asked her father, trying to make the question sound casual as she stacked plastic plates.

Evan grunted, already preoccupied with wrestling the cooler into the back of his pickup. “Hmm? No, can’t say I did. Probably off to some other shindig. That girl’s always got a dozen irons in the fire.” He didn’t look up, his mind clearly on the logistics of cleanup.

Lila didn’t press it. It was likely nothing. She helped him carry the last of their things inside, locking the front door behind them. Her father went straight to bed, his earlier joviality replaced by the quiet weariness of an older man. Lila lingered in the kitchen, washing her hands, the smell of charcoal and lemonade still clinging to her skin.

She walked out onto the porch, drawn by the quiet of the street. Only a few porch lights remained on, soft beacons against the dark. The swing creaked gently in the faint breeze. Lila scanned the three houses down, the blue Victorian with its gingerbread trim. The Dollhouse. All its windows were dark. No light in the living room, no glow from an upstairs bedroom. Complete darkness.

A sudden, sharp twist of anxiety tightened in Lila’s chest. It was late, well past midnight. Mia, for all her spontaneous nature, was meticulous about her cat, Mittens, a fluffy ginger tabby who usually greeted guests from the porch swing. Mittens should have been in by now, or at least visible. But the porch swing was empty. The entire house was silent, a hollow echo in the suddenly too-quiet street. Mia, the vibrant heart of the midsummer block party, was simply... gone.

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