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# The Silence in Silver Falls

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## Introduction

By the time Nora Bennett saw the welcome sign for Silver Falls, the rain had thinned to a needle-fine mist that made the road shine like oil. The river ran swollen beside her, black and fast, and somewhere ahead the falls themselves gave their steady thunder—so constant it seemed to vibrate in the steering wheel. She had promised herself she wouldn't look for ghosts in every wet shadow and dripping porch, but memory works on its own clock. The eaves here always cried. The fog always held the streetlamps close like little secrets.

The church sat on the rise above the green, a white steeple cut from old bone. Inside, the wood smelled of lemon oil and wet wool. Pastor Daniel Crowe's voice was even and careful as he spoke her father's name, the way someone handles a fragile heirloom. Nora sat in the front pew with Grace, their shoulders not quite touching. Marcus Hale stood at the back in his uniform, hat in his hands; he looked older around the mouth, like the town had taught him a polite way to clench. Mayor Evelyn Lyle arrived in a pale coat that refused the weather and pressed Nora's fingers between her own, saying all the right words with eyes that measured.

Nora read the eulogy because no one else would. She chose the parts that wouldn't bruise—her father's hands, the way he could fix a stalled engine by listening, his stubborn thrift that turned into generosity when no one was looking. She did not say the other truths, the ones that had sent her running years ago, or the way his silences had been taller than him. From the open door at the back, the sound of the falls seeped in, a low insistence beneath every sentence. In Silver Falls, silence wasn't absence; it was a presence, a thing people fed.

Afterward, the town funneled into the church basement, where coffee cooled in dented urns and ham sandwiches sweated under plastic. The floor was faintly slick, and the air smelled of bleach, salt, and the old damp that never quite left these walls. People Nora hadn't seen since she was eighteen touched her elbow and offered condolences that felt like folded notes passed in class: brief, coded, and curious about what she might unfold in return. There were glances that slid away when she met them. Someone mentioned the fundraiser next weekend and how her father always showed up to stack chairs, and then stopped mid-sentence, as if a hand had been laid over their mouth.

Marcus found her near the exit and kept his voice low. "I'm sorry," he said, and it sounded like he meant it. Between them hung the years they hadn't spoken and the one night they never talked about. "You staying long?" he asked, and when she didn't answer, he nodded toward the rain-smearred window. "Call if you need anything." It

was what a sheriff should say. It was also a warning shaped like kindness.

The house on Alder Street was smaller than Nora remembered and more crowded with time. Water ticked from the gutters into a metal pail by the back steps, counting out seconds with a dull patience. Inside, boxes sat where the hospice nurse had left them, labeled in a careful hand—tools, bills, keepsakes. Nora moved through the rooms, opening drawers and finding the relics that make up a life: screws in old film canisters, a stack of diner receipts turned to felt, a cracked wristwatch that still tried to tick. Her breath clouded when she stood too close to the back door; the weather came in even when you closed things here.

She almost left the last box for morning. It was the smallest, pushed to the back of the bedroom closet, the cardboard soft with age. Inside, beneath a folded work shirt that still held the faint edge of machine oil, sat a tarnished tin with a chipped blue lid. She knew the tin. He'd kept screws in it when she was a kid, let her shake it like a rattle while he worked under the hood of a neighbor's truck. Now, when she pried it open, the sound inside wasn't metal on metal but the soft rustle of paper.

There was a creased matchbook inside, the kind you used to find in the ashtrays of bars that no longer existed. Harborlight Fund Gala was stamped across the front in fading gold, a date embossed beneath it—twenty summers ago. A single strike strip was worn near smooth. On the inside flap, in tidy pencil that might have been her father's, there was a phone number and, beneath it, one letter: D. She felt the room shift, a small tilt like a boat meeting wake. Her father did not go to galas. He did not write numbers he intended to forget.

Something else lay stuck to the back of the matchbook, the paper fused at one edge by time and damp. Nora eased it free—a Polaroid, its colors leached toward gray-blue. The frame held the town green at dusk, strings of lights beaded with fog, and in the foreground a hand turned just so, catching a charm bracelet in the camera's flash. The charm was a tiny silver leaf, unmistakable and painfully familiar, the kind of detail a town learns to unsee and then can't stop seeing once it returns.

Nora held the photograph to the light and listened. The house creaked. The falls whispered their endless, heavy secret. Down the hall, the pail by the back steps caught another drop. She could feel that old summer peel itself up from the floorboards, could feel how a small thing—paper, graphite, a gold-stamped date—could reopen a room you thought you'd bricked over. She slipped the matchbook and the photo back into the tin, and when she closed the lid the click sounded too loud, like a decision made. Outside, the town kept its breath, and Nora understood that coming home meant learning what her father had kept and why the quiet here had a cost.

## CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The pale light of morning did little to lift the heavy drape of Silver Falls. Rain still pattered against the window of her rented room at the Anchor Inn, a sound Nora found both lulling and unnerving. It was a familiar rhythm, one that had underscored her childhood, a constant reminder of the town's damp embrace. She'd woken with the matchbook and the Polaroid heavy in her mind, a foreign weight in a place already overburdened with old associations.

After a lukewarm shower that did little to shake the chill from her bones, Nora dressed in practical jeans and a sweater. Her father's house still beckoned, a repository of further mysteries, but first, she needed coffee – strong, black, and hot enough to scald away the lingering fog of sleep and grief. The Anchor Inn's continental breakfast was a sad affair of plastic-wrapped muffins, so she opted for the familiar comfort of The Buoy, a diner tucked away near the docks.

The Buoy hadn't changed in twenty years. The same cracked vinyl booths, the same scent of frying bacon and stale coffee, the same perpetually damp window condensation. Agnes, the owner's daughter who'd been a year ahead of Nora in high school, was still behind the counter, her hair a tighter, brighter shade of red. She eyed Nora with a mixture of recognition and carefully veiled curiosity as she poured the coffee.

"Nora Bennett," Agnes stated, not a question. "Heard you were back for the funeral. Sorry about your dad." Her voice was flat, devoid of real warmth, but her gaze lingered a fraction too long on Nora's face. Agnes had always been a font of local gossip, a living almanac of Silver Falls' quieter dramas.

"Thanks, Agnes," Nora replied, stirring sugar into her mug. "It's good to be... back." The word felt like a lie. It wasn't good. It was necessary. She gestured vaguely at the diner. "Place hasn't changed a bit."

Agnes snorted. "Nothing much does around here. Except the people, maybe. They get quieter." She wiped down the counter with a practiced, almost violent, swipe. "Still doing that big city reporter thing?"

Nora deflected, opting for a general statement. "I'm taking a break. Figuring things out." The truth was more complicated, a professional implosion after a particularly nasty story went sideways. But Silver Falls didn't need to know that. Not yet. She took a sip of her coffee, the bitter warmth a welcome shock.

"Figuring things out," Agnes repeated, a knowing glint in her eye. "Like why your dad had that old tin in his closet? The one with the... *stuff*?"

Nora's hand froze on her mug. She hadn't told anyone about the matchbook or the Polaroid. The discovery felt too fresh, too raw, too much like a clue only she could see. She met Agnes's gaze, a jolt of alarm running through her. "What are you talking about, Agnes?"

Agnes leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, even though the diner was almost empty. "The hospice nurse, Martha. She helps everyone, you know. Said she found it when she was tidying up. Didn't know what to make of it. An old matchbook, she said. With a picture of a little girl's bracelet." Agnes's eyes flickered. "Martha thought it was odd. Your dad wasn't one for collecting trinkets, was he?"

The casual revelation hit Nora like a physical blow. Her privacy, her moment of discovery, already breached and circulating through the town's silent network. Martha, the kind, efficient hospice nurse, had apparently been a key node in the Silver Falls gossip web. Nora tried to keep her voice even. "My father had a lot of things. Old bits and bobs he never threw away."

"Bits and bobs, maybe," Agnes countered, unconvinced. "But Martha said it was different. Said she put it back where she found it, just in case. But it stuck with her." Agnes paused, scrubbing harder at a phantom spot on the counter. "Especially with the anniversary coming up."

Nora blinked. "Anniversary?"

Agnes's eyes widened slightly, as if she'd accidentally spilled a secret. "You know. Marybeth. The fundraiser, the whole thing. Twenty years this summer. People still remember."

Marybeth. The name resonated with a cold, hollow echo in Nora's memory. Marybeth Keller. The missing teenager. The girl whose disappearance had cast a long shadow over Silver Falls, a shadow Nora had actively tried to outrun. It was the other big event of that summer, overshadowed only by her own quiet exodus. "Right," Nora said, trying to sound casual. "Marybeth Keller. That was... a long time ago."

Agnes straightened, her conspiratorial air vanishing, replaced by a guarded neutrality. "Yeah. A long time. No one ever found her, did they? Just vanished. Poof." She shrugged, a dismissive gesture that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Best not to stir up old dust, Nora. People here... they don't like it."

Nora stared into her coffee, seeing not her reflection, but the faint, unsettling image of

a silver leaf charm. The matchbook, the date from twenty summers ago, the Harborlight Fund Gala - it all clicked into a disturbing alignment. Marybeth Keller had disappeared the same summer Nora had left. The same summer of the fundraiser that the town still held, the very event mentioned at the funeral.

A chill, colder than the damp air outside, settled over Nora. Her father, a man of routine and quiet habits, had kept a direct link to the town's most enduring mystery in a forgotten tin. A matchbook from a gala he wouldn't have attended, and a photograph of a bracelet, a symbol of a girl no one had ever found. The coincidence felt too sharp to be accidental.

As if sensing her thoughts, Agnes leaned in again, her voice a low murmur. "I'm serious, Nora. You're back now, and people are already... talking. About your dad, about the past. About everything. Some things are better left buried."

Nora pushed her coffee cup away, the desire to drink it suddenly gone. She felt a familiar prickle of irritation, the same stubborn defiance that had driven her investigative work, that had always clashed with Silver Falls' quiet compliance. She might have run from her past, but she hadn't forgotten how to dig. "I appreciate the advice, Agnes," she said, her voice firm. "But sometimes, digging up old dust is the only way to clear the air."

Agnes just shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. She walked away, leaving Nora alone with the metallic taste of cold coffee and the unsettling hum of a town that clearly remembered more than it wanted to say. Nora knew, with a certainty that settled deep in her bones, that she had returned not just for a funeral, but to walk into the very silence her father had kept. And that silence was now hers to unravel.

Later that afternoon, Nora returned to her father's house. The rain had picked up again, drumming a steady rhythm on the roof. The boxes were still there, still waiting. She bypassed the rest, going straight for the bedroom closet, and retrieved the small, tarnished tin. The matchbook felt thin, fragile, the Polaroid's edges softened by time. The name D. stood out, stark and solitary.

She sat on the edge of the bed, the mattress sighing under her weight, and examined the items again. The Harborlight Fund Gala. She remembered it vaguely as a yearly affair, a big social event for the town's more affluent and influential citizens, held at the old Yacht Club down by the river. Her father, a mechanic, would have had no reason to be there. Unless...

Unless he was working. Or unless he was there for someone else.

The silver leaf charm on the bracelet in the Polaroid seemed to shimmer in the dim light, catching the residual dampness from the room. Nora knew that bracelet.

Everyone in Silver Falls knew that bracelet, or at least, they had, twenty years ago. It had been Marybeth Keller's. A gift from her grandmother, a distinctive, almost singular piece of jewelry.

Her phone buzzed. It was Grace. "Hey," her sister's voice said, sounding strained. "Are you at Dad's house? I was thinking of coming over."

"I am," Nora replied, tucking the tin back into her pocket. She hesitated, then decided against mentioning her discovery yet. Grace was pragmatic, a compromiser, and Nora wasn't ready for her sensible advice. "Just... sorting. It's a lot."

"I know," Grace said softly. "Listen, are you still planning on going to the Harborlight Gala next weekend? Evelyn Lyle mentioned it. Dad always went to help set up. She wants to make sure someone from the family is still involved."

Nora felt a prickle of unease. "The gala? I hadn't really thought about it."

"It's important, Nora. For the town. And for Dad's memory. It was one of the last things he was really committed to, even when he got sick." Grace paused. "Plus, everyone will be there. It would be a good chance to see people."

Nora stared out the window at the rain-lashed street, a sudden, cold certainty forming in her mind. Her father had been connected to the Harborlight Fund Gala, more than just as a chair-stacker. The matchbook, the date, Marybeth's bracelet. This wasn't just about sorting through her father's effects. It was about stepping into a much older, colder current. "Okay, Grace," Nora said, her voice firmer than she intended. "Tell Evelyn I'll be there."

As soon as she hung up, a text message arrived. An unknown number.

*"We don't talk about that."*

Nora stared at the screen, the words stark against the white background. The air in the room seemed to thicken, suddenly heavy with unspoken threats. The silence in Silver Falls was already speaking, and it was telling her to stop. But Nora had never been good at following instructions, especially when they came with a warning. She gripped her phone, the smooth metal cold in her hand, and knew, unequivocally, that she had to keep digging.

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