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The Vanishing Hour

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Introduction

Mara Bennett had never intended to settle down in Elderwood. As a child, the small town was synonymous with Sunday afternoons at her grandmother's house, the scent of lilacs, and that innate sense of something left unsaid after the sun went down. Yet, decades later, Elderwood was where she returned—to the familiar hush of the town's only library, to winding streets lined with whispering pines, and to the constant, comforting rhythm of small-town life. In spite of the peace she managed to weave around herself, Mara always carried a hidden fracture within—a troubled past marked by orphaned memories and chronic sleepwalking, the source of which she had never truly understood.

Her days, until recently, passed in quiet routine. Early morning walks, careful arrangements of weathered books, and shared coffee with her closest friend, Jeanette, formed the backbone of her world. Mara found solace in the predictability, the sense of order she could restore on the library's shelves whenever life grew too chaotic inside her mind. She knew nearly everyone in Elderwood, and they knew her—at least, the Mara she allowed them to see. Behind her gentle smiles and calm demeanor lay a latticework of precariously repressed memories and whispered anxieties she told no one.

The townsfolk had accepted Mara as one of their own, but the legacy of her late parents—enigmatic outsiders who vanished under mysterious circumstances—followed her like a shadow. Some praised her dedication and kindness; others eyed her with suspicion, recalling the rumors that once swirled about “the Bennett family” and the misfortunes that had befallen them. Even her closest connections were not immune to strain. Beneath the laughs shared at book club and the polite exchanges at the grocer, unease always simmered, never quite reaching the surface.

Over the years, Mara's sleepwalking episodes had grown less frequent but more confusing. She would find herself standing by the window at dawn, footprints in the dew behind her, uncertain how she'd arrived there. Diaries, started in hopeful attempts at self-understanding, were filled with pages she didn't remember writing—half-formed thoughts, cryptic sketches, and the occasional dream that felt too vivid, too real. Fearing judgment, she kept these episodes to herself, unsure how to differentiate dreams from waking reality.

What Mara wanted, more than anything, was a life grounded firmly in the present—a life defined by certainty, by relationships she could trust, and by truths she could hold. But Elderwood was a town that kept its own secrets. There were stories told in hushed

voices: of children who disappeared without a trace, of nights when the air bristled with unspoken fear, of the legendary “Vanishing Hour” that old-timers swore was more than just folklore. Mara scoffed at such tales, but deep inside, the past tugged at her with insistent fingers, whispering that not all mysteries could be left unsolved.

This is where Mara’s story begins: standing on the edge of absence, about to awaken to a world forever changed. One ordinary morning, she will discover that a day of her life has simply vanished into nothingness. In Elderwood, the hour that went missing is just the beginning. Behind every closed door lurks a piece of the puzzle, and within Mara’s own fractured mind lies the frightening, necessary key to uncovering the truth.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Silent Gap

The insistent, chirping crescendo of her alarm clock usually pulled Mara from the depths of sleep with a gentle tug, a gradual ascent into consciousness. But this morning, the sound was an abrasive shock, a jolt that threw her wide awake, instantly disoriented. Her eyes snapped open to the familiar ceiling of her bedroom—the faint water stain that resembled a sleeping dragon, the faint dust motes dancing in the first slivers of dawn light. Yet, nothing felt familiar. A profound, unsettling blankness had taken root in her mind, a cavernous void where the previous day should have been.

She blinked, trying to recall even a fragment of yesterday. What had she done? Who had she seen? Had she gone to the library? Had Jeanette stopped by for their usual Tuesday coffee? The questions swirled, formless and frustrating, like smoke she couldn't grasp. Her mind was a perfectly clean slate, wiped bare. It wasn't the fuzzy-headedness of a long sleep, or the scattered thoughts of a restless night. This was absolute, unnerving emptiness.

Mara pushed herself up, her muscles protesting with a dull ache she couldn't account for. The duvet lay crumpled at the foot of the bed, as if she'd thrashed in her sleep, though she remembered no dreams, no tossing and turning. Her gaze swept across the room. Her favorite mug, usually left on her bedside table, was missing. The book she'd been reading, a weighty historical fiction, was nowhere in sight. Small things, easily overlooked, but in this sudden vacuum of memory, they screamed.

A peculiar metallic tang lingered in her mouth, like old pennies, and her tongue felt thick. She ran a hand through her hair, finding it tangled and slightly damp, as if she'd sweated profusely. Disquiet tightened its grip in her stomach. This wasn't just a forgotten afternoon; this felt like an entire day, plucked clean from her existence.

She stumbled out of bed, her bare feet meeting the cool floorboards. The house was too quiet. No hint of the morning radio news, no scent of coffee brewing. She hadn't even set up her usual Tuesday morning routine. Every instinct told her something was profoundly wrong. She reached for her phone on the nightstand. The screen lit up: Wednesday, October 18th.

Wednesday.

A cold dread seeped into her bones. If today was Wednesday, then yesterday was Tuesday. The Tuesday she couldn't remember. The missing day.

Her heart began to thump an erratic rhythm against her ribs. She usually logged her

library hours, meticulously kept her planner, tracked every book she borrowed, every patron she helped. How could an entire day just... vanish?

She padded into the living room, her eyes scanning for anything amiss. The curtains were drawn, plunging the room into a muted gloom. The remote control was on the floor beside the sofa, not in its usual holder. A faint, earthy smell, like damp soil, hung in the air, oddly out of place in her meticulously clean home.

Mara walked to the kitchen, her steps hesitant. The coffee maker was empty, its carafe still holding yesterday's grounds, untouched. No fresh brew. The sink held a single, unwashed mug—a plain white one, not her usual floral pattern. And then she saw it.

On the counter, tucked beneath a forgotten grocery receipt, was a small, folded piece of paper. Her breath hitched. It was a Post-it note, canary yellow. And it was in her own handwriting.

Mara picked it up, her fingers trembling slightly. The scrawl was hurried, almost frantic, unlike her usual neat script.

"Check under the loose floorboard in the reading nook. Don't tell anyone. It's important. They're watching."

"They're watching." The words felt like an icy whisper against her ear. Who was watching? And what was under the loose floorboard? The reading nook at the library.

A jolt of adrenaline shot through her. This wasn't a dream. This wasn't sleepwalking. This was a direct, written instruction, from herself, to herself, about a day she couldn't recall. The Post-it was slightly smudged, as if it had been handled roughly, or perhaps, written in haste. The ink was a dark blue, a pen she rarely used.

She noticed a faint bruise blooming on the back of her left hand, a purplish smudge near her knuckles. She touched it, a small pang of tenderness. Had she fallen? Hit something? There was no memory of that either. The metallic taste returned, stronger now.

Her mind raced. Had she been in some kind of accident? A minor bump on the head? But then why the note, the secrecy? "Don't tell anyone." It implied danger, a deliberate act, not just a mishap.

Mara grabbed her phone again, her fingers hovering over Jeanette's contact. Her closest friend, her confidante. Jeanette would know. She would have seen Mara yesterday, talked to her. But the note's chilling instruction echoed in her head: *Don't tell anyone.*

A knot of paranoia tightened in her chest. If she couldn't trust her own memories, could she trust anyone else? Who exactly was "they"?

She pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater, her movements jerky. The quiet house suddenly felt menacing, the familiar objects watching her with silent judgment. She needed to get to the library. She needed to see that reading nook. Whatever had happened yesterday, the key lay there, hidden, waiting.

The sun was fully up now, casting long shadows through the front window. Elderwood was waking up. Soon, the street would fill with the usual morning sounds—the delivery truck, Mrs. Henderson's poodle barking at the mailman, the distant hum of the school bus. Mara had to appear normal. She had to pretend this wasn't happening, that her entire Tuesday hadn't simply vanished.

But as she stepped out the door, the crisp autumn air did nothing to clear the fog from her mind. It merely amplified the eerie silence of the missing hours, a gaping hole in the fabric of her life. And the unsettling truth pressed down on her: she wasn't just looking for a lost day. She was looking for a lost Mara, a version of herself who had experienced something so significant, so dangerous, that she had deliberately, meticulously, hidden it from her future self. And the only clue was a smudged note, warning her that someone was watching.

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