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# Shadow Sister

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## Introduction

I never planned to return to Crestwood, not after the night I left that house behind—my hair damp with rain, my cheeks raw with tears, my mind set on forgetting the past. Yet the past, it seems, has a way of clinging even tighter the further you try to outrun it. The letter that arrived last week, bearing my name in Isla's familiar hand, was impossibly real—and impossibly wrong. Because Isla, my twin, was already gone by the time it reached me.

For years, I'd built my life on distance: new city, new career, no contact. All that disappeared with a single phone call. "She's gone, Nora," my mother's voice trembled through the line. They said it was an accident. They said I should come home. Now, for the first time since we stood together against the world, I would stand alone—inside the walls that saw our laughter, pain, and all the things we never dared speak aloud.

I drifted away from my family for reasons even I find hard to untangle: fracture and blame, old secrets festering in the silence, and the puzzle of Isla herself—I never knew where she ended and I began. We shared the same face, but our choices fractured us in ways no one else could see. I told myself I was escaping for good, running towards freedom and away from shadows. But the truth is that leaving Isla meant abandoning something essential inside myself.

Returning to the creaking hallways of my childhood home, I am forced back into Nora the daughter, the sister, the twin. Grief cuts sharper each day, but beneath it thrums a darker, colder current: suspicion. Why won't anyone meet my eyes? Why do they slip in code between themselves, tightening each secret like a knot? Nothing fits; the story of Isla's death leaves gaps wide enough to swallow me whole.

Here, in the blue and gray gloom of Crestwood, everyone keeps their truths close and their wounds closer still. Old betrayals rise up from beneath polished floors and family photographs. Childhood memories—half-formed, haunting—crowd back, and with every step I take, I wonder whether the real threat is what happened to Isla, or what I might be forced to remember about us both.

This is my beginning and my reckoning. In coming home to bury my sister, I risk unearthing what truly binds us all—the tragedies we survived, and the lies that just might kill again.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Letter

The envelope sat on my scratched kitchen counter like an unexploded ordnance. Creamy parchment, elegant script. It stood out amidst the usual detritus of my life: last night's empty takeout container, a stack of overdue bills, the crumpled grocery list I'd forgotten to use. My name, Nora Marshall, was etched across the front in a hand that, for a split second, made my stomach clench with an old, familiar dread. Isla. It had to be Isla.

We hadn't spoken in five years. Not a text, not an email, not even a drunken, late-night phone call. Our estrangement had calcified into something as solid and unyielding as granite, a silent agreement born of too many broken promises and unspoken hurts. I'd told myself it was for the best, a necessary amputation to save what little sanity I had left.

The return address was unfamiliar: Crestwood Funeral Home. My heart plummeted before my brain even registered the implication. Funeral home. No. It couldn't be. Not Isla. She was invincible, infuriating, impossible. She was the twin, the one who always found a way to survive, to bounce back, to land on her feet with a smirk and a shrug.

I ripped it open. Inside, a formal, engraved card. "It is with deepest sorrow that we announce the passing of Isla Eleanor Marshall." The words blurred. My eyes raced down to the date. Three days ago. Three days. And then, the funeral arrangements. Saturday. This Saturday.

A cold, creeping nausea began to spread through my chest. Three days. My mother had called me yesterday, voice thin and reedy, but she hadn't mentioned a funeral home. Just, "She's gone, Nora. Isla's gone." I'd attributed her vagueness to shock, to the inherent difficulty of relaying such news. Now, a sliver of suspicion pricked at me.

Why the letter? Why not a direct call from the funeral home, or from my parents the moment it happened? It felt... staged. Or perhaps, just delayed. Crestwood was a small town, slow to move, stuck in its own peculiar rhythms. That's what I told myself. A delay. Nothing more.

My phone buzzed, vibrating on the counter next to the letter. It was my mother again. I stared at the caller ID, then at the elegant, terrible card. My hand trembled as I answered.

"Nora? Did you get it?" Her voice was strained, barely a whisper. "The letter?"

"Yes, Mom. Just now." I tried to keep my voice steady, but it cracked on the last word. "Three days ago? Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

A beat of silence. "It's all been... a blur, darling. An accident. So sudden." Her words were clipped, rehearsed. "The police... they're still investigating. But they're calling it an accident. A fall."

A fall. Isla, clumsy? Isla, who'd scaled every tree in Crestwood, who'd walked tightropes made of clotheslines, who'd jumped off the high dive before anyone else dared? The image didn't fit. Not at all.

"Where was she?" I asked, my voice tight. "What happened?"

"At the old lighthouse," she said, and her voice finally broke. "She was... she was taking photographs. The rocks were wet. It was dark."

The old lighthouse. Our lighthouse. The one place Isla and I had always gone when we needed to escape, to be just us. The place where some of our darkest secrets were buried, not literally, but certainly figuratively. A chill that had nothing to do with the chilly October air outside snaked down my spine.

"I'm coming," I said, the words surprising even myself. I hadn't meant to commit so quickly. But the thought of Isla, alone in the ground, without me there, was unthinkable. The thought of that house, full of my grieving, secretive family, without me there to witness it, was even more so.

"Good," my mother whispered. "Your father... he wants you here. We all do."

A lie. A partial truth at best. My father, perhaps. He'd always been the more forgiving of the two. But my mother, with her tightly wound anxieties and her carefully constructed facades, had been the architect of our separation. She'd facilitated my escape, urged me to sever ties with the "unhealthy influence" of my twin.

I hung up, the silence of my small city apartment suddenly deafening. The letter lay before me, a stark white rectangle against the dark wood. Isla's handwriting on the envelope, looping and artistic, taunted me. It was so distinctly hers, vibrant and alive. And yet, she was not.

My gaze drifted to the framed photograph on my bookshelf. Isla and me, eleven years old, identical smiles, matching freckles. We were standing by the lake in Crestwood, arms around each other, a tangle of limbs and innocence. We were inseparable then, a singular entity, a whispered language only we understood. We were the Shadow Sisters, as my grandmother used to call us, always flitting in and out of each other's

lives, impossible to tell apart unless you knew the subtle tells: my slightly crooked nose, her tiny scar above her left eyebrow.

But the years had driven a wedge between us, slowly at first, then with the force of a battering ram. The last time I saw her, five years ago, it had been a fight. A screaming match in the rain-slicked driveway of our childhood home. Words were exchanged that could never be unsaid, accusations flung like stones, the shattering of a bond that had once seemed unbreakable. I'd gotten into my car and driven away, not looking back, convinced I was escaping a toxic entanglement.

Now, as I stared at the funeral announcement, a different kind of pain began to gnaw at me. Regret. A deep, agonizing regret for all the missed phone calls, all the unspoken apologies, all the years we had wasted apart. And a colder, harder emotion began to solidify in its place: a stubborn, unwavering need to know.

An accident, they said. A fall. But in my gut, a different narrative was already beginning to form. Isla didn't just fall. Not Isla. Something was wrong. And I was going to find out what.

I picked up the letter again, my fingers tracing Isla's elegant script. It felt like a message from beyond the grave, a final, cryptic summons. And suddenly, my carefully constructed life in the city, the one I'd built to forget Crestwood and all its shadows, felt flimsy and insignificant. I had to go home. Not just for Isla's funeral, but for the truth. Whatever that truth might be.

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