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Stolen Shadows

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Introduction

In the small town of Willow's Edge, secrets live quietly until someone dares to unearth them. Daylight pours over tranquil streets, children's laughter carries over picket fences, and porch swings creak in the breeze—but the shadows here are not as empty as they seem. Some are only waiting to be reclaimed.

Mara Foster knows about secrets. In her pockets, in her posture, behind her eyes, she carries the weight of a tragedy she tries to bury beneath neat routines and professional empathy. Only a year earlier, her world split apart: a loss so sudden, so unresolved, that she finds echoes of it in everything and everyone. As the school counselor at Willow's Edge High, she pours herself quietly into helping troubled students—hoping, perhaps, to save in others what she could not save in her own family.

But Willow's Edge is that kind of place. While it looks like a photograph from a simpler time, every neighbor watches each other, gossip curls like smoke, and past wounds never truly heal. Some people are more damaged than they let on; others are more dangerous. Mara senses unrest just below the surface—a kind of tension threaded through the corridors of the school, thickened by secrets and history no one wants to revisit.

When Ashley Price, a student in Mara's care, begins to unravel, Mara feels the old panic rise: déjà vu in every desperate note and missed class, every bruise too carefully hidden. She pours herself into routine investigations, longing to believe the town's assurances that everything is fine—until Ashley disappears, rippling fresh terror through Mara's barely-held-together life.

The shock of the disappearance prickles through the town like static. Parents become suspicious, teachers close ranks, and old grudges resurface. For Mara, each unanswered question cracks her composure and brings the darkness of her own history surging closer. Her sister's unsolved vanishing years ago—the pain that never left—returns to haunt her every step.

Here, in the intersection of grief and obsession, denial and hope, Mara must decide how far she is willing to go. The truth is tangled and dangerous, and as Mara begins to pry it loose, she finds herself in the town's crosshairs. In Willow's Edge, some shadows should never be disturbed. But for Mara Foster, the only way out is through the darkness she fears most.

CHAPTER ONE: Shadows in Sunlight

The fluorescent hum of the school counselor's office was usually a comforting drone, a steady pulse against the frantic rhythms of teenage angst. For Mara Foster, it was a sanctuary, a neutral zone where the messy emotions of others could be neatly categorized, analyzed, and, ideally, resolved. Today, however, the hum felt less like a balm and more like a low-grade headache, vibrating behind her temples with the insistent thrum of something left undone.

It was a Tuesday, late April, the kind of day in Willow's Edge when the dogwood trees bloomed in soft explosions of white and pink, and the air hummed with the promise of summer. But inside Mara's office, the sunlight that streamed through the blinds felt thin, diluted, unable to penetrate the quiet unease that had settled over her like a fine dust.

Mara had been trying to reach Ashley Price's mother since Friday. Three voicemails, each progressively more clipped and less patient. Ashley, a sixteen-year-old with a perpetually guarded expression and eyes that seemed to have seen too much, had missed three days of school. This wasn't entirely unusual for Ashley, whose attendance record was as patchy as an old quilt. But there was something different this time, a cold prickle of intuition Mara couldn't shake.

Ashley had been changing, subtly at first, then more dramatically. A few months ago, she'd been withdrawn, yes, but still engaged, still a flicker of spark in her sharp retorts. Lately, that spark had gone out, replaced by a brittle defensiveness. Her clothes, once mismatched and shapeless, had become baggier, almost deliberately concealing. And her eyes, those dark, knowing eyes, carried a new, unsettling glint—a kind of desperate watchfulness.

Mara picked up the phone again, her thumb hovering over the numbers for Ashley's home. She knew the drill: initial concern, then growing frustration with unreturned calls, then the slow burn of worry turning into alarm. This was the point where alarm bells started to ring, soft at first, like distant church chimes, then louder, more insistent.

"Mara, can I grab you for a quick second?" The voice belonged to Mr. Henderson, the vice principal, a man whose permanently furrowed brow suggested he was always just on the cusp of an aneurysm. He leaned against her doorframe, his tie slightly askew, a stack of disciplinary referrals clutched in his hand.

Mara sighed, setting the phone down. "Of course, Ken. What's up?"

"It's about Ashley Price again," he said, his voice dropping slightly, as if the walls themselves had ears. "The truancy officer just called. Her mother, Sarah, is claiming Ashley's with her aunt in out of state. But they couldn't get a hold of the aunt, and Sarah sounded... vague."

Mara felt a cold knot tighten in her stomach. "Vague how?"

"Like she was making it up on the spot," Henderson elaborated, shifting his weight. "Mumbled something about a family emergency, then cut the call short. And this is after me leaving half a dozen messages about her attendance. It's not like Ashley to just... disappear like this, even for her." He paused, rubbing his temple. "Look, I know she's one of your regulars. Anything you know that might explain this?"

Mara thought about the last time she'd seen Ashley, just over a week ago. Ashley had been agitated, pacing Mara's small office, picking at a loose thread on her oversized hoodie. "I can't tell you," she'd whispered, her voice raw, "but something bad is going to happen. I just know it." Mara had pressed, gently, professionally, but Ashley had clamped down, her mouth a tight, defiant line. Mara had attributed it to typical teenage drama, perhaps a fight with friends or a boyfriend. Now, the memory felt ominous, heavy with unheeded warning.

"She's been... more withdrawn than usual," Mara admitted, choosing her words carefully. Confidentiality was paramount, but so was Ashley's well-being. "She mentioned feeling unsafe, but wouldn't elaborate. I tried to get her to open up, but she shut down."

Henderson nodded, his gaze distant. "Unsafe, huh? She's a good kid, deep down. Smart, too, even if she hides it behind that tough act." He sighed. "Well, the truancy officer is going to try one more time, and if nothing, they'll escalate it. Maybe a welfare check. I just hope it's nothing more than a teenage tantrum." He didn't sound convinced.

Neither was Mara. A welfare check. That was the next step, the point where the school's responsibility ended, and law enforcement's began. It was also the point where Mara felt the first tremor of true fear. Teenage tantrums rarely involved outright vanishing acts, especially not with a mother who suddenly became evasive and a story that frayed around the edges.

After Henderson left, Mara stared at her phone. The familiar unease had sharpened into a specific, cold dread. Ashley Price wasn't just a troubled student; she was a girl who had been trying, in her own fractured way, to tell Mara something important. And Mara, in her professional detachment, in her adherence to protocol, might have missed it.

She pulled up Ashley's file on her computer. Academic struggles, a history of family instability – her father had left years ago, and her mother worked two jobs, often leaving Ashley to her own devices. There were notes from previous counselors about low self-esteem, occasional conflicts with peers, but nothing that screamed 'runaway.' Nothing that hinted at a deeper, more sinister undercurrent.

But something in Mara's gut churned. It wasn't just the professional obligation. It was the echo of another girl, another quiet vanishing, another family whose explanations had rung hollow. Her sister, Clara. The memory was a dull ache, a phantom limb that throbbed whenever a missing person story flickered across the news, whenever a parent's face was etched with unspeakable grief. Mara had been just a few years older than Ashley when Clara disappeared, and the helplessness, the gnawing uncertainty, had never truly left her.

Mara decided she couldn't wait for the truancy officer or a welfare check. She needed to do something. She needed to see for herself. She pulled out her worn address book, flipping past the names of colleagues and old friends until she found it: Sarah Price, 14 Maple Street. It was a modest house, on a quiet street on the outskirts of town, indistinguishable from a dozen others. Mara had dropped Ashley off there once after a late after-school counseling session. The curtains had been drawn, the porch light off, even though it was only early evening.

She debated calling the police directly, but what would she say? A hunch? A mother being "vague"? It wasn't enough. Not yet. She needed something more concrete, something that justified breaking protocol and stepping outside her designated role.

She pushed her chair back, the plastic wheels squeaking softly against the linoleum floor. Her lunch break was coming up. It was the perfect window. A quick drive, a casual drop-by. Just to check in. Just to ease the persistent tremor in her gut. She grabbed her purse, pulled her keys from the top drawer, and slipped out of her office. The hallway was empty, the classrooms still buzzing with the muted sounds of lessons in progress. No one would notice her absence for a few minutes.

The drive to Maple Street was short, the spring air deceptively mild. Willow's Edge still felt like a postcard, a place where trouble was something that happened elsewhere, in bigger, uglier cities. But Mara knew better. She knew that the prettiest facades often hid the darkest truths. Her own life was a testament to that.

When she pulled up to 14 Maple Street, a faded blue Honda Civic was parked in the driveway. A good sign, perhaps. Sarah Price was home. Mara killed the engine, the sudden silence amplified by the chirping of unseen birds. The house itself was quiet, too quiet. No music drifting from an open window, no television drone. The blinds were drawn, just as Mara remembered.

She took a deep breath, pushing down the familiar surge of anxiety. This was her job. This was what she did. She helped students. Sometimes, helping meant going the extra mile. She got out of her car and walked up the short path to the front door. The paint on the door was peeling, a forlorn shade of green. She lifted her hand and knocked, a firm, even rap.

Silence.

She waited, her ears straining for any sound from within. A dog barking? Footsteps? Nothing. She knocked again, louder this time, her knuckles aching slightly. Still nothing. She tried the doorbell. A faint, almost imperceptible chime sounded from inside, swallowed by the stillness.

Mara frowned. Sarah's car was here. She had to be home. Unless... Unless she was deliberately avoiding Mara. Or worse.

A tiny tremor of unease turned into a ripple of genuine fear. She peered through a gap in the blinds of the living room window, but the interior was dark, a jumble of shadows and indistinct shapes. She walked around the side of the house, following a cracked concrete path that led to the backyard. A rusty swing set stood forlornly in the overgrown grass, a single swing creaking faintly in the breeze.

The back door was equally unyielding, locked tight. Mara returned to the front, her mind racing. What now? Call the police? What would she tell them? That the house was too quiet? That a mother wasn't answering her door? It wasn't enough for a forced entry, not without more.

Just as she was about to give up and head back to the school, a flash of color caught her eye. Tucked beneath a loose brick on the porch, barely visible, was a small, crumpled piece of paper. It looked like a note. Mara's heart began to thump. She knelt down, her fingers trembling slightly as she pulled it out.

It was folded haphazardly, a single sheet torn from a spiral notebook. On it, scrawled in hurried, frantic handwriting, were only three words: *He knows everything.*

The words hit Mara like a physical blow. Her breath hitched. "He knows everything." Who was 'he'? What did he know? And where was Ashley? The vague fear that had been simmering beneath the surface finally erupted into a full-blown alarm. This wasn't a runaway. This was something far more sinister. And Mara had a terrible, sickening feeling that she was only just beginning to understand the true nature of the shadows in Willow's Edge.

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