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# The Forgetting Hour

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## Introduction

Casey Harper always believed her life was the blueprint of success: a rewarding career as a rising architect, an engagement to a charming, dependable fiancé, and a quiet cul-de-sac home where the neighbors exchanged polite smiles over manicured lawns. Her days were ordered and deliberate, her future architectural plans extending as far as her dreams would reach. Yet on one unremarkable morning, everything Casey thought she knew about herself and her carefully drawn life evaporated in the span of a single, horrifying instant.

She wakes as dawn cuts through the curtains, her head pounding, her mouth dry, and her hands trembling. There's a metallic tang in the air. To her horror, a crimson stain has soaked through the sleeve of her favorite white blouse—a color she cannot recall seeing the night before, nor an event that might have caused such a mark. Her phone buzzes relentlessly, flashing unread messages and missed calls from people she barely remembers speaking to. Worse yet, her memories of the previous twelve hours have vanished, swallowed by an impenetrable fog.

Casey's attempt to piece together her night is met by a wall of uncertainty. The familiar routine of her mornings feels suddenly foreign. Where she once found comfort in control, there is now only doubt. She moves through her home in a daze, noticing displaced objects and half-opened doors that suggest movement and activity she does not remember. When news breaks that a woman from her neighborhood has disappeared—last seen near Casey's street—the icy grip of fear tightens around her. All clues seem to circle back to the place where her memory fades, and Casey dreads what truth it might reveal.

Her fiancé, Evan, tries to reassure her, offering explanations and comfort, but a kernel of suspicion nestles itself in Casey's mind. Every glance, every well-meaning touch, carries a ripple of uncertainty. Friends and neighbors come by, asking questions with veiled accusation, their smiles now tinged with curiosity and concern. Casey's reality, once so solid and sharply defined, buckles under the strain of not knowing what she might have done—or what was done to her—during the missing hours.

Desperate for answers, Casey turns to the only evidence she can piece together: digital breadcrumbs on her phone, surveillance footage, cryptic notes in her day planner, and brief, flickering memories that refuse to stay in focus. As police begin their investigation, and a relentless private investigator presses closer, Casey finds herself at the heart of a spiraling web of suspicion and secrets. Her quest to reclaim lost time unearths uneasy questions about trust, identity, and the lies that thread through even the most ordinary of lives.

In the unforgiving morning light, as fear and memory collide, Casey Harper's story begins—a journey through the treacherous landscape of the mind, where every answer unearths a new question and nothing is ever quite what it seems.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Crimson Stain

The first thing Casey registered wasn't the throbbing headache, or the sandpaper dryness of her tongue, but the unsettling chill on her left arm. She blinked, the pale morning light through her bedroom window feeling like a physical assault. Disoriented, she slowly brought her hand to her forehead, pressing against the dull ache. The room, usually a sanctuary of muted tones and carefully chosen textures, felt alien, the furniture looming like forgotten statues.

Then she saw it. A dark, irregular splotch on the pristine white sleeve of her favorite silk blouse, a blouse she couldn't recall wearing. It was a deep, almost rusted, crimson. Her breath hitched. It looked like... blood. Her stomach lurched, a sour taste rising in her throat. She stared, transfixed, her mind scrambling for an explanation. A clumsy spill? A paper cut she hadn't noticed? But the stain was too large, too vivid, to be dismissed so easily.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to prickle at the edges of her consciousness. She flung back the covers, her movements jerky. The sheets were undisturbed, pristine. No other stains, no evidence of a struggle. She stumbled out of bed, her legs feeling like lead, and made her way to the ensuite bathroom. The mirror reflected a stranger: pale, wild-eyed, with faint smudges beneath her eyes. Her usually neat blonde bob was a tangled mess.

She yanked off the blouse, the fabric stiff where the stain had dried. Holding it up to the light, she examined it more closely. It definitely wasn't jam or wine. The texture, the dark, almost metallic odor clinging to it, confirmed her worst fear. It was blood. But whose? And how did it get there? A terrifying void opened in her memory. The last thing she remembered was pouring herself a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, settling onto the sofa with a new design brief. That had been around 8 PM. Now, the digital clock on her nightstand read 6:17 AM. Twelve hours gone. Vanished.

A low hum from the kitchen pulled her attention. The refrigerator, perhaps? Or the dishwasher? She vaguely recalled the muted clatter of dishes last night, a sound she always found comforting, a sign that the day was winding down. But she couldn't conjure any specific images of washing up, or even eating dinner. Had Evan been home? She glanced at the empty spot next to her in bed. He must have left for his early morning run already.

Her phone, buzzing incessantly on the nightstand, finally caught her eye. She snatched it up, her fingers trembling as she unlocked the screen. The notifications exploded across the display: three missed calls from her boss, Mark, at 11 PM, 1 AM,

and 5 AM. A text from her best friend, Sarah, sent around midnight: "Hey, you okay? Tried calling." And then a series of messages from Evan, starting at 7 AM: "Morning, beautiful! On my run. You asleep? Everything alright?"

Her thumb hovered over Sarah's message. Sarah was her anchor, the one person she could always confide in. But what would she say? "Hey, I woke up with blood on my shirt and no memory of the last twelve hours?" The absurdity of it made a hysterical laugh bubble in her throat, quickly choked back by a wave of nausea. No, she couldn't tell Sarah yet. Not until she understood.

She navigated to her call log. No outgoing calls after 8 PM. No incoming calls other than Mark and Sarah. Her social media apps showed no activity, no late-night posts or comments. She scrolled through her photos, hoping for a clue, a blurry selfie, anything. Nothing. The digital trail was cold, a blank slate matching the emptiness in her mind.

A sudden, sharp pain lanced through her temple, making her wince. It was a dull, throbbing ache that seemed to emanate from behind her eyes. She needed coffee. And maybe some ibuprofen. She padded barefoot into the kitchen, the cool tiles a small comfort against the gnawing fear. The espresso machine sat idle, but a half-empty mug of cold coffee sat on the counter beside it. Had she made coffee last night? That didn't make sense.

Her gaze drifted to the kitchen table. On it lay her work bag, unzipped, a few architectural sketches spilling out. Beside it, her laptop was open, the screen dark. She never left her laptop open overnight. And her keys, usually tucked into the small bowl by the door, were lying haphazardly beside her bag. Small details, easily explainable on their own, but together, they formed a chilling tapestry of disarray.

She reached for the laptop, pressing the power button. It hummed to life, revealing her company's CAD software, a complex floor plan of the new downtown development project still open on the screen. She'd been working on that yesterday, but she was sure she'd saved and closed everything before heading to the living room. Had she returned to work late last night? Why?

A flicker of an image darted across her mind: a shadowy figure, tall and indistinct, standing by the living room window. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, like a static burst on a television screen. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Was it a memory? Or just her panicked imagination playing tricks?

She walked to the large bay window in the living room, pulling back the heavy curtains. The sun was fully up now, casting long shadows across the manicured lawns of her quiet cul-de-sac. A few early birds were out, walking dogs or retrieving newspapers. Mrs. Henderson from next door was tending to her prize-winning roses,

her usual cheerful wave conspicuously absent.

Casey tried to catch her eye, but Mrs. Henderson seemed to deliberately avoid her gaze, turning her back and bending low over her flowerbed. A prickle of unease rippled through Casey. Had something happened last night that made Mrs. Henderson act like that? Something involving her?

As she watched, a police cruiser slowly drove down the street, its presence an anomaly in their usually peaceful neighborhood. It paused briefly outside the house two doors down – the Tremaine residence – before continuing its slow crawl. Casey's breath hitched again. The Tremaines. Elena Tremaine. The woman from the neighborhood watch committee who was always organizing bake sales and block parties.

The cruiser stopped directly in front of Elena Tremaine's house. Two uniformed officers exited the vehicle, their faces grim, and walked purposefully up the path to the front door. A cold dread settled deep in Casey's stomach. Police at Elena's house? At this hour?

She fumbled for her phone again, her fingers clumsy. She opened the local news app, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm against her ribs. No new alerts. She scrolled through Twitter, her community's unofficial bulletin board. Nothing.

Then, a post from the official "Maple Creek Neighborhood Watch" Facebook page, timestamped 6:00 AM. It was short, stark, and utterly devastating: "URGENT: Elena Tremaine of 14 Sycamore Lane was reported missing overnight. Last seen in her home around 9 PM. If you have ANY information, please contact the Maple Creek Police Department immediately."

Casey's vision blurred. Elena Tremaine. Missing. Last seen around 9 PM. That was roughly an hour after Casey's memory went blank. And the police were at her house right now. And the blood... the crimson stain on her shirt...

A cold, undeniable certainty washed over her, chilling her to the bone. Her lost night and Elena Tremaine's disappearance were connected. They had to be. And the unsettling truth, whatever it was, was buried deep within the twelve missing hours of her life. She needed to remember. Before the police, before anyone else, connected her to the missing woman. Before it was too late.

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