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# The House That Lied

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## Introduction

My house wakes up before I do. There are mornings when I lie in bed, listening as Helios activates the under-cabinet lights downstairs, adjusts the thermostat by half a degree, and pours news headlines into the speakers in Evan's voice. Sometimes, if I've been slow to respond, the master bath mirror dims to a soft blue: gentle reminder, feature not flaw. The place is always one step ahead, a showpiece of suburban innovation—glass and cedar, glass and steel, syncing every movement, archiving every private word. Our friends joke we're living in the future. I've learned the future is a matter of trust.

Evan says the house is for my peace of mind. He installed every sensor and backlit screen, every whisper-quiet camera, promising safety, control, transparency. He texts me screenshots of security logs: every door opened, every door shut, a chart for each night I sleep through. I'm supposed to feel safe. Mostly, I do: that's the funny thing about surveillance, the way it tries to pass for comfort until you remember what comfort really is.

Today is a day like every other—or that's what I think, right up until it isn't. I shuffle from the warmth of our tangled sheets to an empty kitchen, my mug already steaming on the counter. Routine hums through the house: blinds tracking the weak coastal dawn, Evan's playlist layered with birdsong I'm never sure is real. There's milk in the fridge, although I wouldn't have remembered to buy it. There's a message from my best friend Lucy, asking about Friday, but my phone is buried somewhere, and already my mind slips between moments. That happens sometimes. I blame it on the sleep aids, now rationed, tucked out of sight in a bathroom drawer.

When I open the back door, the air bites at me. I almost trip—half-dreaming—because the door shouldn't be open. Not unless I forgot, which I never do, or unless Evan left early. But his shoes are still by the rug, his watch charging by the bed. There's a smear of something dull and brown on my sleeve. Reflex tells me to laugh it off: coffee, maybe, or sauce from last night's pasta. But something knots in my stomach. The silence at my back is too sharp, too deliberate.

I call for Evan. There's no answer. My mind tries to catch itself, to flip through the prior night, but the images blur, as if I've scrolled past them too quickly. A heaviness, unfamiliar and foreboding, presses into my temples. I check my phone, but the news headlines are already gone, replaced by a single notification from the house: "Last event recorded at 2:16 a.m." I don't remember 2:16 a.m. I don't remember much after midnight, truth be told.

That's when the lights in the hallway flicker, and a chime—soft, apologetic—sounds from the ceiling speaker. My house wants my attention. For the first time since we moved in, I wish it didn't know so much about me.

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## Chapter One: The Empty Side of the Bed

The cold air hitting my face from the open back door feels like a punch, sharp and immediate. My bare feet, usually accustomed to the heated floors Evan installed, now register the shock of the cool tile. The smear on my sleeve, once dismissed, screams for attention, a dark stain against the pale grey of my silk robe. This isn't coffee. This isn't marinara. It's too viscous, too... deep.

"Evan?" My voice is thin, a reedy sound that gets swallowed by the unnerving silence of the house. No smart reply, no automated "Good morning, Mara." Just the low hum of the refrigerator and the distant, almost imperceptible whir of the ventilation system. The silence itself feels wrong. Evan is a creature of habit, and his habits involve noise: the morning news, a podcast, the clatter of him making coffee, even if it's just for me.

My phone, clutched in my hand, shows the notification again: "Last event recorded at 2:16 a.m." I tap it, a desperate search for context, for *anything*. The Helios app opens, displaying a timeline of the house's activity. Front door locked at 10:47 p.m. Bedroom lights off at 11:03 p.m. Garage door closed at 11:15 p.m. Then a blank space. Then, "Back door opened. 2:16 a.m." Followed by, "Back door closed. 2:16 a.m."

It's too neat. Too swift. As if someone opened it, paused for a breath, and closed it again, all in the same minute. And where's the footage? Helios records everything, streams it to the cloud, stores local copies. I scroll through the timeline again, my thumb pressing harder, as if I can force the missing data to appear. Nothing. Just that frustrating, infuriating gap.

I try to remember. The last thing I clearly recall is Evan kissing my forehead, his breath smelling faintly of whiskey, before I swallowed my sleep aid and drifted off. That was... what time? Eleven? Maybe a bit later. I don't remember waking up. I don't remember opening the back door. I don't remember any sounds, any struggle, any reason for a dark stain on my sleeve. My memory, usually a reliable if sometimes cluttered filing cabinet, feels like a handful of spilled index cards.

Panic, cold and sharp, begins to prickle at my skin. I call Evan's cell. It rings once, twice, then goes straight to voicemail. "Hey, it's Evan. Leave a message, or don't. You do you." His easygoing voicemail greeting, usually a comfort, now feels like a taunt. I call again. And again. No answer.

My gaze darts around the kitchen, searching for any disturbance. A misplaced chair, a spilled cup. Everything is precisely as it always is: minimalist, gleaming, perfectly ordered. Too ordered, perhaps, for a house where something has clearly gone wrong.

I pull out my phone again, my fingers trembling as I dial 911. "My husband... he's gone. I don't know where he is. And the back door was open." My voice cracks on the last word. The dispatcher's calm, practiced voice asks questions I can barely answer. My name. Evan's name. Our address. "Any signs of forced entry, ma'am?" she asks.

I look around again, my eyes scanning the pristine surfaces. "No," I say, the word a small, ragged breath. "No, it's all... normal. Just the door. And... and something on my sleeve." I don't tell her about the missing footage, not yet. It sounds crazy. It sounds like something I'd have to explain, and right now, my brain is short-circuiting.

Within twenty minutes, the flashing blue and red lights spill across the manicured lawn, painting the modern facade in an ominous, pulsating glow. Detective Sana Patel is the first to step inside, her gaze sweeping the open-concept living space with an efficient, appraising air. She's tall, with dark, intelligent eyes and a no-nonsense bun. Beside her stands a younger, uniformed officer, notebook in hand.

"Mrs. Flynn?" Her voice is even, calm. It's the voice of someone who has seen this before, too many times.

"Mara," I correct, my voice still a little shaky. I gesture vaguely to the kitchen, to the still-open back door. "He's gone. The door was open."

Patel nods, her eyes narrowing as she takes in the smear on my sleeve. "And this?" she asks, inclining her head towards my arm.

"I don't know. I woke up like this." My stomach clenches, a premonition of the questions to come. I know how this looks. The wife, the missing husband, the convenient memory loss.

"You woke up like this," Patel repeats, her tone neutral, neither believing nor disbelieving. She pulls on a pair of latex gloves. "Mrs. Flynn, can you tell me what you remember about last night?"

I press my palms to my temples, trying to force the fog to lift. "Not much after... maybe eleven. I took my Ambien." The word hangs in the air, a silent accusation. I can practically hear the unspoken thoughts: *Of course she did.*

"Ambien," Patel echoes, making a note. "And your husband? What was he doing?"

"He was... here. With me." I hesitate. "We watched a movie. He was... fine. Normal." Normal enough. There'd been a slight edge to his mood lately, a distractedness, but nothing overt. He'd been busy with a new project, another smart home flip across town.

“Did you argue?” she asks.

“No.” The lie slips out smoothly, automatically. Not a full-blown argument, anyway. Just a quiet tension, a feeling of him pulling away, which I’d attributed to stress. Nothing that would explain... this.

Patel surveys the sleek, high-tech kitchen. “This is quite the setup. A smart home, I assume?”

“Yes. Helios Home.” I point to a discrete camera lens above the sink. “It records everything.”

“Everything,” she muses. “And what did it record last night?”

I show her the timeline on my phone, the glaring blank space after midnight, the 2:16 a.m. entry for the back door. “The footage for that time... it’s missing. It says ‘Privacy Mode’ was enabled.”

Patel’s eyebrow arches slightly. “And you enabled it, Mrs. Flynn?”

“No. Never. I wouldn’t. Evan says it’s for security, not...” I trail off, searching for the right word. “Not to hide things.”

She looks at the phone, then back at me. “So, according to this, your husband left through the back door at 2:16 a.m.”

“But he wouldn’t just leave,” I insist, a desperate plea in my voice. “Not without his car. Not without his wallet.” My gaze falls on Evan’s car keys, still hanging on the hook by the garage door. His wallet, I remember, was on his nightstand.

Patel walks over to the back door, her gloved finger tracing the frame. “No sign of forced entry here. And the smart lock?”

I open the Helios app again, navigating to the door logs. “It shows no entries or exits after midnight. Just that one at 2:16 a.m. And it was unlocked from the inside, according to the log.”

The room is silent except for the low hum of the smart appliances. The police officer makes a small scratching sound in his notebook. Patel turns, her gaze unwavering. “So, Mrs. Flynn,” she says, her voice still calm, still even, “if your husband left at 2:16 a.m., and the door was unlocked from the inside, and you were the only other person in the house... what do you think happened?”

The question hangs in the air, heavy and inescapable. I look at the empty side of the bed, the rumpled sheets where Evan should be. The house, silent and watchful, offers no answers. And then I realize: the smart lock shows *no entries or exits* after midnight, only *one exit* at 2:16 a.m. Meaning, whoever opened that door at 2:16 a.m. was already inside the house.

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