

The House on Willow Street

Chapter Seven: The Door That Wasn't There

By the time Clara reached Willow Street, the rain had already turned the road into a narrow river of black water. She drove slowly, both hands tight around the steering wheel, watching the houses disappear behind ~~the~~ curtains of rain. She had not been here in seventeen years, but she recognized the old street immediately, even though most of the houses looked smaller than she remembered. The last house at the end of the street was still there, standing behind a broken iron fence, its windows dark and its paint peeling away in long strips. Clara slowed the car as she approached it, although she had already known ~~that~~ the house would still be there. Some things, she thought, were not supposed to disappear.

Clara parked outside the house and remained inside the car for several minutes. She had promised herself that she would never come back here again, ~~and yet~~ now she was sitting in front of it in the middle of the night ~~like, as if~~ she had been waiting for this moment her ~~whole entire~~ life. It didn't make sense, but nothing about the letter had made sense either. Three days ~~ago earlier~~, she had received an envelope with no return address. Inside was a single photograph of her brother Daniel standing outside this same house. The strange thing was that Daniel had been dead for seventeen years, ~~and yet~~ the photograph looked new, almost ~~like as if~~ it had been taken recently. She kept looking at the picture because ~~there was~~ something about it ~~that bothered~~ disturbed her, although she couldn't ~~understand~~ explain what ~~it was~~.

Daniel was smiling in the photograph, and he looked exactly as he had on the last day Clara saw him. He was wearing the blue jacket their mother had bought him for his birthday, the same jacket ~~Clara remembered him refusing~~ he had refused to take off even when it was too warm outside. Behind him ~~was~~ stood the house, but ~~there was~~ something was different about it. Clara looked closer ~~at the photograph~~ and noticed a door on the second floor. She frowned ~~because she~~. She couldn't remember a door being there, but perhaps the years had changed the house more than she ~~thought~~ realized. She had been a child then, and ~~memories from~~ childhood memories were not always reliable.

She stepped out of the car and crossed the street. The rain soaked her coat almost immediately, but she barely noticed it. When she reached the fence, she stopped and looked at the house again. The gate was locked, although the chain looked old enough to break with one hard pull. Clara pushed it anyway, expecting ~~it to resist~~ resistance, but the gate opened without ~~resistance and made her step backwards~~ difficulty. She stared at it for a moment before telling herself that the lock must have been broken for years. She walked through the opening and continued toward the house, trying not to think about why the gate had opened so easily.

The garden had become completely wild. Tall weeds covered the path, and dead branches scratched against the windows whenever the wind moved through the trees. Clara remembered the garden differently. Her mother used to grow roses here, hundreds of them, and Daniel would spend hours hiding ~~between~~ among them whenever they played together. Clara could still remember his laughter coming from somewhere among the flowers, although she wasn't sure ~~if whether~~ it was a real memory or one she had created over the years. Now there was nothing

left except weeds and the smell of wet earth,~~and the~~. The difference between what she remembered and what stood before her made the house seem even more unfamiliar.

She walked toward the front door, but before she reached it, she heard a knock coming from somewhere inside the house. Clara froze and listened carefully. At first, she thought it was probably a branch hitting one of the windows, because the wind had become stronger and the rain was beating against the roof. Then another knock came, slower this time. Three knocks followed by a pause, then two more. Clara's stomach tightened because she knew that pattern. Daniel used to knock like that whenever they played hide-and-seek, especially when he wanted her to know where he was hiding ~~but didn't want~~without letting their mother ~~to~~ hear him.

Clara reached for the door handle and stopped when she noticed that the front door was already unlocked. She pushed it open slowly and stepped inside. The house smelled exactly as she remembered, which was impossible because the place had been abandoned for years. There was dust everywhere, but ~~underneath~~beneath it she could smell her mother's lavender perfume. It was faint, almost hidden beneath the smell of damp wood, but it was ~~there~~unmistakable. Clara stood in the hallway, trying to understand how ~~a smell~~that scent could ~~survive~~have survived for seventeen years,~~and for~~. For a moment, she wondered if she was imagining it because she wanted some part of her mother to still exist in this house.

"Daniel?" she called, but her voice sounded smaller than she expected.

Nothing answered her. She switched on her ~~phone~~phone's flashlight and moved through the hallway. The old photographs were still hanging on the walls, covered in a thin layer of dust. There were family birthdays, Christmas dinners, school pictures, and photographs from holidays ~~that~~ Clara had almost forgotten. She stopped in front of one photograph and stared at it for a long time. It showed her, Daniel, and their mother standing in front of the house when they were children, but someone had been cut out of the photograph. The edges of the missing figure were rough, as if someone had used scissors,~~and~~. Clara couldn't remember anyone else being there. She kept looking at the empty space because ~~theirs~~ shape ~~of it~~ seemed strangely familiar, but she couldn't ~~place~~remember who had once stood there.

A sound came from upstairs, and Clara looked toward the staircase. The knocking started again, following the same pattern as before;~~three~~ three knocks followed by two. She wanted to leave the house, but instead she began climbing the stairs slowly, trying not to make ~~noise~~a sound. Every step complained beneath her weight, and the ~~sound~~noise seemed louder in the empty house than it should have been. At the top of the staircase, she found the hallway exactly as she remembered it, except for one thing. A door stood at the end of the corridor, where there had only been a blank wall before.

Clara stared at it, unable to understand how it could possibly be there. She had lived in this house for twelve years. She knew every room, every window, and every broken floorboard. There had been three bedrooms upstairs, a bathroom, and a small storage room, but there had never been another room at the end of the hallway. She wondered if the house had been renovated after her family left, although she couldn't understand why nobody had ever mentioned it. The door

looked old, much older than the rest of the house, and something about it made Clara feel that she had seen it before.

She walked toward it slowly. As she got closer, she noticed something carved into the wood. A name had been scratched into the surface, and even before she could read it clearly, she knew what it would say. ~~DANIEL.~~

Daniel.

Clara reached ~~out toward~~for the handle, but before her fingers touched it, the door opened by itself. The room beyond was completely dark, and she couldn't see how deep it went. She stood in the doorway for several seconds, listening for any movement, but there was only silence.

"Daniel?" she whispered again, although she knew there was no reason to expect an answer.

She stepped inside, and the door slammed shut behind her. Clara jumped and immediately turned around, pulling at the handle, but it ~~would not~~wouldn't move. She tried again, harder this time, but the door remained locked. Her breathing became faster as she searched the room with her ~~phone~~phone's flashlight. The room was almost empty except for an old wooden table, a chair, and a television sitting in the corner. The television suddenly flickered on, making Clara step backward.

The screen showed a recording of Daniel sitting in the same room. He looked younger than Clara remembered him, perhaps thirteen or fourteen, and he was wearing the same blue jacket from the photograph. Clara moved closer to the television, unable to take her eyes ~~away from~~off him. Daniel looked directly into the camera, and although the image was old and grainy, ~~Clara~~she could see fear in his expression. He opened his mouth and said something, but the sound was so ~~low~~faint that she couldn't understand ~~the words~~him. Clara leaned closer, trying to hear ~~him~~, and then the recording suddenly became clear.

"Clara, if you're watching this, it means you came back."

Her hands began to shake. She wanted to believe it was some kind of trick, a recording someone had created to frighten her, but Daniel's face made that explanation difficult to accept. The recording continued, and he ~~started~~began talking about the night he disappeared, ~~but some~~. Some of his words were impossible to understand because the sound kept cutting out. Clara could hear her own name several times, along with the words "mother," "door," and "don't trust him," but she couldn't understand ~~who~~whom Daniel was talking about. She moved closer to the television, as if being ~~closer~~nearer to it would somehow make the recording clearer.

Something moved behind her.

Clara turned quickly, but there was nobody in the room. She stood completely still for several seconds, listening to the sound of her own breathing. When she looked back at the television, Daniel was no longer sitting in the chair. The chair was empty, and the screen had changed to an image of Clara standing outside the house. She recognized the scene immediately because it showed her arriving only minutes earlier. The camera angle was impossible, though, ~~because it~~

~~was.~~ The footage had been filmed from behind her as she entered the house, as if someone had been standing outside watching her.

Clara stared at the screen, unable to move. A second figure appeared behind her in the recording. It was tall and completely still, standing several feet away ~~from her~~ as she walked through the garden. Clara watched the figure move closer, but the recording suddenly became distorted before she could see its face. The television went black, and the room became silent again. Clara slowly turned toward the door, because she had the sudden feeling that she was no longer alone.

Someone was standing on the other side of the room.

Clara could not see the person's face clearly, but she knew the shape of the body and the way the person was standing. She had seen it before, somewhere in a memory she had spent years trying to forget. The figure took one slow step toward her, and Clara finally understood why the photograph had been sent to her and why Daniel had wanted her to come back.

She knew the face standing in front of her.

~~And it~~It was the face of someone who had died seventeen years ago.