



# The Key to the Quiet House

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Sam stands in her brightly colored kitchen, a vibrant but unsettling silence filling the air. She sips her coffee, her brow furrowed with a subtle, nagging worry that has recently settled into her peaceful routine. The cheerful patterns on her mug seem to mock the growing unease in her heart.



Later, in her bedroom, Sam meticulously searches a drawer full of neatly folded clothes, her expression puzzled. She's looking for a small, silver stud earring, a familiar piece of jewelry that has mysteriously vanished. This small disappearance ignites a flicker of suspicion.



The vivid living room feels heavy with unspoken words as Jack's back is to Sam, silhouetted against the open front door as he leaves. Sam stands with her arms crossed, a pained and resolute expression on her face, the lingering echo of a difficult conversation hanging in the air.



Walking down a sunlit hallway, Sam pauses, her hand hovering over a doorknob. Her posture is thoughtful, a determined frown creasing her brow. A powerful gut feeling tells her that something is amiss, a secret lurking just beyond her sight, prompting her to act.



With a deep, shaky breath, Sam pushes open the creaky basement door. A single, bare lightbulb casts long, dancing shadows down the steep wooden stairs, transforming ordinary objects into playful yet eerie shapes. Dust motes shimmer like tiny secrets in the descending light.



In the dim light of the basement, Sam is a whirlwind of focused energy, rummaging through dusty boxes stacked high against the walls. Playfully exaggerated cobwebs cling to forgotten treasures, but her determined expression shows she's hunting for answers, not just old memories.



Sam is furious, ripping into a box marked “XMAS DECOR.” She’s not careful. The metal box clatters out, and she jumps back, staring at it—too new, not dusty enough. She kneels, her breathing loud in the dank basement, and fumbles with the latch. It opens. With a sharp intake of breath, Sam gasps, her hand hovering over the contents. She picks up a photo first: it’s of her, through her kitchen window, laughing on the phone, a memory she doesn’t recall. Whispering, trembling, she asks, “When...?” She picks up a simple silver stud earring, touching her own bare earlobe, remembering she had looked for this. Then she sees the key, cold in her hand, and recognition is instant and visceral. To herself, in a horrified realization, she whispers, “The rock. The stupid fake rock.” She remembers buying it, a ‘security’ measure, and putting the spare key under it the day they



Sam is frozen, pressed tightly against a towering stack of forgotten boxes in the darkest corner of the basement. Her eyes are wide with pure, primal terror, barely daring to breathe. The erratically swaying lightbulb casts monstrous, distorted shadows across the mundane objects around her, making her heart pound like a frantic drum.



From Sam's cramped hiding spot, a terrifyingly long shadow stretches down the basement stairs, plunging the bottom steps into deeper gloom. The figure at the top of the stairs remains obscured in darkness, but their looming presence is undeniably clear, filling the air with suffocating tension.



As the first rays of dawn paint the sky in bright, hopeful hues, Sam bursts out of her house, her face a mix of fear and fierce resolve. She glances back over her shoulder one last time, clutching the cold metal key tightly in her hand. The long shadows of the new day stretch behind her, marking the beginning of a daunting but determined path forward.