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The Shadows of Elmsworth

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Introduction

Alice Marlowe had always told herself she had made peace with the winding roads of Elmsworth and the way its sprawling forests pressed against the tidy edges of the village. Yet, as the train pulled into the station beneath a heavy curtain of mist, she realized there were some places the heart remembers in unexpected ways. Returning home was supposed to be a brief detour, a pause in her burgeoning career as a journalist in London—nothing more than a dutiful response to her mother’s declining health. But as hedgerows flashed by and old church bells tolled, Alice felt the weight of nostalgia and unfinished business settle quietly around her.

Elmsworth, with its centuries-old cottages and timeworn cobblestones, seemed suspended between the comfort of tradition and the suspicion of secrets kept just out of sight. The villagers still greeted one another with measured warmth, but Alice sensed an undercurrent—a collective unease that had not been present in her childhood. Her mother’s house, rendered more fragile by years and sorrow, awaited her with silent reminders of loss and love’s complicated strands.

The routines of caregiving were both unfamiliar and relentless. Alice found herself caught between managing medications and chasing fleeting moments of her mother’s lucidity. Sleepless nights blurred into gray mornings, and soon, the act of running errands or walking the town’s familiar paths became small refuges from the gravity of illness. In those solitary walks, Alice would pass the old Thorn estate, its windows shuttered, its story a persistent mystery whispered on the lips of the old women at the market.

It was during one such errand at the Gazette office—a simple request for a feature on Elmsworth’s summer fairs—that Alice first heard the name Gabriel Thorn spoken with a peculiar hush. The town’s once-famous artist, and, she would soon discover, an unspoken link to a series of unsolved disappearances that had quietly haunted the village for decades. The line between professional curiosity and personal involvement began to blur as Alice felt herself drawn into a story more complex, and far darker, than any she had ever written.

Haunted by her own doubts about returning home, guilt for time lost with her mother, and the sense that something vital remained unspoken in their relationship, Alice’s investigation was as much about confronting her past as it was about unraveling the village’s secrets. Each encounter—with wary villagers, fragmentary memories, and cryptic artworks—pulled her deeper into a labyrinth of lies, silence, and half-truths. Her search for answers would threaten not only the delicate stability she was trying to reclaim at home, but also the fragile peace the town had forged between its history

and its present.

In Elmsworth, every corner and every canvas seemed to house a shadow. As the boundary blurred between what must remain hidden and what demands the light, Alice was forced to ask herself how much is worth risking for the truth—and whether redemption can ever truly come to a place, or a heart, haunted by the past.

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CHAPTER ONE: Return to Elmsworth

The rain, a persistent drizzle since Reading, intensified as Alice's train pulled into Elmsworth station. It wasn't the dramatic downpour of a London storm, but a quiet, insidious dampness that seeped into everything, mirroring the chill that had taken up residence in her own chest. She fumbled with the clasp of her worn leather suitcase, the metal cold beneath her fingers. This wasn't a triumphant return, no fanfare for the prodigal daughter making her mark on the world. This was a retreat, a surrender to duty and the relentless tug of family.

A sigh escaped her, fogging the grimy windowpane. Elmsworth. Even the name felt heavy, like the ancient stones of the village church. She hadn't lived here since she'd fled for university a decade ago, eager to shake off the dust of rural life for the vibrant chaos of the city. London, with its endless opportunities and anonymous crowds, had been her haven. Now, Elmsworth felt like a trap, its narrow lanes and watchful eyes ready to reclaim her.

Stepping onto the platform, the familiar scent of damp earth and woodsmoke filled her nostrils, a comforting yet unsettling reminder of childhood. The station was deserted, save for a lone elderly porter who gave her a nod that seemed to encompass both recognition and unspoken sympathy. Alice dragged her suitcase over the worn cobblestones, the wheels rattling a protest against the uneven surface. Her sensible trench coat, chosen for its journalistic gravitas, felt utterly inadequate against the pervasive chill.

The walk to her mother's cottage was short, just past the sleepy High Street where the handful of shops looked exactly as she remembered them: the butcher with his perpetually rosy cheeks, the bakery emitting the tantalizing scent of fresh bread, and the newsagent, its window still displaying the same slightly faded postcards. She spotted a familiar face in the newsagent, Mrs. Gable, peering over her spectacles, her gaze lingering a moment too long. The Elmsworth grapevine, Alice knew, was already humming with her return.

The cottage, nestled behind a wild rose bush that had clearly seen better days, looked smaller, more vulnerable than in her memories. The paint on the front door was peeling, and a loose shutter clattered faintly in the breeze. A knot tightened in Alice's stomach. This was the tangible evidence of her mother's decline, a slow unraveling she had only witnessed in hurried weekend visits. Guilt, sharp and unwelcome, pricked at her. Had she stayed away too long?

Inside, the air was cool and still, thick with the faint scent of lavender and something

else indefinable, a smell of illness and stagnation. Dust motes danced in the slivers of weak sunlight that pierced through the lace curtains. The familiar chintz sofa, the overflowing bookshelves, the chipped teacups displayed on a dresser – every object was a silent echo of a life lived, a life now fading.

“Mum?” Alice called out, her voice sounding oddly loud in the quiet house.

A rustle from the living room, then a fragile voice. “Alice? Is that you, dear?”

Her mother, Eleanor, sat huddled in her favorite armchair, a tartan blanket pulled up to her chin despite the mildness of the early autumn day. Her once vibrant red hair was now a thin, silvery wispy halo around a face etched with a decade’s worth of worry and pain. Her eyes, though still a piercing blue, held a haunted, faraway look.

“It’s me, Mum,” Alice said, trying to keep her voice steady. She knelt beside the chair, taking her mother’s papery hand. It felt cold, fragile. “I’m here.”

Eleanor offered a weak smile. “I knew you’d come. Always knew you would.” Her voice was thin, reedy, a shadow of the booming laugh Alice remembered. “You’ve grown, haven’t you? Still so thin. Do they feed you properly in London?”

The casual question, a familiar refrain from childhood, nearly brought tears to Alice’s eyes. She squeezed her mother’s hand. “They do, Mum. I’m fine. How are you feeling today?”

Eleanor sighed, a sound of profound weariness. “Oh, you know. Up and down. Mostly down these days, I suppose.” She paused, her gaze drifting to the window. “It’s good to have you home, though, my dear. I’ve missed you.”

The admission hung in the air, a silent accusation Alice couldn't quite deflect. She had missed her mother too, in a way, but the demands of her career, the intoxicating allure of London, had always seemed more urgent. Now, confronted with the raw vulnerability of her mother, she felt the full weight of her choices.

The first few days were a blur of doctor’s appointments, medication schedules, and the quiet, often disheartening, task of simply being present. Eleanor’s memory was a kaleidoscope, shifting from moments of startling clarity to long stretches of confusion and repetition. Alice found herself caught between managing medications and chasing fleeting moments of her mother’s lucidity, desperately trying to reconnect with the woman who had raised her.

Sleepless nights blurred into gray mornings. Alice would wake before dawn, the house still and silent, and find herself wandering through the familiar rooms, a ghost in her own childhood home. She’d trace the spines of books on the shelves, run a hand over

the cool porcelain of a teacup, trying to conjure a sense of belonging that remained stubbornly elusive. The routines of caregiving were both unfamiliar and relentless, and soon, the act of running errands or walking the town's familiar paths became small refuges from the gravity of illness.

During one such errand, a desperate search for a specific brand of herbal tea Eleanor preferred, Alice found herself at the old post office, now a quaint general store. As she waited in line, she overheard snippets of conversation, the low murmur of village gossip, like an old tune she vaguely remembered. The name Gabriel Thorn surfaced, spoken with a peculiar hush.

"Did you hear they're thinking of reopening the old Thorn estate?" a woman with a basket full of wool said to another.

"Not after all these years, surely," replied her companion, shaking her head. "Not after... everything."

Alice's ears pricked up. Gabriel Thorn. The name resonated from the distant corners of her memory, a famous artist who had lived in Elmsworth in her childhood, a shadowy figure whose grand, reclusive estate had been the subject of whispered tales and childish dares. She recalled local legends of his enigmatic paintings and his sudden, mysterious disappearance from public life years ago, leaving behind a trail of unanswered questions. The women exchanged meaningful glances, their words loaded with unspoken history.

Later that week, feeling the need for a distraction, Alice paid a visit to the local Gazette office, a small, unassuming building tucked away on a side street. She needed something to occupy her mind, a professional tether to the world she'd left behind. Mr. Abernathy, the editor, a stout man with a perpetually furrowed brow and ink-stained fingers, greeted her with a surprised but welcoming smile.

"Alice Marlowe, I hardly recognized you!" he exclaimed, pushing a stack of papers to one side of his cluttered desk. "Heard you were back in Elmsworth. Sorry to hear about your mum." He offered a sympathetic nod. "London treating you well?"

Alice managed a small smile. "It has its moments. I was hoping, Mr. Abernathy, you might have some small feature I could write? Something local. A distraction."

He stroked his chin, his gaze shrewd. "Well, we are a bit thin on human interest pieces this time of year. There's the Elmsworth Summer Fair coming up, but that's hardly headline news for a London journalist, is it?" He chuckled, then his expression grew thoughtful. "Though, speaking of local interest... there's always the Thorn estate. It's been decades, but the old place still generates a bit of curiosity. A piece on its history, perhaps? The artist, Gabriel Thorn, was quite the figure in his day."

Alice felt a jolt of recognition. Gabriel Thorn. The name again. She remembered the hushed conversations at the post office. "Gabriel Thorn," she repeated, tasting the name on her tongue. "I remember whispers about him, even as a child. He was quite the recluse, wasn't he?"

Mr. Abernathy leaned back in his creaky chair, a glint in his eye. "Reclusive, yes. And a genius, some would say. Before he vanished, that is." He paused, letting the implication hang in the air. "A series of... unfortunate incidents, you might say, followed in his wake. Unsolved, all of them."

He tapped a finger on his desk. "It wouldn't be a hard-hitting expose, mind you. Just a look back at Elmsworth's artistic claim to fame. But even a simple feature might stir up a few old memories. Some good, some... not so good."

Alice's journalistic instincts, dormant for weeks, began to hum. Unsolved incidents. Vanished. The subtle tension in Mr. Abernathy's voice, the way the villagers spoke of Thorn - it wasn't just artistic reclusiveness. There was a story here, beneath the quiet facade of Elmsworth, a story far more intriguing than summer fairs. This could be more than just a distraction; it could be the professional anchor she desperately needed, a way to navigate the turbulent waters of her personal life without entirely drowning in them.

"I'll take it," Alice said, a flicker of excitement igniting within her. "The Thorn estate. Gabriel Thorn. I'll see what I can find."

Mr. Abernathy smiled, a knowing glint in his eye. "I thought you might, Alice. Just be careful what you dig up. Some truths, once unearthed, have a way of clinging to you."

His words, meant perhaps as a gentle warning, only fueled her curiosity. Alice felt the familiar thrill of the chase, the pull of a narrative waiting to be uncovered. But as she left the Gazette office, the damp Elmsworth air seemed to carry more than just the scent of rain. It carried the faint, unsettling whisper of shadows.

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