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Inheritance of Ashes

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Introduction

The city never slept, but it did have a pulse, and I learned to count on it like a metronome. Nights in Boston were my kingdom: the hum of copy machines in the newsroom, the stale coffee warming on the burner, the jittery voices of sources who called after midnight when spouses were snoring and guilt was quiet. I chased stories the way some people trained for marathons—steady, obsessive, with a tolerance for pain. Ten years of that rhythm had given me a byline, a reputation, and an apartment I visited less than my desk. It also cost me a marriage. The last thing my ex-husband said to me, in a courthouse hallway that smelled like lemon cleaner and defeat, was: “You’ll always choose the story.” He wasn’t wrong.

My father said something similar, years before, the day I left Windham Cove and the house he built with his own hands. You won’t be happy until you’ve got the whole world’s business in your notebook, Mara. His pride was a granite ledge; mine was the tide that crashed against it and refused to recede. I told him the town was too small, the future too big. He folded his arms, jaw working, eyes on the horizon instead of me. We were good at that—standing close enough to feel the other’s heat, both of us pretending the view mattered more. I promised I’d visit in a month. Then a month stretched, thinned, snapped. Calls went unanswered on both ends for reasons that felt righteous in the moment and shabby in hindsight.

The night the call came, Boston was a sheet of rain. I was outlining a story about a pharmaceutical donation program someone had turned into a personal pipeline when my phone lit up with an unfamiliar coastal number. The voice on the other end belonged to a neighbor I remembered mainly for her cinnamon rolls and sharper memory. There’s been a fire at your father’s place, she said, and then, after a breath I could hear, We lost him. The words didn’t land so much as hover, a wasp I couldn’t swat. She repeated them once, as if repetition could make death obedient. By the time I found my coat, the newsroom felt like a stage set built for someone else.

Windham Cove arrived first as a smell—salt, creosote, wet pine—sliding in through the cracked window as Route 1 narrowed and the ocean stitched itself in glimpses between trees. Morning had peeled the sky open by the time I turned onto the road that led to my father’s farmhouse. The field was a scab of black. Smoke sat low, the kind that gets into your clothes and your mouth, that lingers for days. Yellow tape drew a hard line through the soft edges of my memory. The sheriff I knew by sight lifted a palm and told me it was too soon to go in. His eyes slid past me to the chimneys, to the crumpled tin roof like a collapsed lung. He said the word accident and I felt it stick. Something in his voice—too practiced or not practiced enough—caught my reporter’s ear and refused to let go.

I told myself I had come to sign papers, sort through what the fire hadn't eaten, and leave before the ash settled on me too. In the lawyer's office, with its diplomas and windows overlooking the harbor, I was handed a thin folder: a modest will, a list of debts that surprised no one, a note in my father's blocky hand clipped to the back. Keep the shore parcel. No matter what. The words were underlined twice. I didn't know the parcel by that name; to me it was the strip of stubborn land where he kept a rusting dory and a stack of traps he no longer used. The lawyer cleared his throat and mentioned a registered letter that had arrived the day before the fire, unopened, from a company called Harborstone Development—logo clean, font expensive. He slid it across the desk as if it might be hot.

On my way back through town, I saw the familiar choreography of grief and gossip—heads bent together outside the diner, a curtain shifting in the upstairs window of the hardware store. Jonah Pierce stood by the marina, hair damp from the mist, shoulders wider than the boy I'd once kissed in the shadow of the boathouse. He raised a hand, then dropped it, like we were both unsure of the rules. Later, over coffee neither of us drank, he asked when I'd head back to Boston. When the arrangements are done, I said. He looked toward the charred field and then back at me, something like warning flickering and gone. Be careful, Mara. People remember everything here, just not the same way.

I drove out to the farmhouse again at dusk, stopping at the edge of the tape. The wind shifted and brought me the dense, oily sweetness of a burn that wasn't just wood. I'd learned enough in a dozen firehouse interviews to note the way the ground blistered, the unnatural speed of certain scorch patterns on the grass. I told myself I was imagining it, that grief was making a detective out of me because that's how I know how to mourn—by interrogating what's left. But the note about the shore parcel weighted my pocket, and the unopened letter from Harborstone weighted the air. I had come home to bury my father. I would stay because the fire didn't feel finished.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The fire had eaten the heart of the house and left the ribs. From the shoulder of the dirt lane, Mara Bennett watched smoke curl from the blackened bones of the farmhouse where she'd learned to tie her shoes and lie to her father about the same. It wasn't an active blaze anymore, not with dawn scabbed gray over the trees and the damp air pinning the smell of charcoal to the ground. Yellow tape shivered in a restless wind and drew a squeamish geometry around the ruin, an order of restraint that looked almost polite against the aggression of the scorch. Two sheriff's cruisers straddled the lane. A deputy leaned on a fender, smoking, watching the house as if it might change its mind and burn again.

Mara rolled down the window and let the cold off the cove crawl into the rental. The smell wasn't just wood. It was the sharp, oily sweetness of accelerant she recognized from a dozen interviews with men who fight fires for a living. Her reporter's brain, which she had once tried to starve into submission, ticked off details: scorch patterns low on the foundation, a darker ring near the front steps, foam residue at the eaves where the volunteer truck had laid down suppression. She fought the urge to pull out her phone and record notes. This wasn't a story yet. It was her father's house. Her father. The phrase didn't sit right in her mouth.

A sheriff's SUV crested the rise and angled to block her in. The door opened and a man stepped out, the same unmovable shape she remembered from high school parking lots and the occasional county fair. Sheriff Roy Dawes. His hat rode low over eyes that had seen too many accidents and not enough crimes. He didn't hurry. He never had.

Mara. He said her name like a compromise. Figured you'd show. Sorry about your dad. He was a good man.

Thank you, Roy. She kept her hands on the wheel. Her knuckles were white, and she made them relax. What happened here?

Likely faulty wiring, Roy said, squinting at the house. Place was old. He gestured with his chin toward the scorch line. We'll know more when the fire marshal gets through. Till then, it's a scene. You know the rules.

I do. Mara got out anyway, keeping the car between them. Her boots sank into the soft earth and found the grit of the drive beneath. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to be anywhere else. The contradiction made her chest ache. I won't go under the tape. I just need to see.

Roy's jaw worked, the argument she could hear before he said it. It's not safe. There's a floor section that went in the center. The weight of her grief was a physical thing pressing behind her eyes, but her voice stayed steady. I'll stay at the perimeter. I need to see what's left.

He studied her for a beat, weighing the stubbornness he'd seen in high school against the professional distance that had carried her off to Boston. Something gave. He lifted the tape with the toe of his boot. Don't cross. And don't touch anything. We still have to clear it.

She ducked under, the plastic brushing her shoulder. Up close, the house was worse. The fire had chewed through the kitchen and the front room, taken the roof's spine, and collapsed the upper floor into the lower in a tangle of rafters and plaster. The windows were gaping, their glass melted to the floor in milky sheets. The mantel she remembered—her father had built it out of a salvaged beam, sanded it for a month until it felt like silk—was gone, replaced by a blackened stump. She could see the space where his worn armchair should have been. She could see the empty.

Her phone vibrated. The screen showed a number she didn't recognize and a single text. *Turn around, Mara.* She scanned the lane, the trees, the ridgeline. Nothing moved but the tape. She slipped the phone back into her pocket.

The deputy at the cruiser raised his head as she approached. He was younger than the others, with a jawline sharp enough to cut himself on. His nameplate said HALE. He kept his hand near the radio. Ma'am. Sheriff asked you to stay behind the tape.

I'm just looking for a box. Anything that might have survived near his desk. He kept important papers in a wooden desk in the back room.

Hale's gaze flicked to the house. It's all gone. Everything's gone.

She looked past him to the ruin. Most of it was, sure. But people were careless about their metal. Fireboxes, safes, the odd tin recipe box that had survived three generations. She'd learned that the hard way, reporting a warehouse blaze where the owner swore up and down he'd lost everything, until a half-melted hinge in the rubble caught her eye and she found a safe underneath with records that put him in a federal pen. You'd be surprised what fire misses, she said.

Roy rejoined them, chewing on a toothpick. He didn't look at her. We got a call last night. Fire at eight fifty-seven. Volunteers were here by nine-oh-four. Heat was already through the roof. The closest hydrant is half a mile, uphill. By the time we got water on it, it was a chimney. He paused. No signs of forced entry. We'll tow the desk out, check the safe if there is one. Might be a week.

Mara's throat tightened. A week. The funeral home would press her on arrangements by noon. The bank would ask about the mortgage. The lawyer—she was meeting him at ten—would hand her a thin folder and a pen. None of it would be done in a week. None of it would feel real until she found a single thing that belonged to her father that still looked like it belonged to him. I understand, she said. I'm staying at the house in town. You know the one. If you find anything—

We'll call. Roy's voice softened just enough to notice. He had always liked her father better than her. Most people did. Go on, Mara. Get some coffee. Let us work.

She nodded, took one more look at the blackened ribs, and went back under the tape. As she turned toward her car, something caught her eye near the stump of the front step—a piece of paper, or what was left of it, fused to the concrete. The edges had burned away, but the center was a coin of soot-stiffened pulp. She knelt, keeping her weight off the slab, and lifted the corner with her thumbnail. It didn't give. It looked like the side of a ledger, the black lines of a column barely visible. She memorized the angle and stood.

On the drive back into town, the radio kept cutting out between country songs and weather. She didn't try to fix it. The road hugged the cove and the water came into view, slate with a chop that promised afternoon wind. Cormorants sat on the mooring balls with their wings spread, black crosses drying in the damp. The town announced itself in pieces: the steep gable of the Congregational church, the rust-streaked trawler that had been a fixture in the harbor since she was six, the hand-painted sign for Pier 7 Fish Market swinging on rusted hooks. It was a place that wore its history on its sleeves and on its siding, where the clapboard never got a fresh coat without someone calling a meeting.

The lawyer's office sat above the hardware store, reachable by a narrow staircase that smelled of brine and creosote. Mr. Dyer had been her father's friend in the way men who share nothing but geography and a need for the hardware store become friends—by showing up when a shed roof blew off and by remembering what size lag bolt you needed without being told. He greeted her with a soft handshake and the expression of someone who had rehearsed what to say and forgotten it in the actual presence of grief.

Mara. I'm sorry. He gestured to a chair. Your father was private. He kept his house in order. I don't know how much he told you—

Not much. She sat, the leather of the chair sighing under her. He never wanted my help. I offered. He always said he was fine.

Dyer nodded and slid a thin manila folder across the desk. It was the kind of folder

that contained a life in triplicate. There was a will, straightforward, leaving her the property and anything in it. There was a list of bills—electric, fuel, a small mortgage with the local bank. There was a handwritten sheet clipped to the back, the paper yellowed at the edges. Keep the shore parcel. No matter what. The line was underlined twice, the pen bearing down hard enough to dent the page.

What shore parcel? she asked, though she could picture it: a spit of land past the marina where her father had kept a dory on blocks and a pile of trap bands he said he'd use again one day. He hadn't.

Dyer cleared his throat. It's that strip along the cove, near Jonah's marina. Not the main house. Two acres, a small outbuilding. Your father refused to sell it for years. I don't know why. He just said it mattered. The will's clear on that. The rest is yours to do with as you please.

She turned the paper over. It was blank on the back. There was nothing else in the folder but the legal language she'd read in other places, for other people. Did he have any debts I don't know about? Anyone he owed?

Not that I'm aware of. Dyer hesitated. He did receive a registered letter last week. From a developer. Harborstone. I didn't open it. It came back after— He stopped. He pushed a sealed envelope across the desk. The envelope was cream, heavy, with a clean logo embossed in the corner: Harborstone Development. The address was in Boston, but the return showed a local P.O. box. It had not been opened.

Mara picked it up. It had weight, the kind that promised papers inside, maybe a contract. The last time she'd seen her father this formal about a piece of paper, he'd been refusing to sign off on a boundary survey for the neighbor who wanted to build a fence two inches over the line. He'd spent two weeks drafting a letter, reading it aloud to her over the phone with a grunt after each sentence. Why are you still here, he'd asked her on that last call, six months ago. You don't need to babysit me. You have a job. We both do.

She turned the envelope over in her hands. It felt hot, like it had been waiting. Thank you, she said, sliding it into her bag. I'll read it at the house. Is there anything else I need to sign today?

Just the acknowledgment that you received the will. Dyer slid another paper. And if you want us to handle the funeral, we can. We've already spoken with—

I'll call them. Her tone was sharper than she intended. Sorry. I just—I need to do this part myself.

He nodded, accepting the apology like a man who had dealt with her father's pride

long enough to recognize it in his daughter. Understood. If you need anything, Mara, the town's here. The way he said it made it sound more like a warning than a promise.

Back on the street, the town was awake. The diner windows steamed. The fish market had its door propped with a milk crate and a boy was hosing down the floor inside, splashing suds onto the sidewalk. Jonah Pierce was across the street, hauling a crate of fishmeal onto the deck of a skiff. He'd put on weight in the shoulders since high school, and the years had taken the softness off his face, but the way he moved—deliberate, careful not to waste a step—was the same. He saw her and raised a hand, then dropped it, then raised it again in a small wave that felt like an admission of uncertainty. She crossed the street.

Jonah. He smelled like salt and diesel. She hadn't expected that to be familiar.

Mara. He wiped his hands on a rag tucked into his belt. I heard this morning. I'm sorry. Your dad—he was a stubborn old bastard, but he was good people.

She nodded, unable to think of an answer that wouldn't crack. Did you see anything? Last night? The sheriff thinks it was wiring.

He glanced toward the head of the cove where the smoke was still a faint smear against the sky. I was at the marina till late. There was a storm cell pushing through. I heard the siren. Nothing else. He looked back at her. You staying long?

Until the arrangements are done. Then we'll see.

You should be careful, Mara. People remember things here. They also forget what they don't want to remember. He said it matter-of-factly, without drama. It was the closest Jonah had ever come to telling a lie she could feel.

She made herself smile. I've handled worse.

Not like this. He took a step closer, dropped his voice. You know those stories you chase back in Boston? They have names on pages. Here, they have faces at the market. It makes a difference.

She let the silence sit between them, long enough for him to hear what she wasn't saying. She'd already decided to stay at the farmhouse, not her father's actual house, but the guesthouse he'd built on the edge of the property years ago, the only thing untouched because it sat far enough from the main structure. She didn't say that out loud. She didn't say she could still smell the burn on the wind. She didn't say the unopened envelope in her bag felt like a brick.

I'll be careful, she said. She wanted to ask him if he'd ever argued with her father

about that parcel, if he'd ever stood on the porch with a beer and tried to talk sense into a man who defined sense in ways that baffled most people. She didn't. Not yet.

By the time she made it back to the guesthouse, the day had thinned into a raw afternoon. The place was sparse—a cot, a woodstove, a table piled with old charts and tide books. It smelled like pencil shavings and cold dust. She set the envelope on the table and sliced it open with her car key. Inside were three crisp pages under a letterhead so glossy it looked wet. Harborstone Development was proposing to purchase a collection of shoreline parcels, including the one referenced in her father's note. The offer was generous. It was also, as far as Mara could tell, a hair away from predatory: a thirty-day acceptance window, a confidentiality clause that would prevent her from discussing terms, and a reminder that they had already acquired the surrounding properties. A glossy brochure featured architectural renderings of a resort—villas, a marina expansion, a spa. It looked like a place that would do to the cove what a polished shoe does to mud.

She set the papers down and opened her laptop. She had a rule for work: when you don't know, look. Harborstone Development's website was slick, all drone footage and smiling executives. The about page mentioned a founding partner, a man named Whitaker, with no photo. The local news section listed donations to the volunteer fire department and the senior center. The town council had issued them a commendation for "revitalization." The address traced back to a P.O. box in Boston, same as the return on the envelope. Nothing illegal. Nothing that explained why a man who hated paperwork had a registered letter he hadn't opened and a note underlining the word *No matter what*.

She picked up the phone and called the number on the letterhead. After two rings, a cheerful receptionist answered. Harborstone Development, how can I direct your call?

I'm calling about the offer for parcel— She glanced at the brochure—Twelve Shore Road, Windham Cove. My name is Mara Bennett. My father—

Oh, yes. We were so sorry to hear about Mr. Bennett. The voice stayed polished. Let me connect you with Mr. Danning. One moment.

Mara waited. The hold music was a generic piano loop that sounded like waiting rooms and bad decisions. A man came on the line, all courtesy and baritone. Ms. Bennett? Paul Danning. I'm sorry for your loss. We were hoping your father would see the long-term benefit of our proposal. He was... resistant.

He didn't open your letter. She kept it flat. I'm here now. I'd like to understand what's already been approved. Permits, zoning changes.

There's a public hearing next week. You're welcome to attend. Danning's tone didn't

change, but the friendliness shifted gears. We're transparent. This town needs a future. It can't survive on fishing and nostalgia alone.

My father thought it could. The words came out harder than she intended. Thank you for your time. I'll be in touch.

She hung up and stared at the table. The guesthouse walls seemed to lean inward. Outside, wind moved through the pines. The smell of smoke was still there, faint but insistent, like a memory that won't leave no matter how you change rooms.

She pulled on a jacket and walked back to the ruin. It was a compulsion she didn't fight. The tape flapped in the wind. The sheriff's cruisers were gone. The only sound was the hiss of tide on rock. She stood where the front steps had been and studied the ground. The deputy had been wrong; nothing survived. But the scorch told a story if you knew how to read it. The burn radiated unevenly from the center of the house outward, not like a fire that started at a faulty outlet and climbed the walls, but like one that had decided to be everywhere at once. She crouched near the line of foam and found a strip of melted plastic from a grocery bag, a button from a coat she remembered, and, impossibly, the metal runner from a desk drawer.

She followed the runner into the debris field with her eyes and then, gingerly, with her boot, nudging aside a charred plank. The runner led to a wedge of metal she recognized—the heavy fireproof drawer from her father's desk. It had been blasted clear of the rest of the desk by the force of the blast and wedged under the sagging lip of the foundation. The face was blackened, the handle fused, but the drawer itself seemed intact. She knelt and tugged. The metal was hot even through her jacket, but it gave. Inside, a metal box, warped but closed, protected by the drawer's shell. She lifted it out. It wasn't large, but it was heavy. She held it to her chest like something fragile and walked back to the guesthouse without looking over her shoulder.

At the table, she set the box down and found a screwdriver in a drawer. The latch was jammed. She worked it carefully, listening to the metal squeal. When it finally popped, the lid lifted on stiff hinges. Inside, charred edges of paper curled away from the center. Most of the pages were burned to ash. But one folded square had survived, shielded by something that had collapsed on top of it. She lifted it with shaking hands and unfolded it.

The paper was cheap, torn from a ledger. The top line was handwritten in her father's blocky print. Across the page were columns. Not numbers, not in the usual sense. Names on the left, dates in the middle, and on the right, a scrawled phrase or a word, like "dock" or "permit" or "trawler." It looked like a record of favors, a ledger of debts, or a map to a story. At the bottom of the third column, a name had been circled twice in pencil, the lead pressed so hard it had nearly cut through: *Tom Hale*. The same name on the deputy at the tape this morning. Mara felt the floor tilt under her. She

didn't move. The fire hadn't eaten everything after all.

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