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The Neighbors Across the Lake

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Introduction

When I came back to Harrow's Cove, the lake was the first to greet me. It breathed in the morning and exhaled at night, laying its fog across the water like a hand you couldn't quite see but always felt. My mother's old house—cedar shingles gone soft at the edges, porch groaning in complaint—still smelled like wet earth, coffee grounds, and the damp wool of winters that never fully left. I unloaded boxes into the quiet, every thud sounding too loud, as if the walls were listening. After a marriage that unraveled in long, invisible threads, I told myself I was here to start over: new classroom, new routines, no more chasing the truth for a newspaper that barely paid and never slept. That was the plan, anyway.

Across the lake, the Holloways' house sat higher than mine, all glass and clean lines, a modern geometry drawn against the trees. In the evenings, their windows glowed like a staged photograph—warmth arranged just so. I watched people become silhouettes: a tall man moving from room to room, a boy hunched and quick like he didn't want to be seen, and a woman on the back steps with her hands wrapped around a mug, steam drifting up to meet the fog. Maggie, I learned later. Maggie Holloway. She turned her head sometimes like she'd heard her name from across the water. I shouldn't say I watched. I glanced. I happened to look. It was easy to tell myself those lies at first.

Harrow's Cove has the kind of politeness that looks good in brochures. The locals keep their secrets folded small enough to fit into a church bulletin—names left out, verbs softened, everybody nodding anyway. I ran into Deputy Aaron Tate at the Harbor Market on my second day back, a paper bag under his arm and a look that said he'd already heard my history in pieces. "Welcome home," he said, like we both understood that word was a negotiation. Pastor Simon Hale shook my hand after Sunday service, his voice honeyed and measured, a man who could talk a fever down. He said something about forgiveness and fresh starts, and his eyes slid past me, toward the lake.

By the end of my first week, I had a key to my new classroom and a pile of laminated name tags that smelled faintly of plastic and hope. Marin, my best friend since we were girls sneaking cigarettes behind the bait shop, pressed a beer into my hand at her bar, the Blue Heron, and asked how I was sleeping. "Like I'm being watched," I said, and we both laughed, and I didn't admit it was true. My ex-husband left a voicemail from a reading in Portland, his voice hitting that performative sincerity he saves for microphones: we should talk, maybe meet, he'd be passing through. I deleted it. Mostly. I kept the last five seconds.

Small things began to ask for my attention. The Holloways' porch light burned three nights in a row, steady and unsleeping. Their lakeside shed stood with its padlock looped but not clicked, door yawning a thumb's width open so rain could stipple the concrete. Once, through that expanse of glass, I thought I saw a bookshelf shifted, a gap where books had been, a negative space like a missing tooth. Maybe it had always been that way. I'm not proud of how quickly my old instincts woke up, the reporter brain at the back of my skull tapping its pen, hungry as ever. I told myself to be a teacher now, to grade spelling tests and mind my business. The lake carried the sound of an argument one night—just the rhythm of it, not the words—and the next morning, gulls screamed like alarms.

People threaded themselves into those days the way they do in small towns, crossing paths until paths become patterns. Mrs. Dwyer, my mother's former neighbor, brought over geranium cuttings and the news that the Holloways were "good people" said in a tone that meant untouchable. Aaron showed up at the Heron for a beer and told Marin he was working too many doubles, his badge catching the neon light and cutting the darkness into clean angles. Pastor Hale started a food-pantry drive, and his volunteers wore their righteousness like fresh-pressed shirts. I saw him from my porch one sunset, standing on the Holloways' dock with Mr. Holloway, their heads inclined together as if praying.

Then Maggie stopped appearing in her window. The mug was left on the back step for two mornings, collecting a ring of lake damp that never quite dried. On the third night, their light in the upstairs corner of the house burned until dawn, a small square sun that refused to set. I told myself she was visiting family, that the early fall chill had kept her inside, that people change their habits the same way the lake changes color with the sky. I told myself a lot of things. The words fit in my mouth, but they didn't warm me.

I asked around without saying her name. At the pantry folding table, someone mentioned a no-show in a voice pitched low, and Pastor Hale smiled like a man smoothing a wrinkled sheet. At the market, the cashier said she hadn't seen Maggie in days and then looked like she regretted saying it aloud. I walked up their driveway once at noon with a plate of cookies like a cliché and the pretense of neighborliness. Her husband opened the door in a shirt with creases too sharp for a regular day, and he told me, pleasantly, that Maggie was with her sister in Bar Harbor. The boy, taller up close, watched from the stairs and rolled his eyes at something I couldn't see. There was a trace of bleach in the air, or maybe that was my imagination dressing the scene.

That night, I sat on my porch with the police scanner I'd kept from my reporting days, an old habit I hadn't thrown out with the marriage. The voices fuzzed in and out—traffic stops, a lost dog, nothing, nothing, and then a welfare check on Lakeshore,

the number I knew without knowing why. I texted Aaron and stared at the three bouncing dots until they disappeared. The fog thickened. Somewhere across the water, a door slammed, and the lake carried the sound to me crisp as a dropped plate.

By morning, the rumor had compressed into a sentence everyone knew how to say: Maggie Holloway is missing. The town wrapped the words in tissue paper, passed them hand to hand, tried not to crumple them with speculation. I stood at the edge of the dock, boards creaking under my feet, the smell of wet wood rising and sticking to my throat. I told myself to look away. I didn't. Because once you start seeing the seams in a perfect picture, you can't stop wondering at the hands that stitched it together—and at what they're hiding underneath.

What happened to Maggie?

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CHAPTER ONE: Porch Light That Never Sleeps

The lake was a hungry thing that morning, swallowing the last tendrils of fog as the sun gnawed at the horizon. I stood on my porch, mug of cooling tea in hand, and stared across the water at the Holloways' house. It still sat there, pristine and silent, a monument to something I couldn't quite name. Perfection, maybe. Or the illusion of it. Yesterday's news of Maggie's disappearance had settled over Harrow's Cove like a shroud, heavy and damp, yet the house across the lake maintained its stoic posture. The porch light, the one that had been on for three nights straight, was finally off. A small, almost imperceptible shift, but my reporter brain, a creature I thought I'd caged, latched onto it.

It was the first inconsistency, a tiny thread pulled from an otherwise tightly woven tapestry. Why turn it off now? Was it a conscious decision, an attempt to erase the evidence of a sleepless night, or simply a sign that someone had finally thought to flip a switch? Such small details were my bread and butter in my old life, the innocuous crumbs that, once collected, often pointed to a much larger feast of secrets. Here, in my new life, they were just... unsettling.

I drove to school, the gravel crunching under my tires, the air thick with the smell of pine and impending rain. The elementary school was a low-slung brick building that felt frozen in time, the kind of place where chalk dust still clung to the air and the squeak of sneakers echoed down linoleum hallways. My classroom was filled with the promise of tiny voices and crayon-scented chaos, but my mind kept drifting across the lake. During recess, while the kids chased each other like joyful maniacs on the playground, I found myself staring out the window, past the swings and the rusty slide, towards the distant shimmer of water.

I hadn't quite shaken off the residue of my previous career. A journalist sees the world in questions, in layers of what's said and what's deliberately unsaid. Harrow's Cove specialized in the latter. Maggie Holloway's vanishing act was the unsaid, echoing in the hushed tones at the grocery store, in the lingering glances when the Holloway name came up. Everyone knew. No one spoke. Not really.

That afternoon, after the last child had been safely delivered into the waiting arms of their parents, I found myself drawn back to the lake. I parked my old Volvo by the public dock, the same one where I'd stood yesterday morning. The air was cooler now, carrying the metallic tang of an approaching storm. The Holloways' house, even from this angle, seemed to watch me. The idea of neighborliness, once a comforting small-town myth, felt increasingly like a performance.

I walked the familiar path along the shore, the fallen leaves slippery underfoot. My mother had loved this path, pointing out the different types of moss on the rocks, the way the light fractured through the canopy of trees. Now, I saw only potential clues. A forgotten glove, a broken branch, anything that might speak of struggle or hurried departure. Nothing. The path was meticulously clean, as if swept. Another small detail, another question mark. Harrow's Cove prided itself on its tidiness. But was this natural, or deliberate?

As I rounded a bend, I saw him. Deputy Aaron Tate. He was standing by the Holloways' property line, a dark silhouette against the deepening gray of the lake. His patrol car, a gleaming white wedge, was parked awkwardly on the shoulder, its lights off. He looked out of place, too official for the serene backdrop, yet also completely at home, a part of the landscape I'd forgotten.

He turned as I approached, his hands shoved into his pockets. The expression on his face was tight, guarded. "Lila," he said, a simple greeting that nonetheless carried a weight. "Walk of remembrance?" "Something like that," I replied, tucking my hands into my own pockets. "Or just avoiding grading papers." The flimsy humor felt hollow. "Anything new on... Maggie?" Aaron kicked at a loose stone. "Standard procedure. Welfare check escalated to a missing persons report. Sheriff's department is on it." His voice was flat, professional. But his eyes, I noticed, kept straying towards the Holloway house, specifically to the lakeside shed. The one with the unlocked padlock.

"I saw the porch light off this morning," I ventured, trying to sound casual. "It's been on for days." He looked at me then, a flicker of surprise in his eyes. "You notice a lot, don't you, Mercer?" It wasn't accusatory, more like an observation. An old journalist's instinct, honed over years, couldn't be easily scrubbed away. "Old habits," I shrugged. "What about the shed? The padlock was open." Aaron's gaze sharpened. "It was secured when we got here yesterday. Mr. Holloway said he'd been meaning to lock it properly." A plausible explanation, delivered without inflection. Too plausible, perhaps.

I remembered the slight gap in the shed door I'd seen days ago, just a thumb's width, but enough to let the rain in, enough to hint at neglect. It contradicted the image of the immaculate Holloway household. "It looked like that a few days ago, too," I said. "Before Maggie was... before she was officially missing." Aaron's jaw tightened. "Holloway said it was fine. We don't have a warrant to search it." His tone was polite but firm, a clear boundary drawn. Small towns meant limited resources, and the weight of social standing often superseded immediate action. The Holloways were "good people," remember? Untouchable.

We stood in silence for a moment, the wind picking up, rustling the leaves. Across the water, the Holloways' house remained stubbornly unyielding, its secrets held tight within its glass walls. I felt the familiar prickle of curiosity, the relentless urge to peel

back the layers. But this wasn't a story I was covering for a newspaper. This was my town, my new life, and suddenly, I was an unwilling participant.

"They brought in a forensic team from Portland," Aaron said, breaking the silence. "Just for a preliminary look-around inside the house. Standard procedure for a potential abduction, just ruling things out." "Abduction?" The word hung in the air, cold and sharp. Until now, the town had been muttering "missing," a softer, more ambiguous term. He sighed. "We have to consider all angles, Lila. Especially with no note, no forwarding address, no word to family or friends." "So her sister in Bar Harbor was a lie?" I asked, remembering Mr. Holloway's pleasant demeanor, his crisp shirt, the boy's rolling eyes. Aaron merely gave a noncommittal grunt. "We're checking all leads." He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of weariness. "Look, Lila, I appreciate you noticing things, but it's probably just a domestic situation. People leave sometimes." He said it with a practiced ease, but I saw the doubt in his eyes, a shadow he couldn't quite conceal.

I thought about Maggie on her back steps, her profile against the glowing windows, her head turning as if she'd heard her name. Was that the look of someone planning to simply leave? Or was it something else entirely? The air grew heavier, pregnant with rain. I felt the pull of the lake, its dark surface reflecting the impending storm, mirroring the growing unease within me.

"Is there anything else I can do?" I asked, the words surprising even myself. The journalist was pushing the teacher aside. Aaron looked at me, a long, searching gaze. "Just keep your eyes open, Lila. But don't go looking for trouble where there might not be any." He paused, then added, "This isn't Portland. People here... they like their privacy." A subtle warning, delivered with a hint of concern. He knew my history. He knew what I was capable of. "I'll try," I said, though I knew it was a lie. I was already looking. The shed, the porch light, the shifting bookshelf, the bleach scent—each a tiny, nagging anomaly.

As he got back into his patrol car, his face illuminated briefly by the dome light, I wondered what he wasn't saying, what professional boundary kept him from sharing the full extent of his concern. The small-town loyalties he was compromised by, perhaps? The "good people" narrative that everyone in Harrow's Cove seemed to subscribe to? Or something more specific, more personal? He was a local, after all. He knew these waters better than I did.

I walked back to my car, the wind whipping my hair across my face. The first drops of rain splattered on the windshield, big and cold. The Holloways' house across the lake was now completely dark, blending into the approaching dusk. It seemed impossible that such an ordinary house could harbor such a deep, unsettling silence. Maggie Holloway was gone. And I couldn't shake the feeling that her absence wasn't a choice, but a carefully orchestrated secret.

What else had been moved or tidied away, besides a porch light and a shed door?

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