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Shadow Over Evermore

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Introduction

Nora Bennett never intended to become a voice for the lost, let alone unravel her own haunted history. Now a renowned true crime podcaster, Nora built her reputation on peeling back the layers of other people's secrets, but she's always run from her own. For years, her listeners hung on her every word as she reconstructed unsolved mysteries and exposed truths that others would rather keep buried. Yet the one story she's never told is the one etched deepest on her heart—the night her best friend vanished from Evermore, and the chain of events that tore her life apart.

Returning home after the sudden and suspicious death of her estranged father is the last thing Nora wants. Evermore is the town she fled—the town that whispers about her in grocery store aisles and crosses the street to avoid her. The bonds of her childhood are fraught with unresolved guilt, fractured loyalty, and lingering grief. The house sits heavy with memories she'd rather forget, and every familiar lane seems to echo with a question that has haunted her for years: what really happened that night, and why did everything fall apart?

Nora expects only a brief visit, a routine sorting of possessions, perhaps an uneasy reunion with her remaining family. She tells herself that closure will be simple, quick, even painless. But Evermore has other plans. The circumstances around her father's death don't add up. Old patterns reappear—official stories that feel rehearsed, evasive answers from the police chief, a town too quick to move on. The past, she realizes, is not as distant or as buried as she'd hoped.

With her return, old wounds open. Childhood friends and rivals are cautious, their words slippery with the weight of years gone by. Even the places she once loved now feel shadowed by secrets and betrayals she never truly understood. And beneath it all, a network of lies stretches back decades, connecting her father's fate to her friend's disappearance and to a string of unsolved crimes that changed Evermore forever.

For Nora, each step back into her old life is a descent into questions that may finally demand answers. Armed with her investigative instincts, but unsure whom to trust, she is pulled inexorably toward the truth—a bitter, tangled inheritance with the power to redeem or destroy. As memories resurface and danger sharpens around her, Nora must decide whether facing the shadows of Evermore is worth it if it means finding redemption—not just for herself, but for a town desperate to keep its secrets.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The sign, weathered and leaning precariously on a single post, still read "EVERMORE: Where Time Stands Still." Nora snorted, the sound dry in the stale air of her rental car. More like, "Where Time Stands Still While Everyone Judges You," she thought, a familiar bitterness coiling in her gut. The familiar landscape, a patchwork of fading autumn fields and skeletal trees, pressed in on her, each shadow feeling like a memory she hadn't invited.

She'd left Evermore ten years ago in a blur of screeching tires and unspoken goodbyes, vowing never to look back. Now, the quiet hum of the engine was the only sound breaking the oppressive silence of the rural highway, a silence that felt heavier than usual. Her phone, usually a lifeline of notifications and deadlines, sat inert in the cup holder, a deliberate choice. She wasn't here as Nora Bennett, the podcast queen, the dissector of other people's tragedies. She was just Nora, the disgraced daughter, returning for a funeral she wished she didn't have to attend.

Her father, Arthur Bennett, had died alone in the old house by the lake. The official story was a heart attack, sudden and swift. But the call from Sheriff Brody, short and oddly clipped, had planted a seed of doubt Nora couldn't shake. Brody had always been a man of few words, but his tone had been too... neutral. Too rehearsed. And for a man who'd known her father his whole life, there was a distinct lack of personal grief in his voice.

The truth was, Nora hadn't spoken to her father in five years, not since the last bitter argument that had sealed the chasm between them. The phone had rung once a year, always on her birthday, always from him. She'd never picked up. Guilt, a constant companion since she was seventeen, pricked at her now, sharper than usual. Guilt for leaving, guilt for not calling, guilt for the way things had ended. And beneath it all, the phantom ache of another guilt, one far older, far deeper.

The town itself hadn't changed much. The gas station on the outskirts still boasted the same faded "Open 24 Hours" sign, its neon tubes long dead. The diner, "Peggy's Place," still promised the "Best Pie in the County," a claim Nora knew to be wildly inaccurate. Even the sleepy Main Street, with its brick storefronts and peeling paint, seemed frozen in time, oblivious to the world outside its quiet bubble.

She passed the old high school, its red brick façade a stark reminder of sun-drenched afternoons and whispered secrets. And then, the library, where she and Sarah had spent hours poring over dusty true crime books, dreaming of adventures far beyond Evermore's suffocating grip. The image of Sarah's bright, mischievous eyes flashed in

her mind, and Nora gripped the steering wheel tighter. No, she wouldn't think about that. Not yet.

Her childhood home materialized around the next bend, set back from the road, partially obscured by overgrown maples. It was a two-story Victorian, once grand, now showing its age with peeling paint and a sag in the porch roof. A knot tightened in Nora's stomach. This wasn't just a house; it was a museum of heartache, a monument to a family that had fractured beyond repair.

The driveway was gravel, crunching under the tires like a thousand tiny accusations. The porch light was off, plunging the entrance into shadow. Nora killed the engine, the sudden silence deafening. She sat for a long moment, hands still on the wheel, summoning whatever courage she had left. This wasn't just a visit; it was an excavation. She had to bury her father, settle his affairs, and then escape this place once more. She told herself it would be quick. Clean.

But as she stepped out of the car, the crisp autumn air carrying the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves, she knew it was a lie. Evermore had a way of holding onto its own, of pulling you back into its orbit, whether you wanted to be there or not. And her father's death, she suspected, was just the beginning of what Evermore wanted to reveal.

The front door was unlocked, a detail that struck Nora as odd. Her father had always been meticulous about security, a habit born, she suspected, from years of living with the shadow of her past. She pushed the door open, a faint creak echoing through the silent house. Dust motes danced in the slivers of weak afternoon light filtering through the drawn blinds. The air inside was heavy, smelling of old paper, stale coffee, and something else - a faint, metallic tang she couldn't quite place.

"Dad?" she whispered, the word feeling alien in the stillness. No answer. Of course not. He was gone. The thought, despite their estrangement, still landed with a dull thud in her chest.

She walked through the living room, a space frozen in time. The same floral couch, the same chipped coffee table laden with a stack of unsolved crossword puzzles. Her gaze fell on a framed photograph on the mantelpiece: a younger, smiling Arthur Bennett, arms around a beaming woman Nora barely remembered - her mother, before the illness, before the silence. Next to it, a photo of Nora and Sarah at twelve, all gap-toothed grins and messy ponytails, standing by the lake. Nora snatched it up, her thumb tracing Sarah's face. It felt like another lifetime.

The kitchen was equally untouched. A half-empty coffee mug sat on the counter, a testament to her father's final morning. She ran her finger along the dusty surface, a strange sense of detachment settling over her. This wasn't the scene of a life lived; it

felt like a stage set, carefully arranged for an audience that wasn't there.

Upstairs, the silence intensified. The floorboards creaked under her weight, each step a reverberation of the past. Her father's bedroom was sparsely furnished, a narrow bed, a dresser, a single armchair. The curtains were drawn, making the room feel like a tomb. She pulled them open, letting in a flood of golden light.

His bedside table held a few books, mostly historical non-fiction, and a worn leather-bound journal. Nora hesitated, then picked up the journal. It felt heavy in her hands, full of untold stories. She flipped through the pages. Her father's familiar, precise handwriting filled them, but it wasn't a diary. It was filled with cryptic notes, dates, and names Nora didn't recognize, interspersed with what looked like newspaper clippings. One name, however, caught her eye, scrawled repeatedly in the margins: "Everett."

She frowned. Everett? As in, Daniel Everett, the police chief? What would her father have been writing about him? A strange prickle of unease ran down her spine. This wasn't just a journal; it felt like a ledger of secrets.

A quick search of the dresser drawers yielded nothing but clothes. But then, tucked beneath a pile of old sweaters, she found it: a small, tarnished silver locket. Her mother's. Nora remembered it clearly, worn around her neck every day until the end. But the locket felt heavy, somehow different. She flipped it open. Inside, instead of the expected miniature photographs, were two perfectly preserved, pressed white petals.

A white rose. Sarah's favorite flower.

Nora's breath hitched. Why would her father have this? And why, after all these years, was it hidden away like a forbidden treasure? The innocent petals suddenly seemed menacing, a silent accusation. The familiar guilt, the one tied to Sarah's disappearance, surged, sharp and suffocating.

She closed her hand around the locket, the metal cold against her palm. This wasn't just a simple homecoming. It was a descent into the unresolved, a quiet opening of Pandora's Box. Her father's death, she was beginning to suspect, wasn't an ending. It was a beginning. And Nora, the reluctant daughter, was already caught in its unfolding narrative.

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