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Echoes of the Forgotten

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Introduction

Tara Bennett's first sensation was the cold. Not a biting chill across exposed skin, but an invasive clamminess that seeped deep into her bones and made each breath sharp and uncertain. When she opened her eyes, she found herself sprawled across uneven ground, staring up at the tangled canopy of a heavy sky, the faint outlines of skeletal branches etched against uncertain light. There was silence—dense, unbroken, except for her own shallow exhales and the slow, implacable beating of her heart.

She struggled to her feet, legs trembling as if relearning balance, the world tilting gently around her. Details fluttered on the edge of her awareness: the buttoned cuff of her shirt, a faded name stitched inside her jacket, the familiar heft of a notebook pressed against her hip. She pressed fingers to her temples and searched, desperate, for personal details—but her mind yielded only fragments. A flash of a courtroom; the scent of burnt coffee; a voice calling her Dr. Bennett. It was enough to remember her profession, but beyond that, there was just a void where her life should live.

The town appeared around her gradually, buildings hunched close together, as if huddled in secrecy. Streets twisted into odd angles, culminating in the impenetrable silhouette of a hospital brooding at the outskirts, its windows like watching eyes. She walked its lanes in a fog of disorientation, passing townspeople with faces marked by a guarded wariness. Each whispered a different warning—about staying inside after dusk, about the old hospital's curse, about the cost of prying into memories best left undisturbed. Answers hovered just beyond her grasp, as ephemeral as her own identity.

When Tara tried to leave, the landscape rebelled against her. Roads folded back into themselves, compasses spun uselessly in her hands, and a crackling barrier—visible only in the way the air shimmered—forced her steps to recoil. It was a prison made not of bars, but of secrets and dread. Desperation prodded her to write in her notebook, urgent missives to herself, in case—when—her mind slipped further into oblivion.

As night deepened, the line between waking and dreaming blurred. Shadows lengthened in uncanny patterns; voices leaked through the walls of empty houses. Her sense of time unraveled, the days segmented not by sunlight but by the persistent tick of half-remembered warnings. Through it all, the hospital remained, an ever-present specter at the town's threshold, its darkness promising either salvation or ruin.

With nothing left but questions, Tara swore to unravel the mystery—of her presence, of the hospital, of the people hiding behind shuttered windows. Each memory pulled free from the fog was both a hope and a threat, and as she pressed onward, it became

clear: whatever had begun here was not finished. And neither, she realized, was she.

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CHAPTER ONE: Awakening in the Fog

The air itself felt ancient, thick with the scent of damp earth and something else—a faint, metallic tang that tickled the back of Tara’s throat. Her first conscious act, beyond the fight to stand, was to reach for the notebook at her hip, its familiar weight a surprising comfort. The pen, clipped neatly to its spiral binding, seemed to offer a lifeline in a sea of unknowing. Her fingers, though, were clumsy, stiff. She uncapped the pen and scrawled her name: *Tara Bennett*. Below it, a question mark, bold and defiant.

She stood on a dirt path, flanked by trees so tall their upper branches vanished into the perpetual twilight that clung to this place. The silence was unnerving, a heavy blanket that muffled even the rustle of her own clothes. No birdsong, no distant hum of traffic, just the soft thud of her heart against her ribs. The trees thinned abruptly, giving way to a clearing, and there, huddled like forgotten toys, were the first houses.

They weren't grand, nor particularly inviting. Small, clapboard structures mostly, with porches that sagged and windows that seemed to squint back at her. No lights glowed from within, despite the deepening gloom. It was as if the town itself held its breath, waiting. A gust of wind, sudden and sharp, whipped around her, carrying with it a faint, cloying sweetness, like decaying flowers. She shivered, pulling her jacket tighter. It was a simple, practical garment, a dark grey, with pockets in all the right places. The kind of jacket a professional might wear. A forensic psychologist, a whisper in her mind supplied. *Dr. Bennett*. But Dr. Bennett had a home, a life, a history. None of which seemed to exist now.

She walked towards the nearest house, her steps hesitant. The front door was ajar, a sliver of darkness visible within. A faint sound, like a sigh, drifted out. She paused, listening. Nothing. Just the oppressive quiet. As she drew closer, a movement at a window across the street caught her eye. A face, indistinct in the murky light, staring. It vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving her with the unsettling sensation of being watched.

The street itself was narrow, cobbled with uneven stones. A faint mist began to roll in, tendrils of white snaking around her ankles, blurring the edges of the houses. It wasn't a natural fog; it had a strange, almost oily luminescence to it. The air grew colder, the metallic tang more pronounced. She continued down the street, her awareness sharpened by an instinctual dread.

A general store stood at the end of the block, its paint peeling, a faded sign above its door reading "Mercer's General." The windows were grimy, obscuring whatever lay

within. As she approached, a woman emerged from the store, carrying a burlap sack that seemed too heavy for her slight frame. She was old, with a face etched with a thousand worries, her eyes like chips of flint. Her gaze met Tara's, and for a long moment, neither spoke.

"Lost, dearie?" the old woman finally rasped, her voice gravelly, like stones tumbling down a hill. She didn't sound sympathetic, more like she was simply stating a fact, one she already knew.

"I... I don't know where I am," Tara admitted, the words feeling fragile, insubstantial. "Or how I got here."

The woman's lips, thin and bloodless, curved into something that was not quite a smile, more a grimace. "Don't suppose you do. Most folks don't, first time they wake up in Harmony."

Harmony. The name felt ironic, given the oppressive atmosphere. "Harmony?" Tara repeated, her brow furrowing. "Is that where we are?"

The old woman nodded, a slow, deliberate movement. "And where you'll stay. Like the rest of us. Best not to fight it." She shifted the sack in her arms, a muscle twitching in her jaw. "The hospital's just down the road. You feel drawn to it, don't you? They all do."

Tara felt a jolt. The hospital. The monolithic silhouette she'd seen from the edge of town. It had exerted an almost magnetic pull, a morbid curiosity that tugged at her. "What hospital?" she asked, though she knew.

"The old Harmony Asylum," the woman said, her voice dropping to a near whisper, as if speaking its name too loudly would invite trouble. "Abandoned for years. Best to leave it that way. Some things are better left undisturbed." She cast a quick, nervous glance over her shoulder, as if expecting something to materialize from the swirling mist. "Don't go digging where you shouldn't, dearie. Memories can be a heavy burden. Especially around here."

With that cryptic warning, the old woman shuffled away, disappearing into the deepening fog, leaving Tara alone once more. The conversation had offered no real answers, only more questions, and a profound sense of foreboding. The idea of being "trapped" here, as the woman had implied, was chilling. Her mind reeled. Trapped by what? Supernatural barriers? It sounded fantastical, yet her earlier attempt to leave had been met with an invisible wall, a disorientation that spun her around until she was facing the town again.

She continued walking, her gaze drawn inevitably towards the looming structure at the

town's edge. The Harmony Asylum. Even the name resonated with a dark history. As she approached, the mist thickened, clinging to the skeletal trees that surrounded the building. The windows of the hospital, dark and vacant, seemed to follow her, like unblinking eyes. A cold dread settled in her stomach, a premonition of something deeply wrong. This wasn't just an abandoned building; it felt alive, sentient, and hungry.

A flicker of movement at one of the upper windows. A shadow, indistinct, yet undeniably there. Tara stopped, her breath catching in her throat. Was it just the mist playing tricks? Or was someone - or something - watching her from within the desolate asylum? The hair on the back of her neck prickled. The air grew heavy, charged with an unseen energy. A faint whisper seemed to drift on the wind, a sound like dry leaves skittering across pavement, or perhaps, something more. A voice? Too indistinct to make out.

She pulled her notebook out again, her hand trembling slightly. She needed to record this, to anchor herself. *Harmony Asylum. Old woman warned me. Trapped here. Felt a presence in the window.* Her pen scratched urgently on the page. The act of writing, of documenting, was a familiar comfort, a way to impose order on chaos. It was what Dr. Bennett would do. But who was Dr. Bennett, truly? The lack of personal details was a gaping maw in her mind, and the more she tried to peer into it, the more elusive the answers became.

The fog continued to swirl, blurring the lines between the decrepit buildings and the encroaching forest. It felt like the town itself was exhaling, a slow, mournful breath. She noticed small, almost imperceptible details now. A children's swing set in a overgrown yard, rusted and still, as if frozen in time. A bicycle leaning against a porch, its tires deflated, covered in a thick layer of dust. These were signs of lives lived, abruptly abandoned. It felt less like a town and more like a diorama, painstakingly assembled, then left to decay.

A sudden, sharp clang echoed from deeper within the town, a sound like metal striking metal, followed by a low moan. Tara froze, her head snapping towards the sound. It came from the direction of the town square, a place she hadn't yet explored. Curiosity, a powerful professional instinct, warred with a primal urge to flee. The idea of investigating a sound in a town that felt so inherently wrong seemed foolish, yet she couldn't resist. Her training as a forensic psychologist had taught her to seek patterns, to find meaning in the chaos.

She took a hesitant step, then another, moving deeper into the heart of Harmony. The streets were deserted, the houses silent and dark, like sleeping giants. The mist swirled, obscuring her vision, making every shadow seem like a lurking presence. The clang came again, closer this time, and unmistakably human. A choked sob. Someone was in trouble. Or something.

As she rounded a bend, the town square came into view. A dilapidated gazebo stood at its center, its paint peeling, its roof sagging. And beneath it, huddled on a bench, was a young man. He was thin, almost skeletal, his clothes torn and grimy. His head was bowed, his shoulders shaking. The sounds she'd heard, the sobs, emanated from him. He looked utterly desolate, a picture of raw despair.

Tara approached cautiously. "Are you alright?" she asked, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence.

The young man flinched, raising his head. His eyes, sunken and bloodshot, were wide with a terror that seemed to pierce straight through her. He scrambled to his feet, a low growl escaping his lips. Not a human sound. More like an animal, cornered and desperate. He wasn't looking at her, not really. His gaze was fixed on something behind her, something in the swirling mist.

"It's here," he croaked, his voice raw with fear. "It's always here. It never leaves."

Before Tara could react, he bolted, a desperate blur of motion, disappearing into the thick fog that now completely enveloped the square. His words, cryptic and terrifying, hung in the air, a chilling echo of the old woman's warning. *It never leaves*. What was *it*? And what did it want? Tara stood alone in the mist-shrouded square, the silence once again descending, heavier and more menacing than before. The encounter had left her with a profound sense of isolation, a stark realization that she was utterly alone in this strange, hostile place. The thought of being trapped here, with whatever "it" was, sent a shiver of pure terror down her spine.

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