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Under the Willow Moon

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Introduction

Nestled along the glimmering shoreline of Lake Serenity, Willow Creek is the sort of place that lives in postcards and memory: neat clapboard houses, sagging front porches heavy with hanging baskets, and weeping willows lining winding streets. The laughter of children drifts from the dock in summer, and the ancient bells of the old town church mark time in measured, gentle chimes. But beneath the tranquil surface beats the complex heart of a town woven together by decades of secrets, grudges, and fragile alliances.

Ten years ago, Harper Lane left Willow Creek with resolve in her stride and heartache in her chest. She built a life on chasing truths as a journalist in the city, her ambition fueled as much by an urge to prove herself as by the sting of the town's whispers in her memory. But dreams rarely grant immunity from consequences, and a recent scandal has left her reputation battered. When her mother's health falters, there's only one place to go—and for Harper, coming home feels like a risk and a refuge all at once.

Returning to Willow Creek is a bittersweet reckoning. Harper finds her childhood room unchanged, yet the air is thick with expectations, regrets, and her mother's quiet disappointment. The townspeople watch her with the wary curiosity reserved for those who once abandoned them; her old friends are distant, her enemies sharper-edged than before. At the annual Willow Moon festival—where lanterns float and the lake mirrors the sky—Harper is forced to navigate old rivalries, stilted conversations, and the ghosts of who she once was.

Yet, nothing could prepare her for the shock that tears through the sleepy town: the beloved mayor is found dead by the water's edge before dawn. The tragedy sends ripples through Willow Creek, suspicion falling hard and fast, none more so than on Mason Ashby, Harper's childhood confidant and once something more. Determined to protect him—and perhaps to redeem her own tarnished legacy—Harper can't stay on the sidelines. With the help of the new sheriff, Ethan Ford, whose past is nearly as tangled as her own, she is drawn into an investigation that pries open decades-old wounds.

As the days pass, Harper delves into the complicated tapestry of Willow Creek: its gossip, its resentments, and those quietly nursing ancient heartaches. Every discovery is a double-edged sword, bringing her closer to an unthinkable truth while also uncovering buried hopes and passions. In seeking justice, Harper must also fight for belonging—deciding if Willow Creek can ever truly be home, and if her future might finally hold forgiveness, trust, and love.

Welcome to Willow Creek, where every window hides a story, and the biggest mystery may be the truths we're most afraid to face. The moon is rising, the festival lights are flickering, and under the willows, nothing is ever quite as it seems.

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Chapter One: Under the August Sky

The August sun beat down on Willow Creek with a sticky, humid embrace, typical for the week leading up to the annual Willow Moon festival. Harper, perched precariously on a rickety stool in her mother's kitchen, felt the heat pressing in, a physical manifestation of the stifling familiarity. Ten years had sculpted new lines on her face, but the kitchen, with its chipped floral wallpaper and scent of stale potpourri, remained stubbornly unchanged. It was like stepping into a time capsule she'd hoped was buried forever.

"Harper, dear, are you *sure* you're quite alright?" Eleanor Lane's voice, a delicate flutter like a hummingbird's wings, drifted in from the living room. Her mother's concern was a constant hum these days, laced with the subtle, unspoken accusation of Harper's recent public misstep. Harper sighed, pushing a stray curl from her forehead. "I'm fine, Mom. Just... hot."

The unspoken addition, *and tired of being back here*, hung heavy in the air. Willow Creek had welcomed her back with the kind of lukewarm embrace usually reserved for a distant relative who only visits when they need something. Whispers followed her like a shadow in the grocery store aisles, and the sympathetic glances were almost worse than the outright stares. She was no longer Harper Lane, the ambitious journalist; she was Harper Lane, the one who'd fallen from grace, back where she belonged.

Her mother's house, nestled two blocks from the shimmering lake, felt both a sanctuary and a cage. Harper spent her days tending to Eleanor, whose once-sharp wit had dulled with her illness, and her evenings trying to rekindle old connections that felt perpetually strained. Her phone, once a lifeline to the demanding world of deadlines and breaking news, now lay silent, a testament to her forced sabbatical.

Today, however, was meant to be different. The Willow Moon festival was set to kick off that evening, a vibrant spectacle of music, food, and floating lanterns that drew crowds from across the region. It was Willow Creek's biggest event, a moment of collective pride and, Harper had to admit, a genuinely beautiful tradition. Even in her city-slicker cynicism, she remembered the magic of it.

"You know, Mayor Thompson is always so keen on making sure the festival goes off without a hitch," Eleanor mused, her voice softer now, almost wistful. "He's done so much for this town. A real pillar."

Harper grunted noncommittally. Mayor Thompson. Edward Thompson. A man whose

smile was as practiced as his handshake, and whose political career had been built on an impenetrable façade of folksy charm. Harper had never quite trusted him, not even as a teenager. There was always something a little too smooth, a little too perfect. But in Willow Creek, Thompson was practically royalty.

The afternoon crawled by, marked by the rhythmic clanging of the church bells and the distant murmur of festival preparations. Harper helped her mother dress for the evening, a simple floral dress that made Eleanor look more frail than festive. Guilt gnawed at Harper. This wasn't how she'd envisioned her mother's twilight years. This wasn't how she'd envisioned her *own* life at thirty-two.

As dusk began to settle, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple, the town slowly came alive. Families strolled towards the lakefront, children's laughter echoing, music drifting on the warm breeze. Harper walked with her mother, her arm linked through Eleanor's, navigating the familiar streets that felt both comforting and claustrophobic. Every face was a memory, a story, a potential judgment.

She spotted the familiar red and white awning of "Granny's Goodies," a bakery that had been a Willow Creek staple for generations, and instinctively scanned the crowd for a familiar face. Mason. Her best friend since kindergarten, her first crush, the one she'd left behind. They'd spoken, awkwardly, since her return, the easy camaraderie of their youth replaced by a hesitant politeness. He ran the bakery now, a surprising turn for the adventurous boy she remembered.

As they reached the bustling festival grounds by the lake, the air vibrated with energy. String lights twinkled overhead, food stalls wafted tantalizing aromas, and a local band played a surprisingly lively set on a makeshift stage. People danced, children chased each other, and the lake shimmered under the emerging moonlight, reflecting the lanterns that were slowly being lit and launched onto the water.

Harper guided Eleanor to a bench under a sprawling willow tree, its branches swaying like ancient sentinels. "Stay here, Mom. I'm just going to grab us some lemonade."

She weaved through the throng, her senses assaulted by the sights and sounds of the festival. The scent of fried dough mixed with pine needles, the chatter of excited voices, the insistent thrum of the bass drum. She felt a strange mix of nostalgia and detachment. This was her home, yet she felt like an observer, a ghost revisiting a past that refused to let her go.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the noise, sending a jolt through her. "Harper Lane? Is that really you?"

She turned, her breath catching. Mason Ashby stood a few feet away, a flour smudge on his cheek, a gentle smile playing on his lips. His dark hair was a little longer, his

eyes still held that familiar spark of kindness she remembered. He was broader now, his baker's apron a stark contrast to the rough-and-tumble clothes he'd worn in their youth.

"Mason," she managed, her voice a little huskier than she intended. "Hey."

He closed the distance between them, and for a fleeting moment, she thought he might hug her. Instead, he just stood there, his hands shoved into his pockets. "Heard you were back. It's... good to see you." His gaze lingered, a hint of something unreadable in his eyes.

"Yeah, you too," Harper replied, feeling a blush creep up her neck. The easy banter they once shared was gone, replaced by this awkward space. She wondered if he still thought about them, about the summer before she left, when their friendship had edged dangerously close to something more.

"Festival's looking good," she offered, grasping for a neutral topic.

Mason nodded, his smile faltering slightly. "Yeah. Mayor Thompson's been buzzing around all day, making sure everything's perfect. He's been in fine form."

A sudden hush fell over a section of the crowd nearby. Harper instinctively looked over, her journalistic instincts kicking in. A small cluster of people had gathered by the water's edge, their faces etched with confusion, then dawning horror. A woman let out a small, strangled scream.

Harper felt a cold prickle on her skin. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

"What's going on?" Mason murmured, his brow furrowed.

Before anyone could answer, a frantic cry ripped through the festival music. "It's Mayor Thompson! Oh my god, he's... he's in the water!"

The joyous cacophony of the festival instantly transformed into a chaos of gasps, shouts, and a terrifying silence. People surged towards the lakefront, a collective gasp rippling through the crowd as the horrifying truth began to dawn. Harper felt Mason grab her arm, his grip tight, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Harper pushed through the gathering crowd, her heart hammering against her ribs. She saw him then, floating face down in the shallow water near the boat dock, his arms splayed out, his festival attire soaked and clinging to him. Mayor Edward Thompson. The town's beloved pillar. Lying lifeless under the soft glow of the Willow Moon festival lights.

The first lantern of the night, released just moments before, drifted serenely on the dark water, its gentle glow casting an ethereal halo around the mayor's still form. The music had stopped. The laughter had died. Only the terrified whispers of the crowd remained, a chilling testament to the night Willow Creek lost its smile. Harper, her journalist's brain already processing the scene, felt a deep sense of dread. This wasn't just a tragedy. This was a nightmare unfolding under the August sky.

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