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The Shadow at Crown Hill

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Introduction

Claire Addison never imagined she'd be back in her sleepy New England hometown of Maplewood after so many years away, let alone at such a crossroads in her life. Fresh from a painful divorce and a career spent among quiet stacks of library books, Claire returns home with mixed emotions—seeking refuge, perhaps, yet wary of the memories and secrets that linger among the winding streets and familiar faces. Her suitcase is lighter than her heart, but beneath her uncertainties lies a flicker of hope for a fresh start.

Crown Hill looms over the town just as it did in her childhood: majestic, mysterious, and a little worse for wear. The grand old estate is more than just an architectural landmark—it's a living piece of family history, woven into the Addison legacy as tightly as the ivy on its brick walls. Inside its many rooms, laughter and whispered arguments have echoed for generations. Claire's memories of Crown Hill are bittersweet, filled with the warmth of childhood holidays and the cold ache of old disagreements.

Family has always been a complicated affair for Claire. Her relationship with her vivacious Aunt Margie—equal parts ally and spirited troublemaker—has been a saving grace, while conversations with her mother remain tinged with tension. The Addisons' tangled ties to the community, once a source of pride, now feel like chains, binding Claire to a history she isn't sure she wants to claim. Yet, as she unpacks her belongings in her childhood bedroom, she senses that this return might finally offer answers to the questions that haunted her long before her marriage unraveled.

Maplewood itself is a paradox: quaint and bustling, filled with the scent of blooming lilacs and homemade baked goods, but also shadowed by old rumors and subtle rivalries. The annual summer garden party at Crown Hill promises a taste of both tradition and excitement—local gossip blends with the laughter of families who've known each other for generations. Here, Claire hopes to find her footing, reconnecting with old friends like Ben, now the town's rookie detective, and finding comfort in the rhythms of small-town life.

But something is different this year. Beneath the layers of nostalgia, a sense of unease simmers. A tragedy at the garden party forces Claire to confront not just her own past, but the secrets that have silently shaped the town and her family alike. Suddenly, she's thrust into a mystery that challenges everything she thought she knew—and pushes her into unexpected alliances with the likes of the enigmatic gardener who's as quick with his wit as his pruning shears.

As Claire begins to unravel the threads of murder and long-buried scandal, she also

finds herself piecing together her own fractured sense of belonging. In searching for the truth at Crown Hill and among the people who shaped her, she is finally able to ask—where does she truly belong? And, perhaps, to discover that going home again can be the start of something entirely new.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecomings and Ghosts

The last time Claire Addison had truly called Maplewood home, her biggest concern was whether the ice cream truck would make it down Elm Street before sunset. Now, the late afternoon sun cast long, unfamiliar shadows across the familiar oak trees lining her parents' driveway, and the only familiar hum was the quiet sigh of her own Honda Civic. She cut the engine, plunging the oppressive silence of her arrival into the New England air, thick with the scent of damp earth and distant woodsmoke. It had been years since her last proper visit, years filled with city noise and a life that had, piece by carefully constructed piece, fallen apart.

Her childhood home, a sturdy Queen Anne on a generous plot, looked exactly as she remembered it, right down to the slightly crooked bird feeder her father insisted on maintaining. A wave of nostalgia, sharp and unexpected, washed over her. This house held a lifetime of memories: scraped knees, whispered secrets under the covers, and the comforting aroma of her mother's Sunday roasts. Now, it felt like a museum of a life she no longer lived, or perhaps, a life she never truly understood.

As she wrestled her suitcase from the trunk—the one practical, scuff-resistant piece of luggage she'd allowed herself to keep post-divorce—the front door swung open. Her mother, Eleanor, stood framed in the doorway, a trim figure with silver hair pulled back in an elegant bun. Eleanor's expression was a careful blend of reserved welcome and unspoken concern, a look Claire knew intimately. It was the same look she gave antique porcelain figurines: admired, but never quite touched.

"Claire. You made good time," Eleanor said, her voice smooth and even, betraying nothing of the whirlwind of emotions Claire felt. "Come in. It's getting chilly."

Chilly was Eleanor's default setting for anything she didn't quite approve of. Claire managed a tight smile, navigating the steps. "Traffic wasn't too bad. The leaves are starting to turn already." She gestured vaguely at the vibrant splashes of red and gold on the distant hills, desperate for neutral ground.

Inside, the house was immaculate, a testament to Eleanor's meticulous nature. Not a single cushion was out of place on the antique sofa, and the polished surfaces gleamed under the soft glow of the lamps. It smelled of lemon polish and a faint, indefinable scent that was uniquely her mother: a blend of lavender and quiet expectation. Claire felt a familiar tension creep into her shoulders. Every object in this house seemed to carry a history, a story that Eleanor curated, and Claire often felt like a misplaced artifact herself.

“Your room is ready,” Eleanor continued, leading the way down the hall. “I’ve aired it out. And I put fresh linens on the bed.”

Claire’s old bedroom, wallpapered in a faded floral print she’d picked out at age twelve, was indeed pristine. Her college textbooks and teenage mementos had been carefully packed away, leaving only the bare essentials. It felt less like a room she’d once inhabited and more like a guest suite. She placed her suitcase on the empty bed, a small island in a sea of beige.

“Thanks, Mom. It looks... great.” Claire bit back the automatic ‘just like I left it’ as she knew that wasn’t entirely true. It was exactly as Eleanor wanted it, which was a subtle, yet significant, difference.

Eleanor paused in the doorway. “Dinner will be at seven. Your father is at his lodge meeting. He’ll be back before then.” Her gaze softened, almost imperceptibly. “Are you... comfortable?”

Claire nodded. “Yes, perfectly. Just tired from the drive.”

“Of course.” Eleanor’s eyes lingered for a moment longer, a flicker of something unreadable passing through them before she gave a small, stiff nod and retreated, leaving Claire alone in the quiet room.

Claire unpacked slowly, placing her few books on the nightstand, her clothes in the empty dresser drawers. Each item felt like an anchor, grounding her in a place she wasn’t sure she wanted to drop anchor in. Her marriage had been a quiet unraveling, a slow drift apart rather than a dramatic shipwreck. Now, at thirty-five, she was adrift, looking for a new shore. Maplewood, with its familiar landmarks and even more familiar familial expectations, felt like the only available port.

She wandered to the window, gazing out at the familiar backyard, where a swing set still stood, a relic of her childhood. Beyond the fence, the treeline thickened, and she could just make out the upper turrets of Crown Hill, rising majestically above the town. The grand estate, a local landmark and a distant relation’s property, had always loomed large in Maplewood lore and in the Addison family history. It was the sort of place that inspired hushed whispers and grand stories, a backdrop to countless town events and childhood dreams.

Crown Hill wasn’t merely a building; it was a character in itself, full of secrets and stories, a silent observer of generations of Maplewood residents. Claire had spent many hours exploring its grounds as a child, convinced hidden passages and ancient treasures lay within its sprawling walls. The annual garden party, scheduled for the upcoming weekend, was always the highlight of the summer, a chance for the town’s

prominent families to mingle, gossip, and subtly assert their social standing. Claire had always found it amusing, a theatrical performance of small-town aristocracy. This year, however, she felt a distinct pang of trepidation about attending.

Later, as dusk settled, Claire found herself drawn to the living room. Her father, David, had returned, his deep voice rumbling as he discussed local politics with Eleanor. David Addison was a pillar of the community, a retired history professor who now dedicated his considerable energy to various town committees. He was a kind man, if a little preoccupied with his academic pursuits and the proper order of things. His welcome was warmer than Eleanor's, a gruff hug and a hearty clap on the shoulder.

"Claire-bear! Good to have you back under our roof," he boomed, pulling away to beam at her. "Maplewood needs some new blood, even if it's just a temporary transfusion."

Claire smiled, appreciating his attempt at levity, though the word "temporary" pricked. She hadn't admitted, even to herself, how long she intended to stay. A few weeks, perhaps? A few months? Until she figured things out, whatever "things" might be.

Dinner was a quiet affair, filled with pleasantries and cautious conversation. Eleanor inquired about Claire's drive, her job prospects (Claire vaguely mentioned exploring options), and the weather. David talked about the upcoming garden party at Crown Hill, mentioning that Harold Ashworth, the esteemed local historian, would be giving a special talk. Harold was an institution in Maplewood, a repository of local knowledge and a beloved figure.

"Harold's been meticulously researching the origins of the Crown Hill estate for years," David explained between bites of roast chicken. "He's found some fascinating tidbits about the founding families. Apparently, there's a rather sensational secret connected to one of the original owners."

Eleanor tsked softly. "David, please. Don't get Harold started on his fanciful theories before he's even given his official presentation."

David chuckled. "It's history, my dear. Not fiction. And Harold's never been one to shy away from the truth, no matter how inconvenient."

Claire listened, half-listening, half-lost in the comfortable rhythm of her parents' familiar banter. It was different from the strained silence that had become commonplace in her own marriage. Here, there was a predictable comfort, even in the slight undercurrent of disagreement. She found herself wondering what kind of "sensational secret" Harold had unearthed. Crown Hill had always felt like a place of hidden depths, a building that held its breath.

After dinner, Claire helped Eleanor clear the table, the domestic ritual a strange comfort. Eleanor then excused herself to review her bridge club notes, leaving Claire and David in the living room. He settled into his armchair, picking up a leather-bound book.

“So, my dear,” David began, peering over the top of his reading glasses. “Are you planning on going to the party? It would do you good to see some old faces. Ben Miller will certainly be there.”

Ben Miller. Her childhood best friend. The thought brought a genuine smile to Claire’s face. Ben, with his easy laugh and unwavering loyalty, had been her partner in countless childhood adventures. He was a rookie detective on the Maplewood police force now, a fact that still felt a little surreal.

“Maybe,” Claire said, a genuine warmth spreading through her. “It would be good to see Ben. Is he still... Ben?”

David chuckled. “More so than ever. Still tripping over his own feet occasionally, but he’s a good lad. Takes his job seriously, too. Though I suspect he spends more time rescuing cats from trees than solving grand mysteries.”

Claire felt a flicker of anticipation. Seeing Ben would be a welcome distraction from the quiet melancholy that had settled around her. Perhaps reconnecting with old friends, with the comforting familiarity of Maplewood, was exactly what she needed. She could ignore the ghosts of her past, the subtle tensions with her mother, and the unsettling feeling that Crown Hill itself held more than just historical secrets. For now, she would simply be home. She would take each day as it came, beginning with the summer garden party, an event that promised nothing more than polite conversation, lemonade, and perhaps a glimpse of the “sensational secret” Harold Ashworth was so eager to share. Little did she know, the party was about to offer something far more sensational than any historical revelation.

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