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Beneath the Cursed Moon

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Introduction

A sliver of moonlight cut through the mist as Nora Archer's car wound its way through narrow backroads, edging ever closer to Silver Hollow—the place she once called home, and the last place she ever meant to return. The quiet hush of the forest outside belied the storm of thoughts whirling in her mind. In the city, one bad decision, dissected for a hungry public, had rearranged her life in a single turn, leaving her career in shambles and trust in tatters. Now, the only conceivable refuge was the familiar, haunted stillness of her childhood town.

But Silver Hollow was a refuge laced with unease. Nestled between rolling hills and deep evergreen woods, the town was part postcard, part cautionary tale. With its storybook main street, the gentle babble of the creek, and the ever-watchful gaze of the ancient quarry high above, Silver Hollow fostered a close-knit community with roots that twisted deep and secrets that ran deeper. Memories of laughter under apple trees blurred with memories of wounds not yet fully healed, and those wounds reopened the moment her tires crunched over gravel in her parents' driveway.

Nora entered her old room that night, walls still papered with teenage dreams and quiet regrets. The stillness was heavy, expectant. She'd left years ago, believing ambition would set her free, but ambition had turned on her, leaving scars the town's gossips would pick at. Unwelcome headlines had followed her—her name linked to a scandal she couldn't fully escape—yet it was the echo of a much older story that tugged at her as she unpacked: the disappearance of a girl during a lunar eclipse, an event that had cast a long shadow even before Nora left.

The townspeople—cautious, friendly, but watchful—offered half-smiles that never seemed to reach their eyes. The past here was not a gentle thing. Nora felt it every time someone gave her a comforting pat or asked her, gently probing, how long she might be staying. She wondered if coming home would ever be as simple as finding comfort in old haunts, or if the ghosts of both her past and the town's would allow it.

Yet beneath her trepidation was the part of her that could never quite let a mystery lie dormant. The very night she arrived, the town buzzed with anticipation of the approaching lunar eclipse—a celestial event said to bring out old truths, and even older fears. When the moon's shadow began its slow crawl across the stars, Nora felt the pull: the need to investigate, to set wrongs right, even as her own life was still unraveling.

As Silver Hollow braced itself beneath the cursed moon, Nora knew she would have to face more than the whispers that followed her from the city. To truly understand what

happened that night twenty-five years ago—and to find her own peace—she must confront the secrets Silver Hollow had buried, and those she'd tried to forget. Hers would not be an easy homecoming, but it promised to be unforgettable.

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CHAPTER ONE: Return to Silver Hollow

The gravel of the driveway crunched under Nora's tires like a thousand tiny accusations, each one echoing the gnawing dread in her stomach. It had been nearly ten years since she'd left Silver Hollow, a decade spent chasing headlines and validation in a world far removed from whispering pines and a town that felt perpetually stuck in amber. Now, the sprawling, slightly unkempt hydrangeas by her parents' front porch seemed to sigh a collective, "Look what the cat dragged in."

Her old Honda Civic, crammed with the remnants of a life she was trying to forget, felt like a metallic coffin. Inside, amidst boxes of discarded notebooks and a wilting fern, lay the ghost of her former self: Nora Archer, the hotshot investigative journalist whose career had imploded faster than a poorly constructed soufflé. The scandal had been sensational, splashed across every tabloid and blog, reducing years of meticulous work to a single, damning misstep. The details were still a blur of flashing cameras and venomous online comments, a public shaming that had left her raw and exposed.

Stepping out of the car, the air hit her – cool, crisp, and carrying the faint, familiar scent of pine and damp earth. It was a smell unique to Silver Hollow, a fragrance that simultaneously soothed and suffocated. The silence, too, was profound after the relentless thrum of city life, broken only by the chirping of crickets and the distant hoot of an owl. She could hear her own heartbeat, a frantic drum against her ribs.

The house, a sturdy two-story Victorian with faded blue paint and a porch swing that looked like it had seen a century of conversations, loomed ahead. It was a place of comfort, yet today it felt like a trap. Her parents, bless their hearts, had offered sanctuary without question, their voices a balm over the phone. But Nora knew their unspoken worry, the way their eyes would betray a mixture of relief and disappointment.

As she dragged her suitcase up the creaking porch steps, the front door swung open. Her mother, Eleanor, stood framed in the doorway, her silver hair pulled back in a neat bun, her apron dusted with flour. A small, tentative smile played on her lips, her eyes, the same shade of hazel as Nora's, alight with a complex emotion Nora couldn't quite decipher.

"Nora, darling," Eleanor's voice was soft, a melodic whisper. She pulled Nora into a hug that smelled of cinnamon and home, a scent Nora had subconsciously craved for weeks. It was a tight, reassuring embrace, yet Nora felt a strange stiffness in her own arms, unable to fully relax into it. The shame of her return was a physical barrier.

“Hi, Mom,” Nora managed, her voice a little rougher than she intended. She pulled back, forcing a smile that felt brittle. “Looks like I’m back for a while.”

Eleanor’s smile widened, though a flicker of concern remained in her eyes. “Your father’s out in the garden. He’ll be thrilled you’re here. Your room’s ready, just like you left it.”

Just like she left it. The thought sent a fresh wave of unease through Nora. Her teenage sanctuary, a time capsule of unfulfilled aspirations and forgotten dreams. It wasn't the fresh start she needed, but a reminder of who she used to be before ambition had warped her.

Later that evening, after a surprisingly quiet dinner with her parents – a meal punctuated by her father’s gentle inquiries about her drive and Eleanor’s subtle attempts to offer comforting silence – Nora retreated to her old room. The wallpaper, a cheerful floral pattern she’d chosen at thirteen, still adorned the walls. Her old desk, scarred with pencil marks and the faint impression of an old sticker, stood in the corner.

A half-read copy of a dusty old mystery novel lay on her nightstand, a relic from a time when her fascination with uncovering secrets was a harmless hobby. She picked it up, running her thumb over the worn cover. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Unpacking was a mechanical process. Each item she pulled from a box felt heavy with memory: a half-eaten bag of artisanal coffee beans from a city cafe, a discarded press pass she couldn't bring herself to throw away, a framed photo of herself, beaming, at an awards ceremony that now felt like a cruel joke. She put the photo face down.

Through her window, she could see the silhouette of the Silver Hollow Quarry, a dark, imposing presence against the deepening twilight. Even from here, she felt its pull. The quarry wasn’t just a local landmark; it was a scar on the town’s collective memory, forever linked to the disappearance of Sarah Jenkins, the teenage girl who had vanished during the last lunar eclipse, a quarter of a century ago. Sarah’s story was a ghost story, whispered in hushed tones, a local legend that had always fascinated Nora, even as a child.

She remembered her grandmother, a woman steeped in local folklore, speaking of the “cursed moon,” the rare lunar eclipse that occurred only once every twenty-five years. “It unearths things, Nora,” her grandmother had said, her voice low and conspiratorial. “Things best left buried.” Nora, then a wide-eyed girl, had been both thrilled and terrified by the pronouncement.

Now, as an adult, the practical, journalistic part of her scoffed at superstitions. Yet, a

shiver still traced its way down her spine. The local newspaper, a thin, community-focused rag, had a small article on the front page, tucked below a photo of prize-winning zucchini: "Rare Lunar Eclipse to Grace Silver Hollow Skies This Saturday." Nora felt a strange prickling sensation, a premonition she couldn't quite shake.

The next few days blurred into a pattern of familiar routines and awkward encounters. A trip to Miller's General Store, where Mrs. Henderson, whose memory for local gossip was legendary, offered a sympathetic but piercing gaze. "Heard you had a rough patch, dear," she'd chirped, her eyes darting to Nora's hands as if searching for tell-tale signs of urban decay. Nora mumbled something about needing a change of pace.

She met a few old classmates, now grown into adults she barely recognized. Mark, who had owned the local hardware store since his father retired, gave her a hesitant nod. Emily, who ran the town's only bakery, offered a free scone with a hesitant, "Welcome home, Nora." The warmth was there, but it was overlaid with a palpable curiosity, an unspoken question hanging in the air: *Why are you really back?*

Her closest childhood friend, Leo Maxwell, who had inexplicably taken over his family's struggling apple orchard, was the one person who seemed genuinely happy to see her, free of judgment. He met her at the old Silver Hollow Diner, the booths still smelling faintly of stale coffee and nostalgia.

"Nora Archer, I'd heard the rumors, but seeing you here... it's surreal," he said, his smile genuine, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Leo had always been her rock, the calm to her storm.

"Tell me about it," Nora sighed, stirring her coffee. "So, orchard life, huh? Still chasing after those pesky codling moths?"

Leo chuckled. "Someone's gotta do it. But seriously, how are you holding up? The news... it was everywhere."

Nora shrugged, trying for nonchalance. "I'll be fine. Just needed to regroup. And Silver Hollow seemed like the quietest place on earth to do it." She didn't mention the gnawing restlessness, the journalist's itch that even public humiliation couldn't quite extinguish.

As they talked, the conversation drifted to town happenings. Leo mentioned the upcoming eclipse, his voice taking on a slightly more serious tone. "Everyone's talking about it. The old timers, anyway. It's been twenty-five years, almost to the day, since Sarah Jenkins disappeared."

Nora felt a jolt. "Really? That close?"

Leo nodded, his gaze distant. "Yeah. My grandma's already got her 'protective' charms out. You know, just in case the 'cursed moon' decides to stir things up again." He managed a weak smile, but the underlying tension was clear. The disappearance of Sarah Jenkins wasn't just a local legend; it was a deeply ingrained trauma, a wound that Silver Hollow had never truly healed from.

Nora looked around the diner, at the familiar faces, the clatter of plates, the comfortable hum of local chatter. For a moment, she felt a flicker of the old Nora, the one who saw stories everywhere, who couldn't resist a puzzle. The Sarah Jenkins case had always been a loose end, a narrative thread left dangling.

"Has anything new ever come out about it?" Nora asked, her voice deliberately casual.

Leo shook his head. "Nope. Not a thing. Just theories and whispers. The police never found a trace of her. It's like she just... vanished into thin air at the quarry."

The quarry. It was always the quarry. The looming mass of rock overlooking the town, a silent sentinel that held its secrets close. Nora felt a sudden, undeniable pull towards it, a magnetic force she couldn't ignore. Her journalistic instincts, long dormant under the weight of her disgrace, began to stir.

The rare lunar eclipse, a celestial event that promised to blanket Silver Hollow in an otherworldly gloom, was set to occur that Saturday night. The town, typically a bastion of quiet routine, buzzed with an unusual undercurrent of anticipation and unease. Some prepared for viewing parties, others battened down the hatches, recalling old superstitions.

Nora, however, felt a different kind of preparation. She found herself drawn to the old Silver Hollow Public Library, its shelves filled with dusty local history books and newspaper archives. The librarian, a stern woman named Ms. Albright who had presided over the library for what felt like centuries, gave Nora a suspicious glance when she requested access to the twenty-five-year-old microfiches.

As Nora scrolled through the grainy newspaper reports, the details of Sarah Jenkins' disappearance slowly unfurled. A vivacious, popular high school student. Last seen near the quarry with friends, heading up to watch the eclipse. Then, nothing. No body. No trace. Just unanswered questions and a gaping hole in Silver Hollow's collective memory.

The articles mentioned a search party, desperate pleas from her parents, and a town gripped by fear. There were no leads, no arrests, just theories and speculation that circulated like a virus. Some whispered about a runaway. Others, about something far more sinister, something tied to the land itself, to the very nature of the eclipse.

As the moon began its slow, inevitable dance with the earth, casting longer, deeper shadows across Silver Hollow, Nora felt a resurgence of purpose, an unwelcome but familiar itch beneath her skin. This wasn't just about Sarah Jenkins anymore. It was about something bigger, something that resonated with her own brokenness. Perhaps, by shining a light on Silver Hollow's darkest secret, she might find a way to navigate her own shadowed past. The cursed moon was rising, and with it, the possibility of unearthing more than just old superstitions. It was unearthing Nora herself.

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