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The Vanishing Game

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** Homecoming Shadows
- **Chapter 2:** The Last Message
- **Chapter 3:** Old Friends, New Fears
- **Chapter 4:** The Sheriff's Warning
- **Chapter 5:** A Town That Forgets
- **Chapter 6:** Behind Closed Doors
- **Chapter 7:** Secrets in Plain Sight
- **Chapter 8:** The Missing Diary
- **Chapter 9:** The Second Witness
- **Chapter 10:** Red Herrings
- **Chapter 11:** Stranger in the Rain
- **Chapter 12:** Ghosts from the Past
- **Chapter 13:** The Mayor's Lie
- **Chapter 14:** Broken Alibis
- **Chapter 15:** Warning Signs
- **Chapter 16:** Small Town Justice
- **Chapter 17:** Digging Up the Past
- **Chapter 18:** The Night Stalker
- **Chapter 19:** Buried Evidence
- **Chapter 20:** The Breaking Point
- **Chapter 21:** Storm Approaching
- **Chapter 22:** Into the Woods
- **Chapter 23:** The Truth Revealed
- **Chapter 24:** No Easy Answers
- **Chapter 25:** After the Storm

Introduction

There's a thin line between nostalgia and regret. As Harper Lane's car crossed the city limits of her childhood hometown, she found herself straddling both. The maples lining Main Street stood unchanged, their golden leaves catching the sunlight like desperate memories. Yet underneath the tranquil surface of this place she once called home, unease simmered—more palpable than ever. It was almost enough to make Harper turn her car around and leave the past where it belonged. Almost.

She hadn't planned on coming back, not after all that she'd endured here, not after the way the town had closed its ranks all those years ago. But the desperate email from Riley—her childhood best friend, her partner in mischief and secrets—had cut through Harper's carefully constructed walls. "I need you," Riley had written. "If anything happens to me, promise you'll find out why." Two days later, Riley vanished without a trace.

Now, Harper returns not just as a former resident, but as a journalist with a reputation for uncovering uncomfortable truths. She's determined to find Riley, but she quickly senses the chill in the air isn't due to autumn alone. The town folk greet her with wary eyes and cautious silences. Old friends have become distant, and adversaries haven't forgotten the grudges of youth. No one wants to dredge up the past—especially not when it threatens the fragile peace the town has made with its own secrets.

Within hours, Harper steps into a world where facts twist with rumors, where every smile has an edge, and where Riley's disappearance is met with a suspicious apathy. The local sheriff, once a trusted family friend, cautions her against "making waves." The elders whisper condolences but offer no help. Even Riley's own family closes their doors, unwilling to explain the turmoil beneath their grief.

But Harper knows there is more to the story. Loose threads appear everywhere—in Riley's cryptic journal entries, in the hush that falls over the diner when she walks in, in the ominous feeling that she is being watched. Each question Harper asks is met with resistance, causing buried grudges, old scandals, and long-held secrets to bubble to the surface.

As she embarks on the search for Riley, Harper must grapple with her own fractured ties to her hometown, the shifting loyalties of those around her, and the dawning realization that the lines between friend and foe may not be as clear as she hoped. With time running out, and danger creeping ever closer, she must decide how much she's willing to risk to bring the truth to light. One thing is clear: in this town, nothing stays buried forever.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming Shadows

The old oak tree still stood sentinel at the entrance to Havenwood, its branches gnarled and reaching like skeletal fingers against the twilight sky. Harper instinctively eased her foot off the gas, the familiar scent of damp earth and pine needles seeping through the open window of her beat-up Honda Civic. It had been ten years, but the town had barely changed, a sepia-toned photograph come to life. The same tired brick buildings lined Main Street, the diner's neon sign still flickered erratically, and the air still hummed with a quiet expectation, a sense that nothing truly new ever happened here.

Except now, something had. Riley.

Harper's grip tightened on the steering wheel. Her childhood home, a modest two-story colonial with a perpetually peeling porch, loomed into view. A single light burned in the kitchen window, a beacon in the encroaching gloom. Her mother, bless her unwavering optimism, was clearly expecting her. The knot in Harper's stomach tightened, a familiar blend of dread and resignation. Returning to Havenwood was like stepping back into a shoe that no longer fit, but she had no choice.

She parked the car and killed the engine, the sudden silence amplified by the chirping crickets. The air was cool, carrying the faint, sweet scent of burning leaves from somewhere down the street. It was a smell that used to mean comfort, autumn nights spent around bonfires, but now it felt like a funeral pyre, a burning away of everything familiar.

As she walked up the flagstone path, the porch light flickered on, illuminating her mother's anxious face. Evelyn Lane was a woman made of stern stuff and stubborn kindness, her silver hair pulled back in a neat bun, her floral apron still stained with remnants of dinner. Her eyes, usually sparkling with an easygoing warmth, were clouded with worry.

"Harper, thank goodness," Evelyn said, her voice tight with relief as she pulled Harper into a hug that was both comforting and suffocating. "I was starting to worry. The drive must have been dreadful."

Harper forced a smile, the muscles in her face feeling stiff. "It was fine, Mom. Just a long one." She pulled back, her gaze sweeping over her mother's face, searching for clues, for understanding. "Any news? About Riley?"

Evelyn's shoulders slumped. "No, honey. Nothing since this morning. Sheriff Brody was

by again, asking if we'd heard anything. Said they're doing everything they can." Her voice trailed off, betraying the obvious lie. In Havenwood, "everything they can" often meant a half-hearted search followed by a swift move to sweep things under the rug.

Harper knew this intimately. She remembered the hushed tones after the fire at the old mill, the sudden silence whenever the topic of the missing funds from the town's development project came up. Havenwood was a town built on keeping quiet, a trait Harper had always struggled to adopt.

She stepped inside, the familiar scent of lemon polish and her mother's famous apple pie filling the air. Her childhood photos still adorned the hallway, a gallery of forgotten smiles. One picture, in particular, caught her eye: a younger Harper and Riley, all knees and grins, perched precariously on the limb of the old oak tree, its leaves a vibrant green. Riley's arm was slung around Harper's shoulder, a mischievous glint in her eyes. It was a stark contrast to the grainy missing person's photo she'd seen on the news sites, a photo that seemed to belong to a stranger.

"Have you eaten?" Evelyn asked, already bustling towards the kitchen. "I made your favorite, chicken pot pie."

"I'm not really hungry, Mom," Harper said, following her into the brightly lit kitchen. Her stomach churned with a nervous energy that food wouldn't settle. "I need to go see people. Talk to them. Figure out what happened."

Evelyn stopped, her hands hovering over a stack of clean dishes. "Harper, please. Let the police handle it. You know how this town is. They don't like outsiders meddling, and well, you haven't exactly been Havenwood's favorite daughter since you left."

The unspoken accusation hung in the air, a leftover from Harper's rebellious teenage years and her pointed exit for a journalism career in the big city. She'd always been the one to ask too many questions, to dig where others preferred to bury.

"I'm not an outsider, Mom. And Riley is my best friend. If the police aren't doing enough, I have to." Harper's voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. "Has anyone seen her? Has she been acting strangely lately?"

Evelyn sighed, leaning against the counter. "Well, she was quiet, I suppose. More than usual. And she'd been... distant. Not like herself." She wrung her hands. "Her mother, Sarah, is beside herself. She barely leaves the house."

"I'm going to go over there," Harper declared, already turning towards the door.

"Now? It's almost dark," Evelyn protested, her voice laced with a mother's worry. "At least let me call Sarah first. She's not taking it well."

Harper paused. "Okay, call her. But I need to talk to her. And then I'm going to the diner. Someone there must have seen something." The diner, "The Daily Grind," was the unofficial town square, where secrets were spilled over lukewarm coffee and gossip spread faster than wildfire.

Evelyn, sensing the futility of arguing, picked up the landline phone, her movements slow and deliberate. Harper watched her, a pang of guilt twisting in her gut. She knew her return brought a fresh wave of anxiety to her mother, who just wanted a quiet, peaceful life. But peace, Harper knew, often came at the cost of truth.

After a brief, hushed conversation, Evelyn hung up. "Sarah says she'll see you. But she's fragile, Harper. Please be gentle."

Harper nodded, her resolve hardening. Gentle wasn't exactly in her journalistic toolkit, but for Riley, she would try. As she stepped out into the cool evening air, the shadows seemed to stretch and deepen, clinging to the familiar landmarks of her past. She had come home, but Havenwood felt less like a sanctuary and more like a stage, set for a drama whose ending she desperately needed to rewrite. The game had begun, and Harper knew, with a chilling certainty, that the stakes were higher than she could ever imagine.

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