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Echoes in the Glass House

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Introduction

They say the house is haunted. Maybe by ghosts—those subtle chills in the corridors, the spectral creaks above at midnight—but more likely, it's something subtler, denser: an accumulation of secrets, sighs, whispered warnings that crowd the air with a silent, suffocating heaviness. To outsiders, the Hartley estate still stands with solemn grandeur atop the bluffs of Silverbank Cove, its glass turrets shimmering in muted sunlight above briny rocks and salt-stained windows. But every return is a step back into shadows, to a place where memories shatter as easily as glass beneath careless hands.

I had long believed that leaving meant freedom. Fifteen years I built a life of structure and symmetry, far from the tangled roots of Hartley House. As an architect, I designed spaces meant to shelter and inspire, yet the foundations of my own past threatened to crumble from neglect. It only took a single call—a voice I thought I no longer recognized, trembling at the edge of desperation—to draw me home. My mother, faltering and frightened after a mysterious fall, needed me. Or perhaps the house needed me, drawing me into its labyrinth again.

Crossing the threshold, the familiar scents of turpentine and sea air hit me first, followed by a cascade of half-remembered arguments and laughter trapped in the walls. The stained-glass windows my father once crafted still sputtered color across the dusty floors, his legacy both beautiful and broken. The sharpness of grief lingered as surely as the fractious bonds with my family—my mother's distance etched into her pallor, my brother's smile just a little too forced.

But the Hartley estate is more than just a home—even I cannot deny the artistry, the deliberate secrets built into every alcove, puzzle, and colored pane. My father wore his genius like a mask, hiding rooms, burying clues, crafting mysteries even in death. His official accident, declared and forgotten by polite society, never satisfied the ache I carried when I left. Now the wounds are open again, and the silence between us all has become another riddle to solve.

As I set about tending to the windows and my mother's wounds, the past seeps in from dormant corners. Doors that shouldn't be locked refuse to open. Odd scrawlings appear on hidden ledges. And late at night, my reflection in the glass is sometimes not my own. The echoes of betrayal, loss, and something far more dangerous stir with every step I take.

I've come home to heal, yet the estate demands to be unearthed. But in this house of colored glass and fractured memories, redemption is as fragile as the truth—and the

line between guardian and threat blurs with every passing day.

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CHAPTER ONE: Return to Hartley House

The familiar crunch of tires on the gravel drive was a sound I hadn't heard in fifteen years, a visceral trigger that sent a shiver down my spine despite the mild late-September air. Hartley House, silhouetted against a sky bruised with the promise of rain, loomed as it always had: majestic, slightly askew, and undeniably formidable. Its multi-gabled roofline, punctuated by the distinctive glass turret that had once been my father's studio, seemed to scowl at my reluctant return.

My sensible black sedan, a stark contrast to the sprawling, antique edifice, felt suddenly too small, too modern, too *me*. I'd spent my adult life building clean lines and minimalist aesthetics, designing structures that breathed light and openness. Hartley House, with its labyrinthine corridors and secretive nooks, was the antithesis of everything I'd cultivated. Yet, here I was, drawn back by the siren song of duty and a mother's whispered plea.

The drive from Boston had been a blur of coastal towns blurring into rugged coastline, each mile taking me further from the ordered calm of my city life and deeper into the unsettling embrace of memory. I'd rehearsed this moment countless times in my head: the forced pleasantries, the awkward silences, the subtle judgments exchanged like secret handshakes. But nothing could prepare me for the sheer weight of the house itself. It felt less like a building and more like a sentient entity, watching my every move.

I cut the engine, plunging the oppressive silence into an even deeper hush, broken only by the distant shush of waves against the cliffs. The salty air, thick with the scent of pine and decay, filled my lungs, a scent that had once been synonymous with childhood freedom, now with stifled regret. For a moment, I considered turning around, driving until the tires met asphalt again and the coast was just a fading memory in my rearview mirror. But the image of my mother, frail and disoriented on the hospital bed, held me tethered.

With a sigh that felt too heavy for my chest, I unbuckled my seatbelt and pushed open the door. The sound echoed in the stillness, a punctuation mark on my forced homecoming. My gaze drifted to the great oak doors, scarred and weathered, their leaded glass panels dull with disuse. Once, they'd gleamed, polished to a high sheen, reflecting the vibrant chaos of a home filled with art and arguments. Now, they simply looked tired.

As I approached the front entrance, my hand instinctively reached for the heavy brass knocker—a stylized rendering of a sea serpent, my father's favored motif. But before I

could make contact, the door creaked inward, revealing a sliver of darkness within. A shadowy figure stood silhouetted against the dim interior, making my heart skip a beat.

"Ava? Is that you?"

The voice, though familiar, was rougher than I remembered, laced with an underlying weariness that hadn't been there fifteen years ago. My brother, Thomas. He stepped out onto the porch, his frame broader, his face etched with lines that spoke of stress more than age. His usually impeccably styled dark hair was slightly dishevelled, and his casual polo shirt looked as if it had seen better days.

"Thomas," I managed, the name feeling foreign on my tongue. "You're... here." A ridiculous statement, given this was his home too, but I'd half-expected him to be in his office in Portland, orchestrating some new real estate deal.

He offered a tight, almost imperceptible smile. "Where else would I be? Mother needed someone." His eyes, the same shade of hazel as mine, held a familiar flicker of resentment, the unspoken accusation that I had abandoned them, leaving him to shoulder the burden.

I bristled, but swallowed the retort. Now wasn't the time for old grievances. "How is she? The hospital was vague."

"Stable, for now. But she's... confused. Says she fell down the main stairs. But the doctors think it was a stroke, or at least a TIA. Hard to say with her." Thomas ran a hand through his hair, his gaze sweeping over my car, then back to my face, scrutinizing. "You look... different."

"Fifteen years tends to do that." I avoided his gaze, feeling the familiar prickle of defensiveness. He'd always been the golden child, the one who stayed, who played by the rules. I was the escape artist, the one who fled.

"Come on in. It's getting cold out here." He stepped aside, gesturing into the house. The interior was even darker than I remembered, the once-vibrant stained-glass panels in the grand foyer muted by a film of dust and neglect. The air inside was heavy, thick with the scent of aged wood, dust, and something else—a faint, metallic tang, like old coins.

As I stepped across the threshold, the silence of the house seemed to press in, magnifying the scuff of my shoes on the marble floor. It was the silence of a tomb, broken only by the distant hum of the old refrigerator and the rhythmic tick of a grandfather clock I hadn't heard in years. Thomas closed the door behind me with a soft thud, sealing us within.

"She's upstairs, resting," Thomas said, his voice softer now, less confrontational. "The nurse is with her."

"A nurse? Is it that bad?"

He sighed. "She needs constant care. The fall... it jarred more than just her bones, I think. She keeps asking for Dad."

The mention of my father, even after all these years, was like a physical blow. A knot formed in my stomach. "Dad's been gone for twelve years, Thomas."

"I know that, Ava. But she doesn't. Not always." He turned, finally meeting my gaze head-on. "It's not going to be easy."

I nodded, the weight of his words settling on my shoulders. I hadn't expected easy. I'd expected difficult, awkward, and emotionally draining. But the idea of my mother, the formidable matriarch of Hartley House, reduced to a fragile, confused woman, was a different kind of pain altogether.

"I can take my bag up," I offered, gesturing to the small duffel I'd slung over my shoulder.

"No need. I put you in the guest room in the west wing. It's closer to Mother's room, and... well, your old room is a bit of a storage unit now." There was a subtle hesitation in his voice, a hint of something unsaid. My childhood bedroom, abandoned and filled with clutter? It felt like another deliberate erasure, another brick in the wall he'd built between us.

"Right," I said, trying to keep my voice even. "Lead the way."

As we ascended the grand staircase, my hand brushed against the ornate banister, its polished wood cool beneath my fingers. Every step echoed with memories: a childhood of sliding down the banister, of whispered secrets at the landing, of arguments that reverberated through the high ceilings. The house, once alive with the clatter of creation and the constant hum of my father's work, was now hushed, almost mournful.

The stained-glass windows on the landing, usually a riot of color, were dimmed, their intricate patterns obscured by layers of dust. My father's genius had always been evident in these windows, each piece a story, a captured moment in light and color. Now, they felt like eyes watching me, their expressions unreadable.

Thomas led me down a long, dimly lit corridor. The air grew colder here, the silence

more profound. We passed closed doors, each one a potential repository of forgotten things, unaddressed issues. My old room, I assumed, was somewhere further down the hall, hidden behind one of those unassuming panels.

He stopped outside a heavy oak door. "This is it. Bathroom's through that door," he pointed to a smaller door opposite. "Mother's room is just three doors down on the right."

He pushed open the guest room door. It was a spacious room, sparsely furnished but clean. A large four-poster bed dominated the center, draped with a heavy brocade comforter. The window looked out onto the overgrown gardens, now a wild tangle of rose bushes and neglected hedges. A sliver of the ocean was visible in the distance, a pewter gray beneath the heavy sky.

"Thank you," I said, dropping my duffel onto the bed. "I appreciate you setting this up."

"It's no problem. I'm just glad you're here, Ava. Really." He looked genuinely relieved, the mask of polite indifference momentarily slipping. "I'll be in my study if you need anything. Just... settle in. We can talk more over dinner."

With a nod, he left, the door clicking shut behind him. The silence of the room enveloped me, heavier now that I was truly alone. I walked to the window, gazing out at the familiar, yet strangely alien, landscape. The untamed garden, once a meticulously manicured masterpiece, felt like a metaphor for the state of the Hartley family.

I turned back to the room. It was devoid of personal touches, sterile in its emptiness. It struck me then, the true extent of my estrangement. My brother, despite his outward resentment, had at least remained within the house's orbit. I, on the other hand, had become a stranger in my own childhood home, relegated to a guest room.

Unzipping my duffel, I began to unpack, the mundane act a grounding force against the swirling anxieties. A framed photograph slipped from a side pocket. It was an old picture, taken years ago: my father, strong and vibrant, holding a younger, smiling me aloft, his face alight with a joy I rarely saw reflected in his later years. Behind us, just visible in the background, was a glimpse of the very glass turret that now loomed over the house.

I set the photograph on the bedside table, its bright image a stark contrast to the room's muted tones. A flicker of movement at the edge of my vision caught my attention. I glanced up, my gaze drawn to the windowpane, where the last vestiges of twilight cast a ghostly reflection. For a fleeting second, I thought I saw another face in the glass, pale and indistinct, watching me from the shadows of the garden.

I blinked, and it was gone, replaced by the familiar reflection of my own tired face. Just the light, I told myself, my imagination playing tricks. But a chill, colder than the September air, traced its way down my spine. Hartley House, it seemed, was already beginning its work.

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