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# Hollow Lake

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## Introduction

The road into Hollow Lake curled through ancient trees and sleeping fields, the sunrise leaking cold gold over fog and frost. For Annie Reynolds, the landscape was both blindingly familiar and suddenly, aching strange—another lifetime pressed shut and shelved until this moment. She'd left the town a decade ago, promising herself never to return, but grief had a way of tugging old roots until they bled. Her mother was dead—suddenly, inexplicably—leaving behind a weathered house on Maple Lane and more questions than answers.

As Annie crossed the wooden bridge into town, the air clung heavy with memory and something colder: the realization that she was a stranger in her own history. Hollow Lake had always been a place where secrets ran as deep as the water itself, masked by neighborly smiles and the perennial scent of pine. Now that she was back to settle her mother's affairs, Annie wondered what she'd really come home to—what the townspeople would say, and what they'd choose, still, to keep hidden.

Inside her mother's silent house, Annie felt the past press in from every dusty corner. There were notes on the kitchen table, handwritten in her mother's careful script, hinting at old fears and unfinished stories. Photographs lined the mantle—friends, family, neighbors, all faces Annie now saw with new suspicion. The rooms swelled with echoes: hushed voices at night, muffled arguments, the sharp crack of lake ice breaking in distant winters. Each memory returned not as comfort, but as unease.

There was no time for mourning. Even as Annie unpacked boxes and sorted through her mother's belongings, the town's undercurrents swept in: neighbors stopping by with condolences too practiced, curious glances at the grocery, the sheriff's car idling a little too long outside the house. Whispers rose about her mother's state of mind, about the string of disappearances that, some said, had never truly left the town's conscience. Annie realized that returning for funeral and closure would not be so simple. The air of Hollow Lake had shifted—grown taut with something watchful, coiled just beneath the surface.

It was impossible not to remember the missing children and teenagers: names that flickered in Annie's childhood nightmares, faces blurred by time. The grown-ups had always offered explanations, forced resolutions, but the lake rarely gave back its dead. As Annie sifted through her mother's effects, she found herself haunted not only by grief but by the suspicion that her mother had known something—perhaps too much. Every clue she found seemed to tug at the corner of a much larger, older secret.

And so, on the threshold of her former life, Annie understood that coming home meant

unraveling more than her mother's last days. To understand her mother's death—and save herself—she would have to confront not only the town's history, but her own darkest memories. And in Hollow Lake, the difference between friend and enemy was thinner than ice in springtime.

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## Chapter One: Return to the Water's Edge

The smell hit Annie first, even before she fully opened the car door: a damp, earthy scent of pine needles and decaying leaves, overlaid with the metallic tang of the lake. It was the smell of Hollow Lake, the one that had followed her through countless nightmares and moments of unexpected nostalgia. She'd tried to scrub it from her memory, to replace it with city smog and the artificial freshness of apartment air fresheners, but some scents, like some truths, clung stubbornly.

She stood for a moment, letting the cool autumn air prickle her skin, her gaze fixed on the house. Her mother's house. A two-story clapboard structure, once painted a cheerful robin's egg blue, now faded to a melancholic grey, almost blending into the perpetually overcast sky. The porch swing hung motionless, a silent sentinel, its chains rusted. A single dead rhododendron bush drooped by the front steps, its leaves brittle and brown. It looked exactly as she remembered it, and yet utterly alien.

Her mother, Sarah Reynolds, had been a woman of quiet habits and even quieter anxieties. Their relationship had been a tapestry of unspoken words and stretched silences, punctuated by bursts of her mother's almost frantic cleaning or her sudden, fleeting smiles. When Annie left for college, the silence between them had deepened into an unbridgeable chasm, only bridged by a terse, quarterly phone call. And now, this final, abrupt silence.

The police had called it a "natural death," a sudden heart attack in her sleep. No foul play suspected. But the terse finality of their tone had unsettled Annie even across state lines. Her mother, for all her fragility, had been meticulously careful about her health. And there was the house, too quiet, too still, as if holding its breath. Annie pulled her single suitcase from the trunk, the wheels grating on the gravel driveway, the sound unnaturally loud in the stillness.

A flicker of movement caught her eye. Mrs. Gable, the ancient, perpetually disapproving neighbor from across the street, was peering from behind her lace curtains, a shadow against the dim light of her living room. Annie offered a small, hesitant wave. The curtain twitched, then fell back into place. Mrs. Gable, the town's unofficial archivist of grievances and gossip, was undoubtedly already drafting a new chapter about Annie's prodigal return.

The key felt heavy and cold in her palm, a piece of metal she hadn't touched in a decade. It slid into the lock with a rusty click, and the front door creaked open, exhaling a puff of stale, musty air. The scent of dust and disuse mingled with something else, fainter, but undeniably her mother's: the lingering sweetness of

lavender and old books.

Inside, the house was a time capsule. The same worn floral sofa in the living room, the same overflowing bookshelves lining the hall, the same chipped ceramic fruit bowl on the kitchen table. Nothing seemed to have moved, as if her mother had simply stepped out for a moment, expecting to return. The illusion was almost comforting, then quickly unsettling.

Annie walked through the rooms, her footsteps echoing on the polished wooden floors. In the kitchen, a half-finished crossword puzzle lay on the counter, a pen resting beside it. Her mother had been an avid crossword enthusiast, her sharp mind a stark contrast to her outwardly meek demeanor. Annie picked up the pen, a cheap plastic Bic, and felt a strange pang of tenderness.

The refrigerator hummed with a low, mournful sound. Annie opened it to find only a carton of milk, long expired, and a half-eaten container of cottage cheese, its surface fuzzy with mold. It was a small detail, but it snagged at her. Her mother was meticulous about groceries, never letting anything spoil. It felt out of character, a tiny rip in the carefully maintained fabric of her mother's life.

On the small round table in the breakfast nook, a stack of mail lay undisturbed. Bills, junk mail, and a single, crisp white envelope with no return address, addressed simply to "Sarah Reynolds." Annie's fingers brushed against it. It felt thicker than a standard letter. She resisted the urge to open it, promising herself she'd sort through everything methodically, as her mother would have.

She moved upstairs, the banister cool beneath her fingers. Her mother's bedroom was sparsely decorated, the bed neatly made, a testament to her ingrained habits even in her final hours. On the nightstand, beside a well-worn copy of a mystery novel, sat a small, leather-bound journal. It looked old, its pages yellowed. Annie picked it up, her heart giving a strange flutter. Her mother had never kept a journal, not that Annie knew of.

She opened it, the leather creaking faintly. The first few pages were blank, then came her mother's familiar cursive, dated sporadically, some entries mere sentences, others rambling paragraphs. The earliest entry was from over thirty years ago. Annie scanned the first few lines. It was a record of daily events, mundane details, but then a particular phrase caught her eye, chilling her to the bone: "The lake keeps its secrets well. Better than any of us."

Annie closed the journal, a shiver tracing its way down her spine. The lake. Hollow Lake. It was more than just a body of water to the town; it was a character in itself, a silent, brooding presence. And it was around this lake that the disappearances had always happened, an unspoken thread woven into the town's very fabric.

Downstairs, the phone rang, its jarring sound echoing through the quiet house. Annie jumped, her nerves on edge. She walked into the living room, picking up the antique rotary phone on the side table. "Hello?" she said, her voice a little breathless.

"Annie? It's Sheriff Miller." The voice was deep, familiar, carrying the faint burr of a small-town drawl. Ryan Miller. Her old flame. The boy who'd once promised her the world beneath a sky full of stars over that very lake. Now he was the sheriff.

"Ryan," Annie said, the name feeling strange and distant on her tongue. "I just got in."

"I saw your car," he said, a hint of something unreadable in his tone. "Welcome home, I guess. Look, I was wondering if you had a moment to come by the station later? Just to tie up some loose ends regarding your mother's passing."

Annie gripped the receiver tighter. "Loose ends? I thought it was straightforward."

A beat of silence stretched between them. "Most things in Hollow Lake rarely are, Annie. Just come by when you can." He hung up before she could respond, leaving Annie staring at the receiver, the faint dial tone buzzing in her ear like a warning. The lake kept its secrets, her mother had written. And it seemed the town was still very good at keeping them too.

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