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The Echoes Beneath

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Introduction

Cassie Donnelly had always imagined that coming home would feel like stepping into an old photograph: familiar, faded around the edges, evoking both comfort and longing. But as she sat on the rickety bench at Fenwick's bus station—damp salt air clinging to her skin—those childhood memories seemed far away, blunted by a decade's worth of distance and dreams deferred. She told herself it was only a visit, a brief pause between her life and the next big story. Yet as the sea crashed wildly just beyond the dunes, Cassie couldn't shake the sense of unfinished business, threads left dangling ever since she'd left the town in her rear-view mirror.

Fenwick was a place that rarely changed. The same clapboard houses lined the harbor road, their paint peeling beneath the relentless wind; the same faces peered from behind curtains as Cassie passed by, curiosity sharpening to suspicion with every step. And yet, beneath the timeworn facades, there was an undercurrent of tension—a community haunted by the things unsaid, by secrets pressed flat and hidden below the surface. It was, perhaps, why Cassie had learned to leave before she could ever belong.

Just hours after her return, the call came in: a sudden offshore storm had unearthed something strange at the site where a new pier was set to break ground. Cassie followed the emergency vehicles to the muddy perimeter, familiar adrenaline coursing through her veins. She found the site crawling with police and townsfolk alike, drawn by the promise of spectacle or, perhaps, the fear of what might emerge from the earth. In the exposed trench, she saw what everyone else did—a skeleton, curled in on itself, one hand forever gripping a locket sealed tight by rust and salt.

The discovery was shocking, yes, but for Cassie, it was also something more—a summons impossible to ignore. She could sense the town collectively recoiling, old anxieties stirring like silt in shallow water. Rumors spread quickly in Fenwick, finding Cassie at her family's doorstep before nightfall. She remembered that feeling from her youth: the way secrets seemed to linger in every conversation, voices dropping when she entered a room, a legacy of things best left buried.

Drawn simultaneously by her instincts as a journalist and her unresolved questions as a daughter of Fenwick, Cassie knew she had to learn the truth—whatever the cost. The locket, the bones, the storm that unearthed them: they felt connected somehow to stories she'd only half-heard as a child, to the doubts she'd harbored about her own past. The investigation would force her to confront people and memories she'd spent years avoiding. Along the way, she would have to reckon with the knowledge that some echoes refuse to fade, their dangers lingering in places no one wants to search.

Now, with each step along Fenwick's rain-slicked streets, Cassie senses something shifting—not just in the town, but in herself. The journey ahead promises revelations and risks in equal measure. The truth lies just beneath the surface, waiting to be unearthed. Whether she finds resolution, or only more haunting echoes, remains to be seen.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Storm After

The first thing Cassie did after the initial shock wore off was what any seasoned journalist would do: she went looking for answers. The emergency tape still fluttered around the construction site like a tattered flag, but the crowd had thinned to a handful of curious locals and the inevitable ghoulish onlookers. The initial flurry of police activity had also subsided, leaving behind a smaller, more focused team sifting through the mud and debris. The air, still heavy with the scent of brine and upturned earth, felt charged with something more than just residual storm energy. It was a tension that seeped into the very bones of Fenwick whenever the past decided to resurface.

She spotted Officer Miller by the yellow excavator, a man whose face she vaguely remembered from childhood, though he'd been a fresh-faced patrolman then. Now, lines etched around his eyes spoke of long nights and too many small-town tragedies. He looked weary, his uniform splattered with mud, his gaze fixed on the excavated pit. Cassie approached, her notebook already in hand, the familiar weight of it a comforting anchor.

"Officer Miller," she began, her voice steady, professional, masking the flutter in her stomach. "Cassie Donnelly, Fenwick Gazette. I heard about the discovery." She held up her press ID, a relic from a brief, unfulfilling stint at a city paper that now felt like a lifetime ago.

Miller turned, his eyes narrowing slightly in recognition. "Donnelly. Thought you'd moved on from small-town news, Cassie." There was no malice in his tone, just a dry observation, a reminder of her decade-long absence.

"Life has a funny way of bringing you back, Officer," Cassie replied, offering a polite, almost practiced smile. "What can you tell me about the find?"

He sighed, running a hand over his close-cropped hair. "Not much that's official. Skeletal remains, looks like an adult. Definitely human. And that... that locket." He gestured towards the pit. "It was clutched in the hand. Pretty unusual."

"Any idea how long they've been there?" Cassie pressed, scribbling in her notebook.

"Forensics will tell us that. But judging by the state of things... a long time. Decades, maybe." Miller paused, his gaze drifting over the small group of lingering townsfolk, their faces a mix of morbid curiosity and a deeper, more unsettling apprehension. "This isn't the kind of thing that happens in Fenwick. Not anymore."

Cassie knew exactly what he meant by “not anymore.” Fenwick had its dark history, just like any town, but the whispers had largely faded, buried under layers of routine and forgetting. This discovery was a seismic shift.

“Any initial thoughts on identity?” she asked, knowing it was a long shot.

Miller shook his head. “Nothing. No ID, no clothing fragments that are easily identifiable. Just... bones and a locket.” He looked at her, a strange glint in his eye. “You always were good at digging, Cassie. Even as a kid.”

The comment was unsettling, a subtle hint that he remembered more than just her being a local girl who'd left. Cassie felt a prickle of unease. “Just doing my job, Officer.”

“Sure.” He turned back to the pit. “We’ll release a statement when we have more. For now, it’s a crime scene. Best to keep your distance.”

Cassie nodded, but her journalist’s instincts screamed otherwise. This wasn’t just a story; it felt personal. The town was holding its breath, and she could feel the collective anxiety ripple through the humid air. She looked at the exposed earth, raw and scarred by the storm, and imagined the life that had been abruptly halted decades ago, now resurrected by the churning waves. Who were they? And more importantly, who wanted them to stay buried?

Leaving Miller, Cassie wandered towards the edge of the police tape, her eyes scanning the faces of the bystanders. She recognized a few – Mrs. Henderson from the bakery, Mr. Davies the retired fisherman, both their expressions a mixture of shock and something she couldn't quite place, a guardedness. Small towns had long memories, and Fenwick’s was particularly tenacious when it came to unresolved mysteries.

She caught sight of a familiar figure, a woman with a tightly-wound bun and sharp, knowing eyes: Evelyn Thorne, the unofficial historian of Fenwick, and the proprietor of the town’s only antique shop. Evelyn was a living archive, rumored to know every secret, every scandal, every buried truth that Fenwick had ever held. If anyone could offer a hint, it would be Evelyn.

Evelyn was talking animatedly to a younger woman Cassie didn't recognize, her hands gesturing towards the construction site. As Cassie approached, Evelyn’s gaze snapped to her, a flicker of surprise, then something akin to approval, crossing her features.

“Cassie Donnelly,” Evelyn said, her voice surprisingly warm. “I heard you were back. And just in time for the fireworks, it seems.” She gestured with a chin towards the site.

“A ghost from the past, wouldn’t you say?”

“That’s one way to put it, Evelyn,” Cassie replied, trying to gauge the older woman’s mood. “Any insights from your vast historical archive?”

Evelyn chuckled, a dry, rustling sound like autumn leaves. “Oh, I have many insights, dear. But few I’m at liberty to share with an aspiring journalist looking for her big break.” Her eyes twinkled. “Though I will say, this smells like an old wound. A very old one.”

“What kind of wound, Evelyn?” Cassie pressed, sensing a door creaking open.

Evelyn leaned in conspiratorially, her voice dropping to a near whisper. “There were rumors, decades ago. A disappearance. Someone just... vanished. The kind of story parents tell their children to keep them indoors after dark.” She paused, her gaze sweeping over the site again. “Never found a body. Until now, perhaps.”

Cassie felt a jolt. A disappearance. She remembered fleeting snippets of conversations from her childhood, hushed tones, averted gazes. “Who disappeared, Evelyn?”

Evelyn straightened, her playful demeanor replaced by something more serious. “Now, Cassie, that’s where my memory gets a little hazy. People didn’t like to talk about it. Still don’t, I imagine. Some things are best left undisturbed.” Her eyes, however, seemed to challenge Cassie, daring her to dig deeper.

“But the locket...” Cassie prompted. “Does that ring any bells?”

Evelyn’s lips thinned. “A locket, you say? Interesting. Very interesting. Certain families had... distinguishing heirlooms. But I couldn’t possibly speculate.” She gave Cassie a tight, knowing smile. “Though I do recall a similar locket mentioned in an old newspaper clipping once. A society page feature, perhaps. From before your time, certainly.”

Before her time. That meant old. Very old. Cassie felt a thrill of discovery, a genuine lead. “Do you remember which paper, or what year?”

Evelyn shook her head slowly. “Faded now, the memory. But it sparked a thought, that’s for sure. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have my shop to open. These old bones won’t dust themselves.” With a final, enigmatic look, Evelyn turned and walked away, her steps surprisingly spry for her age.

Cassie watched her go, a million questions swirling in her mind. A disappearance, a locket, an old newspaper clipping. It was a flimsy thread, but it was a thread nonetheless. Her instincts were screaming now. This wasn’t just a grim discovery; it

was the reawakening of a cold case, one that Fenwick had tried desperately to bury. And someone, she suspected, still wanted it to stay that way. The wind picked up, carrying the smell of the sea and the faint, metallic scent of exposed earth. Cassie clutched her notebook, a new resolve hardening her features. The echoes beneath Fenwick were about to get a whole lot louder.

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