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The Light Between Shadows

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Introduction

Ava Prescott had always preferred the tidy security of distance—distance between herself and the sleepy town of Crescent Cove, distance between her own fragile dreams and the shadows of a past she tried to forget. Ten years earlier, she'd left the coastal town in search of anonymity, trading the salty breeze for the safety of city life, building quiet routines around her work, her friends, her controlled future. But life, she has learned, has a way of calling us back to the places we least want to revisit.

The phone call came on a rain-washed Tuesday: her father, Charles Prescott, had suffered a stroke, and with no one else to care for him, responsibility landed squarely at her feet. Ava hesitated, her first instinct to refuse, to hold tight to the boundary she'd fought so hard to establish. Yet beneath her reluctance pulsed an ache—a mixture of guilt and longing—for the kind of closure that had always eluded her fractured family. It was this ache, more than duty, that urged her to pack a bag and retrace her steps to the weathered house on Old Pine Road.

She arrived to find the town much the same as she left it: thick with sea fog and sharper with memories. The Prescotts had once been one of Crescent Cove's founding families, but scandal and grief had rendered them ghosts in their own home. The house, silent for so long, seemed to breathe with secrets; Ava's father, weakened but stubborn, offered little warmth or welcome. Yet as she settled into her role as caregiver, Ava couldn't ignore the signs that something in her mother's study—untouched since her death—waited to be discovered.

It was there, amid dust and shadows, that Ava stumbled upon a collection of old letters and photographs—evidence of another life, another story. The fragments hinted at a decades-old disappearance, a whispered betrayal that fractured not only her family but the entire community. Each brittle envelope, each faded snapshot, pressed Ava to question everything she thought she knew about her childhood, her parents, and the coastal town that never quite let her go.

As rumors and memories swirl around her, Ava is forced to confront the complicated truth of coming home: that old wounds fester when left unattended, and that healing sometimes requires unearthing the very secrets we wish to forget. *The Light Between Shadows* is Ava's journey through tangled family ties, the danger of buried truths, and the unwavering hope that—no matter how dark things grow—a flicker of light always remains.

Returning to Crescent Cove, Ava must decide not only what to reveal and what to forgive, but also who she wants to become. Her choices will shape not just her own

future, but the legacy of the family she left behind. In the space between darkness and dawn, she may finally find the answers she didn't know she was seeking.

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CHAPTER ONE: Return to Crescent Cove

The old Ford Escape, reliable if not exactly stylish, coughed once before settling into a steady hum. Ava gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white, the salt spray from the ocean already coating the windshield. The road signs, once so familiar they were etched into her subconscious, now felt like unwelcome harbingers. *Crescent Cove: 5 Miles*. The words seemed to mock her carefully constructed urban existence, whispering of a past she'd worked diligently to outrun.

She hadn't driven this route in ten years. Not since the day she'd packed a single suitcase, left a terse note for her father, and fled west, chasing the promise of a life unburdened by the weight of the Prescott name. Her departure had been less about adventure and more about escape, a desperate attempt to sever ties with a town that felt more like a cage than a home. And now, here she was, the prodigal daughter, summoned back by the grim reaper of family obligation.

The landscape shifted from anonymous highway to winding coastal road, the air growing thick with the scent of brine and pine. To her left, the churning expanse of the Atlantic, a slate-grey canvas under an equally grey sky. To her right, a dense forest of ancient evergreens, their branches gnarled and whispering in the perpetual wind. Crescent Cove had always been a place of stark beauty, a wildness that mirrored the untamed emotions she'd tried so hard to suppress.

A faded billboard for "The Salty Siren," a seafood shack renowned for its clam chowder, flickered into view. Ava remembered countless childhood summers spent perched on its worn stools, slurping down bowls of the creamy concoction, her mother's laughter echoing in her ears. The memory, sharp and unbidden, brought a familiar pang to her chest. Her mother, Eleanor, had been the light in their fractured family, and her sudden death had plunged Ava's world into a darkness from which it had never fully recovered.

She passed the turn-off for the public beach, then the weathered sign for the community center, each landmark a tiny pinprick of recognition in the vast map of her forgotten youth. Nothing seemed to have changed. The same weather-beaten fishing boats bobbed in the harbor, their nets drying in the brisk air. The storefronts along Main Street, though perhaps a shade more faded, displayed the same handcrafted trinkets and tourist trap paraphernalia. Time, it seemed, moved at a different pace in Crescent Cove, unhurried and unforgiving.

Her phone vibrated on the passenger seat, a text from her best friend, Chloe, who still lived in the city. *You there yet? Don't let that old house swallow you whole!* Ava

managed a weak smile. Chloe, ever the realist, understood her apprehension. She also knew the deep-seated guilt that had finally propelled Ava back to her father's side.

Charles Prescott. The name tasted like ash in her mouth. Their relationship had always been a complicated tapestry of silence and unspoken resentments. He was a man of few words, his emotions as guarded as the secrets he kept locked away behind the heavy oak door of his study. After Eleanor's death, the already fragile bridge between father and daughter had crumbled entirely, leaving a chasm of misunderstanding and grief.

Now, that chasm seemed even wider. A stroke. The words had been delivered with clinical detachment by a nurse on the phone. *He's stable, but he'll need round-the-clock care for a while. No other family, you see.* No other family. The phrase echoed in her mind, a stark reminder of her solitude. It was just her, and Charles, and the ghosts of a past they both refused to acknowledge.

She turned onto Old Pine Road, the familiar crunch of gravel under her tires a prelude to the inevitable. The trees here were even denser, their branches forming a shadowy canopy that allowed only slivers of sunlight to penetrate. The air grew cooler, damper, the silence broken only by the chirping of unseen birds and the distant roar of the ocean.

And then, there it was. The house. A grand old Victorian, once the pride of the Prescott family, now stood like a decrepit sentinel, its paint peeling, its windows like vacant eyes. It was larger than she remembered, more imposing, casting a long shadow over the overgrown lawn. A single light, dim and yellow, flickered in a downstairs window – her father, or perhaps a neighbor checking in. The thought of a neighbor eased her mind slightly. She wasn't entirely alone.

Parking the car, Ava took a deep breath, the salty air filling her lungs, sharp and cold. This wasn't just a house; it was a repository of memories, both cherished and haunting. It was where she'd learned to ride her bicycle, where she'd celebrated birthdays and mourned losses, where the first whispers of family secrets had begun to take root. Stepping out of the car, she felt the weight of ten years pressing down on her, each year a layer of dust on the memories within.

The front door, once a vibrant navy, was now a dull, flaking blue. She reached for the tarnished brass knocker, her hand hovering for a moment. What would she find inside? A frail, broken man, or the same stoic, impenetrable figure she remembered? More importantly, what would he see when he looked at her? The runaway daughter, finally returning, or a stranger inhabiting a familiar face?

She knocked, the sound echoing hollowly in the quiet afternoon. There was no immediate answer. She tried again, louder this time. Still nothing. A knot of dread

tightened in her stomach. Had something gone wrong? Had she arrived too late?

Just as she was reaching for the doorknob, the door creaked open a sliver, revealing a sliver of light and a sliver of a face. Not her father's, but an older woman's, her hair pulled back in a neat bun, her eyes a startling shade of blue behind wire-rimmed glasses. It was Mrs. Gable, the Prescotts' long-time housekeeper, her face etched with a mixture of surprise and relief.

"Ava? Is that truly you, dear?" Mrs. Gable's voice was soft, slightly raspy, a familiar sound from her childhood.

"Hello, Mrs. Gable," Ava managed, a tightness in her throat. "It's me."

Mrs. Gable opened the door wider, her gaze sweeping over Ava, a flicker of something unreadable in her eyes before settling into a warm, if slightly mournful, smile. "Come in, child. Come in. Your father's been... expecting you."

The word "expecting" hung in the air, a delicate lie. Ava knew her father expected nothing from her, least of all her return. But she stepped across the threshold anyway, into the cool, silent embrace of the old house. The air inside was heavy, smelling of dust, old wood, and something indefinable - a scent she recognized as the essence of Crescent Cove itself, a blend of sea air, pine needles, and long-held secrets. The light between shadows, she thought, and wondered if she'd finally found her way back to the heart of them.

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