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Beneath Hollow Pines

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Introduction

Hollow Pines Woods stands sentinel on the far edge of Willowbrook, its silhouettes looming at dusk like a collection of secrets waiting to be confessed. Willowbrook is the kind of small town that marks time by pageants, bake sales, and high school reunions—a place where every front porch carries a story, and each neighbor is both friend and occasional foe. But behind the tidy yards and polite smiles, tales linger that daylight can't quite exorcise. Most are harmless—ghost stories told at sleepovers, whispered warnings about the woods—but one has claws that still scratch under the surface: the disappearance of Jamie Collins.

Harper Wren hasn't called Willowbrook home for ten years, not since she left after graduation in search of a bigger world—and the promise of anonymity her childhood couldn't offer. Life outside hadn't gone as planned. A journalism career unraveling by the seams, a family she's kept safely at arm's length, and a heart bruised by more than ambition. Now, returning to Willowbrook with little more than worn suitcases and lingering regret, Harper finds the town both eerily unchanged and irrevocably strange.

The woods, especially, draw her back: Hollow Pines, so named for the way the wind sings through its trees in mournful, human notes. She remembers old games played at its rotten edge and warnings from mothers about what could happen if you strayed too far after dark. Harper had believed—like everyone else—that the past was just something to outgrow. Until the morning an anonymous envelope appeared on her childhood windowsill, threading her present to the moment Jamie vanished without a trace.

Everyone claims to know everything in Willowbrook, and yet certain questions have gone unanswered for too long. The deeper Harper looks, the more she uncovers fractures that run beneath the surface: friendships long splintered, secrets tightly guarded, truths masked by false smiles. Tensions thicken as Harper digs into Jamie's life, challenging the official narrative and raising suspicion among neighbors who would rather let sleeping ghosts lie.

The echoes of that fateful summer—her last with Jamie, the shimmering anticipation before everything turned—trail her like persistent shadows. As Harper navigates uneasy reunions and old wounds, she is forced to reckon not only with what happened to her friend, but also with the darkness that lingers in the places we're told to trust most: our homes, our memories, and each other.

Beneath Hollow Pines sets out to unravel the truth at the heart of Willowbrook, where

the cost of silence has grown too heavy and forgiveness is as elusive as a name spoken in the wind. Harper will have to decide how much of herself she's willing to risk to bring the past to light. For here, beneath the hollow pines, what's been buried the longest might yet refuse to stay underground.

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CHAPTER ONE: Return to Willowbrook

The old pickup truck, a relic of her teenage years that Harper had rescued from her uncle's dusty barn, rattled over the Willow Creek bridge. Each groan and shimmy of the suspension was a familiar protest, a soundtrack to her reluctant homecoming. Willowbrook hadn't changed, not really. The Welcome sign, faded by a decade of relentless sun and winter wind, still proudly declared it "The Heart of the Pines," a tagline that always struck Harper as both quaint and vaguely ominous.

The town itself unfurled before her, a patchwork quilt of clapboard houses and well-tended gardens, punctuated by the familiar spire of the First Baptist Church and the brick facade of Willowbrook Elementary. She could almost hear the distant echo of school bells, the shouts of children at recess, and the low hum of gossip that perpetually vibrated through the air here. It was a place steeped in memory, some sweet, some bitter, all of them clinging to her like the pollen that dusted the windshield.

Harper's jaw tightened as she passed the Willowbrook Diner, its neon sign flickering even in the midday sun. She imagined Mrs. Henderson, still perched on her usual stool, nursing a bottomless cup of coffee and observing the comings and goings with a keen, unblinking eye. Every face in this town was a chapter she'd once known intimately, a story she'd tried, unsuccessfully, to forget.

The truck veered right, taking the winding road that led out of the town's core and towards the older, more isolated section where her family home, Wren House, stood. It was a grand, somewhat dilapidated Victorian, swallowed by overgrown azaleas and the creeping shadow of the Hollow Pines Woods behind it. A shiver, not entirely due to the cool blast of the air conditioning, traced its way down her spine.

She'd left Willowbrook ten years ago, a freshly minted high school graduate with a scholarship to a prestigious journalism program and an unshakeable belief that her future lay anywhere but here. The small-town confines had felt suffocating, the knowing glances and whispered judgments a constant weight. She'd yearned for the anonymity of the city, the bustling energy of a world where no one cared what your parents did, or who you dated, or whether your best friend vanished without a trace.

The journalism career, once a shining beacon, had sputtered and dimmed. The hard-hitting stories she'd envisioned had devolved into clickbait articles and puff pieces for an online tabloid. The city, once a symbol of liberation, had become a lonely echo chamber. And her family, a fractured landscape she'd hoped time and distance would heal, remained stubbornly estranged. The phone calls had grown less frequent, the

visits non-existent.

So, when the anonymous letter had arrived at her tiny city apartment, addressed in looping, unfamiliar handwriting, it had felt less like a bolt from the blue and more like an inevitable pull back to the gravitational field of Willowbrook. A single line, stark and chilling, had been scrawled inside: *Jamie didn't just disappear. Find out what happened.*

Jamie. The name was a key, unlocking a forgotten room in her mind, flooding it with images of laughter, shared secrets, and the vibrant, untamed spirit of her childhood best friend. Jamie Collins, whose absence had become as much a part of Willowbrook's fabric as the Hollow Pines themselves. The official story was a runaway, a troubled teen who'd simply decided to leave. But the letter suggested otherwise.

Harper pulled the truck into the gravel driveway of Wren House, kicking up a cloud of dust that settled slowly over the unkempt lawn. The house loomed, silent and imposing, its windows like vacant eyes. It looked exactly as she remembered, a testament to her family's steadfast refusal to change, to move on. A knot formed in her stomach. Reconciling with her family was a secondary, yet equally daunting, mission.

She cut the engine, and the sudden silence was deafening, broken only by the chirping of crickets and the distant murmur of the wind through the pines. A decade of avoidance, of carefully constructed distance, was about to crumble. She took a deep breath, the air thick with the scent of pine needles and damp earth—the smell of Willowbrook, the smell of home.

As she stepped out of the truck, the weight of the suitcases in her hands felt insignificant compared to the invisible burden she carried. The letter, tucked safely into her worn leather satchel, burned a silent hole against her side. It was a challenge, a plea, a ghost's whisper from the past. And Harper, against her better judgment, felt an unfamiliar flicker of the investigative spark she'd once thought extinguished.

The front door, a heavy oak slab, creaked open before she could reach it. Her mother, Eleanor, stood framed in the doorway, her expression a careful mask of welcome and apprehension. Her silver hair was pulled back in a neat bun, and she wore her usual practical apron. Nothing had changed.

"Harper," Eleanor said, her voice softer than Harper remembered, yet still tinged with that familiar, understated disapproval. "You made it."

Harper managed a strained smile. "Hi, Mom."

The air between them was thick with unspoken years, unasked questions, and the

lingering residue of a past they both preferred to ignore. But Harper knew, with a certainty that chilled her to the bone, that the past was anything but ignored in Willowbrook. It was merely waiting, simmering beneath the surface, ready to boil over. And the anonymous letter was the match. What secrets would Wren House refuse to yield?

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