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The House Beneath the Lake

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Introduction

I had always believed that the past was best left undisturbed, lying dormant like roots tangled beneath the placid surface of a forgotten lake. For as long as I can remember, I have run from my childhood, escaping into the chaos and comfort of journalism, crafting stories to make sense of other people's pain so I could ignore my own. When the long-distance calls came from the small Winthrop Lake hospital, alerting me to my father's failing health, I felt an unfamiliar panic rise—a dread about returning to the place I'd spent my life avoiding.

Winthrop had not changed much in the years since I last crossed its faded welcome sign: clapboard houses weathered by wind, the sharp scent of pine and moss, and, always, the lake itself—vast, unnaturally still, swallowing secrets. Yet, nothing about this homecoming felt familiar. My father had shrunk into the bones of a man I barely recognized, and our conversations bristled with unsaid words, the history between us as deep and cold as the water that bordered our land.

There are stories in every town, local legends that grow tangled with truth. Here, it was the tale of the house that vanished—swallowed by the lake after a forgotten tragedy, or so they whispered. Childhood dares had sent us peering into the water, searching for hints of glass and shingle. My mother, before she left for good, used to hush us with warnings, but I never understood why the adults changed the subject or why my father would stare at the lake some nights, his knuckles white against the railing. In all the years I had stayed away, I never expected to become entangled in that particular mystery.

But life has a way of circling back to unfinished stories. The first night in my room I heard the uncanny lap of water against the shore, the howl of wind threading through the trees, and I felt the uncanny certainty that something was waiting for me. Old photographs hidden in drawers. Letters that trailed off in mid-sentence. Among my mother's belongings, I discovered a worn journal and a photograph that chilled me: my missing aunt Evelyn, arm in arm with my young father, standing outside a sun-blached house I'd never seen, yet whose windows felt like eyes.

Within days, the quiet unraveling of my life gave way to restless nights and waking visions—ghostly figures in the morning fog, whispers at the water's edge. And then, as if conjured by memory or need, I saw her. My aunt: lost to the lake and to us, standing on the threshold of a house that should not exist.

All my ambition, all the walls I'd built, began to crumble beneath the weight of family secrets and the pressing question of what truly lies beneath the lake. The time had

come to dredge up what was buried—to understand not just what happened to Evelyn, but whether redemption was possible for those of us left behind. This is the story of how I found the courage to search the shadows of the past, and the house that waited for me beneath the lake's still waters.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming Shadows

The drive to Winthrop Lake felt less like a homecoming and more like a descent. Each mile peeled back layers of the polished, cynical journalist I'd become, exposing the raw, awkward girl beneath. My sedan, usually a beacon of professional anonymity, now felt like a metal shell carrying a very exposed nerve. The landscape flattened, pines thickened, and the familiar, almost suffocating scent of damp earth and something metallic – the lake, I knew – began to seep through the vents. Twenty years. Twenty years since I'd lived here, and only a handful of fleeting visits, each shorter and more strained than the last.

The last time I'd been home, really *home*, was for my high school graduation. Even then, the air was thick with unspoken resentments. My father, Richard, had stood stoically by the punch bowl, a man carved from granite and stubborn silence. He'd clapped me on the shoulder, a gesture devoid of warmth, and I'd fled to Boston shortly after, chasing stories and a life that felt a million miles from Winthrop's suffocating embrace. Now, here I was, returning not triumphant, but defeated. My father's latest fall, a nasty tumble down the front steps, had fractured his hip and, more importantly, fractured the carefully constructed illusion that I could outrun my past indefinitely.

The town itself seemed to have undergone a slow-motion decay. The general store, once a hub of gossip and penny candy, now sported a faded "For Sale" sign. The diner, where teenagers once plotted their escapes, looked perpetually closed, its windows grimy. Everything felt muted, as if the very vibrancy had been leached out by the lake's constant, watchful presence. Even the air seemed heavier, laden with the weight of forgotten moments.

I pulled up the long gravel driveway to our old house, the tires crunching like static on a forgotten radio station. The house itself, a two-story colonial with peeling white paint and a porch that sagged slightly on one side, looked smaller than I remembered. Or perhaps I had grown larger, more substantial, while it remained trapped in a static memory. The front door, once a welcoming portal, now loomed like the entrance to an old tomb.

My father was home, discharged from the hospital just yesterday, a fact delivered by a brusque nurse over the phone, implying my urgent presence was now required. He sat in his usual armchair in the living room, a worn plaid blanket across his lap, staring out the window at the lake. His profile was sharper, his silver hair thinner, and the lines etched around his eyes seemed deeper, carrying the history of more than just age. He didn't turn as I stepped inside, the floorboards groaning a familiar protest under my weight.

"Dad?" My voice felt alien in the silence, a fragile thing that might shatter.

He slowly turned his head, his eyes, the same piercing blue as mine, held a faraway look. Recognition, then a flicker of something unreadable – surprise? Resentment? – crossed his face. "Grace. You made it." His voice was raspy, weakened. It wasn't a welcome, just an observation.

"Of course, I made it," I replied, my own voice firmer than I felt. I set my bag down, the thud echoing in the quiet room. The air was thick with the scent of old wood, dust, and something else, something vaguely medicinal. I walked over, my eyes scanning him for obvious signs of injury beyond the sling on his arm. "How are you feeling?"

He grunted, a sound that conveyed both pain and annoyance. "Old. Frail. The usual complaints of an invalid, I suppose." He averted his gaze back to the window, to the lake, which shimmered deceptively placid in the late afternoon sun. "You didn't have to come."

The words, though expected, still pricked. "Someone has to look after you, Dad. Besides, I needed a break from the city. Editors breathing down my neck." It was a lie, a flimsy excuse. My work was my refuge, my shield. But I couldn't tell him the truth: that a hollow ache had taken root in my chest months ago, and the idea of his solitary decline, however strained our relationship, had become unbearable.

I moved around the living room, a subtle attempt to reacquaint myself with the space. The familiar scent of old books and dust motes dancing in the sunbeams. The mantelpiece still held the same collection of tarnished silver frames, mostly pictures of my parents, younger, smiling, before the shadows lengthened. I noticed one frame was missing. It had held a picture of Aunt Evelyn, my mother's younger sister, the vibrant, laughing woman who had vanished without a trace when I was a child.

"I'll make some tea," I said, breaking the silence that had stretched too long. He didn't respond. The kitchen was as I remembered, though the counters were less cluttered now, a single teacup and saucer drying by the sink. I filled the kettle, the mundane task a comfort. As the water heated, my eyes drifted to the window above the sink, which offered a direct, unobstructed view of the lake. It was vast, ancient, reflecting the bruised violet of the evening sky.

And then I saw it, or thought I did. A ripple, unlike any caused by a fish or a passing breeze. A concentric wave, impossibly wide, radiating from a spot far out in the deepest part of the lake, where the water turned a murky, impenetrable black. It was the same spot where the rumors said the house lay submerged. The house that had vanished.

A shiver traced its way down my spine, a cold knot forming in my stomach. It was just a ripple, I told myself. A trick of the light, the wind. Yet, the old stories, dormant for years, began to stir in the back of my mind. Stories whispered by local kids, half-joking, half-terrified, about the phantom lights seen on moonless nights, the faint music heard over the water. The town's dark history, my mother had once called it, before she too became a part of a different kind of disappearance.

The kettle whistled, a shrill sound that startled me. I poured the boiling water, my hands trembling slightly. Was it just the fatigue of the long drive, the stress of the homecoming? Or was something else, something older and colder, beginning to unfurl itself in the shadows of Winthrop Lake? As I carried the tea into the living room, I glanced back at the window, at the darkening expanse of water. The ripple was gone, absorbed back into the lake's silent depths, but the unsettling feeling remained. My return had just begun, and already, the lake was pulling me in.

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