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Beneath the Wishing Trees

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Introduction

Nestled along the tranquil edge of Sapphire Lake, the town of Willow Creek has always looked like a storybook come to life. Rows of clapboard houses line shaded streets, their porches adorned with flower boxes and wind chimes that sing with every gentle breeze. Towering willows lean over the water, their branches skimming ripples along the shore. Birdsong mingles with the distant hum of a boat motor, and on warm mornings, the scent of honeysuckle hangs in the air. Yet, beneath its postcard beauty, this lakeside town quietly cradles aching hearts and unresolved dreams, secrets woven into the fabric of its every day.

To Harper Ellis, Willow Creek means both comfort and conflict. It's the town that raised her—the place where she learned to paint, to hope, and, heartbreakingly, to leave. A decade ago, restless and hurt, Harper drove away from the only home she'd ever known, vowing never to look back. Now, her career as an artist has dimmed to a shadow of its brightest days, dulled by disappointment and a creative exhaustion she cannot seem to shake. All it takes is one urgent phone call—news that her grandmother's health is failing—to pull her unwillingly back toward everything she'd tried to escape.

For Harper, the return is fraught. The once-familiar streets seem changed, tinged with an ache of memories she'd rather forget. Her relationship with her grandmother, once affectionate and easy, has grown tense in her absence, their words too often clipped or left unsaid. Even her younger sister, once her confidante, now feels distant—a stranger separated by years and misunderstandings. There's a heaviness in the air as Harper steps through the door of her family home; a sense that unfinished business awaits her at every turn.

Yet Willow Creek's quiet rhythm presses in. The town's beauty is persistent—its sunrises and slow-moving days a balm she resists but can't deny. Old friends materialize in grocery aisles, memories tug at her from the corners of downtown, and everywhere she turns, she finds reminders of the girl she used to be and the woman she has become. Most unexpected and unsettling of all is her reunion with Jake Mercer. Once her first love, now the principled high school principal, Jake's steady presence is both comforting and complicated, stirring up feelings Harper believed long since buried.

As Harper tends to her grandmother and tries to mend broken family ties, she finds herself caught between past regrets and the possibilities of forgiveness. Willow Creek offers its gentle, sometimes insistent reminders that the stories she left unfinished here—including her own—may not be over after all. In the hush of the lakeshore,

beneath the ancient wishing trees, hope flickers to life in ways Harper never saw coming.

This is the beginning of her journey: a return home not just to a place, but to the people, dreams, and truths she left behind. Amid the soft sigh of the willows and the warmth of a small town that refuses to give up on its own, Harper will discover that second chances can be found—even when you least expect them—where the heart first learned to hope.

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CHAPTER ONE: Coming Home to Willow Creek

The last ten miles into Willow Creek felt longer than the entire six-hour drive from Chicago. Harper gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white, as her ancient SUV groaned its way along the winding lakeside road. The air-conditioning, a luxury she hadn't realized was failing until too late, blew lukewarm sighs, doing little to combat the oppressive August heat. Outside, the familiar landscape unfolded: dense forests giving way to glimpses of Sapphire Lake, its surface glinting under the afternoon sun like a scattered handful of diamonds.

Every tree, every curve in the road, seemed to whisper a memory. There was the old fishing dock where she and Jake used to sneak out at dawn, hoping to catch something bigger than a sunfish. Up ahead, the towering sycamore that marked the turn-off to the old Miller farm, where they'd shared their first awkward, exhilarating kiss. Harper squeezed her eyes shut for a fraction of a second, then snapped them open, chastising herself. This wasn't a trip down memory lane; it was an obligation. A temporary stop.

She'd packed light, as if to underscore the fleeting nature of her visit: two small suitcases, a box of art supplies she probably wouldn't touch, and a duffel bag filled with clothes she'd bought on sale. No sense unpacking fully, no sense settling in. Her studio apartment in Chicago, with its exposed brick and city hum, felt like another lifetime already, even though she'd left it only that morning.

The call from her sister, Lily, had been curt, bordering on accusatory. "Grandma's not doing well, Harper. The doctors say... well, it's serious. She needs someone here." Lily had always been the responsible one, the one who stayed, the one who picked up the pieces. Harper, the flighty artist, had always been the one who left. The roles were deeply ingrained, a script they'd both followed for years.

Entering the town limits, the speed dropped to twenty-five, and the world outside the car slowed to match. The Welcome to Willow Creek sign, faded by years of sun and rain, still depicted a stylized willow tree bending gracefully over a lake. Harper remembered painting a similar scene in high school, a vibrant watercolor that her art teacher had praised. That felt like another lifetime too, when art was pure joy and not a demanding, often unfulfilling, career.

Main Street appeared, just as she remembered it: the quaint storefronts, the faded awning of Miller's General Store, the tantalizing scent of fresh-baked bread wafting from the bakery. A knot tightened in her stomach. It wasn't homesickness; it was something sharper, more akin to dread. The town felt like an open wound, every

familiar sight a reminder of mistakes made and dreams abandoned.

She passed the town square, dominated by the old bandstand where summer concerts used to draw crowds. Kids on bikes zipped past, their laughter echoing through the quiet afternoon. A woman with a stroller waved from the sidewalk, and Harper offered a tentative, impersonal nod, hoping not to be recognized. She wanted to slip in and out, a ghost passing through, leaving no trace.

Her grandmother's house on Maple Lane was just a few blocks away. The thought of stepping back inside, of facing the silence and unspoken words, made her stomach clench. It wasn't just her grandmother's ailing health that weighed on her, but the decade of strained phone calls, the missed holidays, the quiet disapproval she felt simmering beneath every polite conversation. Her grandmother had never truly understood why Harper left, or why she hadn't returned sooner.

As she turned onto Maple Lane, the familiar rows of mature maples, their leaves already hinting at autumn's amber and gold, provided a welcome canopy. The houses here were older, stately Victorians and sturdy bungalows, each with its own meticulously tended garden. Mrs. Henderson's prize-winning roses, vibrant even in the late summer heat, spilled over their picket fence. Harper remembered countless childhood evenings playing hide-and-seek among those very bushes.

And then, there it was: 14 Maple Lane. The house stood proud, a two-story farmhouse painted a soft sage green with white trim. The porch swing, where her grandmother used to read stories, sat empty. The window boxes, usually bursting with geraniums, looked a little neglected, the flowers drooping in the heat. It was a subtle sign, but a clear one, that things were not as they should be.

Harper pulled her SUV into the driveway, the gravel crunching loudly under the tires. She cut the engine, and the sudden silence of the afternoon pressed in, punctuated only by the distant buzz of a lawnmower. She sat for a moment, hands still on the wheel, staring at the front door. A decade. Ten years since she'd left Willow Creek, convinced she was escaping a life too small, a heartbreak too large.

She took a deep, shaky breath, the air thick with the scent of pine and something indefinable, something uniquely Willow Creek. It smelled like home, and it terrified her. This wasn't just about her grandmother's health. This was about confronting the past, the choices she'd made, and the person she'd become. This was about facing the reasons she'd run, and the consequences of staying away.

With a sigh that felt like it carried all the exhaustion of the past ten years, Harper unbuckled her seatbelt. The sun beat down, hot and unforgiving. She grabbed her purse, the weight of it suddenly heavy on her shoulder, and pushed open the car door. The screen door of her grandmother's house, familiar in its creak, seemed to beckon.

She was here. She was truly home. And the quiet of Willow Creek felt less like a balm and more like a challenge.

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