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The Silent Guest

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Introduction

They arrived on a mild September afternoon, the moving truck humming quietly in the driveway of 17 Maple Lane. For the Harper family, this house was supposed to be a beginning—a place untouched by old wounds, a clean slate nestled in the well-manicured embrace of suburban comfort. Outside, neighbors waved from their crimson porches. Inside, the hardwood floors echoed with the sound of new steps, of boxes and laughter and promises whispered in hopeful tones.

Alice Harper eyed the stained-glass transom above the entryway, her husband Daniel beside her, both catching a glimpse of themselves in the fractured, colored light. Behind them, Julia and Max darted in and out of rooms, their voices ricocheting up the staircase. The family moved through the house, noticing the details left behind by previous lives—a forgotten child's drawing taped to the inside of a closet door, the faint scent of lavender that clung stubbornly to the curtains. They joked about ghosts, not knowing then how quickly humor could curdle into something else.

It wasn't perfection, but it was theirs. Each family member harbored hopes for what these walls might hold: Daniel longed for quiet and routine after a rocky year; Alice dreamed of simpler days, free from the pressures she couldn't name; Julia, in her adolescence, wanted only to settle in and vanish, unnoticed; Max, seven, imagined secret passageways and midnight adventures. If there were shadows here, the Harpers chose not to see them.

Yet, even in those first hours, a faint unease tinged the air. A window that stuck stubbornly closed, a hallway that felt inexplicably colder than the rooms on either side, muffled sounds in the night that the old pipes couldn't quite account for—the house introduced itself with gentle, almost apologetic strangeness. Alice dismissed the sensation as nerves, Daniel blamed it on stress, and the children simply accepted it as part of living somewhere new. Still, something about the place made all of them speak in softer voices after sundown.

Beyond the freshly mowed lawns and clipped hedges, the neighborhood itself seemed to watch. An upstairs curtain twitched across the street, and a woman—invisible until now—appeared beside their mailbox with a thin, knowing smile. She introduced herself as Mrs. Ellison, the house just past the park. "It takes time to settle in here," she said, her words lingering uncomfortably. "This street—well, it remembers things."

As dusk pooled in the corners of their new home, the Harpers unpacked the last of their belongings, shutting away doubts with the closing of each box. In the weeks ahead, those doubts would swell and spill, drawn out by the silent guest who waited,

patient and unseen, within the walls.

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CHAPTER ONE: Unpacking the Past

The first week at 17 Maple Lane was a blur of cardboard and dust motes dancing in sunlit rooms. Daniel, ever the methodical one, had a system for everything, labeling boxes with a precision that bordered on obsessive. "Kitchen essentials," he'd declare, placing a box with undue ceremony on the gleaming quartz countertop. Alice, less structured but no less determined, tackled the living room, envisioning the perfect placement for their inherited antique chest, a piece that always seemed to hum with faint, unspoken histories.

Julia, thirteen and perpetually tethered to her phone, drifted through the chaos, occasionally offering a half-hearted attempt at unpacking her clothes. Her room, spacious and overlooking the sprawling backyard, felt like a temporary refuge rather than a permanent home. She arranged her few prized possessions - a worn paperback, a framed photo of her best friend, a small collection of smooth river stones - on a hastily cleared nightstand, trying to imbue the anonymous space with her own reluctant personality.

Max, on the other hand, embraced the house with unbridled enthusiasm. Every closet was a potential hiding spot, every corner an unexplored territory. He'd disappear for long stretches, his excited yells echoing from unseen parts of the house. Alice would occasionally call out, "Max, what are you doing?" only for his voice to reply, muffled and distant, "Exploring!" It was a comforting sound, a sign that at least one of them was fully invested in this new chapter.

The initial oddities were so subtle they barely registered. A light switch that sometimes flickered when touched, then worked perfectly the next time. A faint chill that seemed to emanate from the floorboards near the front door, even on warm afternoons. Alice attributed it to an old house settling, the quirks of a century-old structure finally flexing its aged bones. Daniel, ever practical, mumbled about drafts and the need for new insulation, adding it to his ever-growing mental list of home improvement projects.

One afternoon, while Alice was wrestling a particularly stubborn curtain rod in the master bedroom, she noticed a faint indentation on the wallpaper, just beside the window frame. It was a perfect circle, the size of a thimble, barely visible unless the light hit it just right. She ran her finger over it, wondering if it was a nail hole, but there was no corresponding hole on the other side. A small, almost imperceptible detail, yet it snagged at the edge of her awareness for a moment before she dismissed it as a defect.

Later that day, Julia came downstairs, her face a mask of mild annoyance. "Mom, did you move my book?" she asked, holding up a copy of *The Secret Garden*. "I put it right here on my nightstand, and now it's in my closet." Alice, mid-sentence with Daniel about paint swatches, shook her head. "No, honey, I haven't been in your room today." Julia shrugged, attributing it to her own forgetfulness, a common affliction of teenagers.

That night, Max woke his parents with a soft whimper. Alice, still half-asleep, stumbled into his room. "What's wrong, sweetie?" she whispered, pulling back his duvet. Max's eyes, wide and dark in the dim nightlight glow, darted towards the window. "There was someone," he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep and fear. "Standing by my bed."

Alice's heart gave a little lurch. "Who, darling? A dream?" Max shook his head vigorously. "No, they were real. And they were looking at me." Alice scanned the room, seeing nothing but shadows and familiar toys. She checked the window, ensuring it was locked, then pulled him close, murmuring reassurances until he drifted back to sleep. She told herself it was just a vivid dream, a result of the upheaval of moving. Yet, a tiny seed of unease was planted, a faint prickle at the back of her neck.

The next morning, the lingering scent of lavender, which they'd noticed upon entering, seemed stronger, particularly in the hallway leading to the master bedroom. Alice had searched the house for the source, thinking it was an air freshener left by the previous owners, but found nothing. It was subtle, almost pleasant, yet it felt strangely out of place, a phantom perfume in their new, unadorned home. Daniel, when asked, said he couldn't smell anything, which only made Alice wonder if she was imagining things.

Max was unusually quiet at breakfast, picking at his cereal. Alice tried to coax him into talking about his "dream," but he just shook his head, looking down at his bowl. "It wasn't a dream," he insisted softly, still avoiding eye contact. "They smiled at me." His words sent a shiver down Alice's spine, but she forced a bright smile, reminding herself that children often blurred the lines between fantasy and reality.

Later that afternoon, as Alice was sorting through old photographs, she noticed a faint, almost imperceptible shimmer in the periphery of her vision. She turned her head sharply, but saw nothing. It was like a ripple in the air, gone as quickly as it appeared. Her imagination, she decided. The stress of moving, the endless unpacking, the new surroundings - it was all getting to her.

She tried to focus on the pleasant aspects of the neighborhood. The tree-lined streets, the friendly waves from dog walkers, the cheerful chirping of unseen birds. It was everything they had hoped for, everything they had worked for. A fresh start. And yet, the house itself seemed to resist this notion of a clean slate, clinging to whispers of

lives lived within its walls.

The first official visitor arrived on their third evening. The doorbell chimed, a surprisingly melodic tone that resonated through the house. Daniel answered, and there stood a woman of indeterminate age, with tightly coiffed grey hair and eyes that seemed to miss nothing. This was Mrs. Ellison, from the house just past the park. She held a basket brimming with freshly baked muffins, their scent wafting tantalizingly through the entryway.

"Welcome to Maple Lane," Mrs. Ellison said, her voice a low murmur, surprisingly strong for her frail appearance. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I just wanted to bring you a little something to help you settle in." Alice stepped forward, gratefully accepting the basket. "That's so kind of you, Mrs. Ellison. Thank you."

Mrs. Ellison's gaze swept past them, into the depths of the house. Her eyes lingered on the staircase, then the dark hallway leading to the back rooms. There was a pause, a beat too long, before she looked back at Alice. "It takes time to settle in here," she repeated, her earlier words from their first day now carrying a more ominous weight. "This street—well, it remembers things."

The air thickened, the unspoken words hanging between them. Alice felt a faint chill, not from the open door, but from the sudden intensity in Mrs. Ellison's gaze. Daniel, ever the diplomat, cleared his throat. "We're looking forward to making our own memories here," he said, attempting to lighten the mood.

Mrs. Ellison's smile returned, thin and knowing. "Oh, I'm sure you will, dear. But some memories... they have a way of clinging. Especially in this house." She gave a curt nod, her eyes still scanning the interior, as if searching for something. "Do let me know if you need anything at all. Though, I suspect you'll find everything you need, and perhaps a little more, right here."

With that cryptic warning, she turned and ambled down the pathway, her figure receding into the deepening twilight. Alice and Daniel exchanged a glance, a silent question passing between them. The muffins, warm and sweet-smelling, suddenly felt heavy in Alice's hands. The subtle unease that had been a faint hum since their arrival now sharpened into a distinct chord of apprehension. The house, they realized, wasn't just a structure of wood and plaster. It was a repository. And it was just beginning to reveal its contents.

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