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# **Moonlight House**

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## Introduction

Moonlight House loomed on the edge of town like a secret waiting to be told. Shrouded in ivy and bruised shadows, the old Victorian mansion had been the setting of Harper Gray's childhood fears—haunted not only by time, but by stories whispered on front porches when the moon was high. Now, after years away, Harper found herself at its creaking front door again, keys in hand, grief heavy in her chest. She told herself she'd come to settle her late aunt's affairs—to do her duty and leave. But a part of her, wary and electric, sensed the house had other intentions.

Harper was hardly the conquering prodigal. Burned out by the relentless churn of newsrooms and bruised by too many stories ending in blood or heartbreak, she had abandoned her ambitions—and much of herself—in the city. Returning to Eddington felt like stepping backward through time: the town's slow rhythms, the long shadows of memory, old wounds left unhealed. That she'd inherited Moonlight House was a cruel twist of fate; the place had always unnerved her, with its choking secrets and uneven silences. Her aunt's death, so sudden and so alone, only seemed to deepen the mansion's mystery.

The townspeople remembered Harper, though not always kindly. She could see it in their eyes as she passed the bakery, the cold shimmer of curiosity and judgment. Some recalled her successes, others her failures. For all their neighborly ways, people here nursed old grudges alongside their casseroles. Relationships she'd left fractured, friendships abandoned in youthful pride or pain, now hung between her and a community that guarded its own secrets. And everywhere, always, was the sense of being watched—not only by her neighbors but by the house itself.

It didn't take long for the strangeness to begin. The chill in the upstairs hallway that lingered well past midnight. The creak of floorboards in empty rooms, photographs moved ever so slightly out of place, and Harper's growing certainty that something—someone—wanted her gone. The unease was subtle at first, a tightness in her chest, a prickle at her nape. But it deepened with every night she stayed, growing into the persistent sense of a presence just beyond sight, old and yearning, perhaps desperate to speak.

Yet, mixed with her fear was an acute, unexpected ache: the sharp grief of loss, the longing for roots, for answers, for forgiveness. Harper's aunt had loved her fiercely and secretively, raising her after her parents' deaths, and the gaps in their history pained Harper as much as the house's literal emptiness. She sensed that the key to both lay buried among the broken banisters, the dusty letters, and the rumors that clung to Moonlight House like cobwebs.

And so, with storm clouds gathering and the past knocking at her bedroom door, Harper braced herself to uncover the truth—about her aunt, about the town, and about the mansion itself. She didn't know it yet, but she was about to disturb something deep, and perhaps unholy, in Moonlight House. In doing so, she would start not only a journey into the heart of a decades-old mystery, but also a reckoning with her own haunted history.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Return to Eddington

The 'Welcome to Eddington' sign, faded and leaning precariously, seemed to mock Harper as she drove past. It was adorned with a chipped painted apple, a nod to the town's long-defunct orchard industry. Twenty years. Twenty years since she'd fled this place like a bat out of hell, and it looked exactly the same—a time capsule of quiet despair and unspoken judgments. Her trusty, if slightly rusty, sedan groaned in protest as she navigated the familiar, winding roads that hugged the perimeter of town. Each turn brought a fresh wave of memory, not all of them welcome.

Her aunt, Elara Gray, had been a woman of routines and secrets, and the call from the county sheriff informing Harper of her sudden passing had been as jarring as it was expected. Elara had lived a solitary life in that monstrous house, a life Harper had only dipped into during childhood summers, full of whispers and an unsettling quiet. Now, that quiet was permanent, and Harper, the sole living relative, was tasked with unraveling its aftermath.

The first stop was inevitable: the Eddington Diner. It was the unofficial town square, where gossip was served hotter than the coffee and every new face was dissected with surgical precision. Harper pushed open the door, the bell above her head jingling like an alarm. Heads snapped up from greasy plates, conversation paused, and a collective hush fell. It was as if a spotlight had suddenly materialized, bathing her in its unwelcome glow.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," a sharp voice sliced through the silence. Betty Mae, with her perfectly coiffed silver hair and eyes that missed nothing, was perched at the counter, a half-eaten slice of apple pie before her. Betty Mae ran the local florist, and her memory for past transgressions was even sharper than her shears. She'd been Harper's Sunday school teacher, a role she seemed to believe gave her eternal permission to judge.

Harper managed a tight smile. "Hello, Betty Mae. Still spreading sunshine, I see."

Betty Mae sniffed. "Some of us never left, Harper. Some of us actually care about this town." The implication hung heavy in the air: Harper did not.

The diner owner, a kind-faced woman named Sarah, who had been a grade older than Harper in high school, emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "Harper! It's good to see you, honey. I heard about Elara. So sorry for your loss." Sarah's genuine warmth was a small comfort in the frigid reception.

"Thanks, Sarah," Harper said, pulling up a stool at the counter, deliberately turning her back to Betty Mae. "Just here to settle things and head back." The lie felt brittle even to her own ears. The truth was, her city life had imploded. Her journalism career had hit a wall of cynicism and burnout, and her last relationship had crashed and burned in spectacular fashion. Eddington was less a pit stop and more a temporary refuge.

As Sarah poured her coffee—black, just as she remembered—Harper took in the diner. The same checkered floor, the same faded photos of local high school sports teams from decades past, the same smell of fried onions and stale hope. It was comforting in its familiarity, yet suffocating in its stagnation.

"So, the house," Sarah said, leaning in conspiratorially. "Old Moonlight House. Are you... staying there?" There was a tremor in her voice, a mix of curiosity and something else, something bordering on apprehension.

Harper nodded. "For now, yes. It's... a lot bigger than I remember." That was an understatement. Moonlight House wasn't just big; it was a behemoth, a gothic fortress that seemed to suck the light out of the air around it. Even in the brightest daylight, shadows clung to its ornate turrets and gables.

"It always was a bit much for Elara," Betty Mae interjected, seemingly unable to resist. "Poor woman, living there all alone. You know, some folks say it's never been quite right since... well, you know."

Harper knew. Everyone in Eddington knew. The hushed tales of tragedy, of strange happenings, of a particular chilling incident from decades past that had cemented Moonlight House's reputation as the town's resident haunted dwelling. But Harper had always dismissed them as small-town superstition, exaggerated by boredom and fear. Now, faced with the house, a prickle of unease started to form.

Later that afternoon, after a whirlwind of small-town greetings that felt more like interrogations, Harper finally found herself pulling up the long, gravel driveway to Moonlight House. The sun had begun its slow descent, casting long, skeletal shadows across the sprawling front lawn. The house itself loomed, a dark sentinel against the bruised sky, its windows like vacant eyes staring out into nothing. A shiver traced its way down Harper's spine, unrelated to the crisp autumn air.

She unlocked the massive oak front door, which groaned open as if in protest, revealing a cavernous entryway plunged into gloom. Dust motes danced in the sparse beams of light filtering through the grimy stained-glass panels above. The air inside was heavy, thick with the scent of aged wood, dust, and something else—a faint, cloying sweetness, like forgotten potpourri mixed with the faint tang of decay.

Each step Harper took echoed in the oppressive silence. The grand staircase, with its elaborately carved banister, rose like a spine into the upper reaches of the house, disappearing into shadows. She remembered sliding down that banister as a child, heedless and carefree. Now, it felt too high, too steep, leading to places she wasn't sure she wanted to explore.

Her aunt's things were everywhere, still meticulously arranged, as if Elara had merely stepped out for a moment. A stack of half-read books on a side table, a teacup on a saucer by an armchair, a shawl draped over the back of a settee. It was eerily preserved, a snapshot of a life abruptly ended. Harper ran a hand over a dusty ceramic bird on a shelf, its painted eyes seeming to follow her. Grief, sharp and unexpected, twisted in her gut. Despite Elara's reclusive nature, she had been the only constant in Harper's fragmented life after her parents died.

As dusk deepened, painting the sky in hues of purple and bruised orange, the house truly came alive. The old timbers creaked and groaned, settling into their nightly rhythm. The wind, picking up outside, whistled through unseen cracks, creating mournful sighs. Harper tried to shake off the growing feeling that she wasn't alone, that the house was breathing around her, observing her every move.

She found the power box in the basement, a damp, spiders-webbed cavern that made her skin crawl, and flicked the main switch. Lights flickered on, dim and yellow, pushing back the immediate darkness but doing little to dispel the gloom. Upstairs, in what had been her aunt's study, she saw a desk covered in papers, notes, and open books. A stack of old journals, bound in worn leather, sat prominently in the center, almost inviting her to open them. She hesitated, a strange premonition fluttering in her stomach.

A soft thud echoed from the floor above, distinct in the sudden quiet. Harper froze, listening intently. It sounded like something had fallen, or perhaps been moved. She told herself it was just the house settling, the old pipes, the wind. But as she stood there, the hair on her arms prickling, a faint, almost imperceptible whisper seemed to drift down the stairwell, as if calling her name. Moonlight House had already begun to claim her.

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