

## The House that Smiled



### Chapter 1 -- The Discovery

The air was chillier than he expected March to be, but not so much due to the temperature, but the dampness. It easily made the 50 degrees Fahrenheit feel much colder than it should have been. Still, he tugged his collar up and headed toward the path into the woods. As of late, he's taken to the woods a lot more, mostly because of Annie's upcoming birthday. She would have been 11 this year, but the cancer won that battle. Nothing he could do about it now but walk and remember how perfectly 11 she once was. They used to walk this path all the time, and always talk about the birds they heard, or the bugs they saw. Each trip out was an adventure, and although he dreaded the walks initially because *he was so busy and so important* back then...he thought sarcastically. But one of those walks would change everything.

It was the summer of her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, and they were out for the usual stroll along the piney woods. It was something about the totality of the day—the cool breeze, the sunlight coming through the trees hitting her face just the right way as she held up some kind of chubby caterpillar. That's when it hit him. The magic of this moment was something he would never get back. It was as fleeting a moment as watching a butterfly first emerge from its cocoon would be. From that moment onward, the walks became not a chore he dreaded, but a necessity like breathing.

They weren't always looking at bugs or nature, but would talk about everything, and anything. About the unfairness in life that the princesses never got to fight the dragons, or why daddy's had to work out of town while mommy's stayed home. There were questions about life, death, heaven, and hell, and it was all those little moments he wouldn't trade for all the tea in China.

Almost rolling his ankle woke him back up to reality. He'd somehow wandered off the walking path and was now a good ten to fifteen feet off into the woods. He was impressed with himself at just how far he'd let his imagination take over. Good thing there wasn't a cliff nearby. Still, he needed to be more careful. Just as he was turning to make his way back, a flicker of a light caught the corner of his eye, and he turned back to have a better look. There was something, something just beyond the next grove of trees that caught his attention.

Pushing some branches out of his way, he peeked beyond the immediate obstruction and saw what looked like a wall, or a corner. Whatever it was, it wasn't natural due to its straight lines and ninety-degree corners. Maneuvering around to a better angle, he confirmed that it was in fact the corner of some kind of building or structure, but what exactly, he wasn't sure. He began moving around to get a better picture.

As he rounded the front, he found himself staring at what looked like an old country cottage. The light he'd seen earlier had no obvious source—maybe the sun had caught the window at just the right angle, creating a fleeting reflection. Yet, as he took in his surroundings, something felt off. The house seemed almost artificially nestled within the grove, as if the trees had been planted on each corner, their branches nearly entwined with its walls. Had the house always been there? Hidden in plain sight just waiting to be noticed? Either way, neither he nor Annie had ever recalled seeing a house along this wooded path. Not once.

Yet, here it was, looking like it's been here a hundred years.

That was, until the lights flicked on.

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## Chapter 2 -- The Laughter

Thomas stumbled back, heart hammering. The house was impossibly old, yet the lights glowed warmly through the windows, golden and inviting.

From a distance, the two front windows and the light from the door made the house look almost like a face.

He took a step forward before catching himself.

*Wait a darn minute...*

*A house, deep in the woods, where there should be nothing but trees? How had he never seen it before? Who lived in a place like this? And I'm about to open the door and enter the mouth? This was like something out of a...fairy tale. Not one of those cute Disney-version ones, but the dark, medieval ones where the endings are rarely happy, and there was always a heavy price to be paid.*

His gaze darted around. The woods suddenly felt darker, closer. Unfamiliar. He swallowed hard, willing himself to turn away.

And then he heard it.

Laughter.

He knew that laugh.

His breath hitched. It was Annie's laugh, the bright, musical sound she had before chemo had stolen it all away.

His feet moved before his mind caught up. He reached for the handle, pushed open the door, and stepped inside.

And found himself standing in his childhood living room.

The fireplace flickered warmly. The orange-brown shag carpet sprawled underfoot. The cheap round coffee table sat in its usual place, ashtrays, and all. The very air smelled like the 1980s—cigarette smoke, vanilla air freshener, something deep-fried in an ancient pan.

For one glorious second, he just stood there, breathing it in.

Then, his eyes landed on her.

Annie.

She sat cross-legged in the corner, playing with her dolls. Smiling, laughing. Whole. Healthy.

A voice in the back of his mind screamed that this wasn't real, but he shoved it down. He had lost so much. If this was a dream, a glitch in the universe, then so be it.

"Annie?" His voice cracked.

She looked up, beaming. "Hey, Daddy!"

Tears blurred his vision. He dropped to his knees beside her.

"Does it hurt where you are?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"No," she said simply.

"Can you see us?"

Her little head tilted. "Of course."

She was even more polite in real life than in his memories.

“Hey, Daddy, you wanna play dolls with me?” she asked, holding up a Barbie.

He laughed wetly, wiping his eyes. “You know I do, sweetheart.”

And so, he picked up Ken and Barbie and played along, letting himself believe that this was somehow real.

For now.

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### **Chapter 3 -- Teatime**

Over the coming days and weeks, the warmth of the house would always wrap around Thomas like an old, familiar quilt, warm and safe. This time, Annie giggled as she positioned Barbie behind a tiny pink convertible, her small fingers adjusting the plastic figure with practiced ease.

“You have to make Ken say something,” she urged, looking up at him with bright, expectant eyes.

Thomas smiled, the old motions of play feeling distant yet not completely unnatural. “Uh, hey Barbie, you wanna go grab some ice cream?” he said in a deep, exaggerated voice.

Annie burst into laughter, clapping her hands. “That’s not how Ken talks!”

Thomas chuckled. “Oh yeah? How does Ken talk then?”

She pursed her lips, considering. “Like this—‘Oh Barbie, you’re the prettiest girl in the whole wide world!’” She made Ken bow dramatically, her voice full of the same sassiness he remembered before the sickness took hold.

Something in his chest ached, but he ignored it. Instead, he let himself sink into the moment, allowing the illusion—because that’s what this had to be, right?—to overtake him.

A soft clinking sound drew his attention, and for the first time since stepping inside, he realized they weren’t alone.

Across the room, a woman stood near a polished wooden dining table, setting down a porcelain teapot. She was beautiful—ageless, with auburn hair cascading over her shoulders, dressed in a long, flowing dress that shimmered like silk. Her blue eyes met his, filled with a warmth that somehow soothed his frayed nerves.

“You must be thirsty,” she said, gesturing to the table. “Please, sit.”

Thomas hesitated. Everything about this should have been unsettling—the house appearing out of nowhere, his daughter inexplicably alive—but the air in the room was thick with something comforting, something that made it easy to ignore the gnawing doubts at the back of his mind.

Annie scrambled to her feet. “Come on, Daddy! You love tea, remember?”

He didn’t, not particularly. But he found himself standing anyway, allowing Annie to pull him toward the table.

The woman smiled, pouring hot amber liquid into a delicate china cup. The scent of honey and chamomile drifted up to him, and for a moment, the tension in his shoulders eased.

“I don’t understand,” he admitted, glancing at Annie, then back at the woman. “How is this possible?”

The woman’s smile never wavered. “Does it matter?”

Thomas opened his mouth, but the words wouldn’t come. *Did it matter?* Annie was here. She was happy. He was happy. For the first time in a couple years, he wasn’t drowning in grief.

As if sensing his hesitation, the woman reached out, covering his hand with her own. Her skin was cool, smooth, almost too perfect. “You’ve been in so much pain,” she said softly. “But you don’t have to be. Not here.”

Annie leaned against him, hugging his arm. “Yeah, Daddy. We can just stay.”

Stay.

The idea settled into him, comfortable and warm.

Stay.

Just for a little while.

## **Chapter 4 – Slipping Through Time**

Every time he visited, the house in the woods, it always smelled like home—like wood smoke and the subtle scent of his mother’s lavender perfume. Annie laughed as she made her dolls dance across the carpet, her golden curls bouncing with every movement. For a moment, nothing else mattered.

“Daddy, you’re not making Ken talk anymore,” she chided, tapping his arm.

Thomas chuckled, shaking himself from his thoughts. “Oh, sorry, sweetheart.” He made Ken clear his throat dramatically. “Barbie, I do believe we are lost. Do you have the map?”

Annie giggled. “Daddy, they’re at the mall. They don’t need a map.”

He smiled, watching her play. It was so real. Every movement, every expression, exactly as he remembered. He didn't know how this was happening—didn't care to question it. Maybe grief had finally broken him, but if insanity meant seeing his daughter again, he welcomed it.

“Stay for dinner,” a voice suggested gently.

Thomas looked up. The woman stood in the doorway to the kitchen, wearing a soft blue dress, her auburn hair pulled back in a loose braid. She was beautiful in a quiet, unassuming way, with a presence that radiated calm.

“I—” He hesitated.

She smiled kindly, stepping closer. “You must be hungry. I’ve made all your favorites.”

The air smelled of roasted chicken and warm biscuits, and his stomach tightened with hunger. He hadn’t realized how empty he felt—not just in his heart, but his stomach as well. The ache in his chest lessened in her presence, as if the weight of his grief had been lifted, if only for a moment.

“One meal wouldn’t hurt,” he reasoned.

He sat at the kitchen table, the warmth of the room easing into his bones. Annie chatted excitedly as they ate, her voice filling the spaces in his heart that had long been hollow. The woman refilled his glass, her touch light against his shoulder.

When he finally rose to finally leave, she touched his hand. “Come back soon.”

The front door creaked as he stepped outside. The air was colder than before, the forest darker. Thomas rubbed his arms and took a deep breath, stepping back onto the path. But as he emerged from the trees, something felt... off.

He pulled his phone from his pocket, his stomach dropped.

Twelve hours had passed.

It felt like he’d only been inside for a couple.

This was going to be a problem going forward.

## **Chapter 5 -- The Smile**

On the next visit, the tea was the best he'd ever had—smooth, soothing, with a hint of honey that lingered on his tongue. Thomas took another sip, then another, the warmth spreading through his body like a gentle tide.

Annie was humming, swinging her legs under the table as she sipped from her own tiny cup. Her curls bounced with each motion, and for a moment, it was as if the last two years had never happened.

The woman—who still hadn't given her name—watched him with a serene expression. "You must be exhausted," she said, her voice as soft as the candlelight flickering around them. "Grief is such a heavy burden to carry alone."

Thomas swallowed. "I... I am tired." He hadn't realized how much until this moment.

"You don't have to be," she said. "Not anymore."

A breeze stirred through the room, though the windows were shut. The fire crackled warmly in the hearth, casting long, golden shadows.

Thomas set his cup down, rubbing his temple. "I don't understand. How is any of this real? I buried my daughter. I know I did."

Annie wrinkled her nose. "Daddy, that's silly. I'm right here." She reached for his hand, her fingers warm and small, just as he remembered. "And I missed you so much."

His heart clenched. God help him, he wanted this to be real. He wanted it so badly that the logic—the impossible, gaping holes in all of this—felt small in comparison to the desperate need clawing at his chest.

The woman tilted her head, her auburn waves cascading over one shoulder. "You should struggle with all of this, Thomas. Just accept it for what it is."

"What is it? That's what I don't understand. I... I shouldn't stay too long." He glanced toward the door, though the thought of stepping back into the cold, grief-stricken world outside made his stomach twist. "I have to—"

"Just for a little while." Her voice was so kind, so patient. "Annie's missed you terribly. And she's here, waiting. She always will be."

Annie's grip on his hand tightened.

Thomas hesitated.

And then he let himself believe.

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Time loses meaning in this house.

He must have visited a dozen times by now.

Days—were they days?—drifted past in a haze of warmth and laughter.

He and Annie played their old games, told their old stories. He read to her at night, just as he used to before the sickness took her away. And when she smiled at him, it was as if the last two years of agony had never existed.

The woman remained a quiet presence, never demanding, never overbearing. She would bring them food—warm, delicious meals that tasted like childhood and comfort. She would hum old lullabies by the fire, her voice rich and knowing.

It was perfect.

Too perfect.

One evening, as he sat on the carpet with Annie, building a castle out of wooden blocks, he felt something strange. A flicker of wrongness he couldn't quite put his finger on, hovering there just beneath the surface.

Annie was laughing, arranging the little wooden knights. But for the briefest second, something about her expression—something in the way her smile stretched just a little too wide—made his stomach twist.

He blinked.

She was normal again, chattering excitedly about the "dragon" that Ken and Barbie had to defeat.

Thomas rubbed his eyes. Maybe he was just tired. Maybe the insanity was finally taking over.

Still, as he settled into bed that night, something gnawed at him.

How long had he been visiting there?

He tried to count the days, but the memories blurred together, slipping through his fingers like sand.

Something wasn't right.

The thought was like a splinter, buried deep.

But before he could pull at it, sleep took him.

And in the darkness, the woman's voice echoed softly in his mind.



*"You should rest, Thomas. You've been so tired for so long."*

## **Chapter 6 – The Lure of the Past**

The house in the woods had become his secret refuge. The warmth, the laughter, the smell of home-cooked meals—it was a world where grief did not exist. The more time Thomas spent there, the less he wanted to leave.

At first, he had been careful. He still checked his phone when he left, still glanced at the messages piling up—friends reaching out, offering condolences, checking in. But each time he returned from the house, those messages felt more distant, like echoes from another life.

The first time he lost twelve hours had startled him. The second time, he lost twelve, was worth it. Then a full day. He ventured over the last six months, he'd easily lost another six.

But in the outside world, nothing seemed to matter anymore. Work, bills, friends—these things had once filled his mind, but now they felt like empty obligations. In the house, there was only the present, only Annie's voice, only the warmth of the fire.

And the woman.

She was always there, quietly tending to the house, offering soft reassurances. Her presence was calming, her voice soothing. Every time he hesitated at the door, thinking he should return to his life, she would touch his arm lightly and say, *"There's no rush, Thomas. You're safe here."*

And he was.

Each visit stretched longer.

At some point, he stopped checking the time altogether.

The outside world faded to an afterthought.

## **Chapter 7 – The Last Goodbye**

Thomas woke one morning to the scent of fresh bread baking. The warmth of it filled the air, thick and familiar, the way it had in his mother's kitchen when he was a boy. For a long moment, he lay still, his body sinking into the old couch, listening to the quiet hum of a world that no longer existed.

There were voices—soft, distant. A radio played from another room, crackling with the sound of a baseball game. He knew that voice. The old commentator, long gone now. It had to be a

Sunday afternoon, summer hanging thick in the air. Impossibly, Annie was in the backyard, chasing fireflies. He almost didn't want to move, didn't want to risk breaking the spell.

But he had to see.

Thomas sat up, rubbing his hands over his face. The house was as it had always been in his dreams—cozy, golden in the late afternoon light. He could hear someone moving in the kitchen, and when he stepped inside, the woman with auburn hair had somehow become his mother (God rest her soul), standing there, rolling dough with steady hands. She looked just as she had when he was a boy, wearing that faded blue apron, humming softly.

"You're up," she said, smiling without looking at him. "Thought you'd sleep the day away."

He swallowed hard. "I—"

His voice cracked, and she turned then, brushing a hand against his cheek the way she used to when he was young.

"You always did love it here," she said. "This house. The way things used to be."

He glanced out the window. It was the old backyard, the one he'd lost long ago, the one that had been paved over and built upon. Annie ran across the grass, laughing, her hair wild and untamed in the wind.

The moment stretched, fragile as glass.

His mother wiped her hands on her apron and looked at him, really looked at him. "But this isn't where you belong, Tommy."

The words hit him like a fist to the chest. He turned away from her, gripping the edge of the counter. "I don't want to go back."

She nodded as if she understood. "I know. It's easier to stay. Easier to pretend the world stopped when they left."

He closed his eyes. "Maybe it should have."

A chair scraped against the floor. She sat down, folding her hands in her lap. "But it didn't."

Thomas exhaled slowly, his eyes drifting back to the window. Annie had stopped running. She stood at the edge of the yard now, watching him. And then, with a small smile, she raised her hand and waved.

His breath caught.

She was saying goodbye.

And just like that, he knew.

This place—this perfect, frozen world—it wasn't real. It was a memory, a house made of longing, of days that could never come back. He could stay, and the house would let him. It would hold him in its warm, golden grasp forever like a modern-day *Rip Van Winkle*. It was all a lovely dream.

But living isn't done in dreams, or in memories.

We were made for the present, for the real.

And we move on.

The living always moves on.

Thomas blinked, and the kitchen was gone. He was standing in the cabin, the real one, the one he had buried himself in after Annie's funeral. The fire had gone out. The air was cold.

He turned, looking around. The walls, the furniture—it was all gone. A façade. Just a shell of rotting wood and dust housing old memories.

The wind howled outside, rattling the windows.

For the first time in a long while, Thomas felt something stir in his chest. He wasn't sure if it was grief or acceptance or something in between. But it felt like movement.

And that was enough.

Memory might be a nice place to visit, but a terrible place to live.

He tugged at his collar and stepped back out into the real world.