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The Stolen Echoes

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Introduction

The sea mist always lingered in Evernight, draping the narrow streets and weather-beaten rooftops with a gauzy, otherworldly veil. As Sofía Merrick stepped from the faded blue bus, she felt the weight of the town's silence settle over her shoulders—a silence thicker than fog, heavy with expectation and memories left to rot along the shoreline. She hadn't seen the town in more than a decade, but its somber beauty and briny air called forth a flood of bittersweet recollections. The old lighthouse still stood at the far edge of the cliffs, steady as a sentry. Somewhere beyond the harbor, the waves whispered secrets no one dared repeat.

Sofía's return was not a triumphant homecoming. Her mother's illness had summoned her like a reluctant ghost, pulling her back into the orbit of a family she had tried, for years, to understand from a safe distance. The old Merrick house, with its sagging porch and wild, overgrown garden, appeared to recognize her immediately—a silent witness to childhood joy, adolescent rebellion, and the sorrowful rifts that still separated mother from daughter. Some nights here had felt endless. Some memories, she feared, would never stop echoing.

On her first night back, as dusk melted into a humid, restless dark, Sofía wandered the creaking hallways of her childhood home. Strange, almost imperceptible sounds drifted on the salty wind—barely-there whispers, an urgent hush that came alive between the floorboards and in the spaces between words exchanged at the dinner table. Perhaps exhaustion played tricks on her mind; perhaps the past was simply eager to speak. Evernight, after all, had always been a town where stories refused to stay buried.

It didn't take long for Sofía to sense that something was deeply amiss beyond her family's troubles. Townsfolk avoided her gaze in the market and hurried past her on the cobbled streets. She became aware of glances exchanged in her wake, and conversations that faltered into uncomfortable silence when she approached. The feeling of being watched shadowed her movements, day and night. Long-standing friendships had apparently withered in her absence, yet Sofía could not escape the sense that everyone still remembered her—and remembered something else, too, something they couldn't or wouldn't name.

Driven by the urge to protect her mother—and herself—from the gnawing fear that crept through the walls, Sofía resolved to find answers. She would learn what haunted these streets and these people, and where her own place was among the town's untold tales. But as new mysteries surfaced and old wounds re-opened, it became clear that the hollowness at Evernight's heart might swallow her, too, if she wasn't

careful. In the shadow of the headland, the echoes were already stirring, restless and hungry for the truth.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming in the Mist

The old General Store, its paint peeled by years of salt air and neglect, still smelled faintly of briny pickles and stale coffee. Sofía pushed open the creaking door, the bell above her head jangling a familiar, yet unwelcome, announcement of her presence. Mrs. Gable, a woman whose face had always reminded Sofía of a roadmap to a particularly arduous journey, looked up from behind the counter, her eyes, sharp as a gull's, narrowing slightly.

"Sofía Merrick," Mrs. Gable stated, as if confirming a long-held suspicion, rather than greeting an old acquaintance. "Didn't think we'd see you back here, not after all this time." Her tone held no warmth, only a thinly veiled accusation that Sofía had abandoned Evernight, and perhaps, by extension, them all.

Sofía offered a tight smile. "My mother needs me, Mrs. Gable. You know how she is." This was a polite understatement. Her mother, Eleanor, had always been a woman of fragile temperament, prone to dramatic pronouncements and prolonged silences, a trait that had only intensified with age and illness.

Mrs. Gable merely grunted, turning her attention back to stacking cans of preserved peaches. The silence that followed was thick with unspoken judgments, a common currency in Evernight. Sofía remembered these silences well, the way they could stretch and warp, filling every corner of a room until you felt suffocated by what wasn't being said.

She picked up a loaf of sourdough bread, still warm from the oven, and a carton of milk. As she approached the counter, a faint whisper seemed to drift from the shadows near the back of the store, too indistinct to make out words, but undeniably there. She paused, her hand hovering over the counter, trying to pinpoint its origin.

"Something wrong, dear?" Mrs. Gable's voice cut through the air, snapping Sofía back to the present. The whisper, if it had ever truly existed, was gone.

"No, no. Just... a little tired from the journey." Sofía paid, her mind replaying the fleeting sound. It had been like a breath, a sigh of wind through a loose pane of glass, yet it had felt more deliberate, almost conversational.

Leaving the store, the mist had deepened, swirling around her ankles like restless spirits. The cobblestone street, slick with dampness, reflected the muted glow of the streetlights. Every house seemed to watch her, their darkened windows like vacant eyes. Evernight had always felt alive, but now it felt... inhabited.

She made her way towards the Merrick house, the sourdough warm against her arm. The familiar scent of damp earth and salt grew stronger with each step. The house itself, a grand Victorian that had seen better centuries, loomed at the end of a winding lane. Its gables clawed at the sky, and the overgrown ivy clung to its walls like a desperate embrace.

Eleanor was in the sitting room, wrapped in a crocheted shawl, staring out at the churning grey sea. The room was dim, even though it was only early afternoon, the heavy velvet curtains drawn halfway, as if to ward off unwelcome light. A half-eaten bowl of gruel sat on a small side table, a testament to her mother's dwindling appetite.

"Sofía," Eleanor murmured, her voice thin and reedy, without turning. "You're back." It wasn't a question, but a weary statement of fact.

"Yes, Mama. I brought bread." Sofía placed her purchases on the kitchen counter, then returned to the sitting room, sitting on the edge of a worn armchair. The silence between them was not a comfortable one, but a familiar chasm that had always existed, even when Sofía was a child.

Eleanor finally turned, her eyes, once vibrant and full of fire, now held a haunted, faraway look. "They're louder now, you know."

Sofía frowned. "Who is, Mama?"

"The whispers. They're always here, in the walls, in the wind. They speak of things... things best left undisturbed." Eleanor shuddered, pulling the shawl tighter around her frail shoulders.

Sofía had always dismissed her mother's pronouncements as the ramblings of a troubled mind, a side effect of her delicate constitution. But after the fleeting whisper in the General Store, a prickle of unease snaked its way up her spine. "What do they say, Mama?" she asked, trying to keep her voice light, dismissive.

Eleanor fixed her with an intense gaze, her eyes surprisingly clear for a moment. "They say... beware the echoes, Sofía. They say the past is not past at all, merely sleeping."

A shiver ran down Sofía's back. She pushed it away, attributing it to the chill of the old house. "You're just tired, Mama. You should eat something." She went to the kitchen and made a fresh pot of tea, the clatter of the ceramic cups sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet house.

Later that evening, after Eleanor had drifted off to a fitful sleep, Sofía walked through the house, trying to find a sense of belonging that had long eluded her. Her childhood room was largely unchanged, a museum of a past self she barely recognized. The faded wallpaper with its tiny blue birds, the dusty collection of seashells on the windowsill, the worn copy of *Wuthering Heights* on her bedside table—all were relics of a girl who had longed to escape Evernight.

She traced the outline of a crack in the plaster above her bed. It looked like a miniature lightning bolt, a permanent scar on the wall. As she stood there, a faint, almost imperceptible sound reached her ears. It was a rhythmic tapping, faint but persistent, coming from the floorboards directly beneath her feet.

She knelt, pressing her ear to the aged wood. The tapping grew slightly clearer, almost like Morse code, though she couldn't decipher any pattern. It was not the sound of mice, nor the creaking of an old house settling. This was deliberate, methodical.

Sofía pulled back, a knot forming in her stomach. Had her mother's "whispers" manifested as tapping? Was the illness affecting her own perception? Or was there something else in this house, something beneath the floorboards, trying to communicate?

She spent the next hour trying to locate the source of the sound, moving furniture, checking the attic above, and the cellar below, but found nothing. The tapping, for its part, ceased as mysteriously as it had begun, leaving her with a sense of unease that lingered long after she had tucked herself into her old bed.

The next morning, the mist had lifted, replaced by a sullen grey sky that promised rain. Sofía decided to take a walk along the bluffs, a path she had frequented as a child, hoping the fresh air would clear her head. The familiar scent of wild roses and sea salt filled her lungs, a nostalgic comfort amidst the unsettling strangeness of her return.

As she walked, she noticed small changes in the town—new businesses, old ones shuttered, fresh coats of paint on some houses, while others crumbled further into disrepair. But the core of Evernight remained the same: a town clinging to the edge of the world, its people as weathered and resilient as the rocks below the cliffs.

She passed the old fishing cooperative, its docks mostly empty now, a stark contrast to the bustling activity she remembered. A lone figure sat on the edge of the pier, his back to her, casting a line into the churning waves. She recognized him instantly, even from a distance. Elias Thorne.

Elias had been her closest friend in Evernight, a quiet, contemplative boy with eyes

the color of the sea on a stormy day. They had spent countless hours exploring the coves, building forts in the woods, and sharing secrets under the vast, star-strewn sky. Their friendship had been a beacon in her often-lonely childhood.

She hesitated, wondering if he would even remember her, or if the chasm of ten years had swallowed their connection whole. Taking a deep breath, she walked onto the pier, her footsteps echoing on the damp wood.

"Elias?" she ventured, her voice a little uncertain.

He turned slowly, his face tanned and etched with the beginnings of fine lines around his eyes, but still undeniably Elias. A faint smile touched his lips, a genuine warmth that was a balm after Mrs. Gable's frosty reception.

"Sofía Merrick," he said, his voice a low rumble, richer than she remembered. "I heard you were back. Though I admit, I doubted it until now." He reeled in his line, an empty hook glinting in the dull light. "Still chasing ghosts, are we?"

The unexpected question took her aback. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged, casting his line out again with a practiced flick of his wrist. "You always did have a knack for finding things that weren't quite right. That old house of yours... it's always had a story to tell."

"My mother mentioned whispers," Sofía admitted, lowering her voice. "She says they're louder now."

Elias paused, his gaze fixed on the horizon, where the sea and sky bled into an indistinguishable grey. "Eleanor always was sensitive to the currents, wasn't she? Some say the sea carries more than just tides. It carries echoes."

"Echoes of what?"

He finally turned to face her fully, his stormy eyes holding a depth she hadn't noticed before. "Of the past, Sofía. Evernight has a long memory. And some things... some things refuse to stay buried, no matter how hard people try."

His words, delivered with a quiet sincerity, resonated deeply within her. It wasn't just her mother's illness or her own imagination. There was a pervasive undercurrent of unease in Evernight, a shared knowledge that went unspoken, yet permeated every interaction.

"Have you... heard anything?" Sofía asked, a little reluctantly. She felt foolish asking, but his calm demeanor invited honesty.

Elias looked away, a shadow passing over his face. "The wind here... it tells tales. Sometimes, late at night, when the fog rolls in thick from the ocean, you can almost hear them." He didn't elaborate, but the implication was clear. He had heard them too.

He stood, dusting off his worn jeans. "It's good to see you, Sofía. I truly mean that." He offered a small, knowing smile. "But be careful. Evernight has a way of drawing you in, then not letting go."

As he walked away, his figure disappearing into the mist that had begun to creep back in from the sea, Sofía was left with a chilling realization. Her return to Evernight was not just about caring for her ailing mother. It was about something far more profound, a collision with a past that was not content to remain silent. The echoes were indeed stirring, and she, it seemed, was destined to hear their call.

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