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The Echoes Down the Hill

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Introduction

By the time the ocean fog rises to meet Hollow Ridge, the road into town has already taught me the old lessons: slow down on the bends, watch for deer where the pines lean over the shoulder, and don't mistake the familiar for the safe. The houses get closer together as the hill lifts, clapboard fronts and salt-bleached shingles and porches held up by paint and habit. I almost miss the turn—my hands think in city grids now, not in curves—and the tires hiss over wet leaves as I ease onto the street that has kept my family's name like a thumbprint. Bennett. It's still on the mailbox, tilted, the paint chipped around the edges where Jonah used to scratch his initials with a nail. The fog rolls low, and the sound of the sea is the sound of breath taken and held.

The call came two mornings ago, just before dawn when New York is at its most honest: trash trucks grip their routes, a barista scrubs a counter, and my building sighs from the heat pipes. Sheriff Ames said Jonah's name like he was shepherding it across thin ice. He said words like "toxicology," "fentanyl," and "no foul play suspected." He said it with the measured politeness that dries blood into bureaucracy. I pressed my phone against the cool kitchen window and watched the city's reflections fracturing, and I thought about how Jonah used to roll his eyes at the way I asked questions. Not now, he'd say. Not everything is a story, Maya. But he also used to leave me voicemails full of nothing: an open door, wind, the sound of the harbor bell. He liked that I listened.

"Next of kin," Ames added, which is another way of saying alone. He'd been the one to give me a ride to school when Mom forgot, the one who clipped newspaper articles when I won something small and ordinary, the one who spoke at our mother's funeral in that way he has—weathered, tidy, as if pain, too, belongs on a shelf. His voice on the phone tried to be a shelf. It didn't hold.

Grief is a metal taste when you turn onto the street where you learned to ride a bike. It is the way fences lean the same way, and how the Carvers' hydrangeas bloom blue no matter what the soil says. It's the mailbox tilted, the front steps thinner from years of feet, and the porch swing we never fixed. It is an unlocked door in a town that locks everything else. I stand in the hallway and inhale what has been waiting: lemon oil, old wool, the faint ghost of our mother's cinnamon, and underneath, deep in the boards, the cold mineral smell of the hill itself. It's the same, and in the sameness something chafes—the way a too-familiar voice can make you set your jaw.

They say an overdose looks like sleep if you want it to. They say your heart forgets and then remembers and then forgets for good. They say a lot of things—the obituary

language, the handling of fragile reputations. But my brother did not like pills. He didn't like the way they dulled his edges. He called me last week to rag on an article I'd written about a city councilwoman's expense account and to tell me a joke about a gull stealing a lobster roll out of a tourist's hand in front of the bait shop. He sent a photo of the gull, mid-crime, a blur of wings and hunger. The timestamp is wrong for the official story. Small things like that are what I anchor to: a time stamp, a voicemail that ends too abruptly, a bruise that's the wrong shape. You learn, as an investigative journalist, that it's the misfit details that pry up the floorboards.

I put my bag down by the coat tree and touch the old photographs on the wall without taking them in: our father in his Coast Guard uniform, Mom on the beach in a scarf, Jonah with a crooked grin and a skateboard too small for him. In the kitchen, the answering machine blinks a patient red. Three new messages, then two, then one as I press and press again to listen, as if repetition could build a boat. A neighbor expressing sympathy in that careful coastal cadence. Lila's voice, quick and bright like always, then lowered at the end: Call me, okay? And then silence, and then a click that feels like a misplaced period. If there was a message from Jonah, it isn't here.

It is nearly five by the time I climb the hill again just to look at the house that doesn't belong to us, that never did, the one everyone still calls by its old name: Hollow Ridge. In daylight it looks like it always has in my head—set back from the road, weathered shingles turning the color of rain, four windows across the front like shut eyes. The rumor is that it was a doctor's house a century ago, when seaside air was prescribed for all manner of sorrows. People brought their pain up this hill, and they left with a story about a cure. We brought ours once, too, or maybe it brought us. I can feel it like an echo against bone. As the fog lifts, the high grass along the fenceline shivers, and I hear, for a moment, something that could be laughter and could be a gull and could be memory hitting the wall we built to hold it back.

When we were teenagers, the house was a dare and a destination. There was a night that everyone knows and no one describes. We were there, and something tilted and never righted. Ask five people and you'd get five versions, each with the edges sanded down in different places. Ask me, and I can give you a few frames: the quick flare of a match cupped in a palm, the smell of spilled beer and damp pine, someone's jacket catching at a nail and tearing, a pendant turning rusty on a chain that snapped, the way a scream can flatten air. The rest is fog. It should scare me that my mind does that—skips, stutters, preserves and erases. It does, but not as much as what my gut insists: that whatever happened on that hill is braided into Jonah's last day. That the town's politeness isn't just about kindness. It's cover.

I park at the overlook and watch the water for a while. Boats move slow as if learning how to be quiet. From here, the town looks arranged rather than lived in. The mayor's house is just visible, its windows generous, its lawn a slope too green to be accidental. Mayor Evelyn Carver was a year older than me in school, already rehearsing her

angles even then. Her name is a garnish on every fundraiser and every scholarship and every ribbon at the county fair. She smiles with all her teeth and knows how to look at you in sections—eyes, hands, shoes—before she smiles again. It's possible that her concern for this town is pure. It's possible that no one is. I've spent years writing about the soft edges where good decisions go to be misunderstood. I know how power can hide behind good manners, and how it needs the town's complicity to stay clean.

I don't have Jonah's official files yet. I have the simple copy of the death certificate, that fat black line under Cause that says Acute intoxication, and time of death approximated, and a checkbox that might as well be a shrug. The coroner's office told me about sealed supplementary notes and ongoing investigations and the importance of patience in grief. They told me what the law says they had to. The sheriff's office told me I didn't need to come by until after the service. They used every word that says wait. I am not good at waiting. I am good at noticing who wants me to.

I walk down to the water as the bell at the harbor tolls, one, two, three, low and full. My breath makes ghosts in the air. Someone has built a cairn of smooth stones at the edge of the path, a little tower of balance and intention. I think of Jonah's hands, always scuffed, always moving—fixing a chain, flicking a lighter, thumbing through vinyl at the thrift store, holding up a Polaroid to the kitchen light like it could give more if you asked politely. He'd tape things to the fridge the way some people pray. A postcard of a lighthouse, a grocery list in our mother's handwriting that we never threw away, the map of a trail he said he'd take me on and then didn't. Things stay where you pin them until they don't. He knew that. He was smart. He could be stupid in that beautiful way the kind are, sure, but he wasn't careless with himself. Not like that.

On the walk back, I pass the bar where Lila keeps her afternoons and her grudges. The neon sign hums, and the window is filmed with condensation that turns the inside into a soft aquarium glow. She sees me through the glass and lifts a hand, two fingers against the pane in a gesture that is both hello and I'm sorry. Lila never pretends. She knows what this town knows and also what it refuses to say out loud. She will be the one who gives me names, and then she will be the one who holds me accountable for what I do with them. That's the thing about coming home: the people who kept your secrets remember not just the secret but also the version of you who needed one.

In the mirror above the mantel at the house, my face looks like someone I almost recognize. Thirty-four looks more like my mother than I thought it would. I open drawers and find objects that are anchors whether I want them to be or not: a cassette player with a cheap plastic earbud, a matchbook from a closed diner, a small box of photographs with the edges curled. One photo is of the hill in winter; you can see the ridge line and the skeleton of a house thinner without leaves to wrap it. There is a smudge in the corner like a finger dragged through ash. I don't remember taking it. Maybe I didn't. Maya, you keep everything, Jonah used to say when he wanted me to

admit that I collect evidence even when I tell myself I don't. He meant receipts, notes, scraps, yes, but he also meant feelings, glances, omissions. You keep and you catalog. And then you decide what story the pieces tell.

This is the story I have today: a town that looks gentler than it is, a brother who died from something he was afraid of, a sheriff who knows more than he selects to say, a mayor whose good deeds stack high enough to cast a shadow, a house on a hill that holds the sound of our names and throws them back a little changed. There is also the matter of a file that should exist and for now does not, and a small piece of evidence I expected to find and didn't—the thing I can't even quite name yet, just a shape inside a memory, like the outline left on carpet when a chair is moved. Absence can be a kind of proof.

I am tired. I am measured, or I am trying to be. I have been other things in other cities—dogged, offensive, relentless; I've been called worse by people who deserved worse—but here my relentlessness feels like a borrowed coat. It doesn't fit as easily. The town is already closing around me, the way fog can feel like privacy until you see how it makes you easy to lose. I tell myself I will go to the funeral, I will hug who needs hugging, I will nod at the appropriate recollections and count the ways people soften their verbs. I will wait, just long enough to arrange the facts into a shape that yields more facts. Then I will push.

On the porch, I listen. Under the wind and the chime of the neighbors' silver bells, there is the low frequency of the hill itself—settling, maybe, or remembering. Echoes don't only travel away; sometimes they roll back down toward you, gather what you've thrown and return it, slightly altered by the incline and the air. I used to think that meant the past is patient. Now I wonder if it's just stubborn. Either way, it is coming. If the town is protecting itself, it is also protecting me from something I have not yet let myself name. I am here to decide if that protection is a kindness or a crime.

Tomorrow, I will walk into the church where I learned to fold my hands the way adults liked to see and I will sit in the front row and I will look at my brother's face in a frame. I will watch who looks where and who doesn't. I will ask for the file I have been told I cannot see. I will unclench my jaw and I will let people touch my arm and say the things grief teaches them. After, I will climb the hill again. I will stand at the edge of the Hollow Ridge yard where the grass remembers more than I do. And I will listen for the next echo, the one with my name in it, the one I'm afraid I already know.

CHAPTER ONE: Return

The church smelled like damp wool and the ghosts of lilies that had given up days ago. I stood in the vestibule under a portrait of a serene, silver-haired man I didn't recognize—some former pastor with a benevolent smile that looked painted on—and felt the town press in around me. Every squeak of a shoe on the linoleum was a headline I didn't want to write. Someone whispered my name like it was fragile, and a hand landed between my shoulder blades with the gentle weight of a bird. The hand belonged to Mayor Evelyn Carver, her fingers cool and manicured, her smile stretched wide enough to show the evenness of her teeth. "I'm so sorry, Maya," she said, and the words were practiced, the same cadence she used to dedicate benches and cut ribbons. She looked past me toward the door, where more people were arriving with that careful, small-town gravity.

In the second row, Lila Rowan had saved me a seat. She caught my eye and tilted her head in a way that said, sit, breathe, later. Lila had been bartending at The Salty Pig for a decade, which meant she'd heard every secret told over a whiskey and a lie. Her hair was still an unnatural shade of red that made her look both younger and more dangerous, and she wore the expression of someone who had decided not to cry in front of an audience. When I slid into the pew beside her, she grabbed my hand and squeezed hard. "He was sober," she whispered without looking at me. "For weeks. He was proud of it." Her thumb traced a circle on my knuckles. "Don't let them write a different ending." I nodded, because the words felt too heavy in my throat, and because I wasn't sure which ending they were already writing.

Sheriff Ames stood in the back, arms folded, the starch in his uniform holding him straight. He watched everyone like he was taking attendance, nodding at a greeting here and there but never quite letting his eyes rest. When he saw me looking, he dipped his chin in that polite, measured way he had. He didn't come to sit up front with family. He kept his post by the door, as if guarding it from the past. I had spoken to him for nine minutes the day before. He'd said the words toxicology and fentanyl and accidental. He'd said the case was straightforward, the evidence consistent, the decision final. He'd said he was sorry. He'd said it like he meant it, and also like he was closing a door gently but firmly.

There was no casket. The funeral director had explained, in a voice designed to soothe, that cremation was the family's wish. He'd used phrases like dignity and peace. On a small table near the altar sat an urn that looked too modern to hold anything of Jonah, and next to it a blown-up photograph of him laughing, taken on a day when the sun was bright enough to bleach the color from the sky. Jonah's hair had been a wild mess, as always, and he was mid-sentence, hands doing the talking even

then. I had taken that photo. I remembered the cheap disposable camera, the click-thunk of the shutter, the way he leaned in to tease me about the frame and then disappeared for an hour afterward. The urn felt wrong. The photograph felt like a taunt.

The pastor began with a scripture about peace that passed like weather over the heads of the people who had come to see us grieve. I tried to let the words land, but my mind was stubbornly concrete. I counted the flowers. Three arrangements of lilies, two of gladiolus, one of white roses with baby's breath that looked like a bad afterthought. The Carvers sent the roses. I knew the card would read From all of us at Carver Realty and Community Fund. It was Evelyn's signature touch—always the gift and the gesture that put her name in the room. She was in the third pew, straight-backed, hands folded in her lap, and when she looked at the photograph of Jonah her mouth tightened into something that could be grief or calculation. It was hard to tell the difference with her. She had always been good at making both look the same.

I went up to speak because it was expected, because I was next of kin, because someone had written down the word eulogy next to my name in the program. The microphone popped when I tapped it, and the squeal ran through the room like a bad decision. I took a breath and looked out at the faces I knew and faces I thought I knew. I said Jonah was generous. I said he was funny and stubborn and allergic to anything that made life too easy. I said he was loved. I said he would be missed. All of it was true and none of it was enough. As I spoke, I watched who looked at me and who looked at their shoes. I watched Sheriff Ames tilt his head toward the door and then look back down at his boots. I watched Evelyn Carver's jaw work in the rhythm of polite empathy. I watched Lila stare at the urn as if she could make it take back what it held.

After the service, the line to hug me felt like a receiving line at a campaign event. People pressed casseroles into my arms and told me the casserole dishes were disposable so I wouldn't need to return them. People said he's in a better place. People said call me if you need anything. People said I knew him when. I nodded and I smiled and I kept my hands from clenching. Sheriff Ames hung back until the crowd thinned, then approached with that careful distance he kept. "Maya," he said. "I know this is hard." He cleared his throat. "I also know you. You're going to want to pick at this. I understand. But the official findings are solid." He paused. "Don't go dragging things up that won't help you or him." It wasn't a threat. It was advice from a man who had watched me grow up and believed he knew what I needed to hear. I told him I appreciated the concern. I did. And I did not tell him that dragging things up was the only way I knew how to breathe.

Later, at the house, the kitchen counter became a temporary altar to other people's kindness. A tuna casserole that still steamed under its foil, a salad in a plastic bowl with a lid that didn't fit, a pan of brownies with their corners already nibbled by

someone who believed sugar helps grief along. The house smelled like lemon oil and casserole and the faint, damp smell of a place that had been left alone too long. I opened the refrigerator and found it mostly empty except for a jar of olives, a half carton of milk with a date that had passed, and something in a Tupperware that had decided to become its own ecosystem. Jonah hadn't been living here, not really, but he had been crashing here. The signs were everywhere: a hoodie slung over the chair, a pair of work boots by the door, a stack of mail on the kitchen table with his name on it. I flipped through it. Bills, mostly. Nothing that felt like a clue.

The answering machine blinked its patient red. I pressed play and leaned against the counter as the tape whirred. A neighbor first, with the soft, practiced words of someone who doesn't know what else to say. Lila's voice next, quick and bright and then lowered at the end: Call me, okay? There was a click and then silence and then another click. I hit rewind and played it again, listening to Lila's cadence, the slight catch on the last syllable. Then the machine beeped and a new message played. It was Jonah. His voice surprised me, real and sudden, the kind of surprise that turns your stomach over. "Hey, it's me," he said. There was a pause, the sound of a car passing and a dog barking in the distance. "I, uh. I'm coming by later. There's something—" Another pause. The recording cut off abruptly. No goodbye. Just the beep. I pressed play again, trying to catch the inflection, the stress on the word something. The message was short and wrong. It ended too soon.

I went through the mail more carefully. The bills were in a neat stack, clipped with a binder clip. Beneath them was a folded piece of paper that looked like it had been torn from a notebook. Jonah's handwriting, cramped and slanted. A list of names, some with numbers next to them—dates? amounts?—and three words at the bottom: Hollow Ridge night. My heart did something complicated. Hollow Ridge. We never called it that anymore. Not out loud. Not in years. It was a house we used to dare each other to go near, a place where something had happened, or almost happened, or maybe we just told ourselves it had. Jonah hadn't written anything else, just those three words and a line drawn under them like he meant to return to it and never got the chance. I folded the paper and put it in my pocket. The house felt too quiet. The silence pressed against my ears, and then the phone rang, shrill and sudden enough to make me flinch.

"Maya?" It was Lila. She sounded out of breath. "Did you—did you get my message?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I tried to catch you after, but Ames was talking to you and I didn't want to—" She stopped. I heard a glass clink in the background, the low hum of bar chatter. "Look, I need to tell you something, but not over the phone. Can you come to the bar? Or I can come there." Her voice dropped. "Jonah was in last week. He was... agitated. He said he was going to talk to someone. He said it was about something that happened at Hollow Ridge. He said it was about her." The word hung there. Her. I didn't ask who. Lila wouldn't have said it anyway. She was careful like that. "Maya, he was sober. Completely. I know the signs. Whatever they're saying,

this wasn't that."

I grabbed my keys. The house felt like it was watching me leave. I locked the door and then unlocked it again, the way people do when they can't decide if leaving is right. Down the hill, the fog had rolled in thick, turning the streetlamps into weak halos. The road curved the way it always had. I drove past the Carvers' house, the windows glowing warm, the lawn manicured even in dusk. I thought of Evelyn's hand between my shoulder blades, the weight of it. I thought of Jonah's voice on the machine, the abrupt cut. I thought of the names on the paper and the three words at the bottom. Hollow Ridge night.

The Salty Pig was busy for a Tuesday. The door stuck when I pushed it, and the smell hit me like a small memory: beer, salt, the lemon cleaner Lila used on the bar every hour. She was already there, wiping down the wood with a rag that had seen better decades. She didn't ask if I wanted a drink. She poured a whiskey and slid it across. "On the house," she said. Then, softer: "You look like him when you're thinking that hard." I took the glass but didn't drink. "Tell me about last week," I said. She looked over my shoulder, at the regulars, the old fishermen with hands like rope, the younger crowd who came for the pool table and the cheap draft. Then she leaned in.

"He came in Wednesday," she said. "Sat right there." She pointed to the end stool, the one with the cracked seat. "He didn't order anything at first. Just watched the door like he was waiting. Then he asked for water. I asked how he was doing. He said better, like he meant it. Then he said, 'I think I remember wrong, Li. I think I've been remembering wrong.'" Lila wiped the bar again, hard. "I asked him what he meant, but he shook his head. He said, 'There's a night you don't talk about because you think it's your fault, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was someone else's.' He said he was going to talk to someone who'd been there. He didn't say who. He left a twenty and a piece of paper. When I picked it up, it was blank. But I think he meant to write something and didn't."

I pulled the folded paper from my pocket and slid it across. "Like this?" Lila's eyes widened. She touched it but didn't unfold it. "Hollow Ridge night," she read softly. "Shit." She looked up at me. "Maya, if he was digging that up—" She stopped. The front door swung open and a gust of cold air pushed in. Sheriff Ames stepped inside, shaking off his jacket. He saw us, nodded, and moved toward the other end of the bar. He didn't approach. He didn't need to. His presence was enough. Lila turned her back and started washing glasses with a little too much vigor. "You should be careful," she said under her breath. "People here don't like that kind of digging. They like their stories tidy."

On the drive home, I took the long way around, past the old road that winds up toward Hollow Ridge. I didn't go all the way. I stopped at the overlook where the town's lights blurred in the fog and the water made its own light. The wind carried the harbor bell,

low and irregular. I thought about the call from Sheriff Ames, how he'd used the word next of kin like he was closing a door. I thought about the message from Jonah that ended mid-sentence. I thought about the bruises on his arm in the funeral home, shapeless and mottled, the kind that come from falling but not the kind you'd expect from an overdose where you just... stop. I thought about Lila's voice saying he was sober.

When I finally got back to the house, the answering machine was blinking again. One new message. I pressed play. Silence at first, the kind that hums, the kind that makes your ear strain for something. Then a voice, low and unfamiliar. "Stop digging," it said. The words were flat, without inflection, like a recording. "You don't want to find what you're looking for." The message ended. There was no beep. Just the sound of the machine resetting itself. I stood in the kitchen with my hand on the counter and my heart beating in my ears. Outside, the fog pressed against the windows. Inside, the house held its breath. I had come home for a funeral, to bury my brother and the stories we didn't tell. I was staying until I knew why his last message cut off mid-word, and why someone didn't want me to press rewind.

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