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The Echo Manuscript

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Yellow Door
- **Chapter 2** The Photograph That Shouldn't Exist
- **Chapter 3** The Warehouse by the Tracks
- **Chapter 4** The Detective's Warning
- **Chapter 5** Ink Under the Door
- **Chapter 6** Blackout Year
- **Chapter 7** That Winter
- **Chapter 8** Evelyn March, in Profile
- **Chapter 9** The Taste of River Water
- **Chapter 10** Do Not Open
- **Chapter 11** A New Voice in the Echo
- **Chapter 12** A Voice I Don't Remember
- **Chapter 13** The Fund
- **Chapter 14** The Novelist Vanishes
- **Chapter 15** The Mayor's Smile
- **Chapter 16** Accusation
- **Chapter 17** Almost Impact
- **Chapter 18** Mapping the Echo
- **Chapter 19** A Face I Trusted
- **Chapter 20** Ten Minutes Gone
- **Chapter 21** The Public Reading
- **Chapter 22** Written in Her Hand
- **Chapter 23** The Hand Behind the Curtain
- **Chapter 24** The Riverside Choice
- **Chapter 25** Annotations and Aftermath

Introduction

On mornings when the city remembered how to be quiet, Nora Hale woke to the bell and the low animal breath of a freight train shouldering past the river. The bell came from the old cathedral two blocks over, peeled and imperfect, a note that dragged a fraction too long as if it could not bear to stop. The train came whenever it pleased. Together they marked time for her in a way her memory no longer could. She lay in the dimness for a moment, reading the room the way an investigator reads a scene: the glass of water on the nightstand crowned with dust, the post-it on the lamp that read, in thick black marker, THURSDAY — CALL IKE, the book she didn't remember starting with three pages delicately dog-eared. The scar at her hairline pulsed gently, a weather report only her skull could hear.

Five years had been carved cleanly out of her life. Or that was how the neurologist put it, as if a surgeon had come in with a scalpel and lifted a slice of something diseased. It hadn't felt clean. It had felt like waking on a different shore with sand in her teeth and the outlines of a city that might or might not be the place she'd grown up. She kept lists. She kept backups of her lists. She lodged her passwords in a cloud service and in a small brass key hidden in the freezer behind a bag of peas labeled PASTA NIGHT. She had learned to pretend that memory was an optional convenience, a luxury she could do without if she moved slowly and ignored the moments when a smell or a color lifted a curtain somewhere far back and showed her a handful of frames from a film she knew she had starred in and could not place.

She made coffee and stood at the window. The street below was wet from a dawn rain, the kind that passed like a rumor. The weather had that sullen, off-season feeling the city did so well: summer threatening and then taking it back. A municipal truck hissed past, pausing to feed a parking meter that had swallowed three neighborhoods in fines. Across the way, a woman clipped a leash to a dog's collar, and the dog strained toward a pile of leaves as if the answer were there. The city liked to keep its answers in places no one was supposed to look. It had a way of folding its arms around secrets — in the locked drawers of its old buildings, in the eyes of the men who shook hands on courthouse steps, in the dead light of its river where the current turned and turned but never seemed to go away.

When she checked the mail slot, there was a single postcard on the floorboards. No stamp. No postmark. The front showed a photograph of the cathedral bell, shot from below, greened with age and haloed by a blur of gulls. On the back, in a hand she almost recognized, five words: Echoes don't fade. They travel. Beneath that, a small inked circle, like an initial the sender had thought better of and scrubbed out. She read the line twice, and a third time, let the words bump against the scar and test the

fences she had built. Echoes. Travel. The phrase made an ache in her that was not quite pain and not quite fear, the way a song from a bad year could make a person's mouth water.

She carried the postcard to the kitchen table and set it down next to a yellow legal pad where she had written, in unsteady block letters, THINGS I KNOW. She added a line: Someone put a postcard through my door. She added another: The handwriting feels familiar. She did not add: The handwriting makes my throat close. She turned her phone face-up. A text from Ike slid into the screen — a photo of a cat tangled in ethernet cables, a morning joke to balance the solemn software he spent his life speaking to. You alive? Coffee later? She typed back: Alive is relative. Coffee yes. Then she propped the postcard against the salt cellar and took its picture, her thumb hovering for a moment over Ike's name, then not sending it. Something prickled her attention like static. The circle. The inked-out circle. It was nothing and it was also, in the way of small things, something that made her want to be nowhere near her apartment.

Outside, the city's skin had dried to a dull silver that flaked gently when people brushed past one another on the sidewalk. The river smell was in the air — iron and algae and a faint sweetness like bruised fruit. Nora walked. She had learned the geometry of streets that did not hurt her. She knew which intersections to avoid because turning her head a certain way put a blade into her temple and how to pass the hospital without seeing the ambulance bay, where the red light could make the words in her head smear. On Market, the coalition of coffee shops opened in sequence like a good argument. On Bell, where the shops were stitched together from old brick and optimism, the secondhand bookstore had painted its door the color of a taxicab that had never been called.

The Yellow Door had been there all her remembered life and likely the years she couldn't retrieve. She had gone in and out of it a hundred times as a girl when she lived and breathed newspapers and wanted ink on her hands. There were mornings she walked past anyway, unwilling to risk brushing the past awake. Today the bell in the cathedral had called to the bell above the Yellow Door's lintel, and the call sat in Nora's bones like an itch. She paused at the window. Inside, the light was amber and patient. Stacks on stacks. A woman with white hair tidying a table of city histories. On a chair by the counter, a cardboard box stamped with a warehouse logo she recognized in a way she didn't like: a circle in a circle, the inner ring smudged.

"Back again," a man on the sidewalk said. He might have meant nothing by it. He might have been talking to the dog he was dragging gently away from a patch of sun. The word lodged. Again. It was the sort of word that was a trap if she let it be. Nora lifted her chin as if that would clear her head and looked up toward the sliver of sky between buildings. She told herself what her therapist had told her: Not every coincidence is a conspiracy. But then, that had been before the postcard that knew a

word like echo would make the air thicken.

She had tried on smaller lives since the accident — quieter jobs, a rented apartment in a building where the hallways smelled of lemon cleaner and boiled rice, a calendar whose emptiest days pleased her because they did not require her to explain why Thursday in March 2017 was a lit room she could not enter. She told herself the version of her who had chased men into alleyways for a quote and dug into campaign finance reports until her eyes felt sanded was a person the city had taken and wouldn't give back. But when she stood in front of the Yellow Door, with the bell and the postcard and the bright paint that had faded just enough to show a previous coat of something darker, she understood that the quiet life was a story she had been practicing, not one she believed.

The woman with the white hair looked up from her table and saw her through the glass. Recognition moved across her face like weather — first the blank of someone seeing a stranger, then a flicker, then the half-smile of a person who thinks she remembers where she knows you from. Nora's heart did the small arrhythmic dance it did when the city pressed a hand to the small of her back and guided her. She thought of Ike and his cat and his steady hands on a keyboard, pulling needles of truth from haystacks of code. She thought of the postcard on her kitchen table, propped like a dare. She thought of the bell — two of them — and the circle in a circle stamped on cardboard inside, smudged like an afterthought.

Nora reached for the handle. The paint was warm beneath her palm as if someone had held it just before her. The bell above the door gave its thin, hard chime. She stepped into the smell of paper and dust and binding glue, into the owned silence of a place that kept other people's words. The woman behind the table smiled in a way that promised she wouldn't make a sound of recognition if Nora didn't want her to. "Morning," the woman said, and Nora answered, and the sound of her own voice in the room made something ease in her spine. Whatever was coming — the unease, the echo, the thing that wanted to be found — it would find her with a book in her hand and the city breathing at the window. Outside, as if to keep time, a train hauled itself forward, and the bell from the cathedral dragged its note, refusing to let it go.

CHAPTER ONE: The Yellow Door

The city breathes in stories. Some are whispered, some are scrawled on walls, and some are tucked into the forgotten corners of libraries, waiting for the right pair of hands. They say the dead don't speak, but their echoes linger, if you know how to listen. And I was listening, oh yes. Even when I shouldn't have been.

The air inside the Yellow Door was thick with the scent of aged paper and a faint, sweet mildew, a perfume Nora found oddly comforting. It was the smell of other people's lives, neatly bound and filed away. The woman with the white hair, whose name Nora dimly recalled as Agnes, offered a nod that suggested both familiarity and a polite discretion, as if she understood the unspoken rules of those who sought refuge in dusty stacks.

Nora drifted, letting her fingers trail over spines, a ritual she hadn't realized she missed. There was a rhythm to it, a slow dance with forgotten narratives. She passed the sections she vaguely remembered frequenting in her youth: True Crime, Political Histories, local authors whose names flickered at the edge of recognition. Nothing called to her, not truly. It was the postcard that still hummed in her mind, the circular smudge, the phrase "Echoes don't fade. They travel."

She moved toward the back, where the light grew dimmer and the shelves taller, a labyrinth of forgotten fiction and obscure non-fiction. This was where the serious collectors came, or the truly desperate, digging for a lost first edition or a buried truth. The cardboard box she'd seen from outside still sat on the rickety chair, slightly askew. It was a standard moving box, the kind designed to hold legal files or heavy machinery parts, not books. And on its side, the familiar, unsettling logo: a circle within a circle, the inner ring smudged. The emblem of the city's oldest and largest shipping and storage company, Meridian Logistics.

A shiver traced its way down Nora's spine. Meridian Logistics. The name felt like a piece of grit in her memory, a fragment that refused to dislodge. She knew it, she was sure of it, but the context was lost in the fog. Was it from a past investigation? A personal connection? The frustrating blankness of the missing five years often presented itself this way: a name, a face, a place, detached from its origin story.

She knelt, her knees protesting slightly, and peered into the box. It was filled with

books, but not in any organized fashion. They looked like discards, titles that hadn't found a home on the regular shelves, waiting for the recycling bin or a charitable donation. Most were hardcovers, older editions, with faded jackets or no jackets at all. A few softbacks were tucked in, bent and bruised.

Her gaze snagged on a particular book, wedged near the bottom. It wasn't the cover that drew her – it was plain, a dull brown with no discernible title or author. It was the way it was bound: not professionally, but crudely, almost like a scrapbook. The spine was wrapped in rough, dark tape, and the edges of the pages were uneven, as if cut by hand. It looked less like a published book and more like a collection of printed material stitched together. A manuscript.

Nora reached in, her fingers brushing past a forgotten copy of a romance novel and a textbook on civil engineering. She pulled the brown volume out. It was heavier than it looked, denser, as if it contained more than just paper. The cover felt rough, almost like canvas. There was no title on the front, no author. Nothing. Just the dull, worn brown.

She turned it over in her hands. The back was just as blank. The tape on the spine was peeling slightly, revealing a glimpse of the binding beneath: stiff, yellowed cardboard. It felt old, but not ancient. More like something that had been handled a lot, loved or hated into its current state of disrepair.

A whisper of curiosity, sharp and insistent, cut through the quiet hum of her amnesia. This felt different. Not like the random flotsam of a secondhand store, but like something *placed*. Like the postcard.

Slowly, carefully, Nora opened the cover. The first page was blank, yellowed with age, but sturdy. The second page, however, bore a title, handwritten in a looping, elegant script, almost too formal for the battered state of the book: *The Echo Manuscript*. Beneath it, in the same hand, a line that seemed to tug at something deep inside her: *Some stories repeat. Some echoes find their way home.*

Her breath hitched. *Echoes*. The word from the postcard. The coincidence was too jarring to ignore, too specific. This was not random. This was a message. But from whom? And why this peculiar, anonymous book?

She flipped past the title page. The manuscript wasn't a novel in the traditional sense. It was a collection of printed pages, interspersed with handwritten notes, faded photographs, and even what looked like newspaper clippings. The text itself was printed in a small, dense font, as if to cram as much information as possible onto each sheet. The narrative seemed to shift, sometimes a first-person account, sometimes a more detached, journalistic style.

Nora's eyes scanned the first few paragraphs. The writing was compelling, evocative, painting a picture of a city she knew and didn't know. It spoke of municipal buildings, of rain-slicked streets, of the constant murmur of the river. And then, a name.

"The old docks down by the Meridian warehouse," she read, her finger tracing the words. "That's where he went, or where they said he went. The water always remembers what the city tries to forget."

Meridian warehouse. The name slammed into her with the force of a physical blow. Not just the shipping company, but the actual warehouse. The same one whose logo was on the box. The same one she'd passed countless times on the periphery of the city, a hulking, red-brick edifice that always looked on the verge of collapse. And the river. Always the river.

A fragment of memory, sharp and unwelcome, pierced through the haze. A flash of dark water. The metallic scent of a stormy night. A sound – a splash, or a cry. It was gone as quickly as it came, leaving her dizzy and disoriented. Her hand flew to the scar at her temple, a familiar comfort. It throbbed.

"Find anything interesting?" Agnes's voice, soft and even, startled Nora. She hadn't realized how absorbed she was.

Nora looked up, the manuscript clutched in her hands. "This one," she managed, her voice a little hoarse. "It's... unusual."

Agnes smiled, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Oh, that old thing. It came in with a batch from a storage locker sale. Meridian Logistics, I think. Didn't have a price, didn't have an author. Just... showed up. A mystery, really." She paused, her gaze lingering on the book. "Funny, it's been here for months. No one's picked it up until now."

Months. The postcard had arrived this morning. The "echoes" and "Meridian Logistics" were too precise to be mere coincidence. This manuscript, this strange, anonymous collection of words, felt like it was waiting for her. Or, perhaps, had been *left* for her.

Nora bought the manuscript without a moment's hesitation, paying Agnes a modest sum for the unlabeled, unpriced volume. The book felt heavy and real in her hands as she left the Yellow Door, its chime a final, unsettling punctuation mark.

The city outside seemed to have sharpened. The grey sky felt more intense, the rumble of the train more insistent. The familiar streets took on a new, unfamiliar quality, as if she were seeing them through a different lens. Every corner held a potential secret, every passerby a possible connection. The world felt suddenly charged, imbued with a new, dark energy.

She walked purposefully, not back to her apartment, not yet. The words from the manuscript, "The old docks down by the Meridian warehouse," pulsed in her mind. It wasn't far, a fifteen-minute walk along the river, past the fading industrial zones that were slowly being reclaimed by gentrification. A place she'd always avoided, not consciously, but as if by instinct. Now, that instinct pulled her directly toward it.

The warehouse was exactly as she remembered, or rather, as she felt she should remember. A colossal brick structure, its windows boarded up, its loading bays rusting shut. Graffiti bloomed in vibrant defiance on its lower walls, covering decades of grime. The air here was heavy with the smell of river water and decay, a sharper, more metallic tang than the general river scent in other parts of the city. Beyond it, the river itself moved with a sluggish, powerful current, the water dark and opaque under the overcast sky.

A faint sense of vertigo gripped Nora as she approached. This place, this specific stretch of industrial decay, felt like a scene from a dream. Or a nightmare. Had she been here before? The sensation was so strong, so physical, she felt she could almost taste the river water on her tongue.

She pulled out the manuscript again, flipping to the first page. "The old docks down by the Meridian warehouse." It was a declaration, an instruction. A gauntlet thrown.

She looked from the words to the dilapidated building, its presence both menacing and strangely magnetic. She was standing in a memory, or at the very least, at the physical manifestation of one. The manuscript had taken her here. And something in her knew this was just the beginning.

As she stood there, a cold gust of wind swept off the river, carrying with it the mournful cry of a distant gull. Her eyes scanned the crumbling brick, the broken windows, the rusted gate. And then, at the base of a particularly dilapidated section of wall, half-hidden by overgrown weeds and a fallen tarp, she saw it.

A splash of vivid, almost unnatural color against the muted brick. Not graffiti, but a series of distinct, vibrant streaks. Red. And beneath it, a smaller, darker stain that looked suspiciously like dried blood, almost completely absorbed by the ancient brick. Her breath caught in her throat. It was too specific, too stark. And then she looked closer.

Etched into the brick, just above the crimson streaks, almost invisible unless you knew to look for it, was a symbol. A circle. And within it, another, slightly smudged. The Meridian Logistics logo. The same one from the cardboard box. The same one that had been on the postcard, inked out. This was no coincidence. The manuscript was not just a story. It was a map. And it was leading her somewhere she absolutely did not want

to go.

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