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Echoes of the Missing

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Introduction

Rain feathered Nora Hale's window as if the night were trying to write to her. She sat in the glow of her laptop, headphones cupping her ears, the waveform of someone else's grief crawling across the screen. Her tiny studio smelled like coffee and old paper—boxes she never unpacked, letters she never threw away. The episode she'd been editing—another city's cold case, another voice swallowing the word gone—hung in limbo. Her phone buzzed. Unknown caller. Then it stopped, replaced by a voicemail notification that pulsed like a heartbeat in the dark.

She pressed play. At first there was only static, a hush like a room holding its breath. Then a man's voice, rasping around a cheap scrambler, said, "You were wrong about your sister." The words landed clean, surgical. "It wasn't a runaway. Check the river. Not the one you remember. The other side. Ten years. Time's up." A soft clink, like a chain touching glass, and the message cut off with a click that felt deliberate.

Nora rewound and listened again, then a third time, setting the playback slower to catch the edges of sound. She heard a faint hum beneath the distortion—machinery, maybe; a low, relentless grind she felt in her chest as much as her ears. It flickered a memory: the mill at Emberly, that constant throat-clearing of iron and water that threaded through her childhood like a warning. She hadn't heard it for years, but it lived there anyway, waiting.

Another buzz. A news alert bloomed across her screen: Emberly Police Seek Public's Help in Search for Missing Teen. Sixteen-year-old Owen Marsh. Last seen near the high school gym after practice. Photograph attached: a boy with wide-set eyes and a smile that looked borrowed. The rain pressed harder at the glass, as if the night itself leaned in to listen.

Her hands found a pen before she knew what to write. River—other side. Time's up. She wrote Liza at the top of the page, then crossed it out, then wrote it again. Ten years ago, the town had taught her to stop asking questions for which people didn't have answers, only alibis. Ten years of telling other people's stories because she couldn't finish her own. On her desk lay the mic that had lifted her voice into a thousand kitchens and cars. She stared at it and thought of all the times silence had been the most dangerous choice.

She called Jonah. Straight to voicemail. She didn't leave a message; he wouldn't want to hear her voice at this hour, not with the name Emberly between them like a live wire. She scrolled to Tom Calder and hovered. Instead she pulled up a map of town—river curving like a question mark, the old mill stacked against the water,

streets she could still walk in her sleep. Other side, the voice had said. Other side of what? Bridge, bend, dam. The words made their own current, pulling her north.

She played the voicemail one more time, listening for what the caller didn't mean to give away. That clink again. A chain against glass. A locker? A locket? Memory answered before logic did: a silver oval that used to rest against Liza's collarbone, warm from sun and skin. Nora felt the room tilt. She looked at the rain and saw a river. She looked at the clock and saw ten years.

By the time the episode on her laptop auto-saved, she had a bag half-packed. Recorder, batteries, chargers, a camera, a notebook with a page torn down the middle where her pen had pressed too hard. She slid her mic into its case like a talisman and pulled on a jacket still smelling faintly of last autumn's leaves. Outside, the street was slick and reflective, a long ribbon back toward the place she swore she'd never live in again but never really left.

She sent Jonah a text—On my way—and shut off the lights. In the dark, the room held that familiar hush of late-night diners and empty church halls, the kind of quiet that made secrets sound louder. She stood there for one breath, then another. The voicemail waited in her phone like a held note. When she stepped into the hallway and pulled the door closed, the lock clicked with a small, final sound. Time's up, the voice had said. Nora pocketed her keys and walked toward the elevator, toward the rain, toward Emberly.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The dashboard clock in Nora's rental car read 8:47 p.m. when she crossed the sign into Emberly. It flickered as if wind had passed through it, though the August air was heavy and still. Welcome to Emberly, The Mill Town That Breathes, someone from the chamber of commerce had decided a decade ago, and the paint had chipped since, leaving the slogan in flaking letters, like a promise someone had stopped keeping. The car's headlights skimmed a row of storefronts shuttered against the dark: a pharmacy with dusty Valentines in the window, a barber pole that no longer turned, a diner with two neon letters missing from its name, turning its sign into a long, incomplete thought.

The mill loomed ahead, a silhouette stacked against the sky, its windows empty as a skull's. Even from here, Nora could feel it breathing—that low, metronomic rumble that was either water or iron or the heartbeat of a town built to keep both moving. She'd grown up measuring storms by how the mill's noise changed, learning to sleep through thunder but never through that. Her hands tightened on the wheel, knuckles white. She told herself it was just road fatigue, a long day and longer nights spent chasing other people's ghosts. It wasn't that the sound had changed. It was that she was listening for it again.

Jonah lived in a saltbox on Cedar with a porch light that stuttered. The yard had been mowed recently; she could smell the grass cut clean and the iron of the rail he'd painted but left to cure in the damp. A boy's bike lay on its side by the steps, front wheel still spinning lazily when she pulled in. Nora climbed out and the porch light steadied, then caught, and the door opened before she reached the top step.

"You're actually here," Jonah said, not quite a question. He stood in the doorway with his daughter, Evie, asleep against his shoulder, a small body swallowed by a larger T-shirt that read Emberly Auto. He looked older than the last photo she'd seen, but maybe that was just the angle of the light carving lines under his eyes.

"I texted," Nora said. Her voice came out too bright, like the first line of an episode she hadn't rehearsed. "I didn't want to—"

"You never want to," he cut in, then winced at his own tone. He stepped back, swinging the door wide. "Evie just went down. Don't wake her."

Inside, the house smelled like the diner they'd both grown up in—coffee and something fried that had settled into the drywall. There were toys in a pale blue crate, a stack of mail on the counter with a rubber band gone tight and brittle, and on the

fridge a drawing of a mill with a yellow sun that looked more like a warning. Jonah eased Evie into her room and came back with two mugs, moving like a man who'd learned to keep the floor from creaking.

"Water's not great," he said, running the tap. "Never was." He set the mug down in front of her. "Saw your face on a billboard outside Portland. 'Listen for the Truth.' Slogan's a little on the nose, isn't it?"

"It's focus-grouped," Nora said, and tried a smile that didn't land. She hadn't expected easy. She'd left too much unsaid, then turned it into a career. "I got a call. Anonymous. About Liza."

Jonah went still around the eyes. He glanced toward the hallway where his daughter slept, then back. "Don't do this here."

"It said to check the river. The other side. That it wasn't—" She stopped, hearing the words again as if they were playing out loud. She lowered her voice. "Time's up, he said. And then today there's this missing kid. Owen Marsh. It felt like an opening I couldn't ignore."

"An opening," Jonah repeated. He rubbed the back of his neck, fingers leaving pale stripes on tanned skin. "Or a door you want to walk through because you can't stand not knowing. It's been ten years, Nora. You chase other people's stories for a living. Maybe leave ours buried."

Nora swallowed the hot of the coffee. It was burned, a little, the way he'd always made it. "You think I should ignore a voicemail that mentions my sister's name the day a kid goes missing in the town where she went missing?"

"I think," he said, leaning against the counter and crossing his arms, "that you shouldn't show up at nine at night and start dropping bombs on a house where a little girl sleeps."

The words hit clean. She deserved them. "I'm sorry," she said. "I should have called first. I will be quieter. I need to go up to the attic. I think there's a box of Liza's things up there. Her diary, maybe."

Jonah shook his head, a short, sharp motion. "That was Mom's idea, not mine. I didn't want it. Still don't."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I didn't throw it out. It's a garage sale in boxes waiting for a weekend I don't have." He set his mug down with a click. "If you're going to dig, do it while Evie's at

camp tomorrow. Don't make it a family tradition."

They stood in a silence that had too many tenants. The porch light flickered again. A car passed outside, slow enough that Nora turned her head, catching the pale oval of a face, then gone. She listened for the mill's rumble and heard it settle in her bones. There were things she wanted to say about guilt and the shape of the house she'd lived in until she couldn't anymore, but she let them pass. Some things didn't need a microphone to be loud.

"Okay," she said. "Tomorrow morning. I'll be quick. I just— thank you."

Jonah sighed, the fight going out of him like a slow leak. "You always were quick," he said. "Doesn't mean you got what you came for."

She slept in the guest room with the window cracked, listening to the breathing of a town that had never learned to whisper. Around 3:00 a.m., rain started in earnest, a steady drumming on the roof that felt like the inside of a machine. She woke with the taste of coffee in her mouth from a dream where her mic picked up only the sound of water moving under stone.

In the morning, Evie stood in the doorway with Jonah's eyes and a curiosity that cut deeper than she should have had. "You're the aunt who went away," she said, without accusation. "You do that podcast with the dead people."

Nora smiled despite herself. "Sometimes they're not dead. Sometimes they're just lost."

Evie considered this, then pointed at Nora's phone. "Can you make my dad laugh? He forgot how."

Nora couldn't promise that, but she made pancakes instead, using the mix from the cupboard and turning the bacon in the pan until it was crisp and dark at the edges. Jonah watched her, arms folded, leaning against the doorway. He didn't say thank you, but he ate three pancakes, and when Evie left the table to get her shoes, he jerked his chin toward the ceiling.

"Attic's ladder-down," he said. "If you break your neck, don't sue me."

The attic was hot and smelled like cedar and old glue. Nora climbed the folding steps into a slanted world where the light came gray through a round window and dust hung in the air like a held breath. Boxes were stacked in crooked towers with soft-top lids. Most had Jonah's careful labels: Photos. Taxes. Lamps. She found one with Liza's name in blue marker, the handwriting her mother's, careful and looping. The tape yellowed and brittle; it snapped when she pulled it.

Inside were yearbooks, a shoebox of hair ties and loose change, a folded piece of construction paper that said Happy Birthday in glitter glue. Underneath, a small, spiral-bound notebook with a purple cover. The diary. Nora turned it over in her hands, feeling the weight of a thing she hadn't held in ten years. She opened to a random page. Liza's handwriting had been quick and slanted, the letters leaning forward like they wanted to get somewhere first. She saw a list of after-school things, a doodle of an eye, a complaint about a teacher who smelled like mothballs. She turned more pages, looking for something that wasn't there, the way you could stare at a river and hope to see the thing that had fallen in.

She was about to close it when she saw the scribble near the bottom of the last used page. It was different ink—black instead of Liza's usual blue—and a different hand, cramped and small, written after the diary's last entry and pressed so hard the paper had buckled. The word was simple. It looked like a question. Then it looked like a warning.

Run?

Nora's breath caught. She took out her phone and photographed the page, then held the book to her chest as if the word might fall out. Downstairs, Evie laughed at something on a cartoon, a bright sound that didn't belong to this room. Nora slid the diary into the waistband of her jeans, pulled her shirt over it, and climbed back down, her heart thudding with a rhythm that wasn't quite fear and not quite hope.

Jonah stood at the sink, hands in soapy water, watching the window. He didn't turn around. "Find what you were looking for?"

"Maybe," Nora said. She couldn't tell him about the scribble yet. Couldn't stand the way it might make him look at her like she was trying to drag them all back into something they'd barely survived. She changed the subject. "Do you remember a kid named Marsh? Owen Marsh. His picture was on the alert."

"Works at the garage sometimes," Jonah said, rinsing a plate. "Comes in for odd jobs to pay for gas and video games. Good kid. A little lost." He paused. "Like his name." He turned then, wiping his hands on a rag. "Why?"

"Just wondering who he hung out with. If he was in any clubs or—"

"You're already turning it over," Jonah said flatly. "Give it a day, Nora. Let the sheriff do his job."

"Tom Calder?" The name came out before she could weigh it. She saw a flicker in Jonah's face that told her he knew about the history, the way a small town keeps a

ledger of everyone's almos.

"Tom Calder," Jonah confirmed. "He's got the badge. You've got the microphone. Don't conflate them."

The garage had a side office with a desk that looked like it had absorbed decades of grease. Nora left a message with the kid behind the counter—"Tell Jonah's sister to stop by if she wants"—and went back to her rental. The morning had slid toward noon, and the clouds were dragging their bellies across the low hills, spitting a fine mist that collected on her hair. She sat in the car and replayed the voicemail until she could map the static like a topography.

On impulse, she pulled up the police frequency on a scanner app she used for work. It crackled and a voice ran through a list of street names and a description: "White sedan. Dented passenger-side bumper. If spotted, do not approach." The dispatch voice was calm and clipped. Nora felt a prickle along her arms. The witness report in the news alert had mentioned a car. Coincidence was a word she didn't trust. It was a word towns used to close files.

She was about to close the app when a shadow fell across her window. She looked up into the face of Sheriff Tom Calder, older than she remembered, hat in his hand, eyes that had once looked at her like she was the punchline to a joke they were both in on. He tapped the glass with a knuckle. Not hard. Not soft.

She rolled down the window. Rain had started again, and it beaded on his sleeves.

"You're a long way from the studio, Nora," Tom said. His voice hadn't changed much. It still carried a little gravel, like a road that had been resurfaced once and never again.

"Funny," she said. "I feel like I'm exactly where I was ten years ago."

He smiled without humor. "You're going to stir up things best left to sleep."

"Owen Marsh is missing," she said. "That's not sleeping. That's wide awake."

Tom glanced at the diner across the street, then back at her. "I hear you got a mysterious call. Don't get ahead of the evidence. We're talking to everyone. We've got a car description. We're doing the job."

"What car?" she asked, though she already knew.

"Nora," he said, and the way he said it was both a warning and a plea. "Don't make this a broadcast."

The rain picked up, ticking on the roof of the rental like fingers on a drum. She watched Tom's shoulders square, the way he'd always stood when he wanted a conversation to be over. She could feel the diary against her skin, a warm rectangle that seemed to pulse. She thought of the word written in that cramped, unfamiliar hand. Run? She thought of the witness's white sedan and the dent that would make it identifiable. She thought of a voicemail that had said Time's up and a mill that wouldn't stop breathing.

Tom leaned in a little. "Go home, Nora," he said, quieter. "Please."

She looked past him at the mill, its windows catching the pale light like dull eyes. "I am home," she said, and rolled the window up.

He stepped back, watching her with an expression that had too many layers to name. Then he turned, settled his hat on his head, and crossed the street toward the diner, his figure diminishing in the rain until it was just a shape blended into the rest of the town. Nora sat there for a long time, letting the engine idle, the scanner murmuring static between occasional bursts of procedure. She made herself wait until her breathing matched the rhythm of the wipers, steady and useless. Then she pulled out her phone, opened her recording app, and pressed the red button.

"Nora Hale, Emberly, August twentieth," she said into the quiet car. "I'm back. And the mill is still breathing." She paused. "I think it's trying to tell me something."

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