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The Echoes We Keep

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Introduction

The envelope is small enough to be a mistake. No return address, just her name scrawled in a tilted hand that tries too hard to be ordinary. It's soft with travel, the corners blunted, the paper holding the faint scent of machine oil and wet cardboard—the smell of postal rooms and back-of-house places. Maya turns it over once, twice, feeling for a telltale ridge, a bump, anything that might make sense of the weight. She tells herself she's only curious because of the timing, because her calendar is stacked and she doesn't have room for surprises. That's a lie. She has always had a place inside her for this kind of thing, a hollow kept ready, a question that never stopped asking.

She carries it into the studio, the one-bedroom's second room transformed by foam panels and a heavy-limbed desk, microphone suspended like a patient spider. An amber light glows on the interface, the kind of warm that looks like an invitation at the edge of night. Her podcast—her life, really—lives in these subdued colors: waveforms in clean lines, show notes written in a careful voice that never quite gives away how her hands sometimes shake after recording. In the corner, a cardboard box holds awards she hasn't bothered to hang and a pair of hiking boots that still have the ghost of dirt from a trip she never took. Audiences know her as the woman who listens well, who stitches stories that don't want to be threaded. They don't know the story she refuses to stitch.

The blade slips neatly through the tape. Inside, a cassette. The sight of it hits her in a way a thumb drive never could. Black plastic, scuffed and old-fashioned, a strip of label gone nicotine-yellow with time. On it, in the same slanted hand, a date: 09.15.02. The date stays on her tongue like a sour candy; it doesn't dissolve. The week Ella vanished, right after the town's fall festival, after paper lanterns and sugar dust, after every adult she trusted said the word routine as if routine could fix anything. Maya hasn't touched a cassette player in years, but she still owns one because people send her things—clippings, voice mails burned to outdated media, a key someone swears opens the wrong door. They send her their little boxes of hope, and she is too soft to throw any of it away.

She pulls a pair of nitrile gloves from a drawer out of habit more than fear. Chain of custody. If you ever turn this over, you don't want your thumbprints all over it. She can hear Liam's voice even without calling him, the way he will say, You can't run with this without a trace record. You can't tease it on the show before the police hear it. He's right. He's been right more times than she likes to admit. She sets the cassette on a folded cleaning cloth as if it might bruise. A part of her wants to close the envelope, to rewrap the years around what they were already covering. She promised

herself she wouldn't do this. She promised herself she would never be one of those hosts who mines their own grief for content, who turns the dead into an opening hook—Ella into a lesson, into a brand.

It isn't content. The word lands metallic in her chest as she crosses the room to retrieve the machine, a compact recorder she bought at a yard sale from a man who told her he used to tape church sermons for his wife. The deck's buttons are sun-bleached; the play triangle is worn almost smooth. She feeds the cassette into its mouth. The room holds its breath. Outside, rain is threatening but hasn't decided yet, the sky a stain against the window. Maya checks the recorder one more time to make sure it isn't plugged into anything that will accidentally send a signal to her cloud backup. She doesn't want anything leaping ahead of her, not yet. Then she presses play.

Hiss first. The kind of hiss that lives in walls and long pipes, as if the recording stole the breath right out of the room it was made in. Beneath it: something mechanical, a distant hum that might be a generator or a vending machine—the kind of sound that seems like silence until you're trained to hear it. There's movement, a bump, a little laugh far away that makes her ribs go cold. She realizes her left hand is at her throat, pressing lightly as if to hold something in. Ella had a laugh like a distilled summer day. The laugh on the tape is too thin, too far, just a thread that might not be laughter at all, might be an echo of one.

A voice comes in, close to the microphone but not confident, the way someone sounds when speaking into a recorder in a borrowed room. Male. The consonants are damp. "Test—okay. We're—we're starting." A pause, the shuffle of fabric against plastic. Maya leans forward, almost imperceptibly, as if her body knows something before her mind does. The man clears his throat, and she sees his mouth in her mind, sees how people shape their guilt into careful syllables. "If anyone ever... this is just in case. Because no one listens when you're nobody." There's another sound then, faint but distinct—the quick two-tone chirp of a door alarm, or program bells, or something she knows she should recognize but can't tug all the way into the light.

She stops the tape. Her breath saws in the sudden quiet. She looks at the date again because it stabilizes her—the way a number can become a railing. On the bookshelf, between volumes with bright spines, is a photo of two girls on a dock: the tall one pretending not to notice the photographer, the small one grinning like she invented heat. She lifts it, not because she needs to see but because holding both the photo and the cassette at once feels like braiding two separate realities that refused to meet. Maya has built a life on explaining to strangers that memory is not a video we replay but a story we remake from scraps. She has said it in interviews, written it in scripts, annotated it with studies. It is different to feel memory revise itself in your hands. It is different when the subject line of the email you will inevitably send to your mother will be: I need to ask you something about that week.

She sets the photo back. This is it, she thinks. The decision point. Open the door and the weather will change. She knows how this works—she will announce a limited series, people will binge the back catalog, sponsors will write to Liam, opportunists will write to her. Someone will call her a vulture and they won't be entirely wrong. Someone else will tell her she is brave and they won't be entirely right. Detective Park will call it complicated, and when Detective Park says complicated, she means: you are going to make my job harder, and I am going to help you anyway. Her mother will not cry this time; her mother spent her tears long ago and hoards the last ones like sugar rations. If Maya turns the tape over to the police and lets them sit on it until it can be "processed," it might disappear into the same gray that swallowed Ella. If she leads with it, the show will explode for the wrong reasons, and her credibility with law enforcement might erode fast.

She presses play again and opens a blank document out of reflex, letting her fingers hover. Her notes, when they come, come like the back-and-forth of an argument: device, time code, environment sounds, speech inflection. There's a scrape on the tape, like a chair leg dragged over old tile. "You said not here," the male voice says, lower now, not to the recorder but to someone else. The reply is buried in the noise, a shape of breath. Then, for a handful of seconds, a quiet so deep it feels intentional. Maya knows sounds hide in quiet, that silence is a lid people place on certain truths, that bad rooms try to erase themselves. In the distance, the pressurized gasp of water through pipes. An air conditioner catching and releasing. A car passing with a distinctive whine, the kind that comes from age and poor maintenance, a wheel that sings the same note even at a crawl.

Her throat is dry. She hadn't meant to go back there today, to the place inside her that catalogues small-town night noises: the generator behind the community center, the announcement chime at Gilmore Hall, the clatter of bottle returns at the corner market. She's lived in cities long enough to forget the difference between a machine and a creature. Her memory is painting over itself, and she can't tell if the room on the tape is real or if she wants it to be real. What she can tell is this: whoever recorded this wanted a record. People who want records either want to cover themselves or to load a gun they plan to fire later. In her experience, those people rarely stand far from harm.

She hits pause, grabs her phone, and dials. Liam picks up on the second ring, his voice thick with coffee. "Tell me it's not another box of clippings about that cult in Oregon."

"It's a tape." She keeps her voice even. "Cassette. Dated the week Ella—then. Dropped at my place. No sender."

On the other end, the inhale is quick, then a door closing. She imagines him moving to his own small office, the soundproof door he built himself out of pride and

stubbornness. “Maya.” Her name stretches like a warning and a promise. “Don’t play it again. Not yet. Gloves. Photos. Call it in.”

“I listened. Some of it.” The confession tastes like something pulled up from the deep. “It’s... I don’t know what it is. But someone made it to be found.”

He doesn’t swear, and that tells her he is already making lists. “Okay. Protocol. We document chain of custody. We loop Park before we utter a word on-air. And Maya—this is your line in the sand. If we cross it, there’s no walking it back without tracks.”

“I know.” She thinks of her mother’s porch stoop, the town’s main street with its painted benches, the way people can look at you like history is a coat you chose to put on. “I keep thinking about that week, and the way I remember it like a smear. Every time I try to hold onto a detail it slides.”

“That’s how grief works,” he says, quiet now. He doesn’t say it’s also how bad actors get away with it. “I’m twenty minutes away.”

She hangs up and stares at the blinking light on the recorder. In the blank document, a title appears before she realizes she’s typed it: The Echoes We Keep—Episode 0: The Tape. Her cursor blinks beside it as if urging her on. She doesn’t know if the show will go live, if she will ever read the script she is about to write, if she’s about to break something in herself that has held, barely, for twenty years. She only knows that the sound of her sister’s name has weight, and that weight is shifting. She takes a breath and resumes the tape.

Static swells. The voice returns, lower and closer, as if the speaker has leaned in. “Okay. If you’re hearing this, you know. It was—” He stops, breathes, tries again. “He said not to use names.” Another skitter of movement, what might be a palm at the mic. Then there is a noise that isn’t a word, more presence than speech, like someone struggling with the fate of a syllable. It resolves, at last, a shape forming itself out of years and dust, a familiar contour in the murk. The voice leans hard into the microphone and gives her a name she hasn’t heard in twenty years, and the room seems to tilt toward it. Maya doesn’t realize she’s whispering until she hears herself say it back.

CHAPTER ONE: Calling Home

The road back to Havenwood Falls had a way of sanding down the edges of memory until they felt smooth, almost benign. Maya drove with the windows down, the air cool and smelling of pine resin and the chemical tang of the municipal swimming pool someone had over-chlorinated that morning. It was the same smell that had greeted her on the morning her sister, Ella, had woken her up by putting a cold hand on her neck. Twenty years, and the recipe hadn't changed. She gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles showed white, counting telephone poles to keep the other memories at bay. They came anyway, in flashes: the red of a bicycle, the snap of a rubber band, the particular shade of dusk that turned the river into a bruise.

She had recorded the announcement for the limited series two nights ago in her apartment, the city sprawled outside her window like a circuit board that refused to power down. Liam had stood behind the glass, his hand up like a conductor waiting for the beat. "This is Maya Reed," she had said into the microphone, voice steady, "and in the next six weeks, we're going to talk about the week my sister disappeared. We're going to talk about the investigation that stalled, the rumors that hardened, and the people who stopped looking. We're calling it *The Echoes We Keep*. If you know something, it's time." Her finger had hovered over the stop button for a full ten seconds after Liam gave her the thumbs-up. The episode went live six hours later. The city didn't blink, but Havenwood Falls did. By sunrise, her phone had three voicemails from people she hadn't spoken to since high school and a text from her mother that read simply: You're really doing this.

The town limit sign had been repainted since last time. Welcome to Havenwood Falls: Where Tomorrow Rests Today. Someone had taped a paper squirrel over the word Rests. Maya slowed, turning onto Main Street, past the storefronts that still wore their summer displays—flags curled from the heat, a pyramid of peaches in the window of the grocer that was more art than inventory. She noticed Gilmore Hall before anything else. It rose above the street, brick and dignified, its windows dark. The mayor had funded its restoration five years ago; his name was etched in the stone, small but permanent. A group of teenagers lounged on the steps, one holding a phone up to film her car as it passed. News traveled fast, even without a signal. Even without proof.

Her mother's house sat two blocks off the main drag, a modest craftsman with a porch swing that still creaked in the same rhythm. Ruth Reed was in the garden when Maya pulled up, kneeling on a foam pad, gloved hands working the soil around a bed of late-summer marigolds. She stood slowly, wiping her forehead with the back of a wrist, and watched her daughter approach. They didn't hug. They had settled into a different ritual years ago: a hand on a shoulder, a glance that measured what was allowed

today. Ruth's hair had gone fully gray, a change that happened so gradually Maya couldn't pinpoint a year when it looked different. She wore the same small hoop earrings she'd worn to every parent-teacher conference Maya could remember.

"You didn't have to come," Ruth said, not a greeting so much as a permission slip. "I could have driven up. We could have done this over the phone."

"I wanted to see you." The lie was small enough to live in the space between them without rocking anything. Maya stepped onto the grass. "I also need to ask you about that week. There might be things you didn't tell me back then because I was a kid, and there might be things you forgot because memory does that." She stopped, aware of how clinical she sounded, how podcast-host-y. She softened. "I need to know whatever you can remember. Not just the things that made sense at the time. The weird stuff, the moments that didn't fit."

Ruth untied her gardening gloves, finger by finger, as if she were disarming something. "There's nothing new to tell, Maya. I said everything I knew to the police, to the newspapers, to the woman who wrote that article about cold cases. I don't have a secret locked in a drawer." She looked past Maya toward the street, where a car had slowed to a near-crawl. "You're going to bring people here who don't want to be looked at. You're going to open a box that smells bad. You don't need to do that to find peace."

"I'm not looking for peace," Maya said, and immediately wished she hadn't. She changed the subject. "Is it okay if I use Ella's room? Just for a couple of days. I won't move anything."

Ruth nodded, a tight, small motion. "It's yours if you need it. I put clean sheets on. Don't leave anything out that the cat might knock over."

Inside, the house felt like a photograph kept under glass. The living room hadn't changed the furniture placement in two decades; the pictures on the mantel were the same frames with the same faces smiling out from the same angles. Maya walked down the hall, past the linen closet where Ella used to hide when they played hide-and-seek, counting loudly against the doorframe so Maya could find her in three seconds every time. Ella's bedroom door was closed. Maya rested her hand on the knob, breathing in the smell of lemon oil and old fabric softener, and pushed. The room was exactly as she expected and nothing like she remembered. The bed was made. The desk held a neat stack of notebooks her mother had bought from the discount store, their covers blank. There were no posters, no stray socks, no half-finished glass of water sweating onto the nightstand. It was a room with the personality scrubbed out of it.

She set her bag on the floor by the closet and took out the cassette, still sealed in the

Ziploc bag. The envelope sat at the bottom of the bag like a confession she hadn't made yet. She didn't want to bring the tape to the police until she'd listened to it again, had a transcript, had something to hold onto so she knew what she was relinquishing. It was a bad instinct, the kind that makes good podcasters and terrible witnesses. She could hear Liam's voice: *Chain of custody, Maya*. She could hear her own voice from the introduction she'd written: *We're going to do this the right way*. She put the cassette in her pocket and went back downstairs.

Her mother was at the sink, rinsing dirt from under her nails. "I'm going to the high school," Maya said. "They kept archives from the yearbook staff. I need to look at the old books for anything that might have been missed, any caption that pointed to something later."

"People don't remember," Ruth said, her back still to her. "They think they do, but they don't. Memory isn't a photograph. It's a story we tell ourselves. You, of all people, should know that."

"I also know that stories can change if you interrogate them. That's the point." Maya hesitated. "Did anyone ever say anything to you afterward that felt wrong? Not a threat. Just... off."

Ruth turned, water dripping from her hands onto the floor. She looked at her daughter for a long moment, then shook her head. "No. People brought casseroles. People stopped bringing them. That's how it went."

The high school was a ten-minute drive, a long brick building with a parking lot that still had the same faded lines. The door by the auditorium was unlocked, a habit in a town where people left their keys in their cars at the grocery store. The archives were in a room off the library, labeled with a sign that said *Memories & Records* in cheerful letters. Inside, a retired English teacher named Mrs. Talbot sat behind a desk, hair in a gray bun, glasses on a chain. She looked up as Maya entered, and the recognition was immediate.

"Maya Reed," she said, not unkindly. "I heard the announcement. I listen to your show when I'm grading papers. It's very... thorough."

"Thank you," Maya said, feeling the weight of being seen in a place where she had once been invisible. "I'm hoping I can look at the yearbooks from the year Ella disappeared. And maybe the school paper. I'm trying to put together a timeline."

Mrs. Talbot stood and led her to a bank of gray shelves. "They're in chronological order. 2002 is third shelf down. Don't take them out of the room, and please don't fold down corners. I'll be at the desk if you need me."

Maya pulled the heavy volume labeled *The Beacon 2002* from the shelf and carried it to a table. The cover was worn, the school mascot—a hawk—faded to a pale blue. She flipped through pages of smiling teenagers, the awkwardness of that age captured in stiff poses and the occasional over-enthusiastic grin. There was her own class photo, hair too long, expression caught between defiance and panic. She turned the pages carefully, the way you handle something you're afraid might ignite.

She found the fall festival spread eight pages in. The photo was a wide shot of the town square, lanterns strung between lampposts, the band on a portable stage, a line for the cake walk. In the lower left corner, a smaller inset photo showed Ella and a friend from her soccer team holding cotton candy. Maya stopped breathing. It was the first time in a while she had seen a photograph of Ella that she didn't have to conjure herself. The girl in the photo was eleven, freckled, wearing a silver bracelet on her right wrist that Maya recognized because she had given it to her for her birthday—a cheap little thing from a mall kiosk with a heart charm. The caption read: *Ella Reed and Tessa Doyle celebrate the harvest.*

She traced the edge of the photo with her fingertip, then flipped a few more pages to the club photos. The yearbook club had a group shot, arms crossed, serious faces. She scanned the names. There was a face she knew, a boy named Caleb Mason who had been in her math class. He was not in the club photo, but his name was under a caption on the previous page describing the *Winter Dance Committee*. Maya frowned, remembering that Caleb had been in the background of a lot of things. He was the kind of kid who remembered details. She closed the yearbook, feeling the first thread of a possibility she hadn't let herself consider before: that there were people in this town who had been close to Ella, who might have seen something that night, who had stayed quiet for reasons she didn't yet understand.

When she left the school, a car was idling across the street. It wasn't anyone she recognized, a blue sedan with tinted windows. It pulled away as she approached her own car, no hurry, as if it had been waiting for her to leave. She told herself it was nothing. People sit in their cars. People check their phones. She was not the only person in Havenwood Falls whose imagination had been sharpened by loss.

Back at the house, she made herself a cup of tea in the kitchen, leaning against the counter while it steeped. The house was quiet, the kind of quiet that isn't empty but full of held sentences. Ruth had gone to the grocery store. The cat had appeared from somewhere and was winding itself around Maya's ankles. She took the tea and the envelope into Ella's room and shut the door. She set up a small digital recorder on the desk, put on a pair of nitrile gloves she kept in her bag for handling evidence, and took the cassette out of its plastic. She had listened to it once in the city, but she wanted to listen again with the room around her, with the smell of her sister's house and the particular hum of its appliances, as if context might unlock the audio.

She slid the cassette into the portable player she'd found in a box of her mother's old things in the garage. It was a relic, a yellowed plastic brick with a door that popped open with a satisfying clunk. She pressed the small triangle labeled play. The hiss arrived first, then the low hum. The voice followed, close to the microphone but uncertain: "Test—okay. We're—we're starting." She closed her eyes. The room was dim, the blinds half-lowered, slicing the afternoon light into bars that stretched across the bedspread.

Maya took notes on a legal pad. *Hiss and hum. Low-frequency mechanical noise. Possibly generator or HVAC.* She jotted down the two-tone chirp she'd noticed before. *Door alarm? Vending machine? School bell?* She rewound a few seconds and listened again to the voice. Male, mid-range, not old. No accent she could place. His diction was careful. He said, "If anyone ever... this is just in case. Because no one listens when you're nobody."

She stopped the tape, opened her laptop, and started a document with a header: *Transcript 09.15.02.* She typed the phrase she'd just heard and stared at it. It was a confession without a confession. It was the sound of someone positioning themselves as powerless, which was a posture people wore when they were about to do something terrible and wanted to look small in the retelling.

She pressed play again. There was the scrape she'd heard before—chair leg on tile. Then the line that had made her throat close the first time: "You said not here." She listened for the other voice, the response, but it was buried. She ran the audio back and used the player's rudimentary equalizer, flipping the switches to boost the treble and cut the bass. There it was, faint but there: a whisper underneath, a single word maybe, a name. She couldn't make it out, but the cadence was urgent. Then came the silence that felt like a lid, and in it, the pressurized sigh of water in pipes. She wrote: *Location unknown. Water pipes suggest a building with plumbing. Could be anywhere.*

The next noise was the car. She isolated it, listening three times. The whine was high, a grind at the edge of the pitch. She wrote: *Vehicle. Old, possibly misfiring or belt wear. Distinctive.* Then came another scrape and a sigh, and the voice returned, closer. "Okay. If you're hearing this, you know. It was—" A pause. A breath. "He said not to use names." A rustle, palm over the mic, then the long, struggling sound that resolved into a single word. The name. She had played it once and felt the floor drop. She played it again now, headphones pressed to her ears as if to hold the sound inside her skull.

The name was not the one she expected. It was not a boy from her class, not a man she'd ever thought to suspect. It was a name she had heard in civic ads, in speeches at school assemblies, in thank-you notes printed in the local paper. She whispered it now, the syllables clumsy in her mouth, like a word in a language she hadn't studied.

She stopped the tape and sat very still, the bars of light on the bedspread seeming to shift as if the house had exhaled. The cat jumped onto the bed and kneaded the blanket, purring, unaware that names had weight, that they could change the shape of a room.

Maya recorded a short audio note for herself, her voice low, trying to stay outside the panic that wanted to bloom. "I have a cassette. Dated nine-fifteen-zero-two. Male narrator. Hesitant. Mentions a warning not to use names. A final name is spoken, but it's muffled. I need an audio forensics expert to clean it. I need to know if that two-tone sound can be matched to a location. I need to know who was at the festival late that night. I need to know where this recording was made." She stopped, realizing she was listing demands to a machine that couldn't answer. She saved the file and emailed it to a secure folder she rarely used, the one Liam insisted she maintain for anything that could land them in court.

Before she could second-guess herself, she called the police department. The front desk answered on the third ring. "Havenwood Falls PD." The voice was flat, bored.

"Hi," Maya said. "This is Maya Reed. I'd like to speak with Detective Ava Park, please. It's about my sister's case."

There was a pause, the sound of a chair creaking. "Park's not in today. You can leave a message, or I can transfer you to the duty sergeant."

"Message, please. Tell her I've received new evidence dated September 2002, and I'd like to bring it in for evaluation as soon as possible. She can reach me at this number."

"New evidence," the officer repeated, a question in his tone. "Like, physical?"

"Yes. A recording."

He didn't ask for more. He took the number and hung up. Maya stared at her phone, then at the cassette. She needed to call Liam, to tell him she was going to release the teaser clip, the one with the voice but not the name. She needed to make sure it wasn't libel. She needed to remind herself that a podcast wasn't a courtroom.

She held the cassette in her gloved hand, feeling its density. She thought about the boy in the yearbook, Caleb Mason, and the way he used to memorize baseball stats like they were scripture. She thought about the blue sedan and the fact that someone had known her well enough to put an envelope under her door. She thought about her mother's garden and the way marigolds smell like summer and old wood. She put the cassette back in its bag and sealed it tight. The room was quiet again, the cat asleep now, its body soft with trust. Maya closed her eyes and let the name sit in her chest like a small, cold stone. She didn't know yet how heavy it would get, but she knew it

was moving.

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