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The Silence on Hollow Street

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Introduction

By the time the call reached her, Maya Archer had learned to keep her life orderly: two rooms she rented above a bakery that opened before dawn, a wall of cold-case files arranged by color-coded tabs, and a pair of noise-cancelling headphones that could turn the world down to a hum when her thoughts wanted to run. She liked the ritual of it—the neatness, the illusion of control. It was easier to interrogate other people's histories than to look too closely at her own. Easier to chase the truth in towns that did not know her name.

The number flashed with an area code she had not seen in years. Hollow Street lived in that code, and so did the places she avoided: the brick church that creaked in winter gales, the narrow sidewalks lifting at the roots, the house where her mother still drew the blinds at dusk. When Maya answered, the voice on the other end belonged to a young officer from Sayers's department, careful and breathless all at once. A construction crew had pulled up a foundation slab behind a row of storefronts off Hollow Street. There was a fragment in the dirt. The state lab thought it might be human. The officer said Lila's name like a question he wasn't sure he should ask.

Maya moved to the window, watched the bakery's neon sign flicker on—Open—though the sky was still slate and empty. She had not been home in a long time. Grace's voicemails had grown sparse and practical: a forecast, a doctor's appointment, a line about the hydrangeas. They did not talk about the things they would not change. Their last argument had ended with her mother saying, We survived by forgetting. Maya had said nothing in reply, because some silences were older than either of them could name.

She took down the Mercer file as if it were any other: photographs softened by handling, a copied school portrait of Lila in a sweater too big at the sleeves, notes in Maya's tidy hand from a decade-old internship when she still believed distance made her better at what she did. The first time she had seen Lila's face again, it had brought with it a trick of sound: the tail of a song from the summer that never quite ended, the high float of a melody that popped like a bubble in her ear and was gone. Sometimes stress did that to her—memories collapsing, re-forming with sharp edges. She knew how to manage it now. She knew how to stop the reel before it made her doubt everything.

The officer transferred her to the chief's office, and a secretary told her the formal request would be emailed by morning. Polite. Professional. The town had learned new words, but Maya remembered the old ones, too. She set the phone down and let the quiet of the room expand until she could hear the refrigerator tick and the pipes

complain in the walls. Hollow Street was a place that taught people how to listen to what wasn't said.

Ethan Cole texted before the email arrived, a link to a neighborhood forum already fizzing with rumor. You hearing this? Bones under a slab. If you go, I'm in. He always was—too loud, too public, exactly the kind of pressure a small town hated. Maya typed and deleted twice before she sent back: Don't post yet. It's not confirmed. He replied with a thumbs-up and a clock emoji that made her roll her eyes and, unexpectedly, smile.

She packed in the lull between decisions: a carry-on with field notebooks and a spare recorder, a sweater that still smelled faintly of cedar, the worn photograph of a road sign with a bullet hole through the O in HOLLOW. She told herself it was only work, a consultation, a few days. Outside, the bakery's radio clicked to life with an oldies station, and for a second she caught the opening bars of a song she almost recognized. When the bones were found under a foundation slab everyone swore they'd stood on for twenty years, Hollow Street finally woke up. Maya booked the ticket and, with the click that followed, felt the past turn to meet her.

CHAPTER ONE: Return to Hollow Street

The town of Havenwood hadn't changed, which was its most profound deceit. From the elevated window of the rental car, the place looked exactly as it had when Maya left it: the downtown square manicured to a fault, the copper spire of the old Presbyterian church catching the pale afternoon light, and the relentless, suffocating green of the late summer foliage trying to swallow everything whole. It was the kind of prettiness that demanded silence, a landscape of polished denial.

She checked into the one motel that wasn't a chain, a faded pink structure called The Haven Inn, whose lobby smelled perpetually of lemon disinfectant and old coffee. She bypassed the standard greeting from the desk clerk—a woman whose face Maya almost recognized from high school yearbook photos—by keeping her eyes strictly on the receipt and her tone purely transactional. She wasn't here to catch up on two decades of lives lived and forgotten. She was here for Lila Mercer, who had been forgotten by the rest of them.

The official email confirming the bone fragment identification—human, inconclusive on age or sex pending further DNA sequencing—had arrived twelve hours after the initial call, formalizing the consultancy agreement with the Havenwood PD. Maya was technically acting as an independent cold-case specialist, but everyone in town knew who she was, and everyone knew why she was here. She was the bad penny that kept turning up, the native daughter who insisted on digging where others had built foundations.

Hollow Street was her first stop. It ran perpendicular to Main, a short, shadowed cut-through that used to be residential but had been gradually absorbed by commercial sprawl. For years, the spot where Lila Mercer had vanished had been a dilapidated auto-parts store. Now, Adam Lowell's ambitious development project had cleared the lot, turning the space into a concrete pad awaiting the foundations of what the glossy placards called 'The Havenwood Commons'—mixed-use retail and luxury apartments.

Maya parked on a side street, adjusting the rearview mirror to watch the traffic behind her. She was looking for patterns, not people. The air here felt thicker, charged with expectation. A single police barrier, yellow tape frayed at the ends, marked the specific site behind the boarded-up storefronts where the construction crew had stopped work.

The officer who met her was named Leo Vance, a clean-cut man barely into his twenties, looking overwhelmed by the weight of a twenty-year-old case. He was standing guard, clutching a coffee cup like a lifeline.

"Ms. Archer? We weren't sure you'd actually come back for this," Vance said, shaking her hand firmly, but his eyes were darting toward the street.

"I consult on every case I can," Maya replied, keeping her voice even. "What can you show me, Officer Vance?"

He led her around the back, careful to step around the loose gravel and discarded rebar. The site was messy, a violent disruption of the earth. The bone fragment had been found deep within the subsoil, beneath what had been the slab of the old store's utility shed.

"Forensics swept the immediate area, but it was disturbed by the initial excavation," Vance explained, pointing to a small, roped-off square of dark earth. "The bone itself was tiny. The initial assessment was that it might be non-human, but the state lab flagged it. Morphology suggested hominid. They need more to run a comprehensive profile, of course."

Maya knelt, despite the mud staining her professional trousers. She wasn't looking for evidence the crime scene unit had missed; she was looking for the impression the land held. Twenty years of weight. The shed had sat right here, she remembered. A flimsy, rusting structure where the auto parts owner stored old tires and leaky oil drums.

"What was the construction crew doing when they found it?"

"Digging a trench for new drainage—they hit a layer of compacted fill, then this," Vance gestured to the surrounding excavation. "They said it looked like something had been moved here a long time ago, a large volume of dirt. They almost missed the fragment entirely."

"Compacted fill," Maya repeated, running her gloved finger over the cold, damp soil. People don't just fill in foundation sites with random dirt unless they are trying to cover something up or level out uneven ground. In this town, the two were often synonymous.

She stood, dusting off her hands. "I need access to the initial excavation reports, the crew's logs, and any photographs taken before the site was disturbed further. And I want to speak to the person who found the fragment."

Vance nodded, relieved to be given concrete tasks. "We have the preliminary reports back at the station. Chief Sayers wants you to check in with him when you're done here."

The name hung in the air. Chief Daniel Sayers. The man who had run the investigation

two decades ago, who had assured the town that Lila Mercer was simply a runaway, a troubled kid who had hopped a bus and disappeared into a larger life. Now, two decades later, the ground beneath his feet was moving.

"Chief Sayers," Maya said, a flat recognition in her voice. "Of course, he does."

As she turned to leave the enclosed area, she caught sight of a small, almost insignificant detail: a length of thin wire, the kind used in craft projects or cheap jewelry, tangled in a root clump near the edge of the excavation. It was copper-colored and brittle. She took a photograph before she nudged it back into the dirt. Likely nothing, but in a cold case, you catalogue the irrelevant until the pattern emerges.

Vance walked her back to the car. "It's been quiet here for too long, Ms. Archer. People are... nervous. Especially the older families. They like things settled."

"Things aren't settled, Officer," Maya said, looking him directly in the eye. "Lila Mercer is still missing."

She drove away from Hollow Street, the image of the disturbed earth etched into her mind. Instead of heading straight to the police station to face Sayers, she made an unplanned detour. She needed coffee, and more importantly, she needed an anchor in this landscape of shifting memories.

She found herself, almost instinctively, pulling up outside Grace Archer's house. Her mother's home was small, two stories of white vinyl siding and a porch draped with wisteria—a plant that Grace claimed was impossible to kill, much like certain types of guilt.

Maya found her mother in the sunroom, tending to miniature orchids under a heat lamp. Grace looked up, her expression tightening into the familiar mask of controlled disapproval that had been the primary mode of communication between them for years.

"I didn't think you'd come so fast," Grace said, not moving to hug her or offer a hand. Her voice was thin, the voice of someone who only spoke when strictly necessary.

"The case reopened," Maya stated simply, leaning against the doorframe. "A bone fragment was found on Hollow Street."

Grace carefully misted a bright purple orchid. "The ground keeps its promises, Maya. The town made a promise to forget that girl. You shouldn't be the one to break it."

"Forget? Or cover up?"

Grace sighed, finally setting the sprayer down. "Don't be dramatic. It was a tragedy. She ran away, or something worse happened, and no one could prove it. Sayers did his best. Now you come back, stirring up dirt that hasn't seen the light in decades. For what? To remind everyone you left?"

"I came back because there's a possibility of a body," Maya countered, refusing to rise to the bait about her departure. "If this fragment belongs to Lila, we can give her family closure."

"Closure," Grace scoffed, running her fingers along the smooth edge of a terracotta pot. "You think Havenwood wants closure? Havenwood wants quiet. You and I, we know what quiet costs."

The conversation was going nowhere, following the well-worn script of their relationship. Maya needed information, not therapy. She shifted tack.

"The site where the fragment was found—it was the old auto parts store. Do you remember who owned it, twenty years ago? What kind of people frequented Hollow Street?"

"It was Mr. O'Malley's place, before Adam Lowell bought the block up for his new apartments. O'Malley sold out and moved to Florida years ago. It was a grubby little corner. Teens used to smoke back there." Grace paused, then added, her voice dropping slightly, "And Lila, she wasn't always where she was supposed to be."

It was a classic Havenwood line: *the victim was difficult, therefore less worthy of pursuit*.

"Did you ever see Lila near there, the week she disappeared?"

Grace looked at her, truly looked at her for the first time since Maya arrived. "No. I saw you, though. You were driving around that week. Driving and looking stressed."

Maya felt the familiar, sharp twist in her stomach—the signal of a memory she couldn't rely on. "I don't remember driving around."

"Of course, you do. It was the week before you left for college. You were frantic about something, always on the phone. You had that old blue Civic, rattling like a tin can. You were near Hollow Street, the night of the community gala."

The gala. The annual civic fundraiser where everyone in town who mattered—and a few who didn't, like her family—got dressed up and pretended they were bigger than Havenwood.

Maya pushed the specific memory away. The gala was irrelevant. Her mother's recollections were often colored by retrospective judgment. "If you remember anything concrete about Lila, about who she spent time with, you call me. I'm staying at The Haven Inn."

"How long will you stay?" Grace asked, the question laced with hope and dread.

"Until the case is closed."

Outside, the streetlights were beginning to fizz on, casting long shadows. Maya left the house, the silence following her like a second skin.

Instead of returning to the motel, she headed toward the police station to meet with Chief Sayers. She needed to establish control, procedural territory, before the old guard started maneuvering.

The Havenwood Police Department was housed in a renovated colonial building. Inside, it was heavy with the smell of institutional wood polish. Sayers met her in his office, a spacious room decorated with framed commendations and photographs of him shaking hands with every mayor and governor the state had produced in the last thirty years. He looked exactly as she remembered: solid, graying at the temples, radiating a quiet, unassailable authority.

"Maya. It's good to see you, though I wish it were under happier circumstances," Sayers said, standing and offering a handshake that was both firm and slightly too long. His eyes held a practiced sorrow.

"Chief," Maya replied, keeping her distance. "Thank you for the quick transfer of the initial reports. I'm concerned about the integrity of the scene, given the development work."

"Understandable. But we locked it down immediately after the state lab's preliminary confirmation," Sayers reassured her, waving her toward a worn leather chair. "Look, let's be frank. I know your history here, and I know your expertise. We welcome the consultation. But this town has been through enough with the Mercer case. We need to handle this quietly, efficiently, and with respect for the families involved."

Respect for the families—a classic euphemism for *respect for the town's reputation*.

"That's my intention," Maya said. "But efficiency requires total access. I need the original evidence logs from 2002, the full witness interview files, and I'd like to interview the officer who handled the initial missing person report."

Sayers nodded patiently. "That would be Officer Miller. Retired now. Lives down by the lake. I'll have his contact info forwarded. The initial files are sparse, as you know. The assumption was always that she left of her own accord."

"And the evidence log? The chain of custody for items collected from Lila's room and school locker?"

Sayers leaned back, his chair creaking slightly. "The physical evidence was mostly purged during the departmental restructuring in 2010. Routine policy for inactive cases. We retained copies of the reports and the crime scene photos, such as they were."

"Purged?" Maya's eyebrows rose. It was possible, but highly convenient for an unsolved disappearance. "Even items that weren't definitively linked, but might contain trace DNA?"

"It was a different time, Maya. We weren't as savvy about long-term cold storage. But any crucial artifacts are certainly accounted for." He tapped a stack of thin manila folders on his desk. "I've pulled everything we have. You can review it here, or take it with you."

The gesture was overly generous, designed to appear cooperative, yet the underlying message was clear: *this is all there is, don't look further.*

Maya accepted the folders, their thinness insulting the gravity of the case. "I'll take them. I'll need a secured work area—somewhere I can analyze the files without interruption."

Sayers chuckled, a low, paternal sound. "The Haven Inn? I trust their WiFi is adequate. If you need anything, my door is always open. But Maya, tread lightly. This town has secrets, but it also has very little tolerance for disruption."

As she stood to leave, a young dispatcher hurried in with a printed-out photograph, handing it to Sayers. It was a mugshot, dark and grainy, of a man with shifty eyes and a patchy beard.

Sayers barely glanced at it. "Send that to patrol. Make sure they know we don't want him disturbing the site. Just keep him away from Hollow Street."

Maya caught a glimpse of the man's name before Sayers covered the photo: *Dennis Rourke*. A name she didn't recognize, but his immediate proximity to the Hollow Street site, and Sayers's quick dismissal, raised a small flag.

"Who is Rourke?" Maya asked.

"A vagrant. Used to hang around the old auto parts store before Lowell bought it. Probably just trying to scrounge up copper from the rebar. Nothing to do with Lila." Sayers dismissed Rourke with a flick of his wrist.

Maya filed the name away, along with the unsettling realization that Sayers seemed far too calm about the potential reopening of a murder case on his watch.

She returned to the Haven Inn, the stack of files weighing less than they should have. She spread the sparse contents across the bed: photocopies of the initial missing person report, a few badly focused Polaroid pictures of Lila's bedroom (a typical teenage mess, posters of faded rock stars), and three pages of typed summaries of witness interviews that all circled back to the same dead-end: *Saw her leave the diner, looked upset, didn't notice where she went.*

Maya pulled out her laptop and logged onto the state cold-case database. She requested the raw forensic data on the bone fragment, needing the precise dimensions and any micro-analysis done on the surrounding soil.

She worked for an hour, the quiet hum of the motel refrigerator the only sound. The work was familiar, comforting in its routine. She cross-referenced the names in the witness statements, looked up the addresses of the old auto parts employees, and noted the gaps in the paperwork.

There was a knock on the door, tentative and low.

Maya froze, her hand hovering over her recorder. Sayers had been too quick to know where she was staying. She walked to the peephole.

Standing outside was Ethan Cole, the investigative podcaster, leaning against the doorframe, wearing a baseball cap pulled low and an almost impossibly hopeful grin.

"Maya, you didn't answer my text. Did you really think you could sneak back into the lion's den without the lion tamer noticing?" he whispered loudly.

She opened the door, letting him in quickly. "Ethan. I told you not to post anything."

"I held off. I'm a professional." He tossed a flimsy plastic bag onto the table. "I brought donuts. They still make the maple bars at The Sugar Shack, thank God."

Ethan, thirty-something, perpetually dressed in the uniform of a tech journalist who forgot to sleep, was her perfect foil: he thrived on chaos, while she sought order. They had worked together on two previous cold cases, his public pressure often forcing the procedural action Maya needed.

"The case is officially reopened," Maya told him, ignoring the donuts. "A bone fragment, possibly Lila Mercer. The chief is being cooperative—too cooperative."

"Sayers? That old war horse? He's terrified," Ethan declared, pulling out his own battered laptop. "I already ran the initial construction permit for the Hollow Street site. Guess who owns the shell corporation that bought the entire block? Adam Lowell."

Adam Lowell. The ambitious developer, the hometown boy who made good, now trying to turn the site of a famous local tragedy into high-end retail. Motive, proximity, and power—the perfect trifecta of a Havenwood suspect.

"Lowell's name is everywhere. We expected that," Maya said, focusing on the files. "I need you to dig into the departmental budget for 2010. Sayers says they purged evidence during a 'restructuring.' I want to know who authorized that, and what the logs actually said was destroyed."

"Got it. Digital archaeology. And I'll start reaching out to Lowell's former employees," Ethan said, his fingers flying across the keys.

They worked in shared silence for nearly an hour, the low glow of the computer screens the only light. Maya felt the tightness in her shoulders start to ease. She trusted Ethan's instincts, and, more importantly, she trusted his research skills.

She was reviewing the sparse photographs of Lila's room when Ethan whistled softly.

"Hold on. I just got a ping." He turned his screen slightly. "I was running the name 'Rourke'—the vagrant Sayers wants kept away from the site—through public records. No official connection to Lila, but he was arrested multiple times in the late nineties for petty larceny, all in the vicinity of Hollow Street."

"Means nothing. He was local trouble," Maya murmured, her eyes still on a photograph of Lila's wall.

"Wait, I'm digging deeper into the property transfers. Look at this." Ethan pulled up a dated tax record. "The parcel where the bone fragment was found—the shed site—it was originally owned by O'Malley, yes. But for six months in 2002, right before Lila disappeared, the property lines were temporarily leased to a local security company."

"A security company?" Maya leaned closer, intrigued. "Why would an auto parts store need a security lease for a shed?"

"That's the thing. The company is called *Protectorate Security Solutions*. Registered in the county seat. And the owner, listed here..." Ethan zoomed in on the scanned

document. "The owner is listed as Daniel Sayers."

A jolt ran through Maya, sharp and cold. Chief Sayers had owned the property surrounding the exact spot where the potential remains of a missing girl were found, *at the time she disappeared*. He had leased the property himself under the guise of a shell security company, then sold it back to O'Malley months later, wiping his fingerprints.

The file Maya had just read, the one Sayers had handed her with such calm paternal care, now felt like a taunt.

"That's a massive conflict of interest," Maya whispered. "And he didn't mention it."

"It's worse than that. It's control," Ethan countered, his face serious now. "He wasn't just investigating the disappearance; he had a vested, undisclosed interest in the actual ground it happened on."

They stared at the document on Ethan's screen, the bureaucratic lines of the tax record betraying two decades of silence.

"This changes everything," Maya said, pulling out her phone. "We can't go public yet. We need confirmation that the bone belongs to Lila, and we need to understand what he was using that shed for."

"I agree. I'll publish a teaser, though—something vague about the complexity of the Hollow Street land deeds. Stir the pot, see who jumps," Ethan said, already typing.

Maya finished her analysis of the files. The gaps were too deliberate, the witness statements too uniform. She locked the files in her suitcase, feeling the weight of the town settling back onto her shoulders.

As Ethan gathered his things, ready to head back to his own rental, he noticed something slipped under her door—a white piece of paper, folded precisely in half.

"Did you order room service?" he joked, but his eyes were sharp.

Maya walked to the door and picked up the paper. It was thick, textured stock—the kind used for formal invitations. She unfolded it slowly. The message was handwritten in block capitals, clean and deliberate, using a fountain pen.

SOME THINGS ARE BETTER BURIED. IF YOU KEEP DIGGING, YOU MIGHT FIND YOURSELF DOWN THERE TOO.

Maya felt the blood drain from her face. This wasn't local rumor or political pressure.

This was intimate, menacing, and delivered with the certainty of someone who knew exactly where she was and what she was looking for.

"What is it?" Ethan asked, leaning in.

Maya smoothed the note on the table, the texture of the paper unsettlingly luxurious.

"It's a warning," she said, her voice low. "And whoever sent it knew I was at the Haven Inn less than an hour after I arrived. Which means they're watching the moment I step out the door."

She looked at Ethan, then back at the ominous note. The game had escalated before she even set foot in the police archives. Someone was already moving to protect the silence on Hollow Street, and they were willing to cross the line from civic resistance to personal threat. The bone fragment was the key, but the real mystery was who felt so threatened by the idea of the ground giving up its dead.

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