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The House at Blackthorn Ridge

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Introduction

The road to Blackthorn Ridge had thawed into ruts, brown seams of earth breaking through the last, stubborn lacework of snow. Maya eased the rental up the lane with the windows sealed against the damp and the radio off, listening instead to the soft rattle of the car and the thin winter birds calling from the bare branches. The house sat high where the ridge shouldered the sky, its Victorian bones stark as a ribcage against the gray. The porch swing creaked in the wind, a tired metronome counting out time that no one had kept.

Inside, the air was colder than outside, holding to the chill the way a person clutched a secret. She put her bag down by the hall tree and let the door sigh shut. Lemon oil, old paper, the faint iron note of the radiators that hadn't been bled in years—scents of a life that had ended while she was in another state, wearing headphones, asking strangers to tell their stories into a microphone. The kitchen light hummed with a steady, low anxiety. The refrigerator did its best impression of breathing.

Her mother's handwriting was everywhere if she looked: a grocery list pinned with a magnet shaped like a ceramic pear; a reminder on the calendar to call the plumber on a date now circled in mourning black in Maya's head; and, on the mantel, a shoebox sealed with two thick bands of packing tape. A strip of masking tape labeled the lid in a hand that had wobbled at the ends of its letters. Tapes. For M. Remember if you can.

The words angled through her like a draft. Maya held the box, felt the dense give of its contents. Videocassettes, probably—Hi8 or VHS, the kind her mother never wanted to throw away. Her palms ached with the urge to rip the tape, to break the seal and let whatever waited inside come up gasping. Instead, she set it on the dining table and ran her thumb over the note as if warmth could coax more sentences out of it. Remember if you can. As if memory were a muscle she'd failed to exercise. As if her mother had known about the part of that summer that slid away whenever she tried to look at it straight.

I'm small enough to hide in the linen cupboard. The sheets smell like sun. Someone is counting in the hallway. Six... seven... eight. Don't open your eyes, bunny.

She shut the cupboard of her skull fast, breathing through the pinch. The clock on the mantel had stopped at 3:17, a minute unfortunate enough to look like a decision. Maya lifted the glass dome and set the pendulum swinging. It tapped twice, half-hearted, and then hung motionless again as if the room itself had chosen not to proceed.

She found a paring knife in the kitchen drawer and slid it along the tape. The sound was too loud in the quiet, a shallow rip that traveled the length of the house. Inside, a stack of old media blinked back: four VHS in thrift-store sleeves, three Hi8 cassettes, a miniDV or two in cracked plastic cases. Tucked between them, a folded sheet from a clinic brochure—she recognized the ridge line sketched above a modern facade that didn't belong in this century. Blackthorn Clinic: New Frontiers in Memory Care. Her mother had underlined nothing and written nothing, which somehow felt like a choice.

She picked up the top tape. Someone had written RIDGE—95 in a neat, unfamiliar print. Another said EASTER. Another, just a date. Her fingers remembered the weight of camcorders they hadn't held in years, the way you pressed record and prayed the red light meant it was catching what mattered. She looked for a device that could play any of this and laughed once, softly, at the house that kept its past in forms that required extinct machines.

Branches clicked against a window like fingernails. The furnace shuddered and then went still. Maya gathered the tapes back into their box as if restoring a patient to a bed, as if sleep were the same thing as keeping. She told herself she would inventory them in the morning, after the arrangements, after the business of grief. She told herself she wasn't afraid of the stories they held so much as the silences between them.

Headlights fanned across the parlor wall, a pale sweep that lifted the edges of picture frames and set the glass to a faint ringing. She turned toward the front window and saw the rhythm of blue—soft, not siren-bright, but unmistakable—pulsing through the bare maples at the end of the lane. A cruiser idled there, just beyond the mailbox with BENNETT stenciled in flaked paint. The engine's low growl drifted up the drive and into the house, into her chest, and seemed to sit beside the note on the table.

They had found her first, she thought, or else they had never stopped watching the ridge. The porch swing creaked once and stilled as the blue light washed over it again. Maya stood in the doorway of the room where the clock would not move and the tapes waited with their small, patient mouths, and watched the police car at the end of the lane do what the town did best: wait.

CHAPTER ONE: The Wake Under a Wasp-Gray Sky

The wake was held in a funeral home that pretended to be a chapel by borrowing a steeple from a catalogue. Maya stood at the back where the varnish on the pews smelled like apples and regret, and she counted the number of people who looked as though they had dressed in the dark and left something important behind. A quartet of folding chairs remained empty near the aisle, reserved or simply forgotten, and the minister's voice rode the hush like a blade balanced on a fingertip, careful not to cut but threatening all the same. She gripped her phone in her pocket as if it were an anchor, its edges pressing into her thigh through denim, and wondered whether recording a eulogy counted as theft or preservation. Her mother's absence felt physical, a draft against the back of her neck that no button could seal.

Sheriff Lila Crane sat two rows ahead, broad shoulders inside a coat the color of river stones. Every few minutes she turned her head as though checking the acoustics of grief, and Maya imagined the woman tallying exits, threats, and the likelihood that someone would cry too loudly and break something. They had met only twice before, once when Maya was twelve and arrested for chalking slogans on the pavement, and again at the station after her mother's heart gave out, when Lila had slid a paper cup of water across a table and asked if Maya planned to stay. The answer then had been no. Now it rode in the pocket of Maya's coat like a stone warming against her thigh. Lila's radio crackled once, a burst of static that smelled faintly of ozone, and three people near the aisle flinched as if the dead might answer.

Eli kept his hands in his pockets and stared at the casket as if trying to remember how to hate it. He had arrived late and muddy, boots leaving crescents in the carpet that a volunteer with a brush would later try to erase, as though erasing could fix what shoes had carried in. Maya watched him measure the distance between himself and their mother's box with his eyes, a man calculating a slope he would have to climb or slide down. When the hymn ended, he turned and saw her, gave a nod stripped of vowels, and looked away. She knew that nod from childhood: it meant they were on the same side so long as nobody asked what side that was. Eli's jaw worked like he was grinding gravel, and she wondered whether he, too, had found the box on the mantel and the tapes that waited like teeth in a jaw.

The coffin smelled like flowers selected for their ability to last rather than to mean. Maya had chosen lilies because her mother liked the way they looked in photographs, but someone had swapped them for carnations, stiffer and redder, as though color could brace the dead against rot. She leaned close to read the card and caught a whiff of her mother's perfume lingering on the satin lining, a scent flattened by time into something almost metallic. A woman behind her whispered that the funeral home kept

the rooms brisk to slow decay, and Maya imagined the walls sweating secrets that pooled under the floorboards. She thought of the tapes in the box at home, RIDGE—95 and EASTER stamped in careful print, and wondered if the casket contained a different kind of recording, a stillness that could be played back if only someone knew how to thread a needle through silence.

Outside, the sky tightened like a screw and the wind combed through the cedars lining the drive. Guests emerged in clumps that broke apart at the doors, umbrellas blooming like sudden mushrooms. Maya stepped under the portico and let rain needle her face, grateful for the sting. Lila was beside her before the screen door could click shut, badge catching porch light like a warning. They walked to the rental car without speaking, boots making flat, squelching reports on the asphalt, and Maya felt the weight of the town settle on her collarbone. The lane to Blackthorn Ridge had turned to soup, and the house waited at the top like a patient who had forgotten the question.

Inside, the furnace gave a wheeze and then surrendered, leaving the air to thicken. Maya peeled off her coat and hung it on the hall tree, its brass hooks grinning like crooked smiles. The box of tapes sat on the dining table where she had left it, tape still torn and gaping like a mouth learning to lie. She touched the stack and felt the hum of machines that weren't there, the ghost voltage of playback. Somewhere in the kitchen a faucet dripped in a rhythm that tried to teach her something, but she turned away, deciding there were better teachers in the town itself.

Eli was in the living room with Ben Carroway, who sat with his boots on the ottoman, a mug of coffee sweating onto a coaster made from a slice of trunk. Ben had stayed in Blackthorn Ridge and become the kind of man who fixed doors and sagging porches, who knew the grain of wood and the way it remembered nails. He stood now and offered a hand that smelled like sawdust and linseed, and Maya let him grip hers as though that could fasten her to the present. He told her the boiler was ancient but kind, and she told him she'd seen the box, and he nodded as if that were a language they both spoke fluently.

Eli brewed tea at the stove with the precision of someone counting steps, kettle singing a note that rose and fell like a lung. He didn't ask about the police car at the end of the lane, and she didn't volunteer it. They drank at the table with the box between them like a third guest whose RSVP had been lost. Ben mentioned that the clinic on the hill had posted new hours, that the electronic sign now advertised memory evaluations on Thursdays, and Maya felt a shiver trace the line of her spine. She thought of the brochure tucked among the tapes, Blackthorn Clinic promising new frontiers, and wondered if her mother had crossed that threshold while Maya was busy forgetting.

Ben asked what she planned to do with the tapes, and Maya shrugged and said she didn't know, which was true in the way a road is true even when it leads into fog. She

wanted to run them through a machine and let the past unspool onto a screen, but she also wanted to seal the box again and pretend the lid had never lifted. The clock above the sink ticked in a tempo that argued with the faucet's drip, and Maya felt time pulling in opposite directions, like roads splitting at a junction that wasn't on any map she carried. Outside, a branch scraped the window, and she imagined a child's hand testing the glass, seeking warmth.

Agnes Lowe was waiting on the porch when Maya stepped onto the front stoop for air, a woman folded into a coat that had seen more winters than it could name. Her hair was a bird's nest of gray and stubborn color, and her hands gripped the railing as if the wood might try to escape. Agnes said the rain would turn to slush by morning and that the ridge would be slick with forgetting, and Maya felt the words settle like dust on her tongue. Agnes had lived at the foot of the hill long enough to remember when the clinic was a sanatorium, a place where people went to vanish quietly. She said it had learned new manners but kept its appetite, and Maya wondered what, exactly, it fed on.

The police cruiser at the end of the lane hadn't moved, its blue eye blinking in a pattern that felt patient and personal. Maya watched it from the doorway, felt the porch boards shift under her weight, and tried to remember whether her mother had ever liked the color blue. Agnes followed her gaze and murmured that Sheriff Crane was a careful woman, that she liked to see who came and went before deciding whether to wave or wave them away. Maya nodded and thought about the box again, about the tape labeled RIDGE—95, and how the ridge looked in photographs: a dark line holding up the sky.

Eli joined them with a flashlight and said he was going to check the shed for leaks, and Ben offered to help, but Maya felt the house drawing her back, a magnetism she didn't want to name. She sat on the top step and watched the rain braid itself into the drive, watched headlights sweep through the trees and then vanish. The tapes in the box seemed to pulse, a quiet she could almost hear over the wind. She thought of her podcast microphone waiting in another state, of the stories she had coaxed from strangers, and wondered if she was ready to turn the same hunger on her own home.

The front door clicked shut behind her as she set out for the shed, flashlight beam cutting through the dark like a scalpel. The air smelled of wet stone and something sharper, like metal remembering how to be cold. The shed's hinges wept as she pushed the door, and inside, rain had found a way through the roof to kiss a toolbox in a language of rust. Eli was already there, crouched by the water heater, tracing a line of condensation with his finger. He looked up and gave a smile that didn't reach his eyes, and for a moment she saw the boy who had promised to keep her safe in a summer that had slipped its leash.

They stood in the quiet of tools and spared parts, and Maya asked if he had found

anything in the house that didn't belong, anything that felt like a message or a warning. Eli shook his head and said it all belonged, even the things that didn't make sense, and she thought of the tapes, of the clinic, of the police car that hadn't blinked out of sight. A mouse scurried behind a stack of paint cans, and the beam of her flashlight caught a flyer nailed to a post: an advertisement for Blackthorn Clinic's memory program, edges curled like dried leaves. Maya peeled it away and slipped it into her pocket, thinking of the brochure her mother had kept, and felt the ridge leaning closer, watching.

Back at the house, the clock on the mantel still refused to move, frozen at 3:17 as if the afternoon itself had been arrested. Maya climbed the stairs with the flyer in her pocket and the box of tapes under her arm, and the steps groaned a familiar complaint. In the bedroom where she had once believed in endless summers, she set the tapes on the dresser and looked out the window at the clinic's lights, a pale line along the ridge. She wondered if her mother had watched them, too, and if they had promised to make things lighter, to lift the weight of remembering.

The rain softened to a hush, and the police car finally turned around, its tires whispering against wet asphalt as if apologizing for interrupting. Maya watched it go and felt a hollow open inside her chest, a space where certainty used to sit. She picked up the smallest tape and held it to her ear, as if it might carry a heartbeat, and then set it down with the others. Tomorrow she would find a machine, she promised herself, and she would press play and let the past decide what it wanted to say. For now, the house held its breath, and the ridge kept its secrets, and Maya lay down with her clothes on, listening to the dark learn her name.

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