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Echoes in the Forest

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Introduction

Alice Fern never intended to return to the place where the mountains hug the sky and the pines seem to keep ancient secrets. For years, she hid herself within the comforting disarray of city life, her days filled with deadlines and her nights lost in the low hum of anonymity. Yet, when her phone shuddered with a message she could not ignore—her mother missing, no answers found—there was no choice but to answer the call. The past, it seemed, was not content to stay buried. It had found its voice.

As the train cut through thick morning mist, Alice rehearsed the words she would not say: apologies withheld too long, questions asked too late. Her relationship with her mother had always been a series of near-misses and small betrayals—an awkward affection learned on the fly, then abandoned. Years of silence now stretched between them, fragile as frost on the windowpanes. But loss, Alice realized, had a strange way of sharpening memories, of making grief feel like longing and longing like hope.

The town of Fern Hill had changed little since Alice last fled it. The streets still wound along the river, crooked and secretive; the same families peered from behind familiar windows, surveying newcomers and prodigals alike. There was comfort in the sameness, but also a tension—a sense that beneath the surface, something was stirring, patient and unseen. The old house on the edge of the woods stood as she remembered it: a little weatherworn, full of shadows that never quite belonged to the light. Walking up the front steps, Alice felt the years peel away, leaving her exposed and uncertain.

Inside, the air was thick with the perfume of old books and lavender. Everything appeared untouched, as if her mother had simply stepped out for a moment, or as if time itself had paused. Yet it was only a matter of minutes before Alice spotted the first sign that things were not what they seemed: a journal slipped beneath a loose floorboard, the pages dense with codes and aching handwritten pleas. Out the window, the woods loomed, their green depths whispering things Alice was not ready to remember.

The days ahead would demand more of Alice than she expected. Each encounter with the townsfolk brought a reminder that secrets did not stay buried in Fern Hill—they took root, grew wild, reached back for those who thought themselves safe. Old friendships flickered to life with a hint of danger, while strangers offered moments of unexpected gentleness. All the while, the forest called to Alice—a promise, perhaps, or a warning. With every step, she would find herself caught between memories half-remembered and truths desperate to be uncovered.

Yet even as a storm gathered on the horizon, Alice understood she could not turn away. If finding her mother meant unraveling the tangled history of her family and the town—that tapestry of stories, half-lies, and lingering pain—then so be it. Somewhere in the heart of the forest, and in the depths of her own memory, answers waited. It was up to Alice to enter the shadows and bring back the light.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Call Back Home

The city had a way of swallowing you whole, yet somehow, Alice Fern had always found comfort in its anonymity. For ten years, the relentless pulse of Manhattan had been her lullaby, the towering glass and steel her protective shell. Her days as a junior architect were a meticulous dance of blueprints and client demands, each line drawn a conscious effort to build a life utterly divorced from the one she'd left behind in Fern Hill. She lived in a shoebox apartment in the West Village, its single window offering a view of a perpetually grimy brick wall, a far cry from the sweeping mountain vistas of her childhood. And that, precisely, was the point.

It was a Tuesday, late afternoon, the kind of oppressive summer humidity that made even the air conditioning feel like a suggestion. Alice was hunched over her desk, wrestling with a particularly stubborn structural beam on a high-rise proposal, when her phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen, a flicker of irritation, then a jolt. The caller ID read: HOME. Not a person's name, just 'HOME'. It was her mother's landline, a number Alice hadn't dialed in years, and one she rarely received calls from. Their communication had dwindled to sporadic, terse texts – mostly from Alice, checking in, receiving curt replies.

Her thumb hovered over the 'ignore' button. What could it be? Another passive-aggressive query about when Alice might *consider* visiting? A thinly veiled complaint about the state of her garden? Their relationship, always strained, had frayed completely after Alice left for college, a chasm of unspoken grievances widening with each passing year. Her mother, Beatrice, was a woman built of granite and secrets, whose affection was a rare and precious commodity, often given then just as quickly withdrawn.

But something about the persistent ringing, the way her phone vibrated with an unusual urgency, pricked at Alice. She took a breath, told herself to be an adult, and answered. "Hello?" Her voice was crisp, professional, a shield.

"Alice? Is this Alice Fern?" The voice on the other end was a man's, unfamiliar, gravelly, and laced with an unmistakable tremor.

Alice frowned. "Yes, it is. Who is this?"

"This is Sheriff Brody. From Fern Hill. I... I'm calling about your mother, Beatrice."

The name hung in the air, a bell tolling. Sheriff Brody. Alice remembered him vaguely, a large man with a perpetually tired face who'd handed out candy on Halloween and

occasionally pulled over her teenage friends for speeding. He wasn't the kind of person who called without a reason, and certainly not about Beatrice, who was notoriously self-sufficient, a lone wolf even among the close-knit community of Fern Hill.

"My mother?" Alice felt a chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioning. "Is she... is she alright?"

A pause. A heavy sigh. "Miss Fern, your mother... she's gone missing."

The words struck Alice like a physical blow. Gone missing? Beatrice? Her mother was as predictable as the changing seasons, as rooted to her home as the ancient oaks on the mountain. She didn't *go missing*. She barely went to the grocery store without a detailed plan.

"Missing? What do you mean, missing? Has anyone checked the house? The garden?" Alice's mind raced, trying to find a logical explanation. Maybe she'd gone for a hike and twisted an ankle. Maybe she was visiting a neighbor, though Beatrice didn't have many close friends.

"We've checked everywhere, Miss Fern. The house is empty. Her car is in the driveway. Her phone, her wallet... all still there. It's been three days since anyone saw her. Her neighbor, Mrs. Henderson, she called it in this morning. Said she hadn't seen any lights on, no smoke from the chimney."

Three days. Mrs. Henderson, the neighborhood busybody, must have been gnawing at her nails for at least two of them before she finally dialed. Beatrice would have hated the fuss.

"Three days?" Alice repeated, her voice thin. "Why am I only hearing about this now?"

Sheriff Brody cleared his throat. "We... we weren't sure who to call. Your mother, she keeps to herself. And your number wasn't in any of her records, not that we could find anyway. Took us a while to track you down through old school records."

A cold knot tightened in Alice's stomach. Not in any of her records. It was a stark reminder of the chasm between them, how truly estranged they were. Beatrice had made it clear, in her own quiet, cutting way, that Alice had chosen her life, and she, Beatrice, would live hers.

"So, what does this mean?" Alice pressed, her architect's mind demanding details, a plan of action. "Have you sent out search parties? What are the police doing?"

"We've put out an alert. Local volunteers are helping search the perimeter of her

property, the trails near the house. But it's a big forest out here, Miss Fern. And no signs of forced entry. Nothing stolen. It's... perplexing." The sheriff's voice trailed off, betraying his own unease.

"I'm coming home," Alice stated, the words out before she'd fully processed them. The thought of Fern Hill, of the ancient house, of the looming forest, usually filled her with a familiar dread, a visceral need to put as much distance as possible between herself and it. But now, it was a siren's call, pulling her back. Beatrice might be a difficult, enigmatic woman, but she was still Alice's mother. The only family she had left.

"That would be... helpful, Miss Fern. We could use your insights. Maybe she left a note, something only you would understand."

A note. The idea was absurd. Beatrice didn't leave notes; she left cryptic silences and unexplained absences. But perhaps this was different. Perhaps this was the one time she hadn't planned her vanishing act so meticulously.

Alice hung up, the city noise suddenly deafening. Her meticulously constructed life, her carefully cultivated distance, had shattered in an instant. The thought of stepping back into that house, into her childhood bedroom, filled her with a mix of dread and a strange, unwelcome anticipation. She hadn't been back since her grandmother's funeral five years ago, and even then, she'd only stayed a night, fleeing the suffocating quiet and the unspoken accusations that hung in the air between her and Beatrice.

She stared at the structural beam on her screen, its complexity suddenly trivial. The life she'd built here, the career she'd poured herself into, suddenly felt insubstantial, a flimsy paper cutout compared to the urgent, terrifying reality unfolding hundreds of miles away. Fern Hill, with its whispered secrets and ancient trees, was calling her back. And Alice, for the first time in a decade, had no choice but to answer. The first train she could get was in a few hours. The journey back was going to be long, and Alice knew, with a certainty that chilled her to the bone, that the destination held more than just her missing mother. It held pieces of herself she thought she'd buried forever.

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