The Twin Echo

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Tineke V

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auteurtinekev.com

First edition, 2026

ISBN: 9789465549774

Prologue

1996

The first time Eloise heard the wrong voice, neither girl understood that there was anything wrong with it. They were supposed to be asleep, but rain had been falling over Blackwater since late afternoon and the house had acquired the kind of restless night-silence that made sleep feel like an unreasonable demand. Their mother had already checked on them twice, once because Eloise had been reading beneath her blanket with a flashlight and once because Lena complained that her sister kept kicking the wall between their beds. By eleven, the rooms downstairs had gone quiet enough for Eloise to decide that the adults were finally asleep, although Lena knew from experience that her sister's conclusions usually depended more on what she wanted than on evidence.

Eloise slipped from her bed carrying the flashlight, their blue exercise book and the silver-coloured pencil she refused to share because, in her opinion, ordinary grey was too dull for ghosts. She climbed onto Lena's mattress and pulled the blanket over both their heads before Lena could object properly. "Mom told us to sleep, remember? She was very specific about the part where we close our eyes and stop talking." Lena tried to sound stern, but Eloise was already opening the notebook across their knees. "Mom is specific about lots of things when she wants us to stop asking questions. Besides, she's downstairs and we're up here, which gives us a perfectly reasonable logical advantage." Lena stared at her. "That is not how rules work." Eloise smiled. "It is tonight."

For nearly three months the twins had been writing the same story, passing it back and forth until neither of them could always remember which parts belonged to whom. It had begun with two sisters who discovered a door behind a mirror and had grown stranger whenever one of them was bored, frightened or determined to improve the other's contribution. There were

kingdoms beneath lakes, staircases that appeared only after midnight, a forest where voices became lost before the people who owned them did and a silver fox Lena had introduced because she believed every proper story required at least one animal that understood more than the humans. Eloise had added the queen, and Lena still considered that an error in judgement.

She stopped at a page where a dark figure stood between two badly drawn trees. “You made her too horrible. Nobody is going to want to read about someone who steals faces every five minutes.” Eloise lowered her voice as if discussing serious literary matters. “That is because you keep trying to make villains reasonable. Nobody is frightened of a queen who apologises and gives people biscuits.” Lena thought about it. “I would be frightened if she gave them raisin biscuits.” Eloise clapped a hand over her mouth to stop herself laughing loudly enough for their mother to hear. “Fine. She gives everyone raisin biscuits first, and then she steals their faces.” Lena tried not to laugh with her. “That is much worse.” “Exactly. Now you understand storytelling.”

Beneath the blanket, the story belonged entirely to them again, the way so many things did when adults were somewhere else. Eloise had been ill long enough for hospitals, medicine and whispered conversations to have become part of ordinary life, but none of those things were allowed inside the story unless the girls invited them. Lena turned to the latest drawing, where two sisters stood before a tall black doorway, one holding the silver fox while the other reached toward a smaller figure half-hidden beyond the threshold. Eloise had shaded the darkness so heavily that the graphite shone beneath the flashlight. “You’re going to tear the paper if you keep doing that,” Lena warned. “She’s supposed to be dark.” “You can be dark without destroying the notebook.” Eloise leaned against her shoulder. “You worry about everything because you’re older.” Lena sighed. “By two minutes.” “Still older. Those two minutes have consequences.”

On a clean page Lena asked what happened next, and Eloise chewed the inside of her cheek before deciding that the girl behind the door wanted to come out. “But I don’t think she’s the queen anymore,” she added, drawing a narrow line where the doorway should be. Lena frowned. “Then who is she? You invented her.” Eloise looked genuinely offended by the limitation of the question. “Just because I put her in the story doesn’t mean I know everything about her. Maybe she was there before the queen.”

Lena considered that for a moment. “That makes no sense.” “Not yet,” Eloise said. “That’s different.”

Outside the blanket, rain whispered along the window while the refrigerator motor started somewhere downstairs. Eloise began describing a place between the living world and somewhere else, although neither girl possessed language complicated enough to explain what she meant. She called it the in-between because it sounded mysterious and because Lena had informed her that the middle place sounded like somewhere people waited for buses. Together they drew a corridor, narrow and too long for the page, and Lena added a circular window at the far end. Neither girl remembered seeing one like it before. When Eloise placed the silver fox beside the window, the flashlight dimmed until she slapped it twice against her palm. Lena immediately blamed the previous night’s forbidden reading. “You used half the battery under the blanket.” Eloise raised her eyebrows. “You were awake too, so I don’t think you are in a strong position to report me.”

The beam strengthened for a moment, casting the shadow of Eloise’s hand across the notebook, and then three notes sounded somewhere in the bedroom. Both girls stopped speaking. The melody was faint, a simple rise and fall that could easily have belonged to pipes, wind or an old house settling after hours of rain. Eloise looked at Lena first. “Was that you? You hum when you’re thinking.” Lena shook her head. “Not that tune, and not now.” They listened until a car passed on the wet road beyond the house and the refrigerator downstairs fell silent. When nothing followed, Eloise smiled and whispered that perhaps the fox had learned to sing. Lena reminded her that the fox had never sung before. “He can if I say he can,” Eloise replied. “It is still our story.”

The three notes came again before Lena could answer, louder this time and close enough for both girls to realise that the sound no longer belonged comfortably to the pipes or the rain. It seemed to have shifted toward the bedroom window. Eloise pushed the blanket aside and began climbing down, but Lena caught her wrist. “You are not going over there just because something made a noise.” Eloise glanced toward the dark glass. “I’m only going to look. I am not opening anything, touching anything or inviting a demon to breakfast.” “You always say you’re only looking before you do something stupid.” Eloise slipped free with a grin that did nothing to reassure her. “That is because you decide what counts

as stupid before I have the chance to prove you wrong." Lena followed anyway, because allowing her sister to investigate something strange alone had always been more frightening than the thing being investigated.

The bedroom emerged around them as their eyes adjusted to the dark: two narrow beds, the white dresser their father had painted the previous summer, clothes heaped across the back of a chair and the tall mirror fixed to the wardrobe door. Rain streaked the window opposite it, turning the garden into moving black and silver while the glass reflected the room more clearly than it showed anything outside. Eloise stopped close enough for her reflection to overlap Lena's and whispered, "There. She's back." Lena searched the garden and saw nobody. "There is no one outside." Eloise shook her head without looking away. "I didn't say outside. Look behind us in the glass."

Only then did Lena notice that the reflected bedroom appeared deeper than the room itself. The wardrobe mirror was caught inside the dark window and, within that second reflection, the space between the beds seemed to stretch farther than it could physically allow. A dark-haired girl stood there for less than a heartbeat before disappearing when Lena blinked. Eloise's fingers closed around her wrist. "You saw her that time." Lena wanted to deny it, but the girl appeared again, slightly older than either twin and dressed in something pale that dissolved into the reflected darkness below her knees. Her face remained indistinct, yet her attention was unmistakable. She was looking directly at Eloise. Lena lowered her voice. "We should get Mom." Eloise did not move. "Wait. She looks scared." "That is an excellent reason to get Mom."

The reflected girl slowly raised one hand, and the same three notes sounded behind the twins from the direction of the wardrobe mirror. Neither of them turned. Eloise squeezed Lena's hand and whispered that the girl wanted something, while Lena told her there was no possible way to know that from a reflection. The child in the glass opened her mouth, but no sound came from the window. Instead, a voice spoke directly behind Lena and asked, with patient curiosity, "Which one came first?" Lena spun around so quickly that her bare foot slid against the floorboards, yet the room was empty and the wardrobe mirror showed only the twins beside the window. Eloise had gone pale. "You heard it too,

didn't you?" Lena nodded. "Yes, and that means we are getting Mom now."

Before either girl moved, the voice repeated the question, softer this time. Lena felt the familiar answer rise automatically because they had given it hundreds of times to relatives, teachers and strangers who seemed incapable of meeting identical twins without asking the same things. Eloise recognised what she was about to do and tightened her grip. "Don't answer it, Len. I don't know why, but don't." Lena looked at her sister rather than the mirror. "You just said you don't know what she wants." "I don't. That's exactly why you shouldn't tell her anything."

In the reflected bedroom, the older girl disappeared. Something taller took her place, a narrow figure whose face Lena could not make out, with a shape above its head that resembled the points of a badly drawn crown. Eloise began backing away and pulled Lena with her. Then the voice changed into their mother's and called, "Girls, what are you doing up there?" with such perfect familiarity that Lena nearly answered. Eloise stopped her again. "That isn't Mom. Mom sounds annoyed before she gets to the word girls." A second later real footsteps approached along the hallway, accompanied by the familiar creak outside their bedroom door, and their mother entered to find both daughters barefoot beside the window, the flashlight on the floor and the blue exercise book lying open across Lena's bed.

Their mother stared at them. "Would one of you like to explain why you are standing in the dark instead of sleeping?" Lena told her they had heard her call from the room, but their mother frowned and said she had done no such thing. Eloise glanced once toward the window before answering, "We were writing and then we heard something. We weren't trying to be bad." Their mother sighed, crossed the room and closed the curtains, warning them that if the exercise book appeared again before morning it would spend the rest of the night downstairs. As the fabric passed over the glass, Lena thought she saw a pale hand press briefly against the reflected window. She said nothing because she no longer trusted the darkness enough to decide whether speaking would make anything better.

After their mother confiscated the flashlight and sent Eloise back to her own bed, the room remained quiet except for rain. Several minutes passed before Eloise whispered across the darkness, "Len, if I ever sound like Mom but Mom says it isn't her,

promise you won't listen to me straight away." Lena turned onto her side. "That is a very strange thing to ask after you just spent ten minutes telling me your story doesn't need to make sense yet." Eloise's answer came more seriously than Lena expected. "The girl looked frightened before the tall one came. She wasn't afraid of us, and I don't think the voice was hers." Lena pulled the blanket higher. "Then we stop writing about it. We close the notebook and that's the end." Eloise was quiet for a moment before giving a small laugh that held none of her usual mischief. "You can stop writing in the middle of a story, but that doesn't mean the story stops in the middle with you." Lena stared toward the outline of the curtains. "Watch me."

Neither girl slept properly after that. By morning, the page with the long corridor and circular window had changed. Beneath Eloise's drawing stood a sentence neither of them remembered writing, pressed into the paper in pencil dark enough to leave an imprint on the page below: *She knows which one came first.*

1

The Woman at the Window

By four in the afternoon the rain had blurred the grounds of St. Dymphna into a grey wash of grass, stone and dark pine. Maya Torres had spent most of her shift moving between rooms, answering questions, checking charts and coaxing two patients into eating something more substantial than crackers. She was pushing the medication cart back toward the nurses' station when Thomas Reed stepped out of room nineteen with a blood-pressure cuff looped around one hand.

"Your favourite patient is missing," he said.

Maya glanced toward Lena Daggett's room. The door stood open and the bed inside had been made with the rigid corners Lena never bothered with herself. "Missing as in escaped or missing as in moved six yards without telling anyone?"

Thomas looked toward the common area. "Second one. Unless she's learned how to phase through brick."

"Give her another week."

He snorted and headed toward the supply room while Maya parked the cart beside the station and went looking for Lena. She found her at the far end of the ward near one of the tall windows that belonged to the oldest part of the building. The common room had been renovated twice since the seventies but the windows had survived both times, rising almost from the floor to the ceiling in heavy wooden frames that no contractor had managed to replace without ruining the facade.

The ward was drifting toward the slow part of the afternoon. Dinner trays would not arrive for another forty minutes and several patients had gathered around the television without appearing to watch it. Mrs. Keene, who had spent most of the day insisting that the hospital had stolen her blue cardigan, was now wearing it while accusing a crossword puzzle of cheating. At the nurses' station a half-finished pot of coffee had gone bitter on the

warmer, and Thomas had left an apple beside the keyboard with two bites missing from it. None of it was remarkable, which was exactly why Maya usually liked this hour. The day shift had survived its busiest stretch and the night shift had not yet inherited anyone's problems.

She paused long enough to straighten a stack of plastic cups that did not need straightening, then carried one with water toward the common room. Lena had eaten only a few spoonfuls of tomato soup at lunch and had refused the cookie that came with it. Maya had learned not to turn every refusal into a battle. Sometimes people needed to be allowed to dislike soup without it becoming a symptom.

Lena sat in the old rocking chair beside the glass with one slipper half off her foot and her hands loose on the armrests. Twelve days earlier she had arrived furious, frightened and exhausted enough to argue with anyone who tried to slow her down. The medication had taken the sharpest edges off that fury but it had also left her moving as though every thought reached her body a fraction too late. Her dark hair had not been brushed properly and strands clung to one side of her face. She appeared to be watching the rain although Maya noticed, as she came closer, that Lena's eyes were focused not on the grounds outside but on the reflection in the window.

Maya stopped beside the chair. "You skipped afternoon coffee." Lena's fingers moved twice over the wooden armrest, paused and moved twice again. "It tastes like boiled cardboard."

"That's the strongest opinion you've given me all day. I'm encouraged."

The corner of Lena's mouth shifted but her gaze did not leave the glass. Behind their reflections a man in a navy bathrobe crossed the common room carrying a magazine. A television murmured near the opposite wall and somewhere farther down the corridor a door clicked shut. The old heating system answered with a dull knock inside the pipes.

Maya had learned the building's noises during her first winter at St. Dymphna. The radiators complained when the temperature dropped, the service elevator shuddered before reaching the third floor and one section of flooring near the eastern stairwell creaked no matter how lightly anyone crossed it. None of that bothered her anymore. What bothered her was Lena's expression, which changed whenever the reflected corridor emptied behind them.

“Do you want to come back to your room?” Maya asked.

“No. I’m fine here for now.”

“Dining room, then. You barely touched lunch.”

“She doesn’t like it when you stand there. It makes her nervous.”

Maya followed Lena’s eyes to the window. “Who doesn’t?” Lena slowly lifted one hand and pressed two fingertips against the cold glass. Moisture gathered around them. “You frightened her.”

Maya looked over her shoulder. The common room had emptied apart from the man with the magazine who was now sitting near the television. No one stood close enough to have been frightened by her approach. “Lena, who are you talking about?”

For several seconds Lena seemed to be listening to something Maya could not hear. Her head tilted slightly and the rocking chair gave a small creak beneath her. When she spoke again her voice was clearer. “You’re too close.”

“To the window?”

“To where she died. You’re standing almost exactly on it.”

Maya’s eyes dropped automatically to the radiator beneath the sill and then rose again. “Someone died here?” Lena’s shoulders tightened. “She says people always ask the wrong question.”

“What should I be asking, then?”

“That depends on whether you actually want the truth or just something you can put in my chart.”

Maya pulled a chair from the nearby table and sat down rather than hovering over her. She had read Lena’s chart often enough to know what the staff expected to see: auditory hallucinations, visual disturbances, severe insomnia and a fixed belief that her dead twin sister was contacting her. Dr. Adrian Cole had been careful not to write a final diagnosis after only twelve days. Lena was still being observed, her medication was still being adjusted and the family history remained incomplete. The staff had been reminded more than once that uncertainty was not permission to dismiss her.

“Try me. I can listen without writing it down,” Maya said.

Lena’s fingers tapped the armrest again. Twice. Pause. Twice. Maya watched the pattern. “You’ve been doing that all afternoon. Is it a song?”

“No. It isn’t a song.”

“Then what is it, a count?”

Lena looked at her for the first time. Her eyes were tired but not empty. “A difference. Two is the difference.”

Before Maya could ask what she meant a call light flashed above room twenty-three. She stood, told Lena she would be back and crossed the ward to help Thomas with a patient who had become dizzy after standing too quickly. It took less than five minutes. When Maya returned Lena had not moved, but the room had grown darker and the glass reflected more of the ward than the rain outside.

Room twenty-three belonged to Harold Pike, a retired mechanic who apologised every time he needed help. Maya and Thomas found him sitting on the edge of his bed with one hand braced against the mattress while the blood pressure cuff tightened around his arm. Thomas kept him talking about an old Chevrolet he had once restored until the colour returned to his face. By the time Maya brought him a cup of water and made him promise not to stand without calling, nearly ten minutes had passed.

When she returned to the common room Lena was still by the window. Someone had switched the television from a game show to the local weather and a map of northern Maine glowed blue behind the presenter. Supper smells had begun to travel up from the kitchen: onions, gravy and something baked with too much cheese. Lena had not moved except to pull her loose slipper back onto her heel.

Thomas passed behind Maya carrying a folded blanket. “You coming to supper, Lena?” he asked. Lena did not answer.

“Take that as a maybe,” he muttered and continued down the hall.

Maya leaned one shoulder against the window frame. “He’ll bring you soup if you keep ignoring him. You know that.”

“She hates soup. She always did.”

“Who does?”

Lena’s face softened in a way Maya had not seen before. “Eloise.” The name was familiar from the chart. Maya kept her voice even. “Your sister?”

The reflection in the window caught Lena’s profile and Maya’s own face behind her. For an instant another shape seemed to occupy the narrow space between them, too pale and still to belong to anyone crossing the ward. Maya’s eyes snapped to the glass. The figure vanished before she could focus on it.

She turned around. No one stood behind them. When she looked back Lena was watching her rather than the window. “You saw something.”

“Someone probably walked past. These windows catch half the room.”

“No one did. I was watching.”

Maya pushed away from the frame and tried to ignore the sudden cold along her arms. “What does Eloise want?” Lena looked back at the glass. “She wants me to remember.”

“Remember what, exactly?”

The answer did not come immediately. Lena’s attention drifted as though she were following a voice moving away from her. Then she began humming under her breath. Three notes rose and fell softly before she stopped and frowned.

Maya waited. “What song is that?”

“You always get the last note wrong,” Lena murmured.

“I’m not humming, Lena.”

Lena’s expression tightened. She pressed her palm against the window and whispered something too softly to hear. Maya moved closer, careful not to crowd her.

“What did you say just then?”

“She says there are too many here. She can’t hear herself properly.”

“Too many people on the ward?”

Lena shook her head. A cart rattled across the junction near the nurses’ station and someone laughed in the television room. Ordinary sounds, ordinary movement. Maya held on to them while Lena stared into the deepening reflection.

“There are too many dead people in this building,” Lena said.

The sentence was spoken without drama. That made it worse. Maya sat again. “And Eloise is one of them?”

“No. She came with me. She wasn’t here before I arrived.”

A chill worked its way across Maya’s shoulders. “From where?” Lena’s gaze remained fixed on the window. “I don’t know yet.” Thomas called Maya’s name from the nurses’ station. She lifted a hand to show she had heard him but did not leave. Lena’s fingers had begun tapping again.

Her fingers repeated the same pattern, two beats followed by a pause and then two more.

“Why two? Why do you keep coming back to that number?” Maya asked.

Lena stopped rocking. Her breathing changed and the little colour left in her face seemed to drain away as she stared at something in the glass.

“Minutes. It was always two minutes.”

Maya followed her gaze but saw only the ward behind them. “What about minutes?” Lena’s eyes filled with tears. “She was two minutes younger.” The reflection shifted just enough to make Maya doubt what she was seeing.

For a heartbeat, a woman seemed to be standing directly behind Lena.

The resemblance was immediate enough to make her forget every clinical explanation waiting in the back of her mind. The woman had Lena’s dark hair, Lena’s eyes and the same narrow face, yet something about her expression was softer and younger. Maya spun around so quickly the chair beside her scraped across the floor.

When Maya turned, there was no one there. Thomas looked up from the nurses’ station. “Everything all right?” Maya did not answer at once. When she turned back Lena was smiling through tears, not at Maya but at the empty place reflected in the window.

“Eloise,” she whispered.

2

Two Minutes

The next morning Lena refused the scrambled eggs, accepted the toast only after Maya stopped encouraging her to eat it and took one mouthful of coffee before looking into the cup with open suspicion. The dining room was already noisy enough to make conversation optional: somebody had turned the local news up too loudly, two patients were debating whether the presenter had dyed his hair and Mrs. Keene was trying to convince a support worker that strawberry jam counted as a serving of fruit. Lena sat near the end of the table with the banana from her tray untouched beside her and peeled the tiny blue label from its skin until it rolled into a soft ball beneath her thumb.

Maya took the chair opposite her and asked how the coffee compared with yesterday's. Lena said it had somehow become worse and now appeared to have ambition, which made Maya laugh and finally persuaded Lena to eat half the toast. Nobody congratulated her, a restraint Lena appreciated more than encouragement. Twelve days inside St. Dymphna had already taught her that once eating, sleeping and showering became chartable achievements, ordinary life could begin to feel like a series of examinations she had never agreed to take.

Thomas crossed the room on his way off the night shift, looking tired enough to resent daylight personally. He told Maya that Harold Pike's blood pressure had dropped again around four and that Cole had adjusted the order, then glanced toward Lena and asked whether she intended to terrorise the coffee machine again tomorrow. Lena replied that she would first have to see whether it survived today. Thomas gave her the faint approving nod of someone relieved to hear sarcasm returning and said that this sounded more like her, but after he walked away Lena watched him for a moment and told Maya that he still did not believe her.

Maya said Thomas barely believed the weather before checking it twice, then suggested they use the twenty minutes before Lena's appointment with Cole to go outside. The enclosed courtyard behind the older wing was not beautiful enough to deserve the name garden, but it contained three benches, two stubborn maple trees and a narrow strip of planting that patients and staff had spent years trying to keep alive through Maine winters. Lena hesitated only because leaving the overheated ward meant admitting how badly she wanted fresh air, then followed Maya through the secured door.

The morning was cold and smelled of wet stone, pine and last night's rain. Lena stood still for several seconds after stepping outside, letting the air reach her face while Maya pretended not to notice how much the small freedom affected her. A man at the far bench was explaining a card game to his visiting daughter, who could not have been more than ten and kept correcting him with the ruthless confidence of a child certain that adults existed mainly to misunderstand rules. The sight caught Lena unexpectedly. Eloise had corrected rules exactly the same way, not because she cared about accuracy but because changing them halfway through usually improved her chances of winning.

Maya noticed the shift in Lena's expression and asked whether something had reminded her of Eloise. Lena answered without looking away from the father and daughter. She said Eloise had considered rules provisional whenever they became inconvenient, then added that this was one reason childhood games with her could last for hours: if Lena began winning, Eloise simply announced that the floor had become lava or that older sisters were suddenly worth fewer points. Maya smiled and said that sounded exhausting. Lena admitted it had been, but the memory brought a warmth that made the grief inside it harder rather than easier.

They walked once around the courtyard before the medication heaviness returned to Lena's legs. Near the eastern wall, an old window reflected both women and the wet maple branches behind them. Lena caught herself checking the glass for a third figure and immediately looked away. Maya did not ask whether she had seen anything; instead she said that Cole was waiting and that psychiatrists became restless when deprived of scheduled appointments. Lena told her she had assumed psychiatrists fed on

forms rather than punctuality, and by the time they went back inside she was smiling despite herself.

Cole's office had been designed to feel less clinical than the rest of St. Dymphna, with two armchairs, a small bookcase and a lamp that cast warmer light than the fluorescent panels outside. Lena distrusted it for precisely that reason. Rooms that tried too hard to make people forget where they were usually made her remember it more clearly. Cole stood when she entered, asked whether she wanted the door open or closed and accepted her choice of partly open without comment.

He began with sleep because, as Lena had predicted to herself, he was incapable of resisting it. Four hours, according to the night notes. Lena pointed out that St. Dymphna seemed to maintain better records of her unconscious life than she did, and when he moved on to appetite she asked whether he intended to work through every bodily function before reaching the reason she was actually sitting there. Cole admitted that he probably would if given enough time, because medication, sleep and food were boring only until one of them changed enough to matter. The answer was irritatingly reasonable, which Lena told him was a poor quality in a psychiatrist who wanted to keep conversations interesting.

Cole smiled and set the file aside. Rather than asking immediately about the figure Maya had seen at the window, he said Maya had mentioned Lena seemed more alert that morning. Lena replied that cold air and terrible coffee were apparently more effective than half his treatment plan. The humour loosened something between them, enough that when Cole eventually returned to the window, Lena did not retreat behind sarcasm as quickly as she had the day before.

She told him she had seen Eloise in the reflection and that Maya had seen enough to frighten herself, though Lena did not claim her sister had been physically standing in the common room. Cole asked what 'there' meant if not physically present, and Lena spread one hand in frustration. She said she did not know the mechanics of dead people and resented being expected to provide a theory simply because she was the one hearing them. Cole accepted the criticism and said he was trying to distinguish what she experienced from what he assumed she meant, which Lena conceded was at least more useful than correcting her grammar.

That reminded him of the two-minute pattern Maya had recorded. Lena looked toward the wall clock and explained that she had been born first in 1988, with Eloise following two minutes later and spending the rest of her life treating those two minutes as evidence that Lena should have known better about everything. Cole asked what people who knew them used to tell the twins apart, but the question opened more than he expected. Lena said strangers saw matching faces, while family noticed that Eloise smiled more quickly, climbed anything remotely climbable and slept with one foot outside the blanket because she insisted monsters respected confidence. Thunder frightened her badly enough to crawl into Lena's bed, yet she would deny being scared while practically lying on top of her.

Lena's voice changed as the memories gathered momentum. Eloise hated peas, whispering adults and hospital broth, and during treatment she once spent an entire lunch trying to convince Lena that chemotherapy should legally entitle patients to better desserts. When their mother told her to eat three more spoonfuls before asking for pudding, Eloise quietly transferred two to Lena's bowl and argued that the instruction had never specified whose mouth the food had to enter. Cole laughed before he could stop himself, and Lena looked almost offended by the sound until she laughed too.

For a few minutes Eloise existed in the office as more than a dead child in a chart. Lena described the way she wrote stories when treatment left her too tired to play, how one twin would begin a sentence and the other would finish it, and how their invented worlds became more elaborate whenever the hospital felt unbearable. Cole did not interrupt until Lena mentioned mirrors without seeming to notice she had done so. Then he asked whether the unfinished story her mother had referred to was one of those hospital stories.

The warmth left Lena's face so quickly that Cole regretted the question. She told him the story had never belonged to Margaret to hand over for clinical interpretation and that every time adults pushed at it, something changed around her. Cole said he was not asking because he believed a childhood story had caused her symptoms; he was asking because her reaction to it was stronger than her reaction to almost anything else they discussed, which mattered whether the reason was traumatic memory, superstition or something neither of them currently understood. Lena

considered that and still refused. She said she could tell him about Eloise, but not open that particular door simply because he had finally learned to ask politely.

Cole accepted the boundary. He had just begun to say that they could leave the story alone for the day when three notes drifted through the open doorway, faint enough that at first Lena thought memory had supplied them. The pattern repeated after a pause. Cole stopped speaking and looked toward the corridor. Lena did not move at all.

The melody came once more, the same three-note phrase Lena had hummed at the window. Cole stepped into the hall while she remained seated. A housekeeper worked farther down with headphones around her neck, Maya was speaking with another nurse near the station and no patient stood close enough to account for the sound. Cole returned slowly and said he had heard something but could not identify its source. Lena told him that was not the same as believing her, and he agreed that it was not, although pretending he had heard nothing would be dishonest.

They resumed the session, but the office no longer felt quite as warm. Cole asked what the melody meant to her, and Lena explained that Eloise used it during childhood hide-and-seek whenever she wanted Lena to find her without calling her name. Cole asked whether the tune belonged to a song. Lena said it did not, at least not one she remembered, and that Eloise often got the final note slightly wrong on purpose because Lena always corrected her. The instant she said it, Lena's expression tightened. Correcting Eloise had once been automatic. Now, after the reflection, even that small habit felt strangely exposed.

A few minutes later the three notes sounded again, but this time they did not come from the corridor. The sound seemed to originate behind Cole's desk, near the dark glass front of a cabinet that reflected the two of them from an angle. Cole stood without pretending he had not noticed the change in direction. He checked behind the cabinet, opened it, inspected the small speaker on his desk and even looked toward the ventilation grille before admitting there was no obvious source. Lena watched him with a mixture of vindication and concern. She had wanted him to hear something he could not explain; now that he had, she found she disliked the victory.

Cole sat down again and said that hearing a sound twice did not establish what produced it, but it did give them something

specific to document and, if it recurred, investigate. Lena replied that this was the most psychiatric sentence he had uttered all morning. He accepted the insult and asked whether she wanted to stop. She almost did, then glanced toward the cabinet reflection and said they should finish because she was tired of every strange thing deciding when conversations ended.

They returned to the window incident. Cole said Maya had written that Lena claimed someone had died near the old glass. Lena corrected him: Eloise had said it, and Lena herself had not known anything about a death in that part of St. Dymphna. Cole suggested they check historical building records rather than treating the statement as either fact or delusion. The proposal surprised Lena because it moved the question out of her head and into a place where evidence might exist. She told him that if he actually checked, she would be forced to reduce her opinion of psychiatrists from completely useless to occasionally inconvenient.

Cole closed the file at last, and lunch smells had already begun drifting through the partly open door by the time Maya appeared with Lena's medication cup. Chicken broth reached the office first, prompting Lena to observe that St. Dymphna had an unusual strategy for encouraging recovery. Maya laughed and waited while Lena stood, but before she could leave, Lena stopped so suddenly that Cole thought she had become dizzy.

Her attention had fixed on the cabinet glass. Cole followed her gaze and saw only his desk, Lena near the door and the empty space between them. Lena said quietly that Eloise was talking again, not clearly enough for a conversation but insistently enough that one phrase kept returning. Maya asked what she was hearing. Lena answered that Eloise said they had the date wrong.

Cole asked which date she meant, and Lena's first response was irritation rather than fear. She said that was exactly the problem with records: everyone treated a date as though it settled what happened. Cole reminded her that an actual date could still be checked and asked whether Eloise meant the date of her death. Lena listened for several seconds, her eyes fixed on the reflection, then said that she thought so, except the message did not sound as simple as a clerical mistake. "She's saying the day she died isn't the day something happened to her. Or maybe she means something happened first. She keeps saying before."

Maya's expression changed. Cole asked Lena not to force the message into a meaning if she was uncertain, and Lena nodded

because for once uncertainty felt safer than an answer. She said only that Eloise insisted they were remembering the wrong point in time. Cole told Maya he wanted the recorded death date, Mercy records and any family documentation compared before their next session, not because he believed a ghost had corrected the chart but because a discrepancy was now specific enough to test.

Lena was almost at the corridor when the three-note melody returned. It began somewhere behind Cole's office, crossed the open doorway and seemed to continue farther down the hall without any visible person moving with it. Maya stepped out first, Cole directly behind her, and together they watched an empty corridor while the notes travelled away toward the older section of St. Dymphna. Nobody spoke until the sound vanished. Cole remained in his doorway, looking not frightened so much as offended by a problem that had refused to stay in one location, while Lena understood that the morning had changed something more important than whether he believed her. For the first time, the question was beginning to move outside her mind.

As Maya walked her back toward the ward, Lena glanced once over her shoulder. Cole was still standing where they had left him, staring down the empty corridor. Somewhere beyond the next junction, too faint to be certain and too familiar to ignore, three notes sounded again.

3

The Call

Three weeks before St. Dymphna, Lena Daggett was barefoot in her kitchen slicing a lemon when her phone began to ring. Rain had been falling since dusk and the wind was pushing hard enough through the pines behind the house to make their branches scrape along the siding. She glanced at the screen expecting Rachel or Nathan and nearly cut her thumb when she saw her own name.

She had come home late from a grocery run to Blackwater, changed out of damp jeans and left the bags on the counter while she decided whether cooking dinner was worth the effort. In the end she settled on pasta with butter, lemon and too much parmesan, the sort of meal she made when she wanted something warm without pretending to have culinary ambitions. A bottle of white wine stood unopened near the refrigerator. She considered it, changed her mind and poured sparkling water instead.

The house had been cold when she came in, so she turned up the thermostat, fed two pieces of junk mail into the recycling bin and carried a basket of clean laundry halfway upstairs before abandoning it on the landing. There was nothing unusual about the evening. That detail would bother her later more than anything else. She had not been performing a ritual, reading ghost stories or thinking about Eloise. She had been wondering whether the parmesan had gone stale and whether she had enough detergent to make it through the weekend.

Lena Daggett.

Her number appeared beneath it. For a moment she simply stared. Then she laughed under her breath because the alternative was admitting that the sight unsettled her. “Very funny.” She declined the call and went back to the lemon. Five seconds later the phone rang again.

The same name and the same number filled the screen. Lena wiped her hand on a dish towel and answered. “Hello?”

Static moved through the speaker, not the sharp crackle of a poor signal but something softer and farther away, like wind travelling through a long tunnel. She pulled the phone from her ear to make sure the call was connected and then tried again.

“Who is this?”

Someone breathed. The sound was faint but unmistakably human, close enough to raise the hairs along her arms. Lena looked toward the kitchen window. The glass reflected the counters behind her and the warm pendant light above the table. Beyond it lay only the black outline of the yard.

“This isn’t funny.”

The breathing continued. She ended the call. The phone rang again before she had time to set it down. This time she let it go to voicemail. A notification appeared almost immediately. One new message waited for her, only seven seconds long.

Lena played it once and heard only static and breathing. On the second replay she thought there might be a word near the end. On the fourth she heard it clearly enough for the kitchen to feel suddenly smaller.

“Len.”

No one called her that anymore. Most people never had because she disliked it. Eloise had used it precisely because Lena disliked it and because only Eloise could get away with doing so.

Lena put the phone on the counter as though it had become hot. She ran cold water over her hands, splashed some on her face and told herself she was tired. Caller ID could be spoofed. Voices could be imitated. People knew things. Families talked. Social media preserved details no one remembered posting.

The phone rang again. She closed her eyes, counted five rings and answered on the sixth. “What?” Silence followed, then a woman’s voice so distorted by static that Lena almost convinced herself she did not recognise it.

“You still do that.”

Her free hand tightened around the edge of the counter. “Do what?”

“Count.”

The room seemed to tilt although she had not moved. “Who is this?”

“You know.”

"No."

"Two minutes, Len."

The words took her back thirty years in a single breath: two narrow beds, matching coats by the door, Eloise insisting that being born second meant Lena had been given a two-minute unfair advantage at life.

"Stop."

"I came after you."

"Stop it."

"Two minutes after."

Lena ended the call and stood in the silence with her heart beating painfully against her ribs. She opened the call history and found the impossible entry beneath the time stamp: Caller: Lena Daggett. She took two screenshots before it could disappear and emailed them to herself. Then she called Rachel. No answer. Nathan did not pick up either and she abandoned the idea of calling her mother because Margaret could turn a dropped teaspoon into a family emergency.

Searching the internet steadied her for almost a minute. Caller ID spoofing was common. Scam calls could mimic numbers. Software glitches happened. She read enough to convince herself that a technical explanation existed and then stopped because none of the articles explained why the caller had used Eloise's private name for her.

The pasta had gone cold by then. Lena tried to eat anyway, standing at the counter while she scrolled through explanations for spoofed calls, but after three mouthfuls she gave up and covered the bowl with a plate. She rinsed the knife, wiped lemon juice from the cutting board and deliberately put the kitchen back in order. The small domestic tasks helped because they had edges and endings: wash the glass, hang the towel, lock the back door, switch off the light over the stove. Nothing supernatural was required to explain a dirty pan.

She took her sparkling water into the living room and turned on a comedy she had already seen twice, hoping familiar dialogue would occupy enough of her mind to make the phone ridiculous again. For several minutes it worked. She even laughed once. Then the floorboard creaked overhead.

The house was old enough to move with the weather and she knew most of its complaints. The upstairs landing settled when the temperature dropped and the bedroom window rattled in

strong wind. This was different. It sounded like a measured step followed by another.

She took the heavy flashlight from the kitchen drawer and crossed the living room. At the foot of the stairs a smell stopped her more effectively than any sound could have. The smell carried disinfectant, plastic tubing and something artificially sweet.

Strawberry, she realised, and the recognition turned her stomach. For one dizzy instant she saw Eloise in a hospital bed complaining about strawberry-flavoured medicine and accusing the nurses of trying to poison her politely.

Lena forced herself upstairs. The hallway was empty. She checked her bedroom, bathroom and guest room before reaching the office at the end. The door stood open though she was almost certain she had closed it earlier.

A cardboard box sat in the middle of the floor. ELOISE had been written across the side in black marker.

Lena stopped in the doorway. She had placed that box on the highest shelf of the closet six years ago when her parents downsized. She had never opened it. Now the closet stood open and the shelf above was bare apart from two albums and a folded blanket.

Thunder rolled across the woods and the lights failed. The flashlight beam jumped in Lena's hand. Somewhere downstairs a faint melody began: three notes, a pause and the same three notes again. She knew it.

"Eloise?"

The humming stopped. Lena remained still long enough to hear another floorboard move behind her. She spun toward the window and caught something in the reflection before she managed to turn around. A child stood beside the closet.

Pale hospital pyjamas hung loosely on a thin body and a badly knitted cream cap covered most of her hair. Lena remembered the cap before she remembered the face. Their mother had made it during Eloise's first months of treatment and Eloise had complained that one side always slipped over her eyebrow.

"Ellie?"

The flashlight slipped from Lena's hand and struck the floor. When she snatched it up and turned, the room was empty. Then a telephone rang downstairs.

Not her mobile. An old-fashioned ring echoed from the living room, sharp enough to make her skin prickle. Lena followed it to

the cabinet beneath the stairs and pulled out a box containing extension cords, Christmas lights and an old cream-coloured phone from her parents' previous house.

It had no cable attached. It rang again in her hands. Lena nearly dropped it. Instead she carried it to the coffee table and stared as the receiver trembled in its cradle. On the next ring she picked it up.

"Eloise?"

Static answered first, followed by slow breathing before the voice returned. "You took too long."

Lena closed her eyes. The voice was clearer now and the recognition hurt more than she expected. "No."

"You promised."

"I was eight."

"You left me."

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I couldn't do anything. You were sick and I was eight years old."

"You could have finished it."

The story. Lena's stomach turned as an old image surfaced: a notebook between two hospital pillows and Eloise arguing over the ending.

"We were children, Eloise. Neither of us knew what we were doing."

"Yes, and I still remember what you promised."

"You died."

Static surged through the line. Lena pressed one hand against her mouth and waited until the voice returned.

"I'm still here."

"Where are you, then?"

"In the in-between. I don't know how else to name it."

A second sound moved beneath Eloise's voice, too low to understand and too deliberate to be static.

"Who's there with you? Are you alone?" Lena asked.

For several seconds the line remained silent before Lena tried again. "Ellie?"

"Find it."

"Find what? Tell me what you want."

"Our story."

"I don't have it anymore."

"You do. It's upstairs, where you left it."

Lena looked toward the ceiling. "The box?"

"Finish it. You promised we would."

The whisper beneath Eloise's voice grew louder. It sounded as if more than one person were speaking very far away.

"Eloise, who's there with you?"

"Don't let her—"

The line cut out. Lena gripped the dead receiver. "Don't let her what?" A burst of static cracked against her ear and a different voice whispered through it.

"Look behind you."

Lena did not turn. The living-room window reflected the staircase, the open cabinet and her own white face. Near the bottom step stood the little girl in the crooked knitted cap. This time Eloise was not looking at Lena.

Her eyes were fixed on something just over Lena's shoulder and the fear in her expression belonged to a child who knew exactly what she was seeing. She raised one finger to her lips. The house went dark.

4

You Left Me

The lights returned before Lena had finished counting to three. The room came back in pieces: the sofa, the coffee table, the disconnected telephone in her hand and the empty staircase where Eloise had been standing a moment earlier.

Lena lowered the receiver and listened to the ordinary noises of the house reassert themselves. Rain rattled against the windows. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen. Somewhere in the walls the heating system clicked as power returned. Nothing moved near the stairs.

The old telephone should have gone back into its box. Instead Lena sat on the edge of the sofa and studied it until a memory surfaced: Nathan tripping over its cord when he was twelve, their father shouting from the kitchen and Eloise laughing so hard that the laughter turned into coughing. In the final year of her life almost every ordinary moment had contained that trap. A joke could become a coughing fit. A bruise could mean another blood test. A tired afternoon could end in hospital.

Lena placed the receiver carefully in its cradle and went to the kitchen for her mobile. The call history no longer showed any incoming calls from her own number. Her screenshots remained. She forwarded them to Rachel with a short message asking her to call and then stood for several seconds staring toward the staircase. The box upstairs seemed to wait for her like a dare.

When Lena returned to the office the cardboard sat exactly where she had left it. She checked the closet again before cutting through the old packing tape. Her mother had written ELOISE - KEEP on one side and underlined the last word twice.

The first thing inside was a faded pink blanket from the hospital. Beneath it lay the cream knitted cap Lena had seen in the reflection, complete with the crooked seam and small blue button Margaret had sewn on after Eloise complained that the hat looked

too boring. Lena touched the button and felt the last of her practical explanations slip further away.

She removed a stack of children's drawings, hospital cards and exercise books tied with green ribbon. The first notebook carried both twins' names and a warning to Nathan to keep out. That made her laugh despite herself. A few pages later she found the silver fox, coloured so aggressively in pencil that the paper had almost torn. Eloise had written HE KNOWS THE WAY underneath.

Lena turned page after page and watched the girls' private world reassemble itself. Forests. Castles. Two sword-wielding princesses. Nathan being eaten by a dragon. Then the mirrors appeared. One hung between two trees. Another stood in a ruined place beside water. Eventually an entire page had been shaded black around a single white oval containing a little girl.

Across the top, in Eloise's childish handwriting, ran a sentence Lena did not remember ever reading.

The mirror remembers when you don't.

The story became darker after that. The younger sister wanted to enter the mirror world while the older one resisted. A silver fox warned them about shadows that could not create their own voices. They listened, learned and repeated what they heard until imitation became almost perfect.

One line stopped Lena long enough that she read it twice before continuing. THE SHADOWS CANNOT MAKE A VOICE. THEY HAVE TO STEAL ONE.

The whisper from the telephone returned to her immediately: Look behind you.

A page had been cut from the notebook close to the binding. The next surviving line began halfway through a scene: because she said we must never go there alone. Farther down the page Lena found a drawing of a hospital room. Eloise lay in the bed while Lena stood beside the window. Underneath, Eloise had written LENA CAN SEE HER TOO.

Lena stood so quickly that her knee struck the box and scattered photographs across the floor. One showed Eloise in hospital at seven, pale but smiling around a stuffed rabbit. Another had been taken in the same room from farther back. Eloise slept while Lena stood near the window.

A woman stood behind Lena. The image was blurred enough to invite excuses. A nurse. A trick of exposure. Someone passing the

doorway. Yet the figure appeared to wear a long dark dress and no face was visible. On the back Margaret had written March 1996 - Mercy Children's. Beneath that, in purple childish ink, someone else had added SHE CAME BACK.

Lena's mobile rang downstairs and she screamed before she could stop herself. Rachel's name appeared on the screen when she reached the kitchen.

"Jesus, Lena. What happened? You sound like you've been running."

"Nothing I can explain without sounding insane."

"You sent me screenshots with 'something weird is happening' and then answer like someone's chasing you. Start again."

Rachel's voice steadied her because it belonged to the world Lena understood. She explained the spoofed calls first, then the voice and finally the box. She left out the little girl in the reflection until Rachel asked directly whether Lena had recognised the caller.

"I don't want to say it over the phone."

"Why? You called me."

"Because if I say it out loud, you're going to think I'm losing it."

"I might think you're exhausted and somebody's screwing with you. That's not the same thing."

"They knew about Eloise. Whoever called me knew exactly who she was."

The joking tone disappeared. Rachel had known Lena long enough to understand the weight of the name.

"Anyone in your family could know about Eloise. That part isn't impossible."

"They used 'Len.' Nobody uses that now."

Rachel was quiet. "Okay. That's weird."

Lena told her about the notebook. When she mentioned the silver fox Rachel recognised it immediately and remembered Eloise drawing it on almost everything, including once on wallpaper that Margaret had only recently replaced. The confirmation should have comforted Lena. Instead it made the old story feel less like a forgotten childhood game and more like something that had been waiting intact beneath her memory.

"There's also a photograph," Lena said.

She sent Rachel a picture of the hospital image. Rachel studied it while remaining on the line.