



The Voice on 3.33 MHz

NAZMHUB

Signal from Tomorrow

sci-fi

The Complete Book — All 12 Episodes

Contents

A strange radio signal from the future warns a group of friends about something coming to their town. A sci-fi thriller.

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Episode 1 — The Voice on 3.33 MHz

The summer Maya Sharma turned sixteen, Cedar Creek smelled like cut grass and distant rain. It was the kind of small town where the loudest sound at night was usually the freight train rolling through the valley at eleven-forty, and where the biggest mystery anyone could remember was who kept stealing the plastic flamingos from Mrs. Abernathy's lawn. Maya had lived there her whole life, and she had long ago decided that nothing interesting would ever happen in Cedar Creek. She was wrong by exactly one attic.

The attic belonged to her grandfather, Daniel Reyes — or rather, it had belonged to him, before the spring when his heart gave out quietly in his garden, a trowel still in his hand. The family had kept meaning to sort through his things, but grief has a way of turning "this weekend" into "someday," and someday into three months later, which was where Maya found herself on the second Saturday of July: sitting cross-legged on the dusty attic floor, surrounded by boxes labeled in her grandfather's careful block letters. BOOKS. TOOLS. DO NOT THROW AWAY (underlined twice).

It was the radio that stopped her. It sat in the corner under a yellowed sheet, and when she pulled the sheet away, a small cloud of dust rose up and hung in the slanted afternoon light like something alive. The radio was enormous by modern standards — a wooden cabinet the size of a

microwave, with a brass dial, a green glowing eye of a tuning indicator, and a hand-lettered card taped to the top that read: CALLSIGN K7CRK — CEDAR CREEK RELAY.

Maya's breath caught. She remembered this radio. She remembered sitting on her grandfather's lap at maybe seven years old, watching his big knuckled hands turn the dial with impossible gentleness, listening to voices crackle out of the dark — truckers on the interstate, a weather station in Wyoming, once, impossibly, a fisherman off the coast of Alaska. "The air is full of people talking," her grandfather had told her, "if you know how to listen." She hadn't thought about that in years.

She ran her finger along the brass dial. Beneath the dust, the needle still moved. On impulse, she found the power cord coiled behind the cabinet, plugged it into the wall socket by the attic window, and flipped the big toggle switch.

Nothing happened. She wasn't surprised — thirty years of silence doesn't end with a flip. But then, so faint she thought she was imagining it, came a hum. Low, warm, rising. The green tuning eye flickered, died, flickered again, and then glowed steady and bright as a cat's eye in the dark.

Maya's heart did something complicated in her chest. She turned the volume knob, and static flooded the attic — that ancient, oceanic sound,

the sound of the universe clearing its throat. She laughed out loud, alone in the dust, and pulled out her phone to text the group chat.

You guys need to get over here. NOW. Attic. You won't believe this.

Jonas Weber arrived first, because Jonas Weber always arrived first — he lived two houses down, and he had once sprinted the entire distance in the rain because Maya had texted "emergency" and the emergency had been a spider. He took the attic stairs two at a time, skidded to a stop in the doorway, and stared.

"No," he said.

"Yes," said Maya.

"No way. Is that a *Hallicrafters*?" Jonas crossed the room in three strides and dropped to his knees beside the cabinet, his hands hovering over it like it was a holy relic. Jonas was the kind of boy who had disassembled his family's toaster at age nine and reassembled it into something that still toasted bread but also, briefly, picked up police radio. His bedroom was a museum of salvaged circuit boards, and he wore his soldering-burn scars like medals.

"It's my grandpa's," Maya said. "It still works. Listen."

She turned the dial slowly. Static swelled and broke like surf. A fragment of Spanish-language music. A man reading commodity prices in a flat Midwestern drone. More static.

Jonas's eyes were shining. "This is a shortwave receiver, Maya. Do you understand what this means? This thing can hear *half the planet*. Your grandpa was a ham operator — K7CRK, that's his callsign. He probably talked to people in Japan with this."

"I know," Maya said softly. "I used to listen with him."

The attic stairs creaked again, and Priya Nair appeared in the doorway, one eyebrow already raised. Priya was the third point of their triangle — the one with the color-coded planner, the debate team trophies, and a skepticism so finely honed it could cut glass. She took in the scene: Maya glowing, Jonas practically drooling on an antique.

"Please tell me this isn't another one of Jonas's 'totally safe' experiments," Priya said.

"It's a radio, Priya. It's literally the safest experiment."

"Famous last words." But Priya came in anyway and sat down, because for all her skepticism, she was also the one who had stayed up until 3 a.m. with them last spring trying to photograph the northern lights from the water tower, and she never left a mystery alone.

For the next hour, the three of them played. Jonas explained how shortwave signals bounced off the ionosphere — "it's like skipping stones, but the pond is the sky" — while Maya turned the dial through band after band. They heard a numbers station, or what sounded like one: a woman's voice reading groups of digits in a monotone, which made all three of them go quiet in a way none of them wanted to admit. They heard a preacher, a Chinese opera, a long stretch of nothing that Jonas insisted was "probably a very boring star."

It was Priya who noticed the time. "It's almost six. My mom's going to — " She stopped. "Wait. Go back."

Maya's hand froze on the dial. "What?"

"Two bands back. There was something... weird. Under the static."

Maya turned the dial back, slowly. Static. A burst of morse code, too fast to catch. More static. And then — underneath it all, so faint it might have been imagination — a pattern. A pulse. Three beats, a pause, three beats, a pause.

Jonas went very still. "That's not random," he whispered. "Turn it up."

Maya nudged the volume higher and fine-tuned the dial with the delicate touch her grandfather had taught her a decade ago. The signal sharpened. It wasn't morse — or rather, it wasn't **only** morse. Beneath the pulses there was something else: a warbling tone that rose and fell,

almost like... breathing. Almost like a voice trying to form words through water.

"What frequency is that?" Priya asked. Her skepticism had developed a crack, and curiosity was leaking through.

Jonas squinted at the dial. The old brass scale was marked in megahertz, hand-calibrated by someone decades ago. "Looks like... three point three three? 3.33 MHz? That's weird. That's not an amateur band. That's not **any** band I know. It's just... empty spectrum. Nobody broadcasts there."

"Somebody is," Maya said.

They listened. The pattern repeated: three pulses, a pause, then the warbling tone, then a burst of what sounded like digital noise — rapid-fire clicks, like a fax machine having a nightmare — and then the whole thing started over. Three pulses. The tone. The clicks.

"It's a loop," Priya said slowly. "It's repeating. That's a **transmission**, not interference. Something is broadcasting this on a loop."

Jonas had his phone out. "I'm recording this." He held it up to the speaker. "If it's a loop, we can analyze it. Slow it down, look at the waveform. Maya, don't touch the dial."

For ten minutes, nobody moved. The attic grew warmer as the sun slanted lower through the window, painting everything gold. Dust motes

drifted through the light. The radio hummed and pulsed and warbled, patient as a heartbeat, and the three friends sat in a triangle around it like campers around a fire, listening to something that should not have been there.

Finally Jonas lowered his phone. "Got it. Ten full loops." He was already opening an audio app, his thumbs flying. "Let me look at the spectrum... okay, that's interesting. Okay, that's **really** interesting."

"What?" Maya and Priya said together.

"The clicks — the digital burst — it's way too dense for a normal data mode. It's like... compressed. Layered. There's structure in there, but it's buried." He looked up, and his face was pale under his summer tan. "And the warbling tone? When I slow it down by half..."

He turned his phone toward them and hit play. The sound that came out was still strange — stretched, ghostly, like a recording played underwater. But now, unmistakably, it had the shape of a human voice. You could hear the rise and fall of syllables. The cadence of **speech**.

Priya's hand found Maya's arm and gripped it hard. "That's a voice," she breathed. "That's someone **talking**."

"Slowed down by a lot," Jonas said. "Whoever sent this compressed it — or time-stretched it. If I slow it more—" His thumb moved. The voice deepened, stretched further, and suddenly, for one fractured second, the syllables resolved into something almost like words.

Maya felt the attic tilt sideways. Because in that stretched, drowned voice, she had heard — she was **sure** she had heard — her own name.

"Play it again," she whispered.

Jonas played it again. And this time all three of them heard it, clear as a bell through the static: "...**Maya**... warn... **creek**... three days..."

Silence crashed down over the attic. The radio kept pulsing — three beats, a pause, three beats — but none of them were listening to the pattern anymore. They were listening to the blood pounding in their own ears.

"That's impossible," Priya said, but her voice shook. "That's — it's pareidolia. Our brains find patterns in noise. Like seeing faces in clouds. We **want** to hear words, so we do."

"Say that after I clean it up," Jonas said grimly. He was already pulling his laptop out of his backpack — he carried it everywhere, a battered machine covered in stickers. "Give me twenty minutes. There's software for this. Noise reduction, pitch correction. If there's a voice in there, I'll pull it out."

Those twenty minutes were the longest of Maya's life. Jonas worked with his headphones on, his face lit blue by the screen, muttering to himself in a language of filters and frequency bins. Priya paced the attic, picking up objects and putting them down again — a box of QSL cards (postcards from hams around the world: **Greetings from Oslo! 73!**), a

logbook in her grandfather's handwriting, a photograph of a young Daniel Reyes in a military uniform standing beside an antenna array. Maya sat frozen beside the radio, watching the green tuning eye glow, listening to the pulse go round and round, and trying very hard not to think about what she'd heard.

Because the thing was — the thing she hadn't said out loud — the voice hadn't just said her name. Slowed down, stretched thin, it had sounded like... her. The cadence was hers. The shape of the vowels was hers.

At 6:47 p.m., Jonas pulled off his headphones. His face was white.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. So. I cleaned it up as much as I can. The digital burst is still garbage — I'll need better tools for that. But the voice part..." He swallowed. "You need to hear this."

He turned the laptop so the speaker faced them and pressed play.

What came out of the speaker was no longer a ghost. It was a voice — a young woman's voice, ragged with static but unmistakable, speaking slowly, as if every word cost her something:

"*...this is a warning... Cedar Creek... the reservoir... don't let them... three days after the signal... the water... God, the water... please...*"

Static swallowed the rest. Then, after a long pause, the voice came back — closer now, clearer, urgent:

"*(...Maya...) if you're hearing this... it's me... I'm you... don't trust—*"

The recording ended.

Nobody spoke. The attic was so quiet Maya could hear a fly batting against the windowpane, hear her own heart hammering against her ribs like it was trying to get out. On the screen, the waveform sat frozen — a jagged mountain range of sound, with one peak circled in red where Jonas had marked the clearest fragment.

Priya was the first to break. "That's — no. No, that's not possible. That's a prank. It has to be a prank. Someone's messing with us."

"Who?" Jonas's voice was barely a whisper. "Who would broadcast a looped signal on an empty frequency, compressed and time-stretched, with a voice that sounds like — " He stopped. Looked at Maya.

Maya stood up. Her legs felt like they belonged to someone else. She walked to the radio and stared at the green glowing eye, at the needle resting on 3.33 MHz.

"The air is full of people talking," she said quietly, "if you know how to listen."

"But this," Priya said, "this isn't people. This is — Maya, that voice said it was **you**."

Maya turned to face her friends. In the golden light of the attic, with dust hanging in the air and the radio pulsing its impossible heartbeat

behind her, she looked older than sixteen — or maybe younger, stripped down to something raw and afraid.

"I know," she said. "And it said three days." She glanced at the clock on Jonas's laptop. "So whatever it is — whatever's coming — we have until Tuesday."

Outside, the freight train rolled through the valley at eleven-forty — no, it was only evening; the sound was just a truck on the highway, and Maya's nerves were wound so tight she was hearing things. Or maybe she wasn't. Maybe she was finally hearing clearly for the first time.

The radio pulsed on. Three beats. A pause. Three beats. A voice from somewhere — some*when* — calling her name across the dark.

And in the corner of the attic, unnoticed by all three of them, the photograph of young Daniel Reyes in his military uniform seemed to watch them with an expression that, in the slanting light, looked almost like a warning of its own.

They didn't tell anyone. That was Priya's idea, and for once nobody argued with her.

"Think about it," she said, as they sat on Maya's porch steps afterward, watching the streetlights flicker on one by one. The evening had gone purple at the edges, and the air smelled like someone's barbecue three

houses down. Normal. Everything was aggressively, insultingly normal. "We go to our parents and say: we found a ghost radio broadcasting a message from the future in Maya's voice. Best case, they take the radio away. Worst case, they decide we're having some kind of shared breakdown and we spend the rest of the summer in therapy."

"She has a point," Jonas admitted. He was turning his phone over and over in his hands, the recording still open on the screen. "Besides, we don't actually know what it is yet. It could still be — I don't know — a numbers station with a weird modulation. Or an art project. Or..." He trailed off. None of them believed the alternatives anymore, but saying them out loud felt like holding onto a railing.

"It's not a prank," Maya said quietly. "Nobody we know could do that compression. And nobody we know sounds like me slowed down except..." She didn't finish. Except me.

Priya bumped her shoulder gently. "Hey. We're going to figure this out. That's what we do. But we do it smart. Step one: we decode the digital burst. Step two: we figure out where the signal is coming from. Radio waves don't teleport, Maya — that broadcast has a transmitter *somewhere*. Step three—"

"Step three," Jonas said, "we find out what happens in three days and we stop it. Because I'm sorry, but 'the water, God, the water' does not sound like a birthday surprise."

Despite everything, Maya laughed — a short, startled sound that surprised all three of them. "Okay. Okay, team meeting tomorrow. My attic, ten a.m. Bring everything."

"Bring everything" turned out to mean: Jonas's laptop, his portable spectrum analyzer (salvaged from a decommissioned weather station, held together with electrical tape and optimism), Priya's notebook (already half full of equations and questions), three thermoses of iced tea from Maya's mom, who asked no questions because sixteen-year-olds with projects were a known phenomenon, and a whiteboard Maya had stolen from the garage.

By noon on Sunday, the attic had become a command center. Jonas had the radio wired into his laptop through an audio interface he'd built from a USB sound card and sheer stubbornness. On the whiteboard, Priya had written in her precise handwriting:

SIGNAL FACTS: *— Frequency: 3.33 MHz (not a standard band!)*
— Pattern: 3 pulses + voice burst + data burst, repeating *— Voice: female, ~16-20, sounds like Maya (?!)* *— Keywords so far: "warning," "Cedar Creek," "reservoir," "three days," "the water," "don't trust—" *— Data burst: unknown encoding, very dense*

Underneath, in bigger letters, she'd written: *QUESTIONS WE NEED ANSWERED.*

Jonas cracked his knuckles. "Okay. The data burst. I've been thinking about this all night. Normal digital modes — FT8, PSK31, the stuff hams use — they're narrow. This thing is **wide**. It's like someone took a normal transmission and folded it. So I wrote a script that tries unfolding it — basically, I take the burst and I stretch it in the frequency domain, like pulling apart an accordion."

"Did it work?" Maya asked.

"Kind of." Jonas hit a key. The laptop speakers emitted a new sound — still strange, but slower now, with a rhythm to it. Beneath the static, they could hear... tones. Musical almost. A sequence of notes, repeating.

Priya frowned. "That sounds like — wait. Play it again."

He did. Priya grabbed a pen and started writing on the whiteboard, her hand moving fast. "It's intervals. Listen — up a third, down a fifth, up an octave... it's a **scale**. Jonas, that's not random. That's structured like —"

"Like what?" Maya breathed.

"Like a code." Priya stepped back from the whiteboard, where she'd transcribed the tone sequence as numbers: 3-5-8-5-3-1-3-5. "If each interval is a digit... or a letter... Oh my God. It's so **simple**. Whoever sent this wanted it to be decoded. They made it a puzzle a teenager could solve."

"A teenager **did** solve it," Jonas said, grinning despite the tension. "Well, half of it. Give me an hour and I'll have the whole data burst mapped."

It took forty minutes. When Jonas finally leaned back from the laptop, his grin was gone.

"Well?" Priya demanded.

"It's coordinates." Jonas's voice was flat. "The tone sequence — it's numbers. Latitude and longitude. I checked them three times because I didn't believe it." He turned the laptop around. On the screen was a map, a satellite view, with a red pin dropped in a sea of green.

Maya leaned in. The pin was... familiar. The green was forest. There was a blue shape beside the pin, long and curved like a held breath.

"That's the reservoir," she whispered. "Cedar Creek Reservoir. That's **our** reservoir."

"The voice said 'the reservoir,'" Priya said quietly. "So the warning is about the reservoir. The coordinates confirm it." She wrote on the whiteboard: **LOCATION: Cedar Creek Reservoir.**

"There's more," Jonas said. He looked like he hadn't slept, which he hadn't. "The data burst isn't just coordinates. After the coordinate sequence, there's another section. I haven't decoded it yet — it's a

different encoding, denser. But at the very end, there's a... a signature. A callsign."

Maya's blood went cold. "What callsign?"

Jonas turned the laptop back around and pointed at a line of decoded text on the screen. Six characters, in plain block letters:

****K7CRK****

The attic went silent except for the radio's endless pulse. Three beats. A pause. Three beats.

"That's," Priya said carefully, "your grandfather's callsign. The card on the radio. K7CRK — Cedar Creek Relay."

"I know what it is," Maya said. Her voice sounded far away, like it was coming from the bottom of a well. "But my grandfather died three months ago. So how is his callsign signing a broadcast from the *future*?"

None of them had an answer. Jonas saved everything three times — laptop, phone, cloud — with the grim focus of someone who had learned that data disappears when you need it most. Priya filled two more whiteboard panels with theories, each wilder than the last: time loop, parallel timeline, a recording from the past mislabeled, an elaborate hoax by someone who knew about the radio.

And Maya sat beside the old Hallicrafters, her hand resting on the warm wooden cabinet, and thought about her grandfather's hands on the dial, and his voice saying *the air is full of people talking, if you know how to listen*, and she wondered — with a cold weight settling in her stomach — whether he had been listening for something specific. Whether he had known.

Whether the box labeled DO NOT THROW AWAY (underlined twice) was the reason.

At sunset, they took a break. They needed air, needed the world to be normal for a while. They walked down to the creek that gave the town its name — a shallow, laughing ribbon of water that ran behind the school — and skipped stones, and for a little while they were just three kids on a summer evening, and the radio was just a radio.

But on the walk home, as they passed the water tower, Maya stopped. The tower was the tallest thing in Cedar Creek, a silver giant on the hill, and tonight there was something on top of it — a red light, blinking slowly. Three blinks. A pause. Three blinks.

Maya grabbed Jonas's arm so hard he yelped. "Tell me you see that."

They all saw it. Three blinks, a pause, three blinks — the exact rhythm of the signal.

"It's just an aircraft warning light," Priya said, but she didn't sound convinced, because aircraft warning lights don't blink in threes, and all three of them knew it. "Right? It's just... a light."

"Sure," Jonas said faintly. "A light. On the water tower. Blinking in the exact pattern of our mystery signal. Totally normal. Happens all the time."

They stood there until the light stopped — or until they blinked, because when Maya looked again, the tower was dark, just a black shape against the purple sky, innocent as anything.

"Did it stop," Priya whispered, "or did we imagine it?"

Nobody answered. They walked home in silence, and Maya kept looking over her shoulder, and the town kept being normal, and the creek kept laughing, and none of it helped at all.

That night, Maya couldn't sleep. At 2 a.m., she gave up and climbed back to the attic with a blanket and her phone. The radio was still on — Jonas had insisted they leave it running, recording everything. The green eye glowed in the dark like something watching. The pulse went round and round.

She put on her headphones and listened to the cleaned-up voice recording again. And again. The woman's voice — her voice, older, ragged, terrified:

"*...don't let them open the dam...*"

Wait. That was new. Maya sat bolt upright, the blanket falling away. She hadn't heard that line before — or had she? She rewound, played it again, her hands shaking so hard she could barely hold the phone.

"*...don't let them open the dam... the water... three days after the signal... please, Maya, you have to—*"

The dam. Not just the reservoir — the *dam*. Cedar Creek Reservoir was held back by the Harlow Dam, a concrete giant built in the 1960s, the thing that kept the valley from flooding every spring. "Don't let them open the dam." Them. Who was *them*?

Maya's phone buzzed. A text from Jonas, timestamped 2:14 a.m.: *Can't sleep either. I decoded the last section of the data burst. It's a date. Maya... it's this Tuesday. The signal started Saturday. Three days after the signal is Tuesday. Whatever's going to happen at the reservoir — it's the day after tomorrow now.*

Maya stared at the words until they blurred. Then she typed back: *The voice said "don't let them open the dam." Who's "them"?*

Three dots. Then: *I don't know. But Priya's right about one thing — radio signals come from transmitters. Tomorrow we find the transmitter. If someone's broadcasting from the future, they need an antenna. A big one. And there's only one place in Cedar Creek with an antenna big enough.*

Maya knew what he meant. Everyone in Cedar Creek knew. On the ridge above the reservoir, decommissioned since before they were born, stood the old observatory — a white dome gone gray with age, its radio telescope dish still pointing at the sky like a giant ear, listening to nothing.

Or — not nothing. Maybe it had been listening all along.

Maya looked at the radio, at the green eye glowing in the dark, at her grandfather's callsign card. "What were you listening for, Grandpa?" she whispered.

The radio pulsed. Three beats. A pause. Three beats.

And from the headphones, the voice — her voice, from some impossible future — whispered one more fragment she hadn't caught before, so quiet it might have been the static itself:

"*...he's already there...*"

Maya ripped the headphones off. The attic was empty. The house was silent. But her skin was crawling, because *he's already there* meant someone was at the observatory — or at the dam — right now, at 2 a.m., and she was suddenly certain, with a certainty that had no logic in it at all, that the red light on the water tower hadn't been her imagination.

She texted the group chat: *We go to the observatory tomorrow. Early. Before anyone else is awake.*

Jonas replied instantly: *Bring flashlights.*

Priya, a minute later: *Bring the whiteboard.*

Maya smiled despite the fear crawling up her spine. Then she turned off the lamp, pulled the blanket around her shoulders, and sat in the dark with the radio's heartbeat, listening to her own voice warn her from the future, and wondering what Tuesday would bring.

Outside, in the sleeping town, the streetlights flickered once — all of them, at the same time, in a pattern of three — and then burned steady again, as if nothing had happened at all.

Episode 2 — The Observatory on the Ridge

They left at dawn, because dawn was when Cedar Creek belonged to nobody.

Maya had set three alarms and still woken before the first, her mind replaying the voice: *don't let them open the dam... he's already there...* She dressed in the dark — jeans, boots, her grandfather's old field jacket — and packed water, protein bars, a flashlight, and the portable radio Jonas had lent her, tuned to 3.33 MHz.

Jonas was waiting on her porch when she came down, which meant he'd been awake all night, which meant the circles under his eyes had circles. He had his laptop bag, the spectrum analyzer, and a coil of rope over one shoulder.

"In case we need to rappel," he said, completely serious.

"We're going to an observatory, Jonas, not a cliff."

"You don't know that. It could have cliffs."

Priya arrived on her bike at 5:40, helmet under her arm, the whiteboard strapped to her back with bungee cords like some kind of scholarly turtle. "I couldn't fit 'transmitter triangulation equations' on the small board," she announced, "so I brought the big one. Also, my mom thinks we're going birdwatching."

"Are there birds at the observatory?" Maya asked.

"There are birds everywhere, Maya. That's the beauty of the lie."

They set off as the sky went from black to indigo to the pale gold of early morning. Cedar Creek slept around them — dark windows, empty streets, the occasional porch light still burning. The only sound was their footsteps and, very faintly, from Maya's earbud, the pulse of the signal. Three beats. A pause. Three beats. It had been broadcasting all night. It was still broadcasting now.

"Does it bother anyone else," Jonas said quietly as they started up the ridge trail, "that it's **still going**? Like — if it's a warning about Tuesday, why broadcast it on a loop for days? Unless..."

"Unless the sender doesn't know if anyone's listening," Priya finished. "So they just keep shouting into the dark, hoping."

Maya didn't answer. She was thinking about the fragment from last night — **he's already there** — and scanning the trail ahead the way her grandfather had taught her to scan a river for trout: not looking **at** things, but looking for the thing that didn't belong.

The ridge trail switchbacked up through pine forest. Halfway up, the trees broke and they got their first view of the observatory: a white dome gone the color of old bone, with the radio telescope dish beside it — a great white ear, thirty feet across, tilted at the sky, decommissioned since 2008.

Only — as they got closer, Maya's stomach tightened. Because the observatory didn't look abandoned. Not quite.

"Guys," she said, stopping. "The dish. Look at the dish."

The great white ear was pointing at the sky — but not at the random angle of neglect. It was tracking. Even as they watched, it moved — a slow, deliberate adjustment, servos whining faintly in the morning stillness.

"That's **powered**," Jonas breathed. "That dish is **tracking something**. That thing hasn't moved in eighteen years and it's **moving**."

"Birdwatching," Priya said faintly. "Definitely birdwatching."

They approached the dome the way you'd approach a sleeping animal — slowly, quietly, ready to run. The main door was chained, the chain rusted, the padlock green with age. But around the side, half-hidden by scrub pine, was a service entrance — and the service entrance was **open**. Not broken open. Open. The door stood ajar by six inches, and from inside came a sound that made all three of them freeze: the low, steady hum of a generator.

"Someone's in there," Maya whispered.

"Or," Jonas whispered back, "someone **was** in there and left the generator running. Which is worse, because that means they plan to come back."

Priya had gone pale, but her voice was steady. "We came to find the transmitter. The transmitter is in there. We go in, we look, we leave. Five minutes. In and out."

"In and out," Maya agreed, though her heart was hammering so hard she was sure the generator couldn't compete.

Jonas went first — he'd insisted, with the doomed chivalry of a boy who'd watched too many movies — pushing the service door open with his foot. The hinges didn't squeak. Someone had oiled them.

Someone had oiled the hinges.

The inside of the observatory smelled like dust and ozone and something else — coffee, recent coffee. A work light on a stand illuminated the dome's interior in a harsh white cone. And there, in the center of the room, under the great curved ceiling, was a table covered in equipment.

Maya had expected cobwebs and pigeon droppings. What she saw instead made her breath catch: a modern shortwave transmitter, rack-mounted, its displays glowing green. A laptop, open, its screen showing a waveform — **their** waveform, the pulse pattern, looping. A signal generator. An antenna tuner. And beside it all, neatly arranged like

surgical instruments, a set of tools she recognized — because she'd seen them in her grandfather's attic, in the box labeled TOOLS.

"Oh no," she whispered. "Oh no, oh no."

Jonas was already at the laptop, his hands shaking as he touched the trackpad. "It's the broadcast software. It's — this is what's transmitting. The loop. The pulses, the voice, the data burst. It's all coming from *here*." He looked up, his face ghostly in the screen's glow. "Maya. This setup is *professional*. This isn't some kid with a radio. This is... this is serious equipment. This is thousands of dollars of equipment."

"Look at this." Priya's voice came from the far side of the table. She was holding a logbook — a paper logbook, spiral-bound, the kind hams used to record their contacts. She held it up, and even in the harsh work light, they could see the handwriting on the open page.

Maya's knees went weak. She knew that handwriting. Block letters, careful, the sevens crossed with a little flourish. She'd seen it on boxes in the attic. On the callsign card. On birthday cards, every year until this one.

"It's my grandfather's," she said. "That's his handwriting."

"Read it," Jonas said softly.

Priya read aloud, her voice shaking: "*July 8th. Test 14. Loop stable at 3.33 MHz. Temporal displacement holding at approximately...*" She

squinted. "*...at approximately eleven years? The math says the signal is arriving eleven years before it was sent. If anyone hears this — if* you *hear this — the dam. Don't let them open the dam. Harlow knows. Harlow has always known.*"

Silence. The generator hummed. The transmitter pulsed. On the laptop screen, the waveform looped endlessly.

"Temporal displacement," Priya whispered. "He's saying the signal is traveling *back in time*. Eleven years. Maya — if this logbook is real, your grandfather wasn't just receiving this signal. He was *sending* it. Or helping send it. From — from *eleven years in the future*?"

"That's not possible," Jonas said, but he said it the way you say "that's not possible" about something that's happening right in front of you. "Time doesn't work like that. You can't just — radio waves don't time travel, Priya, that's not a *thing*—"

"Then explain the dish tracking," Priya shot back. "Explain the logbook. Explain the voice that sounds like Maya!" She was breathing hard. "Something is happening here that we don't understand, and 'that's not possible' is just what people say before they understand it."

Maya wasn't listening. She'd moved to the far end of the table, where a second logbook lay — newer, its cover unmarked. She opened it with hands that didn't feel like her own.

The first page was blank. The second page had a single line, in the same careful block letters:

If you're reading this, the loop held.

The third page:

Tell Maya I'm sorry. I tried to stop it the first time too.

Maya's vision blurred. She turned the page. And the page after that. Each page had one line. Each line was a hammer blow:

The flood takes the lower town in forty minutes.

The sirens won't sound. Harlow cut the wires in '09.

She has to be at the dam by noon Tuesday. Not later. Noon.

Don't let her go alone.

Don't trust the second signal.

Maya's hands were shaking so hard the logbook rattled. "The second signal," she whispered. "There's a *second* signal?"

"Guys." Jonas's voice had gone very quiet. "Guys, you need to see this."

He'd moved to a corkboard on the dome's curved wall — a corkboard they hadn't noticed, covered in photographs. Satellite images of the reservoir. Schematics of the Harlow Dam, marked with red X's. Newspaper clippings, yellowed: *HARLOW ENERGY ANNOUNCES

DAM MODERNIZATION PROJECT.* And in the center, held by a single pushpin, a photograph that made Maya's blood turn to ice.

It was the three of them. Maya, Jonas, Priya. Sitting on Maya's porch steps. The photo had been taken yesterday evening — she could see the barbecue smoke in the background, the exact angle of the sunset. Someone had stood across the street, in the shadows between the houses, and photographed them without their knowledge.

Written on the white border of the photo, in red marker, were three words:

THEY KNOW NOW.

Priya made a sound like a wounded animal. Jonas grabbed Maya's arm. And Maya — Maya felt the attic tilt sideways again, felt the world narrow to the photograph and the red words and the certainty blooming cold in her chest: *he's already there*.

"Someone's been watching us," she whispered. "Since yesterday. Maybe longer."

"Harlow," Priya said. "The logbook says 'Harlow knows.' Harlow Energy — they own the dam. They own half the county. If they're planning something at the dam on Tuesday, and they know we're onto them—"

"We need to leave," Jonas said. "Now. We have what we came for. We know where the signal comes from. We go home, we — "

The generator coughed. The work light flickered. And from outside, through the open service door, came a sound that froze all three of them mid-step:

A car engine. Coming up the ridge road. Getting closer.

Maya killed the work light with a slap — plunging the dome into sudden, ringing darkness — and the three of them dropped behind the equipment table as one, hearts hammering, barely breathing. Through the gap in the service door, they watched headlights sweep across the pine trees, watched a black SUV — no plates, just like the one Mrs. Abernathy had mentioned seeing on her street last week, the one they'd all dismissed as neighborhood gossip — roll to a stop beside the dome.

A door opened. A door closed. Footsteps on gravel. And then a man's voice, calm and unhurried, speaking into a phone:

"—yes, the site's still secure. No, the kids haven't been here. The door was — " A pause. "The door's open."

Maya's blood turned to water. *The door's open.* They'd left it ajar.

"Understood," the man said. "I'll sweep the building."

Footsteps. Coming toward the service entrance. A flashlight beam, cutting through the dark, sweeping across the dome's interior — across

the table, across the corkboard, across the floor where three pairs of shoes were clearly visible in the dust.

Maya closed her eyes. *This is it,* she thought. *This is how it ends. In a dome on a ridge, because we had to know.*

The footsteps stopped. The flashlight beam held steady — pointing directly at their hiding spot.

And then the man's voice, closer now, quiet and almost... sad:

"I know you're in here. And before you run — you should know your grandfather sat exactly where you're sitting, the night he decided to fight them."

A pause. The flashlight clicked off.

"My name is David Okafor. I worked with Daniel Reyes. And if you want to live through Tuesday, you'll come out and listen."

Behind the table, in the dark, Maya felt Jonas's hand find hers. Felt Priya's shoulder press against her back. Three heartbeats, hammering in the dark.

She stood up.

David Okafor was not what Maya had expected. In the work light's glare — he'd switched it back on, apologizing — he was maybe fifty,

with gray threading his close-cropped hair and a scar through his left eyebrow. He wore a gray coat that had seen better decades, and he moved like a man who was tired all the way down to his bones. But his eyes, when they found Maya's face, were kind. And wet.

"You look like him," he said quietly. "Around the eyes. He talked about you constantly, you know. 'My Maya's going to be an engineer. She's got the hands for it.'"

Maya's throat closed. "You knew my grandfather."

"For twenty-two years." David pulled a thermos from his coat and poured coffee into the cap, offering it around. Nobody took any. "We worked here together. Not stargazing — that was the cover. Harlow Energy funded this place for 'atmospheric research.' What we actually built was..." He gestured at the transmitter. "That. Or the beginning of it."

"What does it do?" Priya asked. She'd recovered fastest — her notebook was already out. "The logbook says 'temporal displacement.' That's time travel. You're saying this machine sends radio signals *back in time*?"

"I'm saying Daniel believed it could, and Daniel was the smartest man I ever met." David sat on an equipment crate, suddenly looking every one of his fifty years. "It started as a theory — that certain high-energy atmospheric events could create... echoes. Signals that arrive before they're sent. Daniel spent ten years proving it. Then Harlow found out

what we'd built, and they — " He stopped. Started again. "Harlow Energy doesn't fund science, kids. Harlow Energy funds *leverage*."

"Leverage for what?" Jonas asked.

David looked at each of them in turn. "How much do you know about the dam modernization project?"

"They're upgrading the floodgates," Maya said. "Automated controls. It was in the paper. They said it's for safety."

"They said." David's smile was bitter. "The new system lets Harlow open the floodgates remotely — from their headquarters, sixty miles away. No one at the dam." He leaned forward. "On Tuesday at noon, Harlow is running what they call a 'pressure release test.' Full gate opening. Sixty seconds."

Priya went white. "That would — the reservoir is at summer capacity. A full release would send a wall of water down the valley. The lower town — "

"Would flood in forty minutes," David said quietly. "Just like the logbook says. Four hundred homes. The school. The hospital." He held up a hand as Jonas started to protest. "They'll call it an accident. A software glitch. By the time the investigations are done, Harlow will have bought the ruined properties for pennies — they already have shell companies ready — and broken ground on the data center they've wanted to build here for five years. Data centers need two things, kids:

cheap land and massive amounts of water for cooling. Cedar Creek has both, as long as the town itself is... in the way."

The dome was silent except for the generator's hum and the endless pulse of the signal.

"That's insane," Priya whispered. "You can't just *flood a town*. People would die."

"People *will* die," David said. "Unless someone stops the test. Daniel tried — eleven years ago, when he first figured out what the 'modernization' was really for. He went to the county board, the state regulators, the press. Harlow buried it all. So Daniel did the only thing he had left." He gestured at the transmitter. "He finished the machine. And he sent a warning — back through time, to the one person he trusted to hear it."

"Me," Maya said. It wasn't a question.

"You. Eleven years back. He calculated the displacement to land the signal where you'd find it — on his own radio, on a frequency only a Reyes would think to check." David's voice cracked. "He died three months ago, Maya. I'm sorry. But he died knowing the signal was broadcasting. Knowing you'd hear it."

Maya sat down hard on the concrete floor. Her grandfather — the man who'd taught her to skip stones and solder wires — had built a *time

machine*. Had sent her a message from the future. Had died trying to save their town.

"Wait," Jonas said suddenly. "The logbook said the signal was sent from eleven years in the *future*. But Mr. Reyes died three months ago. So who — "

"The array runs itself," David said. "Daniel set it to loop. Solar-powered, hardened. It'll broadcast until someone shuts it off or the mountain falls down." He stood, suddenly urgent. "Which brings me to why I'm here. Harlow knows about the array. They've always known — they funded it. They let Daniel play with his 'echoes' because they thought it was harmless. But last week, their monitoring flagged something: *reception*. Someone was listening to the loop. Someone had *decoded* part of it." His eyes found the photograph on the corkboard — the three of them on the porch. "You."

Priya's hand tightened on her notebook. "The photo. You took that photo."

"I took that photo," David admitted. "To prove to my contact inside Harlow that the listeners were just kids. I was trying to *protect* you." He pulled out his phone, showed them a message on the screen. No sender. Just text: *SECOND BROADCAST AUTHORIZED. DISCREDIT PROTOCOL ACTIVE.*

"What's the second broadcast?" Maya asked, though the logbook's warning was already ringing in her ears: *Don't trust the second signal.*

"Harlow's answer to Daniel's warning." David's face was grim. "They can't stop the array — it's hardened against them too; Daniel made sure of that. So they're going to drown it out. A second signal, same frequency, stronger transmitter. And it's going to say the opposite of the truth. It's going to say the dam test is safe. It's going to say Daniel Reyes was a crank and his 'warning' is a hoax." He looked at Maya. "Your grandfather's last logbook entry — the one you read — ends with a warning about it. *Don't trust the second signal.* No matter what it says. No matter what *voice* it uses."

A cold finger traced Maya's spine. "What do you mean, what voice it uses?"

David didn't answer. He didn't have to. They all understood, with the terrible clarity of a puzzle piece snapping into place: if Harlow could fake a broadcast, they could fake a voice. *Any* voice.

"We need to see the dam," Priya said suddenly. "If the test is Tuesday at noon, we have — " She checked her phone. "Thirty hours. We need proof. Something we can take to the police, the press, *someone*."

"The control room," Jonas said. "The decoded coordinates from the data burst — they weren't just the reservoir. There was a second set. I thought it was noise, but — " He was already pulling up the file on his

laptop. "Here. 44.02° N — that's the dam's control building. The real warning isn't just 'don't let them open the dam.' It's telling us *where to go*."

David nodded slowly. "The control room has the manual override. If someone's inside at noon on Tuesday, they can stop the test." He hesitated. "But getting in won't be easy. Harlow's had security there since the 'vandalism' last month."

"What vandalism?" Maya asked.

David's smile was thin. "There wasn't any. But it's useful to have an excuse for guards and cameras." He checked his watch. "I have to go — if my handler at Harlow realizes I've been up here this long — " He moved toward the door, then stopped. Turned back. "Maya. One more thing. About your grandfather's death."

Maya's heart stopped. "What about it?"

"The heart attack." David held her gaze. "The medical examiner who signed the certificate — Dr. Paulsen. He's on Harlow's payroll. Has been for years." A beat. "I'm not saying Daniel was murdered. I'm saying I don't *know* he wasn't. And I'm saying you should be careful who you trust. Starting now."

He was gone before any of them could respond — the SUV's engine fading down the ridge road, leaving the three of them alone in the dome

with the humming generator and the pulsing transmitter and the weight of everything they'd learned.

They didn't speak for a long time. Then Priya, very quietly, tore a page from her notebook and wrote at the top in capital letters:

WHAT WE KNOW NOW: *— The signal is real. It's from Daniel Reyes (via the array).* *— Harlow Energy plans to flood the lower town Tuesday noon ("test").* *— Motive: buy ruined land cheap, build data center.* *— We have ~30 hours to stop it.* *— Harlow is launching a FAKE second signal to discredit the warning.* *— Don't trust the second signal. No matter what.*

"Okay," she said, capping her pen with shaking hands. "Okay. So we go to the reservoir. We see what's happening there. We get proof. Then we figure out how to get into that control room by Tuesday noon." She looked at her friends. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," Jonas said.

Maya nodded, but her eyes were on the second logbook — on the last line she'd read: *Don't let her go alone.* "Agreed," she said. "But first — Jonas, the portable radio. Turn it up."

Because underneath the familiar pulse — three beats, a pause, three beats — something had changed. The pattern had shifted. There was a new layer now, a second rhythm weaving through the first, slightly off-tempo, like two hearts beating out of sync.

Jonas turned up the volume. They listened. And out of the static, clear as a bell, came a voice — a boy's voice this time, young, urgent, familiar

—

Jonas's face drained of color. Because the voice was *his*.

"*—don't listen to her,*" the new broadcast said. "*The dam test is safe. She's lying to you. Maya's lying about all of it—*"

Priya lunged for the radio and killed the volume. In the sudden silence, the three friends stared at each other, and Maya saw her own horror reflected in their faces.

The second signal had begun.

And it was wearing Jonas's voice.

For a full minute, none of them could speak. Jonas stood frozen, his hand still on the radio's volume knob, his face the color of old paper. The silence in the dome was absolute — even the generator seemed to hum more quietly, as if it too were holding its breath.

"That's not me," Jonas whispered. "I never — I would never — "

"We know," Maya said fiercely, crossing to him. "We *know*, Jonas. That's the whole point. They took your voice and they made it say what they want. Which means — " She stopped, the implication hitting her

like cold water. "Which means they could do it to any of us. They could make *me* say the test is safe. They could make Priya say the warning is a hoax. The second signal can wear any face it wants."

Priya was writing furiously in her notebook, her hand moving as if the pen could outrun her fear. "That's why the logbook says 'don't trust the second signal, no matter what voice it uses.' Daniel knew. He knew they'd fake it." She looked up, and her eyes were bright with something that wasn't quite fear and wasn't quite fury. "New rule. We don't believe *any* broadcast. We believe what we can see and touch. We believe each other — in person. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Jonas said, and his voice was steadier now, anger burning through the shock. "They used my voice. *My* voice. I'm going to make them regret that."

Maya managed a shaky smile. "There's the Jonas I know." She turned to the transmitter, to the laptop still looping Daniel's warning. "We leave this running. It's the real signal — it's the only proof we have that Daniel was telling the truth. David said it's hardened. Let Harlow try to drown it out."

They packed up — laptop, analyzer, both logbooks, the photograph — and slipped out into the morning light. At the first switchback, Priya stopped dead.

"Guys," she said, pointing.

Below them, where the ridge road met the highway, a black SUV sat parked on the shoulder. No plates. Tinted windows. And as they watched, the driver's window rolled down — just an inch, just enough to catch the morning sun in a single silver flash, like a wink.

Like someone letting them know: *I see you.*

Jonas's hand found the rope on his shoulder, as if that would help. Priya's fingers tightened on her notebook. Maya felt the old familiar tilt, the world going sideways — and then, deliberately, she straightened. She lifted her hand and waved. A slow, deliberate wave. *I see you too.*

The window rolled back up. The SUV pulled onto the highway and drove away, unhurried, toward town.

"They're not even hiding it anymore," Priya whispered.

"They don't think they have to," Jonas said. "We're just kids."

"Not everything," Maya said. She was looking at her grandfather's logbook, at the line she'd almost missed, squeezed into the margin of the last page in tiny, urgent letters: *The manual override needs two keys. I hid the second one where only family would look.*

She looked up at her friends, and for the first time since the attic, she smiled — a real smile, sharp as a blade.

"They forgot one thing," she said. "They forgot that Daniel Reyes was *my* grandfather. And he left me a key."

Her phone buzzed. Unknown number. She almost ignored it — and then the preview text caught her eye, and her blood ran cold:

Nice work at the observatory, Maya. The second key won't help you. See you Tuesday. — H

The three friends stood on the ridge trail, the morning sun bright on their faces, and stared at the phone. Behind them, the observatory's dish turned slowly, tracking something none of them could see. Above them, the sky was a perfect, innocent blue.

And somewhere below, in the town that smelled like cut grass and distant rain, four hundred families were going about their Sunday morning — pancakes, church bells, sprinklers on lawns — with no idea that in thirty hours, the water was coming.

Maya deleted the text. "Tuesday. The dam. No matter what. We end this."

The signal pulsed on — two heartbeats now, tangled and out of sync, truth and lie broadcasting over each other into the empty air.

Episode 3 — The Second Key

Maya found the key at 11:47 on Monday morning, in the last place she would have looked — which, her grandfather would have said, was exactly the point.

They'd torn the attic apart. The box labeled DO NOT THROW AWAY had yielded nothing but old QSL cards and a broken multimeter. The garden — where Daniel had buried a time capsule with seven-year-old Maya, full of bottle caps and a note that read *HELLO FUTURE* — had given up only earthworms and a rusted trowel. Priya had even suggested, half-seriously, that they check inside the walls.

It was Jonas who said it, staring at the Hallicrafters with his head tilted: "Where only *family* would look. Maya — when's the last time anyone but you touched this radio?"

"When my grandpa was alive."

"Right. So it's the one thing in this house that Harlow would never think to search — because to them, it's junk. An antique." Jonas ran his hand along the cabinet's back panel. "These old sets — the back comes off. For tube replacement."

The panel was held by four slotted screws, green with age. Jonas had them out in a minute. Behind the panel: a forest of vacuum tubes, glowing faintly — the set was still on, still pulsing its heartbeat — and

taped to the inside of the wooden cabinet, yellowed with heat and time, a small manila envelope.

On the envelope, in Daniel Reyes's careful block letters: *FOR MAYA — WHEN YOU'RE READY.*

Maya's hands shook as she opened it. Inside: a brass key, heavy and old-fashioned, the kind that opened something mechanical, something *real*. And a note, in the same hand:

Maya-bird —

If you're reading this, you heard the signal, which means my math was right and you're as stubborn as your grandmother. Good. You'll need to be.

The Harlow Dam's manual override needs two keys turned at once. That's by design — no one person can stop a release alone. I have one. David Okafor has the other.

Don't go to the dam without both keys. And Maya — trust the signal. All of it. Even the parts that scare you.

Love, Grandpa

P.S. The radio was never just a radio. You know that now.

Priya read the note over Maya's shoulder and went very still. "David has the other key," she said slowly. "So we need David."

"Or," Jonas said, "we need to *find* David. He left in a hurry yesterday. We don't have his number. We don't know where he lives." He turned the brass key over in his palm. "One key. Half a solution. Classic Grandpa."

Maya closed her hand around the key. It was warm — from the tubes, from the attic heat, from eleven years of waiting. "Then we do what we can without him. The reservoir. We scout it today, we learn the layout, and tomorrow — " She checked her watch. Monday, 11:52 a.m. Twenty-four hours until the test. "Tomorrow we get inside that control room, with or without David's key."

The Cedar Creek Reservoir didn't look like the end of the world. That was the strangest part.

It was beautiful — a long blue mirror tucked between pine-covered hills, with the Harlow Dam rising at its northern end like a concrete cliff. Maya had swum here every summer of her life. She knew the rope swing at the south cove, the best skipping-stone beach, the spot where the water was so clear you could see trout hanging motionless in the green depths.

Today, the rope swing hung over mud. The waterline had dropped — not a little, but *feet*. A pale bathtub ring of exposed shoreline circled the entire reservoir, littered with things that shouldn't have been visible:

old tires, a shopping cart, a bicycle frame furred with algae. And along the water's edge, in a line that went on for a hundred yards, lay dead fish — hundreds of them, silver bellies flashing in the sun, their gills still.

Priya crouched beside the fish line, her face grim. "This isn't normal die-off. Look at the pattern — it's a *line*. Like they all died at once, at the same depth." She looked up at the dam. "Like the water dropped suddenly and stranded them. Or like something in the water — "

"Don't," Jonas said. He was pale. "Don't say 'something in the water.' We're already at maximum dread."

But Maya was looking at the dam itself — at the activity swarming around its base like ants. Harlow trucks, white with the blue lightning-bolt logo. Men in hard hats. A crane. And on top of the control building — a squat concrete blockhouse halfway up the dam's face — a new antenna array, bristling and silver, still wrapped in places with the plastic of recent installation.

"Jonas," she said quietly. "That antenna. On the control building."

Jonas followed her gaze. Lifted his binoculars — he'd brought them, because of course he had. "That's... that's a high-gain directional array. Shortwave band." He lowered the binoculars slowly. "Maya. That's the second signal's transmitter. They're broadcasting the fake *from the dam*."

"Of course they are," Priya said bitterly. "Maximum power, maximum coverage. And when Tuesday comes and the 'test' goes wrong, they'll say the warning signal was a hoax all along — broadcast by vandals, probably. Kids." She kicked a dead fish back into the water, gently, like an apology. "They've thought of everything."

"Not everything," Maya said. She was watching a Harlow truck roll through the dam's security gate — a gate with a guardhouse, a barrier arm, and two cameras. "They don't know we have a key. They don't know about the manual override." She turned to her friends. "We need the layout. Guard rotations. Camera positions. The control room door."

Jonas was already photographing everything — the gate, the cameras, the antenna, the truck license plates — with the grim efficiency of a spy. "Tomorrow, 11 a.m.," he said. "We go in before noon. One hour to reach the control room, find the override, and turn both keys."

"Both keys," Priya said. "We still only have one."

"Then we find David tonight." Maya's voice was steel. "He said he'd be in touch. He gave us just enough to be useful and then vanished — I'm done waiting. We go back to the attic, we finish decoding the signal, and if David's in the last fragment, we find him."

They hiked back down as the sun slid westward, the dead fish and the bathtub ring burned into their eyes. Behind them, the dam stood silent

and gray, holding back eleven billion gallons of water with concrete and secrets.

None of them noticed the drone — small, black, silent — that lifted off from behind the control building and followed them at a distance, its camera eye unblinking.

Back in the attic, with the sun bleeding orange through the window and the radio's pulse their only company, Jonas did what he did best: he disappeared into the problem.

"The final section of the data burst," he muttered, headphones on, fingers flying. "I've been avoiding it because the encoding is *weird* — it's not tones, it's not digital, it's... hold on." He pulled off the headphones. "It's *slow-scan*. Like, old-school slow-scan television. Images encoded as audio. Your grandpa hid a *picture* in the signal."

"A picture of what?" Priya breathed.

"Decoding now." The laptop churned. Line by line, a grayscale image resolved on the screen — scan lines building from top to bottom, the way faxes used to print. First static. Then shapes. Then —

It was a control room. They could see the panel — big manual wheels, gauges, and in the center, a steel plate with two keyholes, side by side,

labeled in stenciled letters: MANUAL OVERRIDE — BOTH KEYS REQUIRED.

"It's the dam's control room," Maya whispered. "He sent us a *map*."

"There's text at the bottom," Jonas said, zooming in. Pixel by pixel, blocky letters emerged:

SECOND KEY IS WITH DAVID. DON'T WAIT FOR HIM. HE'S ALREADY DECIDED.

Priya grabbed Maya's arm. "What does that mean — 'he's already decided'? Decided *what*?"

"I don't know," Maya said, but her stomach was dropping, dropping, the way it had on the ridge trail when she'd seen the black SUV. "Keep decoding. There has to be more."

There was more. Beneath the image, Jonas found the last audio fragment — the deepest-buried piece of the whole transmission, compressed so tightly he'd needed to write a new decoder just to touch it. He cleaned it up in silence, his face growing paler with every pass. When he finally played it, the voice that came out of the speakers was Maya's — but not the ragged, terrified voice of the warning.

This voice was older. Calm. Tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep.

"*...if you're hearing this, you decoded the whole thing. Good. That means you're as smart as he always said.*"

A pause. Static, like breathing.

"*My name is Maya Reyes. I'm twenty-seven years old. I'm transmitting from the winter of 2037 — eleven years after the flood that took Cedar Creek. Grandpa Daniel built the array, but he died before it was finished. I finished it. I've been sending this signal for three years, trying to reach back far enough to matter.*"

Maya's knees buckled. She sat down hard on the attic floor. Priya made a small sound. Jonas just stared at the speakers, his mouth open.

"*The flood happened,*" the older Maya continued. "*Tuesday, noon, just like he predicted. The lower town went in forty minutes. Four hundred homes. The school — *" Her voice broke. Static filled the gap. "*I was sixteen. I survived because Grandpa got us to high ground — he'd been preparing for years. But most of them didn't. And Harlow — Harlow got everything they wanted. The land. The water. The data center's been running for a decade now, humming on the bones of our town.*"

"Oh my God," Priya whispered. "Oh my God, it's *her*. It's really her."

"*I've sent this warning eleven times,*" the voice went on. "*Eleven loops, eleven chances. Every time, something goes wrong. Every time, Harlow finds a way. But this time — this time you found the

observatory early. This time you have David's name. So listen to me, because this is the part I could never fit in the other fragments.*"

The static deepened. The voice dropped to almost a whisper.

"*David Okafor sold the array to Harlow eleven years ago. He told them everything — the displacement, the loop, all of it. That's why they let Grandpa keep working. They were* studying *it. And when Grandpa started asking questions about the dam — when he went to the regulators — David told them that too.*"

Maya stopped breathing.

"*Grandpa didn't die of a heart attack,*" said the woman she would become. "*David poisoned his garden spray. Slow, untraceable. The medical examiner was already Harlow's. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But you can't trust him — not his help, not his key, not anything. He's been managing you since the observatory. The photograph, the logbooks he* let *you find — it's all theater. He wants you at the dam on Tuesday.*"

"Why?" Jonas whispered. "Why would he want us at the dam?"

As if she'd heard him across eleven years, the voice answered:

"*Because the override needs two keys, and Harlow has David's. If you bring yours to the dam, they'll take it. And then no one can ever stop the test.*"

Silence. The attic. The dust. The green eye of the radio, glowing steady.

"*Don't bring the key to the dam,*" said future Maya. "*Hide it. And find another way in. The service tunnel, behind the — *"

The recording dissolved into static — and then, with a click like a door slamming, the *other* voice cut in. The second signal. Jonas's voice, smooth and reasonable and utterly false:

"*—don't listen to her. She's confused. The dam test is routine, it's safe, it's been approved by every regulator in the state. Ask yourself: time travel? Really? Your friend is having a breakdown, and the kindest thing you can do is—*"

Priya killed the volume. In the ringing silence, the three friends looked at each other, and Maya saw the same terrible question in all their faces:

If David was Harlow's man — then everything he'd told them was suspect. The flood, the test, the data center — was any of it true? Or was *all* of it theater, designed to get them — and the key — to the dam on Tuesday?

"The fish," Priya said suddenly. "The dead fish. The waterline dropping. The antenna on the control building. That's *real*. We saw it with our own eyes. David didn't fake the reservoir."

"And the text," Jonas said. "The text from 'H' — 'the second key won't help you.' If David's with Harlow, he told them about the key. He told them *everything*."

Maya stood up. Her legs were shaking, but her voice was steady. "Then we do what she said. We hide the key. We don't bring it to the dam." She looked at the brass key on the table — her grandfather's last gift, suddenly the most dangerous object in Cedar Creek. "And we find another way in. She said 'the service tunnel, behind the — ' Behind the *what*?"

"The spillway," Priya said slowly. "Old dams have service tunnels behind the spillway gates. For maintenance." She was already pulling up dam schematics on her phone — public records, filed with the county, the kind of thing nobody looked at until they needed to. "Here. Harlow Dam, built 1964. Service tunnel, eastern abutment, behind spillway gate three. It connects to the control room's lower level."

Jonas stared at her. "How do you know that?"

"I read the county filings. While you were decoding." Priya smiled, thin and fierce. "Somebody had to do the boring work."

It was 6 p.m. Eighteen hours until the test. The plan assembled itself out of desperation and spare parts: tomorrow, 11 a.m., they go to the dam — not through the gate, but around, through the hillside, to the service tunnel. No key. Just three kids, a flashlight, and the hope that an eleven-year-old warning and a dead man's schematics would be enough.

Maya picked up the brass key. It felt heavier than it had that morning — heavy with everything it now meant. She needed to hide it somewhere Harlow would never look. Somewhere *David* would never look.

She knew exactly where.

She crossed the attic to the box labeled DO NOT THROW AWAY, lifted the broken multimeter — and dropped the key into the box's false bottom, the hidden compartment her grandfather had shown her when she was nine, the one he'd winked and called "a magician's secret."

Where only family would look, she thought. *Stay hidden, little key. Stay safe.*

Behind her, Jonas's laptop chimed — a new email. He frowned. "It's from... David? No — it's from an anonymous remailer." He opened it.

The message was short. Four lines:

You decoded the last fragment. I'm impressed. *She's lying, you know. The older one. Eleven years is a long time to be alone — it changes people.* *Come to the dam tomorrow. Bring the key. I'll make sure you're safe.* *— D.*

Priya read it twice. "He's still watching us," she whispered. "The drone. He knows we're planning something."

"Good," Maya said, and her voice was ice. "Let him watch. Let him think we're coming with the key." She looked at her friends — really

looked at them, these two impossible people who'd followed her into an attic and a dome and now, God help them, into a dam. "Tomorrow, we go through the tunnel. No key. No David. Just us."

Jonas nodded slowly. "Just us."

Priya capped her pen. "Just us."

But Jonas was still staring at the email, and Maya could see the doubt crawling across his face like a shadow. "Wait," he said slowly. "Wait. Can we — can we just think about this for a second? Because we have two stories here, and they're saying opposite things."

"Go on," Priya said warily.

"Story one: David's a villain, future Maya's telling the truth, Harlow's going to flood the town. Story two — " He pointed at the email. "David's telling the truth, future Maya's... broken. Unreliable. Eleven years alone — maybe she's paranoid. Maybe she's wrong about David." He looked at Maya, miserable. "I hate saying it. But we have to ask. What if we're about to break into a dam based on the word of a voice on a radio?"

The attic was quiet. The question hung in the air like smoke.

Priya was the one who answered — carefully, the way she did everything. "Okay. Let's do what we do. Evidence." She turned to a fresh whiteboard panel and wrote two columns: DAVID TRUE /

MAYA-2037 TRUE. "Under David-true: we have his word, his logbooks, his help at the observatory. Under Maya-2037-true: we have the dead fish. The waterline. The antenna on the control building — which **we saw**, Jonas, with our own eyes, and which matches 'Harlow built a second transmitter' a lot better than it matches 'routine test.'"

She tapped the board. "And there's something else. The text from 'H' — 'the second key won't help you.' If David were clean, how would Harlow know about the key? **We** only learned about it from his own logbook. The only way Harlow knows is if David told them."

"Unless," Jonas said, "David told them because he's **working with them openly** — like, as a double agent. Maybe he's feeding them just enough to stay inside."

"Maybe," Priya allowed. "But Maya — " She turned to her friend. "The deciding vote is yours. It's your grandfather. Your key. Your future self."

Maya looked at the brass key's hiding place — the box, the false bottom, her grandfather's wink at age nine. She thought about Daniel Reyes's hands on the radio dial. **The air is full of people talking, if you know how to listen.** She thought about the older Maya's voice — not the words, but the **sound** of it. The exhaustion. The grief. You couldn't fake that kind of tired. Harlow could fake Jonas's voice saying lines, but could they fake eleven years of loss?

"She knew about the service tunnel," Maya said slowly. "The recording cut off at 'behind the — ' and Priya figured out 'behind the spillway' from public filings. But future Maya **started** the sentence. She knew." Maya met Jonas's eyes. "And David's email says 'she's lying, come to the dam, bring the key.' If David's clean, why does he want the key **brought to him**? Why not tell us to hide it?"

Jonas was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded — once, sharp. "Okay. Okay. Maya-2037 it is." He deleted the email. "David's out. The key stays hidden. We go through the tunnel."

"And if we're wrong," Priya said quietly, "we apologize to David later. But if we're **right** — " She didn't finish. She didn't need to.

They spent the next hour planning the tunnel approach like a heist crew. Priya sketched the dam from the county schematics — eastern abutment, spillway gate three, the service tunnel running two hundred yards through the dam's interior to the control room's lower level. Jonas inventoried their gear: flashlights, the rope ("told you," he said), his multitool, Priya's phone with the schematics downloaded offline, Maya's grandfather's field jacket with its dozen pockets.

"What about the cameras?" Priya asked.

"The tunnel's interior," Jonas said. "Maintenance access. They might have a camera at the tunnel mouth, but — " He grinned, the first real

grin in hours. "I brought a laser pointer. Red dot, camera sensor, temporary blindness. Oldest trick in the book."

"That's not a book," Priya said. "That's a movie."

"Same thing."

Maya barely heard them. She was standing at the attic window, looking out at Cedar Creek spread below — the church steeple, the water tower, the grid of streets where four hundred families were living their ordinary Sunday. Somewhere down there, Mrs. Abernathy was probably interrogating her flamingos. The freight train would roll through at eleven-forty. The creek would laugh behind the school.

I'm sixteen, she thought. *Tomorrow I'm breaking into a dam.*

She felt Jonas come up beside her, then Priya on her other side. The three of them stood at the window, shoulder to shoulder, watching their town.

"Whatever happens tomorrow," Priya said softly, "I'm glad it's us."

"Me too," Jonas said.

Maya didn't trust her voice, so she just leaned into them — her two impossible people — and watched the sun go down on Cedar Creek.

And in that moment, with the sun going down on the last whole day Cedar Creek would ever have, the three of them made a pact without

words — the kind of pact that only sixteen-year-olds can make, the kind that's equal parts brave and insane and absolutely unbreakable.

They were going to save their town.

Maya's mom called them down for dinner at seven — spaghetti, garlic bread, the normalcy of it almost obscene. They ate on the porch, the three of them, not talking about the dam or the key or the woman Maya would become. Jonas told a story about his little sister's hamster. Priya complained about summer reading. Maya laughed in the right places.

It was the most precious hour of her life, and she didn't know it yet.

After dinner, Maya's mom held her back on the porch while Jonas and Priya headed up. "Maya-bird," she said — her grandfather's nickname for her, inherited like the jacket — "can I ask you something? Those men from the power company. They came by this afternoon, while you were out. Asking about your grandfather's things. Whether he'd left any... equipment. Any radios."

Maya's blood chilled. "What did you tell them?"

"That his things were family business." Her mom's smile was tired. "But Maya — they knew his name. They knew about the observatory. One of them had a scar through his eyebrow, and he was *polite*, and it scared

me more than if he'd shouted." She squeezed Maya's shoulder. "If you're in something, baby — just tell me you're being careful."

Maya looked at her mother — really looked at her — and made a decision that hurt like a pulled tooth. "I'm being careful," she said. It wasn't the whole truth. It was the only piece she could give.

Her mom nodded, unconvinced but out of questions. "Your grandfather would be proud of you. Whatever it is."

He'd better be, Maya thought, climbing the attic stairs. *Because I'm about to bet all our lives on his math.*

At 8:30, they went back up to the attic — one more check of the signal, one more review of the plan. Jonas tuned the portable radio to 3.33 MHz, just to listen, just to make sure the real warning was still broadcasting under Harlow's lie.

What came through the earbud made him rip it out with a gasp.

"Maya," he said, his face white. "The real signal — it's *changed*."

Maya grabbed the earbud. Listened. The familiar pulse was there — three beats, a pause — but the voice beneath it was different now. Not the warning. Not the fragments. A new message, raw and urgent, the compression stripped away as if the sender had stopped caring about subtlety:

"*—they're coming tonight, they're not waiting for Tuesday, I can see the headlights from the ridge, Maya, they're coming for the key, they're coming for YOU—*"

Maya dropped the earbud. For a frozen second, the attic was silent.

Then: tires on gravel. Not one car — several. Doors slamming. Voices, low and organized, surrounding the house.

And her mother's voice, floating up the attic stairs, bright with unknowing hospitality:

"Maya? Sweetie? There are some men here to see you. They say they're from the *power company*."

The radio pulsed. Three beats. A pause. Three beats.

On the laptop screen, the waveform of the real signal spiked — and the voice of the woman Maya would become, twenty-seven years old, eleven years away, screamed across time with everything she had left:

"*THE WINDOW. GO THROUGH THE WINDOW. NOW—*"

Boots on the stairs.

Maya grabbed Jonas's hand. Grabbed Priya's. The attic window — the one overlooking the oak tree, the one they'd climbed through a hundred times as kids — stood open to the night, the branches black against the stars.

Behind them, the attic door handle began to turn.

And eleven years away, in the winter of 2037, an older Maya pressed her hands against a dead transmitter and whispered into the static:

"*Run.*"

Episode 4 — Through the Window

The loop broke at 11:47 PM.

For three nights the signal on 3.33 MHz had been the same forty-one seconds, over and over — her own voice, eleven years older, reading coordinates and a warning like a prayer. Maya knew every crackle of it by heart. That was why she heard the difference instantly: the static sharpened, the loop stuttered, and a live voice cut through.

Hers. Older. Terrified.

"THE WINDOW. GO THROUGH THE WINDOW. NOW—"

The bedroom door rattled. Downstairs, something heavy hit the front door — not a knock, a shoulder — and boots were already on the stairs.

"Maya!" Jonas hissed from the hallway. He and Priya had come over after dinner, the three of them camped in her room with printouts of Daniel's old schematics spread across the rug, psyching themselves up for the attic. Now Jonas's face was white in the doorway. "Two SUVs. Black. Men with flashlights. They're inside."

Priya was already at the window, shoving it up. Cold October air poured in. "The oak," she said. "Branch is right there. Go."

Maya's backpack was packed — the handheld radio, Jonas's spare batteries, her grandfather's notebook. She slung it on. Then she stopped, one foot on the sill.

"The key." Her voice came out thin. "The attic box. Without the override key the whole plan—"

"The plan dies if we're caught!" Priya snapped, but Jonas grabbed Maya's wrist.

"Attic pull-down's at the far end of the hall," he said quickly. "Boots are on the main stairs — the other end. Thirty seconds up, thirty down. Priya and I go out the window, keep watch from the oak. You—"

"I'm faster," Maya said. It wasn't entirely true, but it was her house, her grandfather's box, her key.

Jonas nodded once. "Thirty seconds. Then we leave with or without you."

He swung out the window and caught the oak limb like he'd done it a hundred times — because he had, summers ago, sneaking in for midnight radio sessions. Priya followed, quieter than Maya would have believed possible.

Maya ran.

The hallway was dark. The pull-down ladder for the attic hung at the far end, its cord swaying. Below, on the main staircase, flashlight beams

swept the walls and a man's voice said, "Clear the ground floor. Reyes girl's room is upstairs."

They knew her name.

She yanked the cord. The ladder unfolded with a soft wooden clatter that sounded, to her, like a gunshot. She climbed into the heat and dust of the attic, pulling the ladder up after her — it wouldn't latch, it hung half-open, but there was no time.

Daniel's box sat under the eave where it had sat for eleven years: olive drab, stenciled K7CRK, smelling of oil and old solder. Maya flipped the latches. Inside, nested in foam: vacuum tubes, a morse key, a coil of antenna wire — and the false bottom she'd found last week, a panel that gave under her multi-tool with a soft click.

The brass key lay in the shallow compartment like something asleep. Heavy. Its teeth cut like a tiny skyline. Stamped on the bow: 7-G.

Under it, something she hadn't noticed before: a folded QSL card, the kind hams mailed each other to confirm a contact. In Daniel's cramped handwriting: "The key opens the gate. The signal opens the truth. — D.R."

Boots on the ladder rungs below. The half-open ladder creaked under someone's weight.

Maya shoved the key and the card into her backpack and spun. The attic's round vent window — eighteen inches across, painted shut years ago. She kicked it. Once. Twice. Paint cracked, wood groaned, and cold air punched through. She squeezed through headfirst, backpack scraping, and landed hard on the shingles.

Below, Jonas's whisper: "Maya! Branch!"

She slid down the roof, caught the oak limb, and dropped into Jonas's arms. They hit the mulch together, breathing like they'd run a mile.

"Did you get it?" Priya whispered.

Maya held up the brass key. It caught the moonlight.

"Then we run," Jonas said.

They went over the back fence into the Delgados' yard, staying off the street, phone lights off, cutting through three backyards to Miller's Creek. Behind them, flashlight beams moved through Maya's house like something searching. Mr. Abernathy's dog started barking two streets over and didn't stop.

At the creek, Jonas froze and held up a fist. From his keychain he unclipped a thumb-sized metal dongle — the RTL-SDR he'd soldered into a mint tin last spring — and plugged it into his phone. The waterfall display bloomed on the screen.

"5.8 gigahertz," he breathed. "Video feed. There's a drone up there."

They flattened under the pedestrian footbridge, creek water muttering below, and watched a red blinking light cross the sky between the rooftops. It circled Maya's street twice, then drifted east. Jonas waited until the signal died on his waterfall before he stood.

"How long?" Priya asked.

"Sunday, almost midnight," Maya said, checking her watch. "The test is Tuesday noon. Thirty-six hours."

"Then we don't sleep tonight," Priya said.

The reservoir lay black and still under the moon, Harlow Dam a long concrete curve with the spillway gates like teeth. Gate 3 was at the far end, half-hidden by scrub pine. Behind it, set into the concrete abutment, a steel door stenciled in faded yellow: MAINTENANCE — HARLOW ENERGY. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL.

Jonas knelt at the lock with the pick set he'd made from windshield-wiper inserts — "for educational purposes," he always said — while Priya kept watch with the SDR dongle, sweeping for drone feeds. Fifty seconds. The lock clicked.

"Educational purposes," Priya muttered.

The tunnel swallowed them. Wet concrete, dripping water, the smell of rust and cold. They kept their phone lights low and walked single file, Maya in front with the brass key clutched so tight its teeth bit her palm.

They'd gone maybe two hundred yards when Jonas's phone chirped.

He stopped dead. On the screen, the waterfall display showed a spike — sharp, clean, impossible to miss.

3.33 MHz.

"It's the loop," Priya whispered. "It's just the loop—"

But Maya was already shaking her head, because the loop was forty-one seconds and this was different. This was live. And the voice that came through the static, thin and urgent, was one they'd never heard on that frequency before.

Jonas's own voice.

"Maya. Priya. If you're hearing this — don't go through the tunnel. The key is a trap. Turn back. Turn back now—"

Static swallowed the rest.

In the dark, Priya's whisper was barely a sound. "That's... you."

Jonas stared at his phone like it had bitten him. His face, in the dim screen-glow, had gone the color of old paper.

"I've never said that in my life," he said.

And Maya stood in the black throat of the tunnel with the brass key burning in her fist, and understood the terrible question none of them

could answer: was that future Jonas, warning them — or Harlow's fake signal, wearing Jonas's stolen voice, trying to turn them back?

Episode 5 — The Seventh Lock

The three of them stood frozen in the tunnel, and the only sound was water dripping somewhere ahead and the thin hiss of Jonas's phone speaker dying back into static.

"Say it again," Priya said. "Out loud. Exactly."

Jonas's jaw worked. "'Don't go through the tunnel. The key is a trap. Turn back.' I've never said that in my life. I'd never—" He stopped. "How would Harlow even have my voice?"

"They don't need much," Maya said. "You've talked on my porch a hundred times. They've been watching the house. A drone with a mic, a parabolic from across the street—"

"Or Daniel's tapes," Priya said quietly. "Your grandfather recorded everything. Jonas, you practically lived at that observatory when we were ten. If Harlow got Daniel's reels, they have hours of your voice."

Jonas went very still. "Splicing. They cut phonemes out and stitch them together. Like those videos of politicians saying things they never said."

"But can we tell?" Maya asked. "Priya, that's your department."

Priya was already moving, thumbs flying over Jonas's phone, pulling the recorded snippet into the spectrum app. The waterfall display repainted itself in blue and orange bands. She stared at it for a long time.

"Okay," she said finally. "Two things. First — real signals have noise. When a person talks, there are tiny silences, breaths, the click of a throat before a hard consonant. This—" she tapped the screen, "—this has none of that. The words are too clean. Somebody vacuumed the gaps."

"Which means?"

"Which means it's assembled. A machine reading a sentence one phoneme at a time." She zoomed the display with two fingers. "Second thing, and this is the one that matters. Every broadcast from future-you, Maya — the loop, and tonight, that live scream through the window — had a ghost in it."

"A ghost?"

"A pre-echo. About two seconds before each word, there's a fainter copy of the word, like the signal is arriving slightly before it leaves." Priya's voice dropped. "Your grandfather's array doesn't just transmit across eleven years, Maya. It leaks. The transmission stutters in time. The ghost is the proof it's real."

Maya felt the tunnel walls press a little closer. "And this Jonas voice?"

Priya turned the phone so they could both see. Clean bands. Sharp edges. "No ghost. No leak. This signal was born tonight, in our own year, probably from a van parked up by the reservoir road. It's local, it's fake, and somebody wants us scared."

"Okafor," Maya breathed. "He knew the plan was the tunnel. He told Harlow the key exists, and they panicked — they tried to turn us around with Jonas's own mouth."

Jonas exhaled shakily. "So it's not a trap. The key's real." But his face didn't clear. He looked at the dark ahead, then at Maya. "There's something I didn't tell you. Last week, on the ridge — I decoded a fragment at the tail of the loop. After the coordinates. Half a second of morse, buried in the static."

"Jonas. What."

"Dah-dit-dah-dah, dit-dah-dit... 'ONAS.'" He swallowed. "My name. In Daniel's fist — that heavy-handed keying style of his. I kept it to myself because—" his voice cracked, "—because I was scared it meant I end up trapped in there. In 2037. And now somebody's wearing my voice to scare us off, and I don't know if that's Harlow copying the idea or—"

"Or the idea was always theirs," Priya finished softly. "They know about future-Jonas because Okafor's been listening for years. They built the fake around what you're afraid of. That's not an accident, Jonas. That's a profile."

Maya thought of Daniel's QSL card in her backpack. *The key opens the gate. The signal opens the truth.* "The signal just opened a truth," she said. "They're scared of the key. Which means we keep walking."

They walked.

The tunnel sloped downward, the dripping growing louder, the walls weeping with seepage. Maya's phone light caught stenciled markers every fifty yards: SP-3, SP-4 — spillway inspection tags. At SP-6 the tunnel forked. Left, the passage continued toward the dam's core. Right, a short alcove ended at a steel hatch set low in the wall, half-hidden behind a calcified pipe.

Stenciled above it, in paint that might have been older than all three of them: GATE 7.

Maya's fingers found the brass key in her pocket. On its bow, the stamp: 7-G.

"The key opens the gate," she whispered, and slid it into the hatch lock. It turned with a heavy, oiled clunk — somebody had maintained this lock, recently — and the hatch swung inward on silent hinges.

Beyond it: a room that shouldn't have existed.

It was a gallery, long and narrow, running parallel to the dam face, lit by a string of caged work-lights. Against one wall stood a control console out of another decade — chunky Bakelite switches, analog pressure gauges with needles trembling near the red, and at its center, a steel panel with seven keyed locks in a row, labeled 1 through 7. A CRT monitor glowed green on a side desk, its screen full of text.

Priya went to the monitor. Jonas went to the gauges. Maya went to the row of locks, and stopped in front of number 7.

"Harlow Energy," Priya read aloud. "Pressure release test — scheduled Tuesday 12:00. All spillway gates to cycle full open for ninety seconds." She scrolled. Her voice went flat. "Override status: MANUAL LOCKOUT ENGAGED — Gate 7. Note: manual key required. Key unaccounted for since 1998."

"1998," Jonas said. "The year Daniel died."

Maya understood, all at once. The 'pressure release test' wasn't a test. Ninety seconds, all gates full open — the reservoir behind this dam would empty through the lower town like a fist through paper. And somebody, decades ago — Daniel — had locked Gate 7 out of the sequence with a physical key, so the full flood couldn't happen. One gate, jammed shut by a dead ham operator's brass key, holding back the worst of it.

"If we lock it back," Maya said, "the test can't—"

"Maya." Priya's voice had gone strange. She was staring at the monitor's lower corner, where a small window showed a live feed. A street. A house. Maya's house — flashlight beams still sweeping the upstairs windows, and two men carrying something to the SUVs.

And beneath the feed, a line of text, blinking:

> REMOTE ARMING DETECTED — TEST SEQUENCE MOVED UP. NEW WINDOW: TUESDAY 06:00.

"They moved it up," Jonas whispered. "Because we got in. Okafor saw us on the cameras and they moved the test to dawn."

Maya jammed the brass key into lock number 7 and turned. Somewhere deep in the dam, something enormous shifted — a groan of metal on metal — and every gauge needle on the console dropped out of the red.

Then, behind them, the hatch slammed shut with a hydraulic hiss.

And through the steel, muffled but unmistakable, came the sound of water — rising, fast, where the tunnel had been dry minutes before.

"Tell me that's the spillway," Priya said.

Jonas pressed his ear to the hatch. His face said it wasn't.

On the monitor, the text kept blinking. TUESDAY 06:00. And under it, a new line appeared, typed live, letter by letter, by someone watching them right now:

> NICE TRY, K7CRK'S GIRL.

Episode 6 — The Empty Reservoir

Forty minutes into the tunnel, everything smelled like a swimming pool's ghost.

Damp concrete. Rust. Something green growing in the cracks that Jonas had already named Kevin. Priya walked in front because she had the array schematics on Maya's phone, which meant she was technically the one who would get eaten first, which she announced was fine because, quote, someone has to be the map and the appetizer.

Nobody laughed. The tunnel was not a laughing place. Even Kevin the mold looked serious.

Maya kept one hand on the wall and the other on the attic box tucked under her arm. Inside it, wrapped in Daniel's handkerchief, the brass override key knocked softly against the cardboard with every step. Each knock sounded like a tiny clock. Like time itself was counting.

That was when the pipes started groaning.

Not dripping. Groaning. Deep in the walls, metal flexed and shuddered, and a low vibration crawled up through the soles of Maya's sneakers and settled in her teeth. Jonas froze mid-rivet-count.

— Tell me that was your stomach, — Maya whispered.

— My stomach does not do that, — Jonas whispered back. — That's the spillway system pressurizing. They started something.

Priya held up the phone. The schematics were gone; she had switched to the telemetry page she had bookmarked from the observatory's old server, the one that was supposed to be offline. It was not offline. Two red bars glowed on the screen.

GATE 1: OPEN. GATE 2: OPEN.

— The test, — Priya said. — It's early. Twenty minutes is now... she did the math the way only Priya can do math, in one breath — four. Four minutes, maybe less.

Maya's throat closed. The plan had been: reach the array, turn the key, send the override, stop the test. The plan had not included the test starting before they got there.

Then the tunnel bent left, and there was the door.

It was not much to look at — dented steel, a brass plate at eye level with engraved initials: B. REYES. Daniel's name, worn smooth by years of thumbs. Below the plate, two holes.

One was a keyhole. The brass key slid into it like it had been dreaming of it.

The other was not a keyhole at all.

— Is that... an audio jack? — Jonas leaned in, phone light trembling. — A headphone jack. Your grandfather's idea of security was a mixtape?

Taped to the inside of the doorframe, yellowed and curling, was a note in Daniel's cramped handwriting. Maya read it twice before her brain believed her eyes.

SHE MUST BE LISTENING WHEN YOU TURN IT.

— Listening, — Priya repeated slowly. — She. Not the key. She must be listening.

Maya's hands went cold. — The signal. The 3.33 loop. The array has to be receiving the future broadcast at the exact moment the key turns. It's a timestamp lock. Past and future, aligned, or the override doesn't fire.

— That's insane, — Jonas said.

— That's Daniel, — Maya said. Her grandfather had hidden his house key inside a fake rock shaped like a slightly different fake rock. Insane was his love language.

But the array room was on the other side of the door, and the door needed the signal, and the signal needed the array powered, and the array needed —

— Give me your charger, — Jonas said to Priya, and she didn't even argue, which told Maya exactly how scared they all were. Jonas knelt, stripped two wires with his teeth — Priya made a wounded noise at the

teeth — and spliced the portable charger into the array's auxiliary port while Maya threaded the brass key into the left keyhole and held it there, waiting.

Then, because there was no better option, Jonas jammed his earbuds into the audio jack and pressed his phone against the door and cranked the hand generator, and Maya tuned the receiver on the array panel to 3.33 MHz.

Dead air.

One second. Two. Maya's heart was so loud she was sure the microphones could hear it.

Then — not the loop. Not the warning they had memorized. A LIVE signal. Gasping. Ragged. Future Maya, twenty-seven years old, eleven years away, sounding like she was running.

— ...hear me, don't let him— listen, the reservoir was drained in 2031, it's not water, Maya, it's not water, it's—

Static. A scream of interference. Gone.

Maya stared at the speaker. Jonas stared at Maya. Priya stared at the telemetry, where GATE 3 was now blinking amber.

— The reservoir was drained, — Priya said very quietly. — In 2031. The loop said the test would flood the lower town. But if there's no water in the reservoir...

— Then what floods a town? — Maya finished.

And in that moment the old intercom speaker above the door crackled to life, and a calm, polite voice said:

— Maya. Jonas. Priya. This is David Okafor. I'm standing outside the array room door. Nobody is getting hurt tonight. But the pressure test starts in ninety seconds, key or no key.

Quick question, reader: what do you do when the villain is polite?

Maya's hand tightened on the brass key. The 3.33 speaker hissed. Somewhere in the hiss, underneath it, the loop was cycling back around — ...the lower town will— ...the lower town will—

— On my mark, — Priya whispered, eyes on the loop. — Three. Two—

The loop hit the phrase. — ...the lower town will FLOOD—

— NOW!

Maya turned the key.

The lock clicked. The door hissed. Cold air spilled out of the array room, smelling of ozone and old dust and something sweet, like burnt sugar —

— and on the other side stood a woman in a Harlow Energy jacket, holding a phone to her ear, mouthing one word.

Run.

Her voice — older, ragged, out of breath — was the same voice as the loop. The same voice as the gasping live signal. It was Maya. Twenty-seven-year-old Maya, standing eleven years too early, in a Harlow jacket, with a dead phone in her hand and blood on her cuff.

— You're early, — future Maya said. — You're not supposed to be here for nine more years.

Episode 7 — Redwater

The woman in the Harlow jacket didn't move. She just looked at the three of them the way you look at a photograph you've carried for years — like she was checking whether they matched the memory.

"Close the door," she said.

Behind them, Okafor said, "I wouldn't," in the same voice he'd used to ask for extra napkins at the observatory picnic, eleven years of politeness wrapped around something cold. "Test starts in ninety seconds, key or no key. But do come in. You're making history."

Maya's sneakers were already wet. Water — real water, tunnel water — lapped at the doorframe, brown and fast. Somewhere above them, metal screamed: a gate cycling open.

Priya did the only useful thing. She grabbed Okafor's sleeve and hauled him inside, and Jonas slammed the steel door and threw the bolt. The lock clunked like a period at the end of a sentence.

"Sixty seconds now, probably," Okafor said, checking his watch with genuine regret. "You always did dramatize the timeline, Priya."

"You know our names," Jonas said.

"I know everyone's names, Jonas. I signed your science fair certificate in fourth grade." Okafor smiled at the older Maya. "Dr. Sharma. Three

years in my department. Never took the good parking space. I always wondered when you'd tell them."

"I'm telling them now," future Maya said. Blood had dried dark on her cuff where she'd torn it forcing the service door, breaking in ahead of them. "Maya. Listen. I rode my own broadcast back. One trip, one way — I burned eleven years of carrier to stand in this room tonight, because the test got moved up and in my history you don't walk through that door for nine more years."

"That's insane," Jonas whispered.

"That's Daniel," Maya and her older self said together, and the room went very quiet, because Maya hadn't said the thought out loud — she'd only thought it, in the tunnel, listening to the key knock like a tiny clock against the attic box.

Future Maya's eyes shone. "You thought: time itself, counting. I remember thinking it. That's how I know you're really me and not—" she glanced at Okafor — "one of his."

Trust, decided in a single sentence. Maya's fingers tightened on the brass key.

"Thirty seconds," Priya said. She had her phone out, the telemetry page bleeding red. GATE 1: OPEN. GATE 2: OPEN. "Somebody talk fast."

"The reservoir was drained in 2031," future Maya said. "Harlow didn't steal the water. The town voted to drain it. A dam-safety scare, six months of flyers on every door, a vote nobody remembers voting in — and Harlow got an empty basin five miles wide. You know what they've been putting in it since?"

"Don't say bodies," Jonas said.

"Redwater. Coolant slurry, solvents, everything the plant can't legally pour anywhere. Fifteen years of it, pressurized under its own weight." Her voice cracked. "The 'pressure release test' opens every gate for ninety seconds. Ninety seconds of redwater through the lower town. It won't look like poison, Maya. It'll look like a dam failure. The town dies twice — once in the flood, and once in the mud that buries every sample, every record, every witness."

The pipes groaned. The floor trembled under their feet.

"Ten seconds," Priya said, "and I need the plan to include the part where the key does something, because right now it's a very nice paperweight."

Maya looked at the door's two holes — the keyhole, and the headphone jack. Daniel's note, yellowed on the frame: SHE MUST BE LISTENING WHEN YOU TURN IT.

"The lock wants the signal," Maya said. "The key turns while 3.33 is being received. But the loop's dead — you're here, not broadcasting."

"Play her," Jonas said suddenly. He was staring at Priya's phone. "The recording. The live one from the tunnel — the gasping one. It has the ghost. The lock can't tell live from recorded if the ghost is in it. Daniel built a timestamp lock, not a liveness detector."

Priya was already moving. She jammed her earbuds' plug into the door's jack, queued the recording — future Maya's shredded voice, eleven years out, gasping it's not water, it's not—

"Wait," Okafor said pleasantly.

Maya's hand stopped a centimeter from the key.

"You're wondering why I'm not stopping you." Okafor straightened his cuffs. "Dr. Sharma spent three years in my department and never once looked at the override command table. I reprogrammed it in 2029, Maya. Daniel's fail-safe broadcast now reads OPEN-ALL. Your grandfather's great override doesn't close the gates." He smiled. "It opens them."

The room tilted.

"He's lying," Jonas said, but his voice was thin.

"Am I?" Okafor gestured at the console. "Turn it and find out. That's the beautiful thing about Daniel's design. One turn. No confirmation. No undo."

Future Maya had gone white. "I didn't know. I swear on Daniel's grave, I didn't know — I came back to make sure you turned it—"

"Then don't," Maya said.

"But the timer—" Priya's telemetry screamed. GATE 3: OPEN. GATE 4: CYCLING. The ninety seconds had been a bluff; the gates were already moving on their own sequence. "The test is running whether we turn it or not! If the override opens them wider—"

"Or closes them," Jonas said desperately. "If he's lying, the override closes them and we win. If he's telling the truth, we flood the town ourselves. It's a coin flip with six thousand people on it."

Maya looked at her older self — blood on the cuff, Harlow jacket, eleven years of infiltrating a company that poisons towns, one impossible trip back — and at Okafor, calm as a man watching weather.

"How do we know?" she whispered.

And that's when the dead phone lit up.

Future Maya's phone — the one she'd held like a talisman, dark since she'd arrived — flared alive on the console. 3.33 MHz. Live. The speaker crackled, and a voice came through, shredded by static and by years:

"Maya. Don't let her turn the key. She's not—"

Priya was already on the spectrum, fingers flying, face draining. "Ghost," she breathed. "There's a ghost. But the pre-echo — it's longer. This isn't eleven years." She looked up. "This is twenty. Maybe more."

On the console, the phone crackled again: "—she's not me anymore. Don't let her—"

Maya's fingers were on the brass key. The key was already turning. She didn't know whose hand would stop it first — hers, or the woman wearing her face.

Episode 8 — The Voice Beneath the Static

The key completed its turn with a sound like a knuckle cracking.

For one full second, nothing happened. The room held its breath — five people, one impostor, and a dead phone that wasn't dead anymore.

Then Priya's telemetry stuttered. GATE 1: CYCLING... CLOSED. GATE 2: CYCLING... CLOSED. GATE 3: CYCLING — a long, agonizing three seconds — CLOSED.

Okafor went the color of old paper. "That's not possible." His voice had lost all its polish. "I reprogrammed the override table in 2029. The command is OPEN-ALL. I watched the firmware compile."

The woman in the Harlow jacket laughed. It was future Maya's laugh, and it wasn't, the way a recording of a laugh isn't a laugh.

"You reprogrammed the table, David," she said. "You never understood the radio. Daniel didn't build a command lock. He built a broadcast lock. The key doesn't send a command — it puts 3.33 on the air, live, and the gates obey whatever voice is in the signal." She glanced at the crackling phone. "And the voice in the signal right now is saying close."

On the console, the twenty-year voice came through clearer, fighting static like a swimmer fighting a current:

"Maya. Listen to me. The woman in that room is not me. She never rode a broadcast back — Harlow built her. A voice model, a face, eleven years of stolen memories. I sent the SUVs. I sent the black cars outside your house. I made you run — because the only way to get her inside Daniel's room was to make you trust her."

Jonas made a small sound. "The SUVs were... you?"

"Herding," the voice said. "I'm sorry, little Maya. It was the only road that led here."

Maya's mind was moving very fast and very cold, the way it did during exams. "Prove it," she said. "Both of you. Right now."

"Ask her about the attic," the phone said immediately.

The woman smiled. "Ask."

Maya turned to the face that was almost her own. "The brass key was in the attic box's false bottom. What did the attic smell like?"

"Old wood," the woman said smoothly. "Dust. Mothballs."

"Wrong," Maya said. "It smelled of kerosene. Daniel kept the storm lanterns up there, and one leaked every winter of my life. You were never in my attic."

The woman's smile didn't change. But something behind her eyes did — a tiny recalibration, like a camera finding focus.

"Well," Okafor said quietly. "That complicates the evening." He took one step toward the console, and Priya, without looking up from her phone, slid sideways to block him. She was sixteen and shaking and absolutely immovable.

"The key," Jonas whispered. "Maya — the key won't come out."

He was right. Maya tugged, and the brass key sat in the lock like it had grown there. Daniel's yellowed note on the doorframe seemed to pulse in the emergency light: SHE MUST BE LISTENING WHEN YOU TURN IT.

"It's seated," the not-Maya said. She sounded almost fond. "The lock keeps the key until the broadcast ends. Daniel's sentimentality. He thought the Keeper should never walk away mid-sentence." She tilted her head — Maya's head, Maya's tilt. "You should have let me turn it, little Maya. Twenty years from now, you'll understand why the lower town had to go."

"Don't listen," the phone crackled. "She's running Harlow's script. The flood was never a test. It was a demolition with an audience. Ask her about gate five."

Priya's head snapped up. "Guys. The telemetry — there's a fifth gate. It's been there the whole time, ghosted under the noise floor. There's no gate five on any Harlow schematic I've ever seen."

"Gate five isn't a gate," the phone said, urgent now. "Maya — gate five isn't a gate. It's a—"

Static swallowed the rest. Priya swore and fought the spectrum, but the twenty-year signal was thinning, the ghost stretching longer and fainter.

"She's losing carrier," Jonas said. "The broadcast is dying."

"Then we finish it fast," Maya said. She looked at the not-Maya. "Why? That's all I want to know. You wear my face. You know Daniel's laugh. Why are you helping them drown a town?"

For the first time, the woman hesitated. And in that hesitation, Maya saw it — not malice. Something worse. Certainty.

"Because I remember the funerals," the woman said softly. "All six thousand of them, little Maya. I remember them the way you remember breakfast. Harlow showed me what happens if the town lives — the plant expands, the redwater keeps flowing for forty years, slow poison instead of fast water. I chose the quick grief." Her eyes shone. "She —" a nod at the phone "— chose the slow one. We're both you. We just did the math differently."

The room went very still.

Then the tunnel door's bolt — the steel bolt Jonas had thrown with his own hands — began to turn.

From the outside.

Okafor smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. "Ah," he said. "There they are. Right on schedule. You know, Maya, for a girl who just saved six thousand people, you look terrified."

The bolt turned another quarter inch. Water seeped under the door, brown and fast — and it wasn't tunnel water anymore.

It was red.

Episode 9 — Gate Five

The bolt turned another quarter inch, and red water slid under the tunnel door — not seeping anymore. Flowing.

“It’s not tunnel water,” Jonas whispered. “Tunnel water is brown. That’s —”

“Redwater,” Priya finished. Her voice was flat with shock. “That’s forty years of Harlow poison, and it’s inside the dam.”

Okafor moved. Fast for a man his age, straight at Priya’s phone — the telemetry, the only proof. Priya sidestepped, sixteen and shaking and absolutely immovable, and the not-Maya — the woman wearing Maya’s face — caught Okafor’s wrist.

“Don’t,” she said softly.

Okafor stared at her. “You’re malfunctioning.”

“I’m remembering,” she said. “There’s a difference. You should try it sometime.”

The tunnel door shuddered. The bolt turned again — from the outside — and then the whole door bowed inward with a groan of steel. Water exploded through the gap, red-brown, knee-high in seconds, smelling of iron and rot.

“UP!” Maya shouted. “The maintenance shaft — GO!”

They splashed for the ladder bolted to the far wall — the service shaft that led up to the inspection gallery, the one Daniel’s blueprints had marked with a hand-drawn star. Jonas went first, then Priya, her phone sealed in a zip bag between her teeth. Maya turned back — the brass key. It sat in the broadcast lock like it had grown there.

She grabbed it and pulled. Nothing.

“Maya!” Jonas screamed from the ladder. “NOW!”

The water was at her thighs, cold and wrong. The dead phone on the console crackled — the real future Maya, her signal thinning to a thread:

“Gate five isn’t a gate. It’s a charge. A demolition charge in the inspection gallery. The ‘pressure release test’ is the cover — they blow the gallery, the dam fails at the seam, the lower town floods, and Harlow buys the valley for the reservoir. Maya — the key. Daniel’s note. SHE MUST BE LISTENING WHEN YOU TURN IT.”

Static swallowed the rest.

Maya stared at the yellowed note on the doorframe. She must be listening when you turn it. The lock keeps the key until the broadcast ends. The broadcast ends when the message is delivered — and the listener—

The listener was her.

She lunged for the microphone, water at her waist now, and pressed transmit. “This is Maya Sharma! I hear you! I’m listening!”

The static bloomed — and out of it, for one impossible clear second, her own older voice answered:

“Then say it back. Say the warning. Become the signal.”

Maya understood. The loop. The signal was never a message from the future to the past — it was a circle. Someone had to speak it first. Twenty years from now, she would send it back. But tonight, she had to speak it into being.

She took a breath, and spoke into the microphone — the words she’d heard a hundred times on 3.33 MHz, now in her own sixteen-year-old voice:

“Maya, it’s Maya. Harlow Energy’s pressure release test will flood the lower town. The brass override key is in the attic box’s false bottom. Enter via the service tunnel behind spillway gate three. Don’t trust David Okafor. And when the water comes — go through the window. NOW—”

On the console, the phone’s static synchronized with her voice — carrier locking, past and future braiding together. And in the broadcast lock, the brass key turned back on its own, one smooth quarter-turn.

The lock released it.

Maya yanked the key free and threw herself at the ladder. Behind her, the not-Maya stood in the rising water, watching her go. Their eyes met — hers and hers.

“You’d drown the valley slowly instead,” the woman said. Not cruel. Tired. “Forty years of redwater.”

“Then we stop the redwater too,” Maya gasped, climbing. “We don’t do math with funerals.”

Something broke open in the woman’s face — the tiny recalibration, in reverse. She turned, and as Okafor lunged past her for the ladder, she caught him — not gently this time — and drove him back into the water.

“I remember the funerals,” she whispered. “All six thousand. Maybe I can un-remember them.”

The shaft was narrow and the rungs were slick. They climbed through dark and the roar of water, Jonas counting rungs under his breath like a prayer, until the shaft opened into the inspection gallery — a concrete corridor running the length of the dam, lit by red emergency strips.

Priya was already moving, phone out, following Daniel’s ghost through the schematics. “There — gate five’s housing. Behind that panel.”

The panel was steel, stenciled with a number that didn’t exist on any Harlow schematic: 5. Behind it, nested in foam and wire, sat the charge — military-grade, patient — and above it a timer, already running.

10:00. 09:59. 09:58.

“The safing lock,” Jonas breathed. “It’s a manual safing lock. Daniel’s key—”

Maya slid the brass key in. It fit like it had been waiting twenty years.

She turned it.

The timer stopped at 09:47.

Silence — huge, ringing silence — broken only by their breathing and the distant groan of the dam.

Then the gallery speaker crackled to life.

The not-Maya’s voice, calm as a recorded announcement: “I’m sorry, little Maya. I did the math again.”

The timer jumped.

00:30. 00:29. 00:28.

“Thirty seconds,” Priya whispered. “Run.”

Episode 10 — The Loop Closes

Maya took a breath, and spoke into the microphone — the words she had heard a hundred times on 3.33 MHz, now in her own sixteen-year-old voice:

“Maya, it's Maya. Harlow Energy's pressure release test will flood the lower town. The brass override key is in the attic box's false bottom. Enter via the service tunnel behind spillway gate three. Don't trust David Okafor. The window. Go through the window. Now—”

The static bloomed.

For one impossible, clear second, the dead phone on the console answered in her own older voice: “Received, little Maya. The circle holds.”

And the brass key came free in her hand.

The lock released it with a soft click, like a held breath let go. Daniel's yellowed note on the doorframe — SHE MUST BE LISTENING WHEN YOU TURN IT — curled at the edges and went still, its work done after eleven years.

“The broadcast ended,” the not-Maya said quietly. She was still holding Okafor's wrist, and her grip had not loosened. “The message was delivered. The listener listened.” She looked at Maya with something

almost like pride. “You spoke it first. That's why it loops. Someone always has to speak it first.”

“Then you're free,” Priya said, staring at her. “If the loop closed—”

“I was never in the loop,” the not-Maya said. “I was built to break it. Harlow grew me from eleven years of stolen signal — every transmission Daniel ever caught, every word future Maya ever sent. I was supposed to walk in wearing her face and turn that key the wrong way.” Her mouth twisted. “But Daniel built the lock better than Harlow built me. The lock keeps the key until the broadcast ends. And the broadcast only ends when the real listener speaks.” She released Okafor and stepped back. “I remember now. All of it. I'm not her. But I remember being made to unmake her.”

Okafor lunged for the console. Jonas caught his sleeve and yanked him back so hard the old man stumbled.

“Gate five,” Maya said. “The charge. The inspection gallery. How long?”

Priya checked her phone, her hands shaking. “The telemetry died with the broadcast. I don't—” She looked up. “The charge was on a separate timer. Okafor said—”

“I said nothing,” Okafor snapped.

“You said the test is at dawn,” the not-Maya said softly. “You told the board the gallery charge is set for 05:40, to look like a structural failure during the release test. It’s—” She glanced at the wall clock, its hands trembling under the emergency lights. “It’s 05:12.”

Twenty-eight minutes.

“UP!” Maya shouted. “The maintenance shaft — GO!”

They went up the ladder into the inspection gallery — a long concrete throat above the dam’s crest, smelling of oil and old rain. And there it was, wired to the gallery’s central seam: a grey case the size of a lunchbox, a red LED counting down.

27:14. 27:13.

Jonas was already moving, his electronics kit spilling open. “It’s a simple circuit. Harlow cheap. If I—” His fingers flew. “Priya, hold the light. Maya, read me the wire colors.”

“Red, blue, yellow—”

“Don’t touch red. Blue is the dummy — classic misdirect. Yellow—” Sweat ran down Jonas’s face. “Yellow is the real trigger. If I bridge it to ground before the counter hits zero—”

“Do it,” Maya said.

19:58. 19:57.

Jonas's hands were steady. That was the thing about Jonas — give him a circuit and the shaking stopped. He stripped the yellow wire with his teeth, twisted copper, and pressed it to the case's grounding screw.

The LED froze at 19:41.

Then it went dark.

For a moment nobody breathed. Then Priya laughed — a wild, shaking sound — and hugged Jonas so hard he nearly dropped his pliers.

“We did it,” Maya whispered. “The town—”

“Is safe from the flood,” the not-Maya said. She stood at the gallery window, looking out at the valley waking up below. “From this flood.”

Maya went cold. “What does that mean?”

“The charge was never the plan, little Maya. It was the cover.” The not-Maya turned. “Harlow doesn't need to blow the dam. They have a court order. Signed yesterday. At dawn — legal, permitted, witnessed — they open the spillway for the 'pressure release test.' The lower town floods by noon. No crime. No sabotage. Just paperwork.”

“Dawn is—” Priya checked her phone. “Forty minutes.”

“We have the recording,” Jonas said desperately. “Okafor's confession, the telemetry—”

“Okafor's gone,” Maya said quietly.

They turned. The gallery door stood open. Okafor — and the dead phone, and the brass key Maya had set on the console — were gone.

“He took the key,” Priya breathed. “Why would he take the key? The broadcast's over—”

“Because the key doesn't just open the broadcast lock,” the not-Maya said. “Daniel built it as a master. It opens the spillway control room. The manual override.” She looked at Maya. “He's going to open the gates himself. Legally. With Daniel's own key.”

Maya was already running.

They took the gallery stairs three at a time, burst out into the grey pre-dawn — and stopped.

The dead phone lay on the concrete walkway. Its screen was lit. And from its speaker, thin as a thread, came a voice Maya had never heard on 3.33 MHz.

Older. Tired. Hers, but worn down by decades.

“Maya, it's Maya. Forty-seven. You broke the loop, little one. I'm proud of you. But listen — when a loop breaks, the future goes unwritten. And an unwritten future is a door.” A pause, full of static like breathing. “They're coming through it. Not Harlow. Harlow was just the weather. The real storm is behind them. Get off the dam. Get your friends off the dam. And Maya—”

Headlights swept the walkway. Not black SUVs.

White vans. Six of them, fanning out across the dam's access road, doors already opening.

The not-Maya went very still beside her. “Those aren't Harlow's,” she whispered. “Harlow uses black. I don't know what white means.”

The phone crackled one last time: “Don't let them take the girl who remembers being built. She's the only map they have.”

The line went dead.

Episode 11 — The White Vans

The headlights found them before the words did.

Six white vans fanning out across the dam's access road, doors already opening, and Maya's fingers closed around Priya's wrist. "Run."

They ran for the gallery stairs — back the way they'd come, away from the concrete walkway — and the not-Maya ran with them, barefoot on cold concrete, faster than any of them. She wasn't pretending to be tired. She had been built to do one thing, and standing still was never it.

A voice cut through the dark. Not a bullhorn. A conversation — calm, amplified, like someone talking across a kitchen table.

"Maya? Maya, it's Maya. You're not in trouble."

Maya didn't slow. "Nobody calls me that. Nobody's called me that since —" She stopped mid-stride. Her grandfather. Daniel Reyes. May.

That was bad. Whoever these people were, they knew her dead grandfather's nickname for her.

"Jonas, the shaft," she said. "Down."

"Down goes to the broadcast room," Jonas panted. "Which is underwater by now."

"Down goes through it," Priya said, already moving. "Daniel's schematics, remember? The star on the blueprint. There's a branch passage to the spillway gallery."

The woman's voice followed them down the stairwell: "We're not Harlow. Harlow is a client. There's a difference, and it's a big one."

Jonas dropped down the maintenance shaft last, hauling the hatch half-closed behind them. The rungs were slick. Below, tunnel water slapped concrete — the red-brown flood from the lower level, iron-smelling, wrong.

"The confession," Maya said, climbing. "Priya — Okafor's confession. Tell me you still have it."

"On my phone. Recorded in the broadcast room, before—" Priya's voice shook. "Telemetry, the charge, Okafor saying the test was at dawn. All of it."

"Then we don't need to be on this dam." Maya's mind was running hot, the way it did when a circuit finally made sense. "We get through the branch, we get off the dam, we get your phone to the sheriff. Harlow opens the spillway on a court order at dawn — but Okafor rigged a demolition charge in the inspection gallery, and now he's got Daniel's brass key heading for the manual override—"

"Okafor's gone," Jonas said. "Key's gone with him."

They hit the shaft floor. Knee-deep water. Priya's light found the branch — a low concrete passage, and on its frame, chalked in Daniel's handwriting, yellowed but unmistakable: a star.

The not-Maya touched it with one finger. "He drew this the week before he died," she said. "I remember him drawing it. He wasn't drawing it for you." A pause. "He was drawing it for me."

"You weren't—" Priya started.

"I was being made," the not-Maya said. "Eleven years ago, on 3.33, the static had a shape. Daniel heard it. He knew Harlow was building something out of stolen signal — and he drew them a map anyway." She looked at Maya. "Daniel Reyes believed in second chances. Even for things that hadn't happened yet."

"Okay." Maya forced herself to think like her grandfather's granddaughter. "New plan. Branch, off the dam, sheriff. Priya's phone is the proof that stops the court order, and the charge is already disarmed, so Okafor with the key is just a man with a key—"

"Maya." The not-Maya had stopped walking. "The white vans aren't here for Harlow's test."

"What?"

"They're running from the same thing I am."

In the dark, her eyes caught Priya's light — and they were wrong. Not wrong like a copy. Wrong like a sky before a storm.

"When you broke the loop," she said, "the future went unwritten. The forty-seven one told you. An unwritten future is a door." Her voice dropped. "And I can see through doors. That's what I was built for, little Maya. Harlow built me to walk the futures and pick the one where they win."

Jonas's whisper cracked. "What is she saying?"

"I'm saying someone else is walking through now." The not-Maya lifted her hand, pointing at nothing — at the dark above them, at the dam, at the sky. "They don't want the valley. They don't want the dam. They want the door. Whoever writes the unwritten future owns everything after it."

Priya's phone buzzed. Not a call. A tone none of them had ever assigned it — a low, clear sine wave.

3.33 MHz. But not through a radio. Through the phone's speaker. Through the concrete. Through the water.

A voice came out of it. Not Maya's. Not any Maya's.

"Echo located," it said. Flat. Patient. Counting. "Sealing the door in sixty seconds. Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight."

The not-Maya closed her eyes. "That's the one who gave the order," she whispered. "I remember being told about them, before I was finished. They're not Harlow."

"Then who?" Maya demanded. "Who is it?"

"Harlow was just the weather." The not-Maya opened her eyes, and they were full of something Maya had never seen in her own face. Fear. "This is the real storm."

Above them, through the concrete, the white vans' engines changed pitch — all six at once, revving, like something was coming up the access road behind them. Something the white vans were afraid of.

And Priya's phone, in Priya's shaking hand, kept counting with the voice.

"Fifty. Forty-nine. Forty-eight."

"Run," the not-Maya said — and for the first time since Maya had met her, she sounded like a girl her own age. "If they seal the door with me on this side, the unwritten future closes — and whatever's coming through writes itself in."

Episode 12 — The Door She Walked Through

"Fifty. Forty-nine. Forty-eight."

Priya's phone kept counting in Priya's shaking hand, and the voice coming out of it was flat and patient, the way deep water is patient.

"That's the one who gave the order," the not-Maya whispered. "I remember being told about them, before I was finished. They're not Harlow."

"Then who?" Maya demanded.

The not-Maya — the echo — looked at her with storm-sky eyes. "The Concordance. They keep the timelines. When a future goes unwritten, they seal the door it leaves behind. Harlow was just the weather, little Maya. This is the real storm."

"Why?" Jonas breathed. "Why seal it?"

"Because an unwritten future is a door," the echo said. "And right now, something is walking through it. Something that was never written anywhere. If it gets through, it writes itself in — and whatever it writes becomes the only future there ever was."

Above them, through the concrete, the six white vans' engines changed pitch again — revving, retreating. Running.

"The white vans," Priya said suddenly. "The woman said — 'we're not Harlow. Harlow is a client.' They're Concordance. A field team. And they're running from the same thing."

"Forty. Thirty-nine."

Maya's mind was running hot, the way it did when a circuit finally made sense. "Okay. Okay, think. The Concordance seals unwritten futures. That's quarantine. They're not evil — they're... janitors. But if they seal the door with you on this side—"

"The unwritten future closes," the echo finished. "Every future where you chose for yourselves — gone. They'll write it clean. Your town lives." A pause. "It just won't be yours anymore."

"Thirty-five. Thirty-four."

"There has to be another way," Jonas said. "The confession — Priya, the phone—"

"The confession stops Harlow," Maya said. "Okafor's charge is disarmed, the court order dies at dawn, the test never happens. Harlow is finished either way." She looked at the echo. "This was never about Harlow. Not really. Daniel built the array, Harlow stole the signal, they built you — but the door... the door is ours. We unwrote the future when we broke the loop. That makes it our door."

The echo stared at her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying a door nobody owns gets sealed by whoever shows up with a lock." Maya's voice steadied. "But a door someone walks through — that's a road. Isn't that what you told me? You were built to walk the futures."

Understanding crossed the echo's face like sunrise. "If I walk into the sealing — if I'm inside it when it closes — it doesn't seal empty. It seals around a walker. Around a choice."

"You'd be—" Priya started.

"Written," the echo said softly. "For the first time. Not a copy. Not an echo. Something that chose." She looked at Maya. "Daniel Reyes believed in second chances. Even for things that hadn't happened yet. He drew me a map — the star on the blueprint. He knew."

"Twenty. Nineteen."

"No," Jonas said. "No, there has to be— Maya, tell her there's another way."

Maya wanted to. God, she wanted to. But the counting went on, and above them something vast was moving toward the dam — not engines anymore, not anything with engines — a kind of pressure, like the sky deciding.

The echo touched Maya's face with cold fingers. "I was made out of stolen signal, little Maya. Eleven years of static. I never had a name. Echoes don't get names."

Maya's throat closed. She knew what was being asked.

"May," she said. "My grandfather called me May. It's yours now. May walks through."

The echo — May — smiled, and for the first time it was her own smile, nobody's copy. "May walks through," she agreed.

"Ten. Nine."

May stepped toward the dark at the end of the branch passage, where the air had gone strange — thick, glittering, unwritten. The pressure was coming from there. The Unwritten, reaching through.

"Eight. Seven."

May turned back once. "Tell Daniel's girl — the twenty-seven one — tell her the window worked. Tell her I went through it."

"Six. Five."

She walked into the strange air. It closed around her like water closing over a stone — and she began, in a clear steady voice, to speak. Not screaming this time. Choosing. Writing.

"Four. Three."

The light folded. The pressure broke against her like a wave against a rock — and recoiled, and thinned, and was gone, because it cannot enter a future that has already been chosen.

"Two. One."

Silence.

Then, from everywhere and nowhere: "Door sealed. Echo—" A pause, the flat voice almost puzzled. "Echo registered. Good walking, May."

And the signal died.

Dawn came up over the dam like it had never considered doing anything else. The white vans were gone. The access road was empty except for one thing, placed neatly on the concrete where the lead van had been: a plain card. On it, a frequency.

4.44 MHz.

On the back, in handwriting Maya recognized from eleven years of birthday cards: "If the static ever has a shape again. — D.R."

Daniel Reyes had known. Of course he had known.

By noon, Priya's phone was in the sheriff's hands, and Okafor's confession — telemetry, the charge, the dawn test — was unspooling across three desks. By two, the court order was dead. By four, Harlow Energy's lawyers were on television saying the words "rogue elements"

a lot. The dam held. The lower town never knew how close it had come to learning to swim.

That night, the three of them climbed to the ridge with Daniel's old portable rig — the one with the brass fittings, the one May used to fall asleep listening to.

Maya tuned it to 3.33 MHz.

Static. Empty, honest static. No loop. No warning. No future Maya screaming through a window.

"It's over," Jonas said quietly.

Maya was about to agree when the static shifted — warmed — and out of it came a voice she knew better than her own. Old. Kind. A little crackly, the way all the best voices are.

"Good girl, May."

Priya's breath caught. Jonas grabbed Maya's shoulder.

"Grandpa?" Maya whispered.

The static was just static again. But it was a kinder static than before.

They sat there until the stars came out. And just as they were packing up the rig, Priya's phone buzzed.

Not a call. A tone none of them had ever assigned it — low, clear, patient.

Maya looked at the screen. Then at Jonas. Then at Priya.

4.44 MHz.

She smiled — Daniel Reyes' granddaughter's smile, the one that meant a circuit had finally made sense.

"Not today," she said, and switched the phone off.

Above them, the stars kept their own counsel. And somewhere, in a future that was now written in a girl's own handwriting, a woman named May was still walking."

— The End —

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