

Chapter One – The Echo Beneath Things

Part 1

(The Garden and the Kitchen)

Lyra Evans had a secret.

Not the sort you shared with friends on the playground or scribbled in a diary with a glittery pen. This one pulsed inside her fingertips, a quiet vibration only she could feel, like a song played for her alone.

When Lyra touched things, they remembered.

The world carried echoes, and she could hear them.

A garden fence might whisper with children's laughter, summers long gone but still alive in the grain of the wood. A chipped teacup might sigh with warmth, the memory of a hundred nights filled with cocoa and stories. Even stones murmured, their voices deep and steady, shaped by rain and centuries of patient time.

She had once told her mother, when she was very small and didn't yet know that some secrets were best kept. "*Mum, the chair is humming!*" she had insisted, pressing her ear against the kitchen stool. Clara Evans had only smiled and kissed her head. "*What an imagination, Lyra.*"

After that, Lyra never mentioned it again. If no one believed her, why waste the words?

Now the echoes were hers alone—a hidden map of the world that no one else could read.

The Garden's Song

That morning, the garden tugged at her fingers like an impatient friend.

Mist lay heavy over the grass, turning the lawn into a sea of silver pearls. Each breath tasted sharp and green, damp with dew. Birds rustled in the hedges, trading sharp questions and soft answers in voices too quick for human ears. Somewhere down the street, a dog barked twice, then silence folded back over the neighborhood, hushed and waiting.

Lyra crouched beside a cluster of tulips. She was a wiry girl, all restless knees and elbows, her dark curls caught into two messy braids that were already loosening. Her hazel-green eyes reflected the tulips' glow as she brushed a fingertip over one trembling petal.

Her chest filled at once with the tulip's memory: sunlight soaking into green veins, bees nosing greedily for sweetness, the quiet pride of bursting open after a long winter sleep.

"You're brave," she whispered. "You remembered how to grow."

The tulip quivered faintly, whether from the breeze or from her words, she couldn't be sure.

"Lyra!" Her mother's voice floated out from the kitchen window. "Breakfast!"

Lyra lingered. She pressed her palm against the garden wall as she turned to leave. The rough brick pricked at her skin, then softened, glowing faintly in her mind with memory. It remembered her grandmother's careful hands, stacking stone upon stone, humming a tune that lingered like sunlight in dust. The hum was faint now, but steady, warm.

Lyra smiled at the memory's touch and slipped inside.

The Evans Kitchen

The kitchen smelled of toast and tea, underpinned by the sugary brightness of jam. Steam hissed from the kettle on the stove. Plates clinked, chairs scraped, a butter knife tapped a quick rhythm against the counter. It was the song of an ordinary morning, but one note in the music had gone missing.

Her mother, Clara, moved briskly from counter to table. Her dark hair was tied into a bun, though strands had escaped to curl against her temples. Her sweater sleeves were shoved to her elbows, ready for anything—spilled milk, dropped dishes, sudden tears. Tiredness shadowed her warm brown eyes, but she smiled anyway, fiercely determined to keep the morning bright.

Across the table sat Daniel Evans, tall but slightly stooped, his dark hair dusted with gray. His glasses slid low on his nose as he scanned the newspaper, lips tightening with each new headline. When the words displeased him, he tapped the rim—tap, tap, tap—a sound almost lost under the kettle's hiss. Almost. To Lyra, it was as loud as speech. *Dad is worried again, but won't say so.*

And then there was Leo.

Her brother slouched in his chair, hoodie half-zipped over a faded T-shirt. At fifteen, he was all long limbs and loose joints, folded untidily like he didn't care where he landed. His hair, once golden from soccer practices under the sun, now stuck up in dull, messy tufts. His gray-blue eyes—once bright as the sky—looked dim, as though they had forgotten how to catch the light.

Leo had always been noise. He whistled so off-key that Lyra would groan and throw pillows at him. He drummed his spoon on the table until Mum shooed him away. He cracked jokes so quick that even Dad, usually serious behind his paper, would chuckle.

Now the only sound from him was the soft scrape of a spoon dragging through cereal he didn't eat.

Lyra slid into her chair across from him. She waited for him to look up, to flick her a grin that said *I see you*.

But his gaze stayed fixed on the bowl of milk, cloudy and still.

Part 2

(The Missing Echo and the Uneasy Night)

Lyra's hands curled around the edge of the breakfast table. The wood was smooth beneath her fingers, warm with years of use. It carried layers of memory—birthday candles dripping wax, Sunday pancakes with sticky syrup, her father's hand slapping it in laughter after one of Leo's ridiculous jokes.

She pressed harder, listening for something newer, something from this very morning. The echoes usually came quickly: a shimmer of sound, a flash of color, an imprint of feeling. But today there was only stillness.

She reached deeper, searching, until at last a faint thread brushed against her. Leo's whistle—off-key, climbing toward a high note that never quite landed. The memory bubbled through her like sunlight breaking a cloud.

But it was old. Worn. Almost faded.

Her chest tightened.

"Eat up, Leo," Mum urged. She slid a slice of toast onto his plate, forcing cheer into her voice. "You'll need energy for school."

Leo hunched lower, stirring the milk without looking up.

Dad rustled his paper. "Teenagers," he muttered, not unkindly, as if that explained everything.

Lyra bit her lip. She wanted to shout, *He isn't just tired. Don't you see it? Don't you feel it?* The words rose like hot bubbles but lodged in her throat. Instead, she bent over her plate and whispered so softly only the table would hear:

"I remember."

The Empty Afternoon

School passed in a blur. Ava poked her shoulder in math class, whispering, “You’re somewhere else again.” Lyra just shrugged, scribbling numbers she didn’t understand. At lunch, laughter buzzed around her, but every sound felt distant, muffled, as if she were underwater.

By the time she trudged home, the house seemed quieter than ever. Mum clattered pots in the kitchen; Dad’s voice hummed on the phone upstairs. But around Leo’s closed door, the air felt thick, the silence pressing against her skin.

She touched the doorknob. It was cold, and the echo inside it was sharp, a soundless scream swallowed whole. Lyra snatched her hand back, heart thudding.

The Uneasy Night

That night, she lay in bed with her blanket pulled to her chin. The lamp cast a soft glow across her shelves of books and trinkets, enough to keep the corners from swallowing her in dark. Her room smelled faintly of lavender from the sachet her grandmother had sewn years ago.

She pressed her palm to her headboard. The wood remembered her father bumping it against the wall when he carried it upstairs years ago, muttering curses before laughing at himself. The memory made her smile.

But when she turned to the wall she shared with Leo, her breath caught.

She touched the plaster, waiting for the familiar hum. For years, she and Leo had traded goodnights through this wall. Three taps from him: *Goodnight, Lyra*. Two taps back from her: *Goodnight, Leo*. It had been their secret code, stronger than lullabies.

Tonight—nothing.

She pressed harder, straining for even a whisper of memory. The silence on the other side wasn’t empty; it was heavy, like wool stuffed into her ears. The stillness crawled into her chest, making it hard to breathe.

Then, for the briefest moment, something shifted near her desk. A darker patch of shadow, darker than the rest of the room. It writhed faintly, like smoke.

Lyra’s breath hitched. She blinked—and it was gone.

Her heart pounded. She pulled the blanket to her nose, burying her face in its soft folds.

“Goodnight, Leo,” she whispered to the wall.

Silence answered.

And sleep came slowly, dragging her under as if the night itself was holding its breath.