

# Woodhaven Bay

Book I The Signal  
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# 1

## STATIC IN THE AIR

*October, 1994*

MAYA CHEN TWISTED THE dial on the old Zenith radio, trying to tune out the weird static that had been plaguing *Chen's Electronics* all afternoon. October in Woodhaven Bay always brought strange weather—fog that moved like it was alive, sudden temperature drops that made no sense—but this was different. The static had a pattern to it, almost like it was trying to speak.

"Maya, can you help Mrs Patterson with the new answering machine?" her mother called from the front of the store.

"Coming, Mom!" Maya shouted back, but her hand lingered on the radio dial. There—for just a second—she could have sworn she heard a voice buried in the white noise. A voice that sounded scared.

*Chen's Electronics* sat right in the heart of downtown Woodhaven Bay, squeezed between *Hal's Hardware* and the old *Paramount Theatre*. The store had been her grandparents' dream when they'd moved here from Taiwan forty years ago, back when Maya's dad was only three. Now, it was run by both of her parents, and at thirteen, Maya knew every circuit board, every resistor, and every frequency on the electromagnetic spectrum. Or at least, she thought she did.

The bell above the door chimed as Mrs Patterson left with her new answering machine, promising to recommend the store to all her friends at the country club. Maya's mother, Grace Chen, smiled and waved, but Maya could see the worry lines around her eyes. Business had been slow lately. People were buying their electronics from the big chains at the mall instead of from the family store that had served downtown for years.

"Maya, you finish your homework?" her father asked, emerging from the repair room in the back. David Chen was a thin man with

thick glasses and hands that could fix anything electronic. He'd taught Maya everything she knew about radios, televisions, and the mysterious world of electromagnetic waves.

"Almost done," Maya lied. She hadn't even started her algebra homework. How could she concentrate on equations when the radio kept making those unusual sounds?

"Good. Help me close up, then we can go home for dinner. Your mother made dumplings."

Maya loved her mom's dumplings, but she couldn't leave yet. Not when she was so close to figuring out what was wrong with the radio. "Dad, can I stay a few more minutes? I want to check something."

Her father glanced at the old Zenith. It was a 1960s model they kept for display, not for sale. Customers loved seeing the vintage equipment, proof that *Chen's Electronics* had been fixing radios since before most people had cable TV. How like him, his daughter was. He smiled at the thought. But he hoped she would grow to more than third generation repair shop owner. To do that, she would need good grades, along with an aptitude for technology.

"Ten minutes," he said. "Then you come home."

Maya waited until her parents had gathered their things and headed out the back door to their van. The moment she was alone, she returned to the radio and began turning the dial with the precision of a safe cracker.

1240 AM—static. 1250 AM—more static. 1260 AM—wait.

Almost. She couldn't hear it so much as feel it.

*Almost.*

She dialled back. There it was again, barely audible beneath the interference. The hum became a pattern. She concentrated on adjusting the dial. It wasn't possible to tune it in any further. A burst of static rang out. She went back to 1250 AM—nothing. To 1240 AM—zilch.

Frustrated, she twisted the dial hard, letting it spin free. Frequencies blurred past.

And there it was.

A voice. No, *multiple* voices, overlapping like a crowd all trying to talk at once.

Maya clamped down on the spinning dial, once more fine-tuning, adjusting in tiny increments. The transmission faded away. "Darn it," she barked. "Come on!"

She stared at the dial clamped in her hand. *It appeared when I spun it freely.* A lightbulb went off in her head. *When I spun it freely.* Again she let loose on the dial. The radio stations flew past, overlapping, showcasing static and the occasional faint rock-music broadcast. Then, as if zeroing in on an impossible transmission, through all that random noise, a voice:

"—help us—" "—trapped—" "—they're watching—"

Maya's heart hammered in her chest. "That's not possible. That's between frequencies ..." She grabbed a notebook and started writing down what she heard, her hand shaking slightly. The voices were clearer now, though still distorted by static.

"—underground—" "—the mall—" "—Operation Tide—"

The front door's bell chimed, making Maya jump so hard she knocked the notebook off the counter. She spun around, expecting to see her parents, but instead found herself face to face with a woman in a dark suit. The woman had cold grey eyes and hair pulled back in a severe bun. Everything about her screamed "government."

"We're closed," Maya said, trying to keep her voice steady.

The woman smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm not here to shop. I'm Agent Cross, and I understand you've been having some ... *interesting* experiences with your radios."

Maya's mouth went dry. How could this woman know about the voices? She'd only just heard them herself.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Maya said.

Agent Cross stepped closer, her heels clicking on the worn linoleum floor. "Let me be more specific. You've been picking up transmissions on frequencies that shouldn't exist. Voices that shouldn't be there." She peered past Maya at the large radio, eyebrow raised.

Maya backed up until she hit the counter. The radio behind her continued its soft static, but the voices had gone silent.

"Young lady, you're playing with things you don't understand," Agent Cross continued. "Some things are meant to stay buried. Some voices are better left unheard."

"Who are they?" The question slipped out before Maya could stop it. "The voices—*who are they?*"

Agent Cross's smile widened, showing too many teeth. "Nobody. They're nobody at all. Just interference. Crossed wires. Your imagination." She reached past Maya and switched off the radio. The sudden silence felt heavy, oppressive. "And if you're smart, you'll forget you ever heard them."

The agent turned and walked toward the door, then paused. "Oh, and Maya? We'll be watching. We're *always* watching." Her eyes seemed to penetrate Maya's own, rummaging deep within her thoughts, searching and learning. "I really don't want to have to hurt you, honey." A long pause as her hand clasped the door knob, her grip iron strong. "*But I will.*"

The bell chimed as she left, and Maya stood frozen for a full minute before her legs gave out and she sank to the floor. The notebook lay open beside her, her hastily scrawled notes visible in the fluorescent light:

HELP US TRAPPED THEY'RE WATCHING UNDERGROUND THE  
MALL OPERATION TIDE

She looked at the silent radio, then at the notes, then at the door Agent Cross had just walked through. Whatever she'd stumbled onto, it was real. The voices were real. And someone very powerful didn't want her to hear them.

Maya grabbed the notebook and stuffed it into her backpack. She had to get home, had to think about what to do next. But as she locked up the store and headed into the foggy October evening, she couldn't shake the feeling that Agent Cross had been right about one thing.

They were watching.

And now they were watching her.