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Beneath Hollow Ridge

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Introduction

The fog came early, shouldering down from the ridge and spilling over the raw red cut the machines had made. A backhoe idled, coughing diesel into the chill as men in reflective vests worked their shovels into the turned earth. The ground smelled metallic, like a box of nails sucked wet. When the shovel struck, it wasn't rock; it was a dull, hollow clack that made the foreman lift a hand and still every arm around him. One worker knelt, brushed away soil with a gloved thumb, and uncovered a curve the color of old ivory. Another scrape, another edge. Then a small rusted tin, the kind that might have held cough lozenges in another life, winked out of the clay like a coin the earth had tried to swallow and failed.

They pried it open with a pocketknife. Hinges protested, flaking rust. Inside, cushioned in damp lint and grit, lay an oval locket no bigger than a thumbprint, its gold gone to the color of autumn straw. A chain, kinked and broken. On the back, beneath a film of grime, two letters were engraved in a careful hand, the curves still precise despite the years: L.H. The foreman swore softly. Around them, the fog muffled sound, turned voices into whispers even when men spoke full-throated. Word ran down the slope faster than the first rumor ever does: bones in the dirt, a girl's locket in a tin.

Sarah Mercer took the last bend up Hollow Ridge with the window cracked, letting in cold air sharp enough to wake a dead engine and a tired reporter. Ten years gone, and the curve of the hillside still made her hands tighten on the wheel. She parked behind a channel van from the city, slung her press badge from the rearview, and climbed out into a morning that smelled like rain and turned soil. The press scrum tilted toward the yellow tape, cameras and microphones extended like flowers angling for light. Sarah stood at the edge, letting the scene arrange itself: the county crew; the foreman's pinched mouth; the sheriff's silver star catching a weak sun that hadn't yet burned the fog off. She was good at that—standing still, letting people tell her what they didn't mean to. Tenacious when the trail went cold. Better at reading people than she was at forgiving them, including herself.

She hadn't meant to come back. Not for a road-widening on a ridge that had always felt older than the town below it. But the assignment had landed on her desk at the regional paper with three lines—human remains unearthed during construction, local interest high—and a photo snapped by a crew member with muddy hands: a tin, a glint of chain, two letters. L.H. The initials punched through the years like a knuckle to the sternum. Lily Haines. Sarah tasted iron under her tongue as if the earth's metallic breath had gotten into her. She'd left Hollow Ridge a decade earlier under a cloud of things unsaid and a job offer that looked like absolution. Guilt traveled light, though; it had made the trip with her and never unpacked.

Down the slope the town spread out, same as ever and not at all: the old mill's brick hulk crouched by the river, its windows dark as missing teeth; the weathered storefronts along Main with their hand-lettered signs; the diner with a coffee pot that never emptied and a bell that knew every regular. Late fall had stripped the maples bare and left the ridge in husks of color—tobacco, rust, the flat pewter of the sky. People gathered in knots at the perimeter tape, talking low, as if volume could offend. There were new faces and the same old eyes, measuring, deciding how much to say. Power in Hollow Ridge never wore a crown; it wore a smile and a good coat. Mayor Evelyn Cross arrived in both, flanked by a woman with a clipboard and a man in a crisp suit Sarah recognized from a glossy development one-pager—Tom Avery, the investor who had promised to turn the ridge into the town's future. Sheriff Marcus Hale—high school football, bad guitar, a jaw that had set more than it had smiled these last few years—stepped up to the tape with his hands open. He'd been a friend once. Sometimes more than that, in the messy ways small towns make more of everything.

"Ms. Mercer," Marcus said, nodding without surprise. Of course the sheriff would know she'd come back; Hollow Ridge passed information like a church plate. Dr. Nina Patel, the county coroner in a navy field jacket, crouched near the find, voice low and precise. "We have a partial mandible, some long bone fragments. Early impressions put us in the mid-2000s." Nina's eyes flicked up to Sarah with professional kindness and no promises. The Founders' Club—those men whose family names were on half the buildings and all the checks—were already watching, visible and not, their brick hall up the street locked up tight even as someone inside would be making calls. Sarah could feel the town aligning, the way water organizes around a rock.

She clicked her pen and wrote: L.H., rusted tin, oval locket, chain broken, preliminary 2000s. She wrote: fog, metallic soil, Evelyn Cross smiling like a woman who believes in progress and doesn't care for detours. She wrote: Tom Avery, hands in pockets, eyes on the hill like he could will the ground to return what it had taken back. She wrote: Marcus's mouth a line, Nina's gloved hands gentle. And she wrote the thing she didn't want to: Lily Haines last seen summer 2006, fifteen and fierce, a laugh like glass in sunlight. Sarah had told herself a hundred times that leaving hadn't been running. But the ridge didn't care for the stories people told themselves. It held on, and when it let go, it did it on its own terms.

Someone behind Sarah said, "Founders won't like this," and someone else answered, "Founders never do," and the fog shifted like a curtain. Sarah slipped under the tape when Marcus gave her a look that said, Fine, two minutes. The locket lay on a piece of clean muslin now, a tiny heart that might have held a photo once. Sarah thought of the girl who could have worn it, the girl who had taught her to hold her breath in the swimming hole until the world went quiet, the girl who had vanished while the town agreed, silently and together, not to pull too hard on the loose threads. Sarah's breath smoked in the air. She couldn't tell if the cold lodged in her or around her.

It should have been simple—write the story the paper expected, the dignified quotes and the caution, get back on the highway before the ridge could say her name. But the initials sat there like a dare. L.H. The town shifted its weight from one foot to the other, waiting to see what story would be told. Sarah felt the old ache stir and something else with it, a stubbornness that had gotten her in trouble more than once. She capped her pen, tucked her notebook into her coat, and looked up at the ridge that had stood longer than any of them. Beneath the fog, it waited. If it had started giving up its dead, Sarah knew, it wouldn't stop at one truth. And neither would she.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

A television van stood crooked at the bottom of the access road, its satellite dish aimed at the ridge like a white plate waiting for rain. A deputy waved Sarah past when she held her press badge to the glass. The tires spun grit and found purchase, and the grade steepened until the pines on both sides leaned in, whispering against the car. She rolled her window up and down, indecisive about the air. The ridge had always had two seasons—cold, and fog—and today it was deep into both. Up top, the machines stood silent, men hunched in their vests. The county had set up a tent for the press and a taller one for equipment; tarps flapped, and the smell of thawing earth lifted, raw and close.

She parked near the backhoe and got out, coat tugged tight against a wind that had teeth. Her boots made a dull sound on the rutted mud. Over by the tape, Sheriff Marcus Hale looked up from a low conversation with the foreman and saw her in the way people who knew each other's angles always do. His hair had gone thin at the front, but he still had that same square jaw she'd once traced with a careless finger on a dark porch swing. Their eyes met; he didn't smile, not exactly, but he didn't cut away. She'd been half-afraid he'd turn her away at the tape, half-afraid he wouldn't. The half that mattered—her story—said stay. She took her notebook from her back pocket and clicked her pen, a nervous habit that had become a professional asset.

Mayor Evelyn Cross arrived with a practiced sweep of her coat and a nod to the press that would have looked magnanimous if you missed the glint of worry in her eyes. She was flanked by Tom Avery, the kind of man who wore a suit like armor and believed himself necessary. His development firm was going to turn this ridge into something that sounded like progress if you didn't think too hard about it—condos, a golf course, and a promise that the river would remain the same. Marcus stepped to the tape when he saw Sarah, and they did a little dance of acknowledgment that was almost a handshake. "Sarah Mercer," he said. "Didn't expect to see you up here."

"Didn't expect to come," she answered, keeping it honest. "But we got a tip about a find. Looks like you have one." She angled her chin toward the yellow evidence tarp. Behind him, a woman in a navy field jacket crouched with gloved hands. The coroner, Dr. Nina Patel, by the badge clipped to her jacket. Sarah liked her instantly, or maybe it was just the way she handled the earth like it had feelings. Marcus followed her gaze and gave a small shrug, as if to say, We don't know yet, and then out loud, "County handles the forensics. I handle the peace. If you're asking for a statement, the mayor wants to say hers first."

"She always does," Sarah murmured, and Marcus's mouth twitched, a ghost of old

humor. Mayor Evelyn was already addressing the cameras, a speech about a tragedy that might be, and how the town would be transparent, respectful, and forward-leaning. The words floated up the slope like smoke. Tom Avery stood a step behind, hands in his pockets, eyes on the curve of the ridge as if measuring it. Sarah watched the press lean in; she watched the locals watching the press. In Hollow Ridge, you didn't just watch what was happening—you watched who was watching it, and you tried to figure out who was angling for something.

When the mayor finished, Sarah moved with the small herd toward the tent where Dr. Patel had set up a portable table and a clean white cloth. Under the tarp, the shape of what had come out of the ground was small and human and not. The doctor peeled back a corner, polite about it. "Mandible fragment," she said quietly. "Partial long bone. Given the level of humic acid in the soil and the state of the bone itself, I'll be surprised if we don't land in the early to mid-2000s. That's a preliminary, Ms. Mercer. Don't run with it yet." Her eyes were dark and steady. Sarah nodded. She had a healthy respect for the difference between a sense of a thing and a fact.

Near the doctor's elbow lay a small rusted tin, lid pried open, and inside it, cushioned by damp lint, lay an oval locket the color of old straw. The chain was broken in two places, kinked and corroded. Sarah leaned closer. There was a high-pitched whine in her ears. The back of the locket was scratched with a film of grime but the engraving was clear: L.H. She took the three letters down in her notebook and then wrote them again, bigger, as if quantity could make it mean something else. "Who found it?" she asked, voice steady, and the foreman jerked his chin toward a kid with mud on his knees. "Gabe, here. It was in the tin, down about two feet. Tin was sealed with rust, whatever was inside stayed inside."

Gabe swallowed, adjusting his ball cap. "Shovel hit something that wasn't rock. Sounded like a lunchbox. I thought I'd be looking at somebody's thermos. Then I saw the chain." He made a vague motion with his fingers, like he was pinching something up. "We stopped. Called it in. Nobody wanted to go digging around after that." Behind them, the ridge wore its fog like a shawl that didn't suit it. A woman in a worn cardigan pushed toward the tape, her voice thin but carrying. "If you all are gonna say this is a county matter, what about what happened to Lily Haines? What about that? People said it was a runaway story. People said a lot of things when it was convenient."

Marcus stepped toward her, one hand out, pacifying. "Helen, we'll talk. I promise we'll talk." Helen swallowed hard and let herself be guided back, but she looked at Sarah, not the sheriff. That look said, You're the one who left. The ones who stayed remember. Sarah held her gaze, then dropped it first. The initials made a hinge in her mind, a door she had shut ten years ago swinging open. Lily Haines had been fifteen when she vanished from Hollow Ridge. Fifteen, with a laugh like glass in sunlight and a mother who worked double shifts and a brother who had never learned to apologize. Sarah had seen her last at the swimming hole, both of them daring each other to jump

from the rope swing, neither doing it, talking instead about the shape of future lives that were too big for this valley.

Dr. Patel cleared her throat softly and used tweezers to lift something that had been stuck to the locket's edge. It wasn't a hair or a flake of cloth. It was the tiniest shard of something with a flat black sheen. "I'll get this under a scope," she murmured. "Could be varnish. Could be paint. Could be nothing. But it's consistent with a specific type of finish, wood or metal. We don't assume yet." Sarah didn't write that down because she didn't want to forget the word, or the shape of it, or the way the doctor's voice had gone a degree quieter. The woman in the cardigan—Helen—was watching them again. Her mouth was a line, not a smile. "Founders won't like this," she said to no one in particular, and the man beside her answered like it was church response, "Founders never do."

Sarah knew the Founders' Club by reputation and by sight, the red brick hall downtown with its white columns and the kind of pride that put up a plaque for the laying of a stone but none for the removal of a body. They were not a cabal, not exactly. They were simply the families who had always been here, who had owned the mill and the land and the stories. The mayor spoke to them like they were a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. Tom Avery had his ear. Marcus, by obligation and history, had to listen. Sarah glanced at the locket again. L.H. She thought of Lily, and of the summer of 2006, and of all the things that could have happened between a girl walking home and a tin buried in mud.

She slid closer to the tape. Marcus gave her a look that said two minutes only, and then looked away to give her the privacy of pretending she'd asked. The locket was smaller than you would think, smaller than a heart. She imagined it warm against skin, a secret kept close. You could fit a picture in there, maybe, or a tiny square of a song lyric, or nothing at all, because sometimes the weight of the locket itself was the point. She could smell the soil, metallic and red, like old pennies in a jar. The ridge held onto the fog like it was hoarding it, and the press cameras went click-click-click like the sound of a lock turning.

By mid-morning, the mayor had given her statement and gone, Tom Avery with her, his car shedding money in the form of a new engine sound that made two local trucks seem embarrassed. The press had drifted to their van to file, the sheriff had gone back to keeping order in a place where order meant mostly keeping a lid on things, and the coroner had taken the tin and the locket and the small sharp shard and packed them with care into a hard case. Sarah lingered by the backhoe tracks, letting the scene drain away around her. She wrote down what she'd seen, who had been there, the weather, the faces, the weight of the fog. She didn't write about Lily, but the name was in her head, underlined.

Her phone buzzed. A message from her editor, Bret, back at the regional desk: *Lily*

Haines connection? She typed back: *Possibly. Let me confirm before we make that leap.* He replied immediately, the way he always did when the story was hot: *Don't let the ridge swallow it, Mercer.* She snorted softly. Bret was good at managing risk and urgency in the same sentence. He wanted her on this. He knew she had roots here, and roots made you dig. He also knew she had left for a reason, and that coming back felt like stepping onto a stage where the play had been running for years without you.

Across the way, Caleb Royce had shown up, wearing a carpenter's dust and the same quiet he'd always had. He stood with a couple of men who looked like they made their living with their hands, all of them watching the machines like they might move again. Caleb caught her looking and lifted his chin. She couldn't tell if it was hello or a question. He had been her high school almost-everything: the boy who fixed broken steps and told stories about wood, the boyfriend who took her to the river and never asked her why she left. She looked away first, not because she didn't want to talk to him but because she didn't know how to do it yet. There was too much history in their silence.

Mayor Evelyn's voice carried over the ridge from the gravel lot where she stood by a dark town car. She was on the phone, one hand pressed to her temple, the other making small impatient gestures. "We can manage this," Sarah heard as the wind shifted. "We will manage this. It was always going to be a risk. The Ridge Rebuild is moving forward." She hung up and smiled at someone who had approached her with a microphone, the same smile she'd worn for the cameras. The smile didn't reach her eyes. Tom Avery leaned against his car, watching her with something like satisfaction and something like impatience, a look that wanted to speed things along.

The sun had not won yet. The fog thinned, then knitted back together. Sarah pulled her coat tighter and took a long look at the ridge. It was a good ridge, high and stubborn, looking down on the town without contempt. From up here you could see the mill's brick chimney and the river's silver seam and the church steeple where Reverend Paul Avery—Tom's father—had preached Sunday sermons that could make you feel guilty for breathing too loudly. You could also see the gravel road that led to the old abandoned mill wing, the one kids dared each other to enter at night, and the turnoff to the river where the current liked to snag what you dropped.

In the car, she let herself sit for a minute with the engine off. The silence had weight. The locket had been found. That meant the ground had been holding a secret and had finally loosened. Secrets came loose in a cascade, not one at a time. She knew that from other towns, other stories, other graves dug by words. The initials L.H. pulsed in the edges of her vision like a migraine. She had left Hollow Ridge telling herself she would come back when it mattered. Maybe it had mattered all along.

She started the car and eased around the backhoe, past the press van, past Helen, who stood with her arms crossed and a look that was not unkind but was absolutely

without forgiveness. The road down was a series of curves you knew by heart. Halfway, she passed the sign for Hollow Ridge, its paint flaking but the letters still sure of themselves. She took the turn into town because there was nowhere else to go. Main Street waited, and it had never been good at pretending it didn't know your business.

As she passed the diner, the bell over the door rang for someone leaving with a coffee cup and a story. At the hardware, a man in a canvas apron watched her car go by, his face thoughtful. The Founders' Hall stood at the corner of Church and Third, red brick and white columns, its windows looking like eyes that refused to blink. The river kept moving. The mill kept standing. The ridge kept watching. The locket, somewhere safe, held its empty shape. Sarah felt it all, the town's breathing, the weight of its years, the way it closed around her like water.

She pulled into a parking space across from the sheriff's office and cut the engine. The clock on the dash said eleven forty-three. She'd missed breakfast and hadn't had lunch. She didn't feel hungry. She leaned her head back against the rest and closed her eyes. In the dark behind her lids, she saw the letters scratched into metal, clear and simple and not simple at all. L.H. She thought of Lily walking home from the swimming hole, hair wet, towel slung over one shoulder. She thought of the riverbank and the rope swing and the way the summer of 2006 had felt like the beginning of something. She thought of all the reasons she had left and the one reason she had come back.

The ridge would give up more than a locket. It would give up stories, and some of them would bite. Sarah opened her eyes. A breeze lifted a swirl of leaves near her tires and dropped them again. She picked up her phone and opened a new note. She typed two words and stared at them: Lily Haines. Then she added: Locket. Ridge. Blood-dark soil. She typed: Ask Marcus about old sightings. Ask Caleb about the mill. Ask Dr. Patel about varnish. She added: Don't trust the smile. She didn't write which smile.

She got out of the car. The air in town was different than on the ridge; it carried diner grease and someone's laundry and a hint of woodsmoke. It carried voices around corners. Sarah locked her door, not because she had to but because old habits died hard. She looked up at the ridge again and felt a pull that wasn't just about a story. It was about the small oval of gold that had risen out of the ground like a coin the earth had finally decided not to keep. It was about two letters and a girl who had been fifteen. It was about the way home could punch you in the sternum and call it a welcome.

On the top step of the sheriff's office, Marcus paused with his hand on the door and looked back at her. He didn't smile, and he didn't frown. He just waited, the way a man waits when he's had a lot of years to learn patience. Sarah lifted a hand, a small wave that meant more than hello. He nodded once, and the door closed behind him.

The ridge held its breath. She could feel it. And she took a breath and went inside.

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